



PATHFINDER

Transforming Private-Sector Engagement for Gender Equality

Lessons from the USAID/Egypt
Women's Economic and Social
Empowerment Program
(WESEP)

Summary

The USAID/Egypt **Women's Economic and Social Empowerment Program (WESEP)**, implemented by Pathfinder International from 2022 to 2025, partnered with private-sector companies, government institutions, civil society organizations, and communities to increase women's economic participation. Rather than treating private-sector engagement as a corporate social responsibility activity, WESEP positioned companies as strategic partners in advancing gender equality through workplace reform, inclusive leadership, and gender-responsive policies. This learning brief shares key implementation challenges, adaptive strategies, and lessons that can inform future private sector partnerships for women's economic empowerment.

Context

Egypt's private sector plays a significant role in driving economic growth and creating employment opportunities across industries such as agribusiness, renewable energy, ready-made garments, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, construction, and engineering. As one of the country's largest employers, the private sector is well positioned to advance women's economic participation and promote more inclusive workplaces.

Although women represent approximately half of Egypt's population, they account for only 18% of the labor force.¹ Despite national efforts to promote gender equality, women continue to face significant barriers to entering, remaining in, and advancing within the workforce. These barriers include limited access to education and skills development, restrictive social and cultural norms, gender wage disparities, workplace sexual harassment, and a lack of supportive workplace policies that enable women to thrive and advance into leadership roles.

In response to these challenges, Egypt's Vision 2030 and the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030 prioritize women's economic, social, political, and legal empowerment. Together, these national strategies aim to increase women's labor force participation, expand leadership opportunities across all sectors, and create more inclusive workplaces where women can participate equally alongside men.²

Within this national context, the USAID/Egypt **Women's Economic and Social Empowerment Program (WESEP)** partnered with the private sector to strengthen gender-responsive workplace policies, promote safer and more inclusive work environments, and demonstrate how investing in gender equality can contribute to both organizational performance and broader social and economic development.

USAID/Egypt Women's Economic and Social Empowerment Program

In line with Egypt's national priorities, the USAID/Egypt **Women's Economic and Social Empowerment Program (WESEP)** strengthened women's economic opportunities by increasing financial inclusion, improving workplace conditions, and addressing barriers to women's participation in the private sector.

Implemented by **Pathfinder International**, WESEP worked in **Cairo, Giza, Behira, Minya, Assiut, Sohag, and Qena**, partnering with government, private-sector, and community stakeholders. The project focused on the agribusiness and ready-made garment sectors, where improving workplace policies and practices created greater opportunities for women.

Beyond the workplace, WESEP supported social norm change through national and community media initiatives. Its television partnership, **Taht el Wesaya (Under Guardianship)**, reached more than **60 million viewers** and contributed to national conversations on women's rights and gender equality. Together, these efforts demonstrated that sustainable women's economic empowerment required coordinated action across workplaces, communities, institutions, and public systems.

Working closely with Government of Egypt counterparts and implementing partners, WESEP:

- 1 Improved the work environment for women in the private-sector economy,
- 2 Expanded women's financial inclusion, and
- 3 Reduced the socioeconomic impacts of violence against women through a comprehensive, inclusive, and innovative package of interventions.



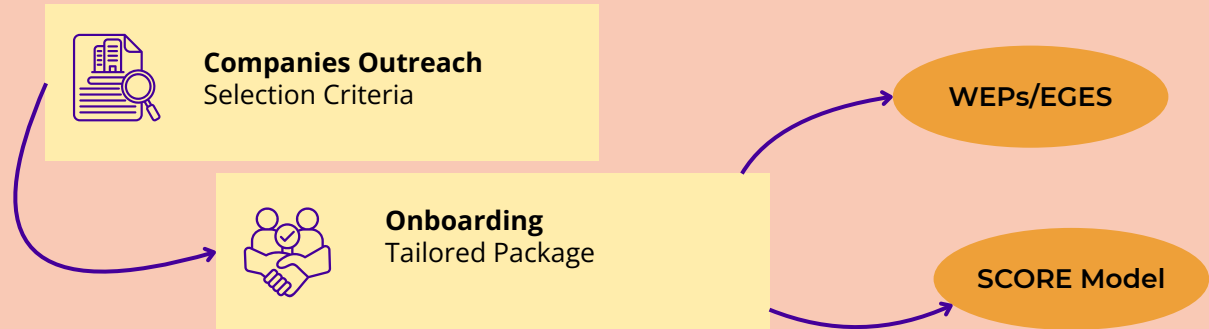
Private-Sector Engagement (PSE) Journey

Private-sector engagement was central to WESEP's strategy for advancing women's economic empowerment. Rather than engaging companies primarily through traditional corporate social responsibility initiatives, WESEP positioned the private sector as a strategic partner in creating safer, more inclusive, and gender-responsive workplaces.

Building on needs assessment findings, WESEP saw that improving women's economic participation required change at multiple levels. In addition to supporting companies in strengthening workplace policies and practices, the project promoted inclusive leadership, fostered organizational culture change, and engaged both women and men in addressing workplace gender norms. This approach encouraged companies to view gender equality as an investment in employee well-being, organizational performance, and sustainability.

WESEP's private-sector engagement strategy focused on building partnerships that supported institutional change. Through workplace assessments, technical assistance, capacity strengthening, and implementation support, the project helped participating companies identify barriers, strengthen gender-responsive policies, and create more equitable work environments. These experiences informed the lessons presented in this learning brief and demonstrated the value of embedding gender equality within organizational systems.

Private Sector Engagement Strategy



Financial Inclusion

- Investment training for management
- Financial literacy for blue-collar workers
- Linkages with financial service providers
- Community Days for workers and families
- Awareness raising messages for all employees
- Training of trainers for scale-up

Violence against Women (VAW) Package

- VAW for management teams
- VAW for blue-collar women
- Male engagement camps for blue-collar workers
- Community Days for workers and families
- Awareness raising messages for all employees
- Training of trainers for scale-up



Men participating in a VAW session during a men's engagement camp.

Private-sector engagement at the management level

WESEP strengthened companies' capacity to assess gender-based gaps in internal policies, practices, and workplace environments. Through consultancy services from WESEP's implementing partners, participating companies conducted gender diagnostics studies and identified improvement areas through gender inclusivity action plans.

WESEP also supported companies in obtaining the Egyptian Gender Equity Seal (EGES, Box 1), and becoming signatories to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs, Box 2).³ This included supporting companies to implement gender-sensitive recruitment which embeds principles of equity and inclusion throughout hiring processes, from job advertising and candidate sourcing to interviewing and selection. This practical application creates fairer employment opportunities for women. In addition, the International Labor Organization's Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises (SCORE) model helped companies identify workplace environment challenges and gaps (Box 3).

WESEP then provided technical assistance to help companies implement action plans and strengthen the capacity of management, human resources staff, and supervisors to put gender-responsive policies into practice through gender-sensitive recruitment. This embedded principles of equity and inclusion throughout hiring, from job advertising and candidate sourcing to interviewing and selection, creating fairer employment opportunities for women. Together, these efforts strengthened workplace systems and advanced gender-responsive management practices.

Private sector engagement at the employee level

Creating gender-responsive workplaces requires engagement beyond management. WESEP complemented leadership interventions with activities that strengthened employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes to promote inclusive workplace cultures.

WESEP trained women and men on gender equality, financial literacy, workplace rights, anti-VAW principles, and sexual harassment prevention. Engaging both women and men helped challenge workplace stereotypes, promote shared responsibility for gender equality, and reinforce respectful workplace behaviors.

The project also supported women to strengthen leadership skills and confidence while encouraging companies to create opportunities for women's professional growth. Together, employee and management-level interventions reinforced workplace policy reforms and contributed to more inclusive organizational cultures.

BOX 1

The Egyptian Gender Equity Seal (EGES)

The **Egyptian Gender Equity Seal (EGES)** is a certification process using the World Bank Gender Equity Model (GEM), which aims to promote gender equity and eliminate gender discrimination and practices that hinder the promotion of women in companies. The GEM model has been successfully implemented in several countries, and it focuses on four key areas: **Recruitment: Career Development, Family-Work Balance, and Sexual Harassment Policies.**

The GEM process was revived and adapted for the Egyptian context through the EGES. Launched in 2021 with support from the World Bank, the National Council for Women (NCW), and the United Kingdom Embassy in Egypt, WESEP partnered with NCW to institutionalize the EGES unit within its Women Business Development Center (WBDC). To ensure long-term sustainability, WESEP developed a certification system with standard operating procedures to support private-sector companies, ensure compliance with EGES standards, and enable ongoing certification. By strengthening NCW's capacity to manage the certification process, WESEP established a sustainable national mechanism for advancing gender equity. The first companies certified through the pilot were Vodafone Egypt and Commercial International Bank (CIB).

Through this partnership, participating companies were better equipped to adopt gender-responsive workplace policies and practices while preparing for certification. By strengthening NCW's capacity to manage and sustain the process, EGES became a nationally owned mechanism that continues to support workplace gender equality beyond the life of the project. The first companies certified through the pilot were Vodafone Egypt and Commercial International Bank (CIB).



WESEP participants at an EGES Ceremony.

BOX 2

Women's Empowerment Principles

The Women's Empowerment Principles seek to point the way to best practice by elaborating the gender dimension of **corporate responsibility, the UN Global Compact, and business' role in sustainable development**. As well as being a useful guide for business, the Principles seek to inform other stakeholders, including governments, in their engagement with business.



Women participating in a financial inclusion and anti-VAW session.

WESEP KEY INSIGHT

Gender equality in the workplace is achieved through stronger systems, inclusive leadership, and the active participation of both women and men.

Principle 1: Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.

Principle 2: Treat all women and men fairly at work-respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.

Principle 3: Ensure the health, safety, and well-being of all women and men workers.

Principle 4: Promote education, training, and professional development for women.

Principle 5: Implement enterprise development, supply chain, and marketing practices that empower women.

Principle 6: Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.

BOX 3

Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises (SCORE)

ILO's SCORE Programme improves productivity and working conditions in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The key intervention of the programme is SCORE Training.

SCORE Training focuses on developing cooperative working relations resulting in shared benefits for enterprise owners and those who work there.

The SCORE Training modules cover Workplace Cooperation, Quality Improvement, Resource Efficiency, Workforce Management, Occupational Safety and Health at Work, Lean Manufacturing, Gender Equality, Responsible Business, Hospitality Coaching, and Working Time. Some modules also respond to crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Throughout implementation, WESEP adapted its private-sector engagement approach to address operational, organizational, and social challenges while maintaining strong partnerships with participating companies. As the project worked with diverse private-sector partners, it encountered varying levels of leadership commitment, differences in organizational capacity, and deep rooted workplace gender norms.

Recognizing that lasting workplace change requires the participation of everyone, WESEP engaged both women and men through awareness raising, dialogue, and capacity-strengthening activities that promoted respectful workplaces, challenged harmful gender norms, and fostered shared responsibility for advancing gender equality. The experiences below highlight the key implementation challenges encountered, and the strategies used to address them.

Addressing management concerns to generate program buy-in

Securing management commitment was an early challenge. A limited number of women in leadership positions and concerns about production disruptions initially affected participation. WESEP responded by working closely with management to align interventions with operational priorities, demonstrating how gender-responsive workplaces contribute to employee well-being, performance, and sustainability.

Engaging employees to support organizational change

WESEP saw that policy reform alone was insufficient to change workplace culture. By engaging women and men in awareness raising, capacity strengthening, and workplace dialogue, the project fostered shared ownership and encouraged more respectful and inclusive workplace environments.

WESEP IN ACTION

WESEP transformed private-sector engagement by helping companies strengthen workplace systems, invest in inclusive leadership, improve women's financial inclusion, engage employees in advancing gender equality, and create safer, more supportive workplaces that benefit both people and business.

Results



200,000 WOMEN gained access to employment opportunities and digital financial services.



60 Million+ digital viewers reached through the project.



3 years of IMPLEMENTATION supporting women's economic and social empowerment.



The project was implemented across seven governorates in Egypt.

Lessons Learned & Recommendations

WESEP's experience demonstrates that meaningful private-sector engagement requires more than supporting community initiatives. Sustainable workplace reform is achieved when companies strengthen their internal systems, leadership commitment, and organizational culture alongside employee engagement.

1. Leadership commitment is essential.

Early engagement with management builds ownership, strengthens accountability, and creates an enabling environment for workplace reform.

2. Tailored approaches improve implementation.

Companies differ in needs, priorities, and operational realities. Adapting interventions to company context increases participation and supports long-term institutional change.

3. Inclusive change requires engaging everyone.

Lasting organizational change depends on the participation of both women and men. Combining policy reform with employee engagement helps shift workplace norms and reinforces gender-responsive practices.

Conclusion

These learnings highlight the **value of building partnerships** with the private sector that prioritize institutional change alongside community impact. As organizations increasingly recognize the impact **workplace gender equality** has on improving performance, employee well-being, and business resilience, WESEP's experience offers insights for future programs seeking safer, and more equitable workplaces in Egypt and beyond.

Endnotes

1. World Bank, Social Norms and Female Labor Force Participation in Egypt (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), accessed June 25, 2026, 1–2.
2. National Council for Women, National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030, 9–25, accessed July 5, 2026.
3. Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), About the Women's Empowerment Principles, accessed July 15, 2026.
4. International Labour Organization (ILO), Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises (SCORE) Programme, accessed July 15, 2026.
5. UN Women and United Nations Global Compact, Women's Empowerment Principles Gender Gap Analysis Tool, accessed August 15, 2026.
6. World Bank, Gender Equity Seal: A Key to Strengthening Egypt's Private Sector, accessed July 15, 2025.

Contributors

Mostafa Abdelfattah
Hadeer Arafa
Ann Kloforn Bloome

Elizabeth Futrell
Mariam Hanna
Dina Kafafi

About Pathfinder International

For nearly 70 years, Pathfinder International has been a catalyst for systems transformation, inclusive growth, and resilient communities. With a global footprint spanning Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, we invest in women and girls by expanding access to essential health products and services, unlocking leadership pathways, and strengthening economic participation. By partnering with civil society, governments, and the private sector, we scale women-led innovations that deliver sustainable systems of support, while generating measurable impact with the goal to ensure every woman has the agency to shape her future and lead a healthy, fulfilling life.

Suggested Citation

Pathfinder International. *Transforming Private-Sector Engagement for Gender Equality: Lessons from the USAID/Egypt Women's Economic and Social Empowerment Program (WESEP).* Cairo, Egypt: Pathfinder International, 2025.

Acknowledgements

This publication was developed using project information and data from the USAID/Egypt Women's Economic and Social Empowerment Program (WESEP), funded by the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)**. WESEP was led by Pathfinder International, in partnership with **Ahead of the Curve, Finbi, Safe Egypt. Gender and Legal Expert House (GELEH), and Baseera**, from 2022 to 2025.

LEARN MORE

pathfinder.org

PATHFINDER