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# Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-supported Childcare in Sri Lanka

## Case Study

**F. J. & G. de Saram**

Legal Services



**FJ&G de Saram**  
Attorneys-at-law  
Commenced 1841



*Creating Markets, Creating Opportunities*

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The IFC-led Women in Work (WiW) Program, a four-year program valued at US\$11.5mn and funded by the Australian Government, launched in April 2017.<sup>1</sup> It is IFC's largest, standalone country-based gender program, working with private sector companies to close gender gaps while improving business performance. The program, which benefits from multisector program design and works closely with the World Bank on research, tackles women's access to jobs and assets at the same time. It aims to increase women's workforce participation in Sri Lanka's private sector, create more and better jobs for women, and has the potential to increase company profits and drive overall economic growth. WiW also contributes to the vision of the Government of Sri Lanka where all citizens can achieve higher incomes and better standards of living by 2025.<sup>2</sup>

Access to quality childcare services is a key constraint on women's labor force participation. Following IFC's global Tackling Childcare initiative, this report highlights Sri Lanka-specific data, experiences and resources on employer-supported childcare and may not only be relevant to individual businesses but can also serve as a resource for special economic zones, Information Technology (IT) parks and other consortium models. This case study is one of 10 featured in the report, *"Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-supported Childcare in Sri Lanka"*, available at [www.ifc.org/tacklingchildcare](http://www.ifc.org/tacklingchildcare).

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2121 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20433

USA

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# F. J. & G. de Saram

## Pioneering Daycare as a Concept since 2000



F. J. & G. de Saram, established in 1841 in Colombo, is the oldest and one of the largest law firms in Sri Lanka. It is a full-service law firm providing legal services in all areas of corporate and commercial law to its clientele which includes leading business houses in Sri Lanka and the majority of the transnational corporations engaged in business in Sri Lanka, including Fortune 500 companies and multilateral agencies. The firm is also consistently ranked by many of the global and regional legal directories as a top tier firm in Sri Lanka in the practice areas of capital markets, project finance, banking and mergers and acquisitions.

The legal profession globally is male-dominated. According to a 2013 study of 86 countries (representing 80 percent of the world's population), women began to join the legal profession in significant numbers worldwide in the 2000s.<sup>3</sup> The situation is significantly different in Sri Lanka, where women are said to make up 65 percent among law professionals of the Bar Association of Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup>

**“Never wait for the organization to create a day care facility. If it’s a business case, it’s in your hands to convince the management, as all it takes is a small space and dedication of the parents to run it.”**

**Shehara Varia, Partner, Founding Parent of the F. J. & G. de Saram crèche**



Founders of the F.J. & G. de Saram Creche Facility

F. J. & G. de Saram has always had women among their workforce, with the first woman lawyer hired in the late 1950s. Today, the law firm has over 100 employees out of whom 64 percent are women. Eighteen years ago, two young attorneys and mothers Ayomi Aluwihare, professional assistant (currently, Precedent Partner), and Shehara Varia, professional assistant (currently, Partner), identified the need to open a daycare facility at the law firm as they wanted to continue their career and fulfill their roles as mothers while being productive at the workplace. The Precedent Partner at the time, Udaya Kadurugamuwa, was open to the suggestion and requested them to submit a business case. At the time, women made up about 68 percent of legal professionals in the firm and the business plan for the crèche was approved with immediate effect with the mothers having taken the ownership of setting up the crèche by themselves.

It all started by converting a room in the office and employing a qualified nursery teacher who is still running the daycare. The crèche caters to children from five months to any age above and is open both to children of male and female professionals working at the firm. Children who are less than two and a half year old are expected to bring their nannies to ensure that all needs are taken care of. The teacher is aware of the necessary skills and knowledge that are required to be imparted for each age group and supports the children with school homework which enables the parents to spend more quality time once they get home. To keep the children engaged, the crèche conducts different activities such as arts and crafts, playtime, celebrations, dance classes, etc.

**“Transport from school to the childcare facility is a critical part for the parents to manage. Thanks to flexible work hours, I can pick up and drop my daughter from school to the daycare, which helps me manage work effectively.”**

**Mother who uses the F. J. & G. de Saram crèche**

The facility is provided free of all costs to the employees who are professionals and can accommodate up to 10 children. Opening hours of the crèche are from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. as it is currently catering to school-going children. One of the key challenges faced while running the daycare was the retention of the crèche facility assistants. However, as the children grew older, their needs also evolved, and a call was made not to employ full-time working assistants.

**“The children have grown up together over many years and have built some long-lasting friendships despite moving into different schools.”**

**Mother who uses the F. J. & G. de Saram crèche**

In addition to the daycare facility, the firm provides extended maternity leave, work from home and flexible work hour arrangements upon request. For non-professional staff, there is a separate provision for childcare, at the discretion of finding an external facility on their own. F. J. & G. de Saram has noticed positive business benefits because of their childcare efforts. They have seen a close to 100 percent maternity return rate since the childcare facility was launched and the percentage of women professionals in the firm has remained high. In recognition of its support to working parents, the firm received the “Best Firm in Sri Lanka” award by Asia Women in Business Law Awards in 2011.

**“I have four children and took some time off and I re-joined the company. Thanks to the daycare facility I can focus and perform at my absolute best.”**

**Mother of four children who use the F. J. & G. de Saram crèche**



1 IFC. 2017. Government of Australia Partner to Support More and Better Jobs for Women in Sri Lanka.  
2 Office of the Prime Minister. 2017. Vision 2025. A Country Enriched. See page 26.  
3 <https://thepractice.law.harvard.edu/article/women-in-the-global-legal-profession/>  
4 Bar Association of Sri Lanka. Number of women lawyer members of Bar Association of Sri Lanka by year. 2017.

## IFC Women in Work Program

IFC, Level 15, NDB-EDB Tower  
42, Nawam Mawatha  
Colombo 2  
Sri Lanka

Email: [womeninwork@ifc.org](mailto:womeninwork@ifc.org)

December 2018