



MAS Intimates and the Uniterra program

A partnership for women's economic empowerment in the apparel manufacturing sector

Uniterra is a Canadian volunteer cooperation and international development program that is jointly operated by **WUSC (World University Service of Canada)** and **CECI (the Centre for International Studies and Cooperation)**. The program supports inclusive economic development to benefit women and youth in 14 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Uniterra works with key private, public, and civil society partners to facilitate growth and change in markets that have the greatest impact on the marginalized. The following case study explores how Uniterra volunteers are supporting a major global apparel manufacturer to promote women's economic empowerment and the potential for bringing this experience to scale.

Worth more than three trillion dollars and employing more than 25 million workers, the global apparel industry offers potential for women's economic empowerment in terms of earning decent pay and accessing dignified and secure work. However, gender discrimination and bias prevents women from fully benefiting from the skills and leadership opportunities that the sector can offer.

Opportunities for women's economic empowerment

MAS Holdings is a world leader in the textile and apparel industry with a turnover of US \$1.6 billion. Headquartered in Sri Lanka, MAS has 50 facilities in 15 countries and provides employment for more than 87,000 people. MAS Intimates, the largest division of MAS Holdings, produces lingerie for many global brands and has over 34,000 employees, approximately 80% of whom are women.

In Sri Lanka, MAS is considered the gold standard for their long-standing commitment to the empowerment of their employees and the communities where they work. Needlepoint workers can earn an income in a safe and secure work environment, work towards a promotion, and access subsidized day care and meals, loans and counselling services.

"Uniterra volunteers permit us to access expert practitioners who are passionate about their work and motivated to make a difference in a short period of time, able to adapt to our priorities, bring new perspectives and fill our skill and knowledge gaps."

Shevanthi Fernando

General Manager Corporate Communication, CSR, and Women's Advocacy for MAS Intimates

Collaboration with Uniterra

MAS Intimates is currently seeking greater diversity in senior management. They are interested in hiring, retaining, engaging, and promoting more women into senior management positions. This will enable MAS Intimates to tap into women's perspectives on their business, bring diversity into decision-making and formulating strategy, address skills shortages, and provide female role models that inspire women throughout MAS Intimates. A key outcome would be a women-friendly environment for all and an improved path for women to grow within the company.

Emerging results and next steps

Uniterra has worked with MAS Intimates since 2016, placing two gender volunteers with the company. These volunteers have trained close to 800 executives and managers on the benefits of gender equality and inclusion for the business and the impact of unconscious gender bias on women's upward mobility and business efficiency. They are supporting MAS Intimates to conduct an organization-wide gender audit that includes cultural perceptions around inclusion and equity in the workplace and upward mobility for women throughout the company.

Based on the findings of the audit, Uniterra volunteers will provide support in the development of the MAS Intimates Campaign of Inclusion and Change. The campaign aims to promote enhanced innovation and inclusion as well as quality of work-life balance and equity. By 2018, MAS aims to have 35% women in management positions, increasing to 50% by 2025.



"I open up conversations about women's empowerment. I can offer a framework, share ideas, bring new perspectives to a problem, and give examples from elsewhere. You cannot solve a problem with the same perspective that created it."

Tamara Fleming

Labour relations consultant with the city of Edmonton and Uniterra Gender Volunteer placed with MAS Intimates

What we have learned

A large multinational corporation might not be the most obvious partner for an international development program that seeks to promote women's economic empowerment. But MAS Intimates has the commitment, resources, and influence to build the business case for women's economic empowerment and others to follow. Communicating clearly about the partnership has been important. Some stakeholders - both internal and external - have questioned the relevance of the the Uniterra program's working with a large corporate partner. Maintaining our shared focus on creating improved opportunities and a better environment for female workers has been important to keep the partnership on track.

MAS Intimates has always been technically innovative, but is less experienced in social innovations such as workplace diversity, gender, and inclusion. This is where volunteers can play a role that staff or consultants cannot. The Uniterra program's ability to mix short-term volunteers with highly specialized expertise and longer term volunteers embedded within partner organizations provides an opportunity to establish relationships built on trust. However, recruiting Canadian volunteers with the mix of skills needed to support gender training and strategy in a corporate environment has at times been a challenge. MAS Intimates' openness to relatively long recruitment timelines has allowed the Uniterra program to source the right volunteers to support their unique needs.

This partnership has the potential for promoting women's economic empowerment at scale. If successful, it can be a model for not only all of MAS but also inspire other actors in the apparel industry in Sri Lanka and around the world. MAS is a member of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) and UN Women's Empowerment Principles, both of which can be used as platforms where learnings can be shared globally. This partnership can ultimately make a difference not only to MAS but potentially to the industry as a whole.