



Steeping success: How Eswaran Brothers is growing women leaders through smart, low-cost action

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Who should read this?

While this case draws on Eswaran Brothers' experience, the insights are relevant for companies, industry groups, investors, and ecosystem actors seeking business-aligned, practical ways to embed gender inclusion across large, operational workforces.



Foreword: A message from Eswaran Brothers' leadership

"At Eswaran Brothers, we have always believed that our people are central to the company's long-term success. For decades, we have worked to create a workplace built on our core values of integrity, determination, and care for both people and the planet.

Yet the data gave us an important insight: while we were not discriminating, there was a clear gap between where we stood and where we aspired to be.

For us, prioritising women's leadership is not only about fairness. It is a business imperative. To grow sustainably, compete globally, and lead in a historically male-dominated industry, we need a more diverse and representative talent pool. It is not enough to rely on goodwill or sporadic initiatives. Building women's leadership requires a systematic approach— policies, processes, and accountability mechanisms that ensure progress is deliberate and measurable.

One thing particularly stood out for me: change does not always need to be driven from the top. Some of the most powerful results have come from mid-level managers and supervisors stepping up as champions and taking ownership.

My message to peers in the tea sector and beyond is simple: don't wait. Review your data. Listen to your people. Set targets. Change does not have to be expensive. What matters is to commit systematically. The results will strengthen your workforce, your resilience, and your business reputation."

- Subramaniam Eassuwaren, Vice Chairman



Executive summary

Eswaran Brothers Exports, a leading Sri Lankan tea manufacturer, partnered with Value for Women and FMO to advance women's representation across the company. At the time, women made up 44% of employees, were known for uniquely driving operational quality, and stayed with the company longer than average. Yet women held only 23% of senior leadership roles. A gender diagnostic explained the gap: many long-serving women employees **felt stuck in their current roles, with no clear path to promotion and limited support during key transitions like maternity leave.**

In response, Eswaran Brothers piloted a series of concrete, low-cost changes. These pilots focused on both workplace policies and manager mindsets, including updates to promotion systems, new parental reintegration practices, manager coaching, and career sponsorship. **The small-scale pilots allowed for cost-effective testing, learning, and adaptation before broader rollout.** And even the initial small scale was able to impact a significant number of employees: while the pilots directly involved only 15 managers, this indirectly affected more than 200 staff reporting into them, representing over 45% of all staff.

Summary of piloted changes

Early results

Career sponsorship pilot for high-potential women, pairing them with senior leaders.	Previously, only 47% of women (compared to 59% of men) reported seeing a path for themselves at the company beyond 3 years. As a result of the sponsorship pilot, all 8 women participants reported improved visibility, confidence, and readiness for leadership. Sponsorship has been permanently implemented and scaled.
Pilot coaching programme for managers, on gender-inclusive management practices.	Shift from managers' peripheral awareness of corporate inclusion goals to their active ownership of them; managers developed department-specific inclusion commitments and key performance indicators.
Standardised promotion requirements, debiased Performance Management System, and integrated Professional Development Plans.	Improved clarity and motivation for career growth; more structured growth trajectory; and 20 promotions of women in 6 months — up from 8 in the preceding year.
Strengthened parental reintegration support, including flexible working arrangements, peer buddy and manager support, and automatic overtime pay for returning parents.	Before the pilot, attrition and absenteeism were high among mothers: 33% of mothers resigned within 1 year of returning from maternity leave. Moreover, only 75% of women and 83% of staff felt the company prioritised supporting parents.
Expansion of parental leave coverage, including provision for loss of pregnancy and extension of paternity leave from 3 to 5 days.	All parents who received reintegration support reported feeling more supported by their employer and less stressed, and missing fewer days of work.

Within 6 months, Eswaran Brothers saw a 2.4x increase in women promoted (16 in factory roles and 3 in office roles, up from 8 total the year before). Men also benefited from the focus on growth, with promotions rising 2x (from 7 to 14). But the biggest gains were for women, showing how standardising performance management and reducing bias can drive more equitable advancement.

Finally, a **noticeable shift was reported in women's visibility, confidence, and ownership— early signs of deeper institutional change.** This case study— which draws on surveys and interviews with staff, managers, and pilot participants —**showcases that meaningful inclusion comes from a combination of leadership commitment, evidence-based action, and engaging staff at all levels, especially middle managers who translate policies into daily practice.** It provides clear evidence that workplace transformation is within reach.

1. Why women's inclusion matters at Eswaran Brothers

Eswaran Brothers is a third-generation family-run Sri Lankan tea producer and one of the country's leading value-added exporters of Ceylon teas. Sustainability has long been central to the company: over a decade ago, it was the first tea company globally to achieve CarbonNeutral certification.¹

Eswaran Brothers is guided by seven core principles: determination, hard work, honesty and integrity, courage, love, patience, and spirituality. These values are seen as the foundation of the company's identity, shaping both how it does business and how it relates to people and the environment. With a workforce spanning across factory and office roles, the company sees its people as central to its long-term success and industry leadership.

Eswaran Brothers aims to remain a leader in sustainable tea by upholding high standards of quality and customer service and by contributing to community well-being.

Growth priorities include expanding into international supermarket chains and strengthening visibility and partnerships in local markets.

Within this agenda, women's inclusion became an important focus for the company. Women account for only 33.7% of Sri Lanka's economically active population.² And while women make up about 65% of the tea sector workforce, they are concentrated in lower-paid, physically demanding roles, such as tea pluckers.³ This represents a missed opportunity: interviews with senior staff at Eswaran Brothers highlighted women's key strengths in quality operations, including diligence and attention to detail. Women are also more likely than men to remain with Eswaran Brothers beyond 5 years (63% of women compared to 43% of men), bolstering workforce stability and reducing recruitment costs.

Additionally, globally, customers, retailers, and investors are today placing greater emphasis on labour and inclusion standards. And at the same time, international benchmarks such as the 2X Challenge provide a framework for setting clear targets and policies on women's inclusion.

Against this backdrop, in mid-2024, **Eswaran Brothers adopted a formal target to ensure women represent 40% of senior leadership roles by 2030** (that year it was at 23%⁴). The company set this priority with a view to living its values, bolstering company performance, and responding to evolving expectations of markets, investors, and global consumers. This made it a strategic priority for the company to systematically support and develop women employees and leaders (this encompasses both senior leadership and managerial/supervisory roles, because Eswaran Brothers recognises that the latter are a key stepping stone for the former).



¹ Eco-Business (2010). ["Sri Lankan Tea Company Makes History."](#)

² Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka (2024). Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics: [Quarterly Bulletin, First Quarter 2024](#). Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics.

³ Ethical Tea Partnership (2023). [Gender Equality in Sri Lanka: Factsheet](#).

⁴ This target includes C-Suite roles and their direct reports.

2. Diagnosing women's barriers to leadership

Following this target setting, in late 2024, with support from FMO, Eswaran Brothers worked with Value for Women to conduct a company-wide gender diagnostic. The diagnostic combined a review of policies and human resources (HR) data with staff surveys, focus groups, and interviews across Senior Leadership, HR, Production, Compliance, Finance, and Trading. The goal was to pinpoint the inclusion gaps and identify action priorities.

The diagnostic identified two main challenges which stood in the way of women's ascent to leadership positions: parenthood-stage attrition and absenteeism and unclear advancement systems.



Blocker 1: Parenthood-stage attrition and absenteeism

Eswaran Brothers experienced high rates of attrition and absenteeism of women employees after childbirth, with 33% of mothers resigning within 1 year of returning from maternity leave.

Statutory maternity benefits and 3 days of paid paternity leave were in place, but staff experienced these as insufficient. Structured support for exiting and returning parents was limited. Parents – women and men alike – described their return to work as emotionally difficult and logistically fraught. Men reported that the three-day paternity leave did not allow them to meaningfully contribute to early caregiving, reinforcing gendered caregiving norms and leaving them concerned for their family's wellbeing in the early days of a new child's life.

In some instances, the company allowed for flexible working agreements, though this was inconsistent and at the discretion of individual managers. Frequently, the long and rigid factory shifts (generally 08:00-20:00) clashed with childcare logistics, such as daycare drop-off and pick-up and dealing with healthcare appointments or emergencies. These logistical challenges led to stress and absenteeism for both mothers and fathers, but particularly impacted women's sustained workforce participation.

Results of the organisation-wide employee survey indicated that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men did not feel the company accommodated the needs of parents.

Why this matters for women's representation in leadership: Studies show that retention and reintegration support for the 12-24 months post-return are pivotal for keeping women in the pipeline for supervision, management, and beyond.^{7,8}



"I was very upset when returning to work after completing my maternity leave because my baby was only three months old... However, I knew that I needed to return to work due to my family's financial situation."

— Employee, new mother

"Most of our factory staff and workers are facing difficulties with child care. For example, at my home, my mother takes care of my wife and newborn baby, while also looking after my other children who go to school."

— Employee, new father



"Mostly women leave... after having kids as they cannot balance work life. We have to do overtime because base pay is not enough, so work-life balance [is] difficult."

— Factory employee, woman

"The 8:00 am to 8:00 pm shifts makes it challenging to put kids in daycare – it conflicts with the daycare's closing times."

— Factory employee, woman

⁵In Sri Lanka, statutory maternity leave for private-sector employees under the Maternity Benefits Ordinance (factories/industrial) is 12 weeks, and under the Shops and Offices Employees Act is 84 working days in the case of birth and 42 days in the case of stillbirth, paid by the employer. Nursing breaks are mandated for the first year – two breaks in any nine-hour period, of up to 30 minutes each if a crèche is provided and up to 1 hour each if not.

⁶In Sri Lanka, there is no statutory paternity leave in the private sector (by comparison, civil servants receive 3 days paid paternity leave).

⁷McKinsey & Company (2024), "[Women in the Workplace 2024: 10th Anniversary Report](#)."

⁸ILO (2022), "[Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more equal world of work](#)."



Blocker 2: Unclear advancement systems

Even though women stayed longer than men at Eswaran Brothers (63% of women vs 43% of men stayed at the company for more than 5 years), men were twice as likely as women to ascend into leadership roles. Overall, while women made up 44% of the workforce, they represented only 23% of senior leadership.



"We joined as supervisors and are still supervisors. There is no career progression."

— **Factory employee, woman**

Long-tenured women in both factory and office roles expressed a sense of stagnation, lacking both clear growth pathways and active career development support. Managers did not consistently see talent development as part of their remit, and few were equipped to identify or support women's progression. Promotion pathways were informal and inconsistently applied, performance reviews did not systematically feed into advancement, and there was no formal succession planning to identify or nurture high-potential candidates.



"Promotions come from management – come as a surprise most of the time... I've never gone and asked for a promotion in 13 years."

— **Office employee, woman**

Furthermore, when asked about their plans, only 47% of women (compared to 59% of men) reported seeing a path for themselves at the company beyond 3 years. This suggests that women stay at Eswaran Brothers out of loyalty, rather than potential career growth. It indicates that giving women greater clarity on career progression would further boost retention.

Why this matters for women's representation in leadership:

When criteria and processes are informal or not standardised, under-represented groups (generally women) tend to progress more slowly.⁹ Clear steps for a promotion, regular reviews of who might move up, and targeted sponsorship of high-potential women candidates are consistently found to help more women reach their first leadership role.¹⁰

⁹ McKinsey & Company (2024), *"Women in the Workplace 2024: 10th Anniversary Report."*

¹⁰ ILO (2022), *"Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more equal world of work."*

3. Eswaran Brothers' interventions: Actions taken and early results

In response to these findings, Eswaran Brothers and Value for Women co-designed a 6-month period of targeted interventions aligned to the blockers above: support for returning parents and deliberate interventions to develop women's leadership. Each intervention was designed to be practical, cost-effective, and aligned with Eswaran Brothers' values and growth ambitions.



3.1 Making parental return sustainable

Actions taken

A pilot programme was rolled out for four factory workers (three women, one man), each either returning from or preparing for parental leave. The programme combined:

- **Temporary flexible hours and workload adjustments:** For example, shorter workdays, extended lunch breaks, or time to attend clinic appointments. These were determined with managers on a case-by-case basis.
- **A one-time overtime-equivalent payment:**
Eswaran Brothers recognised that many factory workers would be unlikely to make use of the temporary flexibility, as overtime pay is a necessity for many to make ends meet. To relieve the pressure on new parents to take on long hours in the first month after returning from parental leave, the company introduced a one-off payment of an additional 3.5 hours of daily overtime for a period of one month.
- **A peer buddy system for new or soon-to-be mothers:** In allocating buddies, HR considered existing workplace relationships (such as colleagues working in the same team) and buddies' own experience as parents, so that buddies could offer both practical and emotional support.
- **Structured manager and HR check-ins:**
These were scheduled at least once every two weeks, and focused on wellbeing, workload, and any reintegration challenges.

Additionally, at the beginning of this pilot, awareness-raising sessions were held with managers and new and soon-to-be parents to explain the purpose of the pilot and outline the new measures. These sessions helped to normalise the idea that returning parents — both mothers and fathers — may require temporary adjustments or additional support, thereby building an understanding that reintegration is a shared responsibility across the company.

Early results

The practical and emotional support provided through this pilot had a tangible impact on the participating parents, and demonstrated to employees that sustained employment is both possible and supported for all returning parents.

- **Workload adjustments:** Mothers who returned from leave appreciated being reassigned from heavy machine work to lighter tasks, being able to take longer lunch breaks when necessary, or arriving late or leaving early to attend doctors' appointments.



"I don't have concerns about workload. Generally, I am off at 3 o'clock. Managers are supportive, nobody will say "no" if I want to take leave for getting a vaccination."

— Employee, mother

"I travel two hours and have three kids... We got special approval to leave at 5:15 p.m. so I can be active with my kids— otherwise they are asleep by the time I get home."

— Employee, mother

- **Peer support:** Participants reported that the buddy system provides psychological and physical support. For example, buddies made themselves available to cover in case of women taking short breaks during the day, which reduced the pressure on new mothers.
- **Manager check-ins and HR support:** Participants reported feeling seen and supported by their managers; they experienced smoother transitions and greater confidence upon return to work.



"My buddy helps with personal matters, talking and listening and emotionally supporting me."

— **Employee, mother**



"After this program, so many things have changed—because earlier, less care was given, now when they are on the floor, they ask 'are you okay, are you happy?'"

— **Employee, mother**

Formalisation

As a result of the successful pilot, the company has now formalised these measures into an updated parental leave policy that includes:

- Bi-weekly manager check-ins, with HR support provided at key milestones;
- Peer buddies assigned from 6 months before to 6 months after parental leave;
- Flexible working arrangements for women returning from leave; and
- The overtime-equivalent payment to ease financial and time pressure.

Additionally, the pilot has been further improved by extending paternity leave from 3 to 5 days and including pregnancy loss under the parental leave policy.



3.2 Making career growth fair and visible

Actions taken

Eswaran Brothers undertook a multi-pronged advancement programme:

- **Career sponsorship:**
Eight high-potential women were paired with senior leaders for two months of action-oriented support. Different from mentors, sponsors use their influence to actively advocate for their sponsees to help them access visibility, stretch assignments, and leadership pathways. Additionally, pairs met bi-weekly to review goals, address barriers, and create professional development plans.
- **Manager coaching:**
Seven team leaders and managers completed a four-session coaching journey focused on embedding gender inclusion across the employee lifecycle, team-level inclusion targets and plans, and team culture. Each manager set personal goals, committed to drive inclusion, and pledged to build trust by following through on commitments and encouraging staff voices. Factory managers committed to making policies and benefits accessible to Tamil-speaking women on the factory floor¹³ – going beyond existing translation efforts to ensure materials were actively read and engaged with.
- **Policy changes:**
The HR team addressed the lack of transparency in career growth by standardising promotion criteria, introducing professional development plans, and redesigning succession planning with explicit attention to gender balance. The new professional development plans are directly linked to promotion and succession discussions, so staff aspirations and development progress is visible and taken into account in formal progression decisions.

Early results

The momentum is tangible: within 6 months, Eswaran Brothers saw a 2.4x increase in women promoted

(16 in factory roles and 3 in office roles, up from 8 total the year before). Men also benefited from the focus on growth, with promotions rising 2x (from 7 to 14). But the biggest gains were for women, showing how standardising performance management and reducing bias can drive more equitable advancement.

At the same time, **both women and managers describe a step-change in women's confidence, visibility, and ownership of their career trajectory.** These are signs of a deeper shift in how inclusion and leadership potential are understood at Eswaran Brothers.

- **Many sponsees** cited the sponsorship programme as the first time they were encouraged to see themselves as future leaders, which strengthened their motivation to grow in the company.
- **Managers** described moving from passive awareness to active ownership. They reported increased confidence to lead on inclusion, recognised its link to business success, and saw themselves as part of a wider team driving change. Inclusion is now viewed as part of managerial responsibility, rather than an HR matter or a compliance issue.

Formalisation

This work is now being formally embedded in Eswaran Brothers' processes:

- The sponsorship programme has been made permanent, extended to a 6-month duration, and formally linked to participating staff's Performance Development Plans to map how it will support their short- and long-term growth.
- The inclusive management coaching journey will be scaled to include more managers over time.
- The policy changes are formally adopted.

Overall, while it is too early to see shifts in women's representation in leadership, the early results are proof of changes in the right direction toward achieving Eswaran Brothers' target of 40% of senior leadership roles held by women by 2030.



"Working for 6 years here, I never thought of myself as a leader... Recently I got a promotion... It's a milestone for me. In our department, I am the first manager who is a woman. [Now] I want to become a senior manager and move to the next level of leadership here."

— Sponsee

"Now we have a path. Now women have career aspirations. We never had such things before."

— Sponsee



"Before coaching, I passed decisions to my Head of Department. Now I feel confident to lead on gender inclusion myself."

— Manager



¹¹These women were from across departments, including HR, Legal, Trading and Finance. They were nominated by HR and management, based on their potential to progress into leadership roles in the short- to medium-term.

¹² From across departments, including HR, Factory Operations, and Trading.

¹³ Although all policies were available in Tamil (commonly spoken by the majority of factory-floor staff), Eswaran Brothers identified that factory staff are less likely than office staff to read company policies and may therefore not have the current information on processes and entitlements.

4. Key lessons and insights

Leadership sets the tone. Strong support from Eswaran Brothers' leadership provided a solid foundation for transformative policy changes and programme measures.

Let employee voices drive the agenda. The gender diagnostic challenged assumptions that existing efforts were “good enough.” Hard data on promotions, attrition, and leadership gaps built urgency, while staff perspectives revealed deeper barriers which would not have been visible from the data alone. Together, this created a nuanced, credible case for action. And drove more sustained inclusion efforts.

Make inclusion everyone's job. By embedding gender inclusion into managerial roles, not just HR, Eswaran Brothers ensured that policies translated into daily practice. Mid-level managers were especially critical for operationalising change and shaping a team culture of inclusion.

Pair system-level changes with cultural shifts. Structural enablers—like clear policies, embedded processes, and new norms—were among the most cost-effective levers for sustained change. The pilots showed that when these structural enablers were paired with awareness-building,

visibility, and peer support, small-scale initiatives shifted mindsets and behaviours across the organisation.

You don't need deep pockets. The most impactful interventions in this pilot relied more on committed time, consistent messaging, and better coordination than on expensive infrastructure.

Pilot smart, scale strategically. Small, targeted pilots allowed Eswaran Brothers to test, refine, and de-risk new approaches before wider rollout. They built internal champions and tangible proof points for change. Moreover, relatively small pilots can – and do – have a wide reach among the total workforce: **the pilots worked with 15 managers, representing 57% of all senior and mid-level managers at Eswaran Brothers, indirectly affecting more than 200 staff reporting into them, representing over 45% of all staff.**

Be clear, be fair. Transparent communication about eligibility, expectations, and intent are essential to build trust and prevent perceptions of favouritism or tokenism.





5. Where to go from here

Eswaran Brothers' journey shows that meaningful progress on gender inclusion is possible in cost-effective and tangible ways. By grounding action in data, listening to staff, engaging middle managers, and piloting practical solutions, the company strengthened women's representation, reduced attrition, and opened clearer paths to leadership. Change didn't begin with big organisation-wide programmes, but rather with smart, well-implemented ideas.

For businesses, the message is clear: Start small, act on evidence and staff feedback, and embed inclusion into business as usual.

For funders, this case study underscores the pivotal role you can play in enabling practical, cost-effective inclusion efforts. And in addition to financing advisory support, funders can share ready-to-use resources—like return-to-work plan templates, peer buddy system guides, inclusive performance review formats, or pulse survey tools. Providing these resources reduces the burden on portfolio companies to start from zero, and helps ensure that inclusion is built into regular HR and operations planning. By curating and promoting these resources, funders can encourage experimentation, learning, and long-term change at scale.