



## Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality in Apparel Sector in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** The apparel sector is a major driver of employment in Sri Lanka, with women making up a substantial share of the workforce. Despite this significant representation, a persistent gender gap remains in terms of equal opportunities and access to resources within industry. This study explores whether the Sri Lankan apparel sector provides equitable treatment to male and female workers by identifying key challenges and opportunities for achieving gender equality. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data through an inductive research design. A total of sixty respondents were selected from the Biyagama Export Processing Zone via convenience sampling to collect primary data through a structured survey and key informant interviews. The identified challenges are categorized under socio-economic and institutional domains. The findings underscore persistent barriers while acknowledging that select leading apparel companies have begun taking meaningful steps toward gender equality; however, the broader industry landscape remains largely stagnant. Prominent challenges include limited earnings for female workers, heavier workloads and poorer working conditions for women, safety concerns during nighttime transportation and widespread silence around sexual harassment. Although leadership opportunities are formally available to all workers, gender-based constraints disproportionately hinder female employees from advancing. The results of this study can inform the development of policies and programs, including advocacy for labor law reform, improvements to workplace regulations, and practical interventions such as workshops, training programs, and women's empowerment and capacity-building initiatives. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the progress and the persistent gaps in achieving gender equality in the Sri Lankan apparel sector.

**Index Terms:** *Apparel Sector, Challenges and Opportunities, Gender Equality, Women Development, Women Empowerment*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The apparel sector is a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's economy, contributing significantly to export earnings and employment generation. Over the past few decades, the industry has created job opportunities particularly for women, who make up the majority of the workforce (International Finance Corporation, 2023). However, despite their substantial representation, gender inequality remains a persistent issue, affecting career progression, wages, and overall working conditions (International Labour Organization, 2019). Globally, nearly 60% of garment workers are women, with that figure reaching approximately 80% in some regions. Asia is the largest employer of

garment-sector workers, with an estimated 42 million women employed in the industry across the continent world" (UNDP, 2018). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) emphasizes the need for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, reinforcing the urgency of addressing gender disparities in the workforce (United Nations, 2023). According to the International Journal of Human Resource Studies, gender equality in the workplace means that all individuals (International Labour Organization, 2023). When examining labor force participation in Sri Lanka, 70.5% of the total labor force is male and 32.1% is female (DCS, 2022). Interestingly, within the apparel industry specifically, approximately 70% of workers are female a stark contrast to the broader labor market (Dissanayake, 2024).

Gender equality has been described as "a fundamental human rights and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable can access and receive equal rewards, resources, and opportunities regardless of gender, a critical pathway toward economic equality and social advancement.

Despite the apparel sector's economic significance in Sri Lanka, a notable gap exists in comprehensive and systematic research focused on gender-related challenges and opportunities within the industry. Challenges, broadly defined, are obstacles and difficulties that individuals face in the course of their work. Hollnagel (1999) defines a barrier as any obstacle, hindrance, or obstruction that prevents anticipated actions or diminishes their impact. Gender-specific challenges further compound these difficulties, particularly for women. Hanek and Garcia (2022) noted that women face workplace barriers rooted in prescriptive gender norms and stereotypes, which affect their leadership capabilities, decision-making, negotiation skills, and overall influence. Similarly, Setyaningrum and colleagues (2024) emphasized that women's leadership careers are obstructed by gender biases, stereotypes, and structural barriers, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies to dismantle these inequities and foster inclusive work environments.

Gender-based challenges are frequently rooted in patriarchal tendencies in how men treat women in professional settings (Msibi, 2020). Addressing these challenges is critical for the long-term advancement and sustainability of the apparel sector. Breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting equal opportunities are fundamental steps in this process. While the apparel industry is a key economic driver and a major employer, empirical research specifically targeting gender biases, inequalities, and challenges within the Sri Lankan context remains limited. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring whether the Sri Lankan apparel sector provides equal treatment to male and female workers and identifying the specific challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality. By reviewing existing literature and analyzing primary data, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of gender-related dynamics in the sector, recognizing that gender equality in the workplace is not merely aspirational but essential to sustainable development.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research employed a mixed-methods design, combining both qualitative and quantitative data within an inductive research framework. The study drew on both secondary and primary data sources. Secondary data included peer-reviewed academic papers, books, institutional reports, government publications, and relevant websites. Primary data were collected through a structured survey and semi-structured interviews conducted with male and female workers at the study site.

The study area was the Biyagama Export Processing Zone (BEPZ), one of the most prominent industrial zones in Sri Lanka. The target population consisted of entry-level and mid-level male and female workers employed within the BEPZ. A total of 60 workers from two apparel manufacturing workplaces were selected using a convenience sampling technique, a nonprobability approach appropriate for this mixed-methods study, given practical constraints, including limited research time and restricted organizational access. Thirty participants were selected from each workplace.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic and descriptive analysis to identify recurring patterns and contextual insights. Quantitative data were processed using Microsoft Excel, with statistical summaries and graphical tools used to interpret trends and draw comparisons across demographic groups.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic information was collected to characterize the respondent population. The analysis revealed challenges categorized under socio-economic and institutional dimensions, as well as opportunities available for advancing gender equality within the sector.

#### 3.1 Demographic Information

Demographic data provide valuable context for interpreting the study's findings. The sample comprised a female-majority workforce, with women accounting for 67% of respondents and men accounting for the remaining 33%. Table 1 presents a detailed breakdown of the sample's demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Gender Composition of the Sample

| Age Composition |        |          | Marital Status |        |          | Level of Education |        |          |
|-----------------|--------|----------|----------------|--------|----------|--------------------|--------|----------|
|                 | Male % | Female % |                | Male % | Female % |                    | Male % | Female % |
| 20-24           | 15     | 15       | Married        | 55     | 50       | Up to O/L          | 85     | 55       |
| 25-29           | 35     | 27.5     | Unmarried      | 45     | 35       | Up to A/L          | 15     | 32.5     |
| 30-39           | 40     | 32.5     | Divorced       | -      | 10       | Diploma            | -      | 5        |
| 40+             | 10     | 25       | Widowhood      | -      | 5        | Degree             | -      | 7        |

Source: Field Survey, February, 2024

As shown in Table 1, most of the workforce falls in the 30–39 age group. Most male respondents (55%) and half of female respondents (50%) are married. A significant proportion of both male (85%) and female (55%) workers have completed education through the Ordinary Level (O/L) exam. Female workers show higher rates of Advanced Level (A/L) completion (32.5%) compared to male workers (15%). A small proportion of female workers (5%) hold diplomas, and 7% hold degrees.

In terms of occupation level, most workers (75%) hold entry-level positions such as machine operators, production line workers, helpers, jumpers, trainers, and printers. Among these, 72.5% of entry-level workers are female, and 85% are male. The largest share of the workforce, 37.5% of female and 45% of male workers has been employed for six to ten years, reflecting considerable tenure within the sector.

#### 4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The barriers to achieving gender equality can be broadly categorized into socio-economic and institutional challenges, as detailed below.

##### 4.1 Low Salaries and Limited Earnings for Female Workers

Fig.1. displays the salary distribution of workers by gender. The largest share of respondents, both male and female falls below the LKR 35,000 salary threshold, indicating that a significant portion of the workforce earns relatively low wages. The modal salary reported was LKR 28,000, with a median of LKR 35,500. Only 10% of female respondents and 15% of male respondents at the mid-level earned between LKR 50,000 and LKR 65,000 representing the smallest segment of the workforce. The data consistently show that supervisory roles, which are the highest-paying positions within this salary range, are disproportionately occupied by men, while the majority of lower-paid, entry-level positions are filled by women.

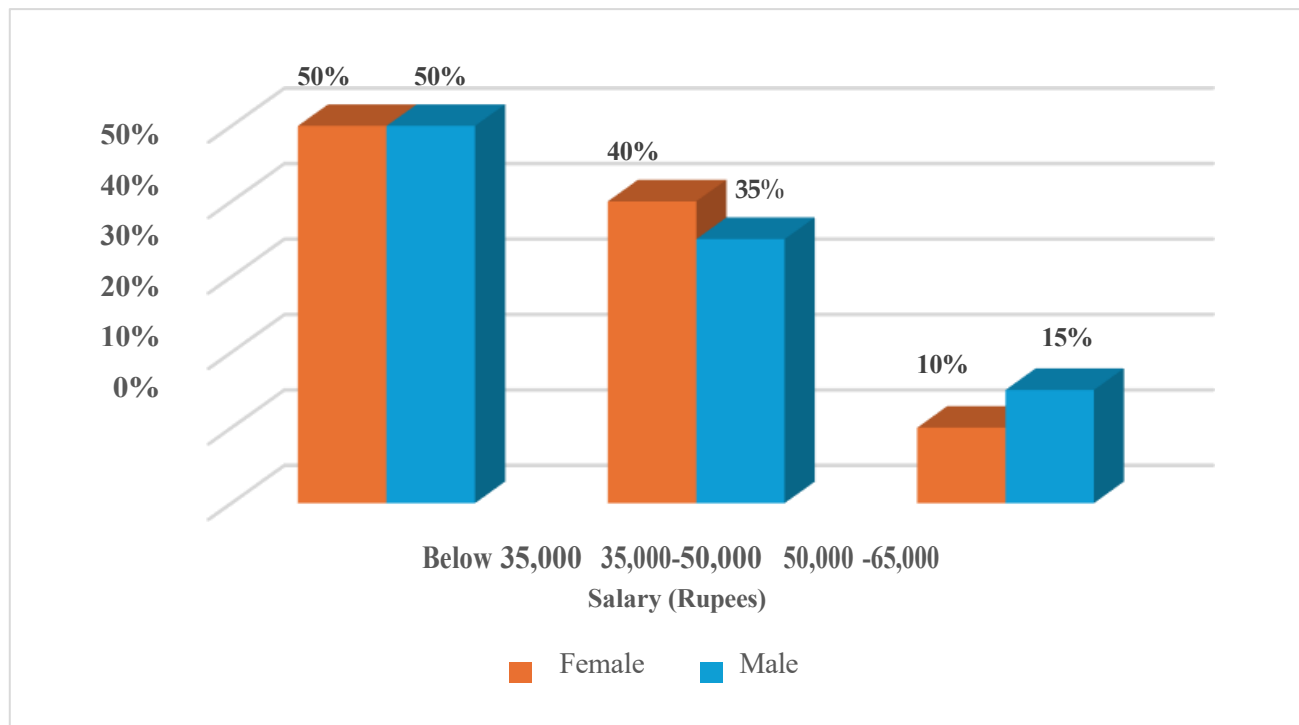


Fig.1. Salary Ranges of Workers by Gender

Table 2: Economic Challenges faced by Workers by Gender

| Expenditures                       | Male % | Female %     |
|------------------------------------|--------|--------------|
| Consumption of food                | 29.1%  | <b>31.4%</b> |
| Children's educational expenditure | 14.5%  | <b>15.3%</b> |
| Expenditure on health care         | 16.4%  | <b>17.8%</b> |
| Paying high rents                  | 18.2%  | 10.2%        |
| Other expenditure matters          | 21.8   | <b>25.4%</b> |

Source: Field Survey, February 2024

As illustrated in Table 2, female workers face greater economic strain across nearly all expenditure categories, including food, healthcare, and their children's education. The gender-based income disparity is compounded by restrictions on female workers performing overtime after 10:00 p.m., which further limits their earning potential relative to their male counterparts. This study's key finding is that female workers face significantly greater economic challenges as a result of lower base salaries and constrained earning opportunities.

## **5. INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES**

Institutional challenges refer to barriers within the organizational environment that impede the journey toward gender equality. The following key findings emerged from the research.

### ***5.1 Workload and Poor Working Conditions***

From a gender perspective, over 37% of female respondents reported dissatisfaction with their workplace conditions, compared to 30% of male respondents, while others remained neutral. The primary driver of female dissatisfaction is the prevalence of jobs requiring sustained standing or sitting without back support, particularly among machine operators. These conditions have a direct and measurable impact on workers' physical health and well-being. While the proportion of dissatisfied workers may appear relatively modest in percentage terms, the health implications are serious enough to warrant careful attention.

### ***5.2 Safety Concerns During Nighttime Transportation***

Approximately 75% of female workers reported safety concerns when traveling home after night shifts. The absence of adequate, safe transportation options disproportionately affects women and reveals a critical gap in workplace safety provisions. These concerns encompass fears of harassment, physical assault, and threats to personal safety. One female worker, aged 39, shared her experience:

*"Yes, we do face safety issues as women. One night, when I was returning home after a night shift, the transport dropped me near my house, but I still had to walk a short distance along a narrow road. During that walk, my chain was snatched, it was a really frightening experience."*

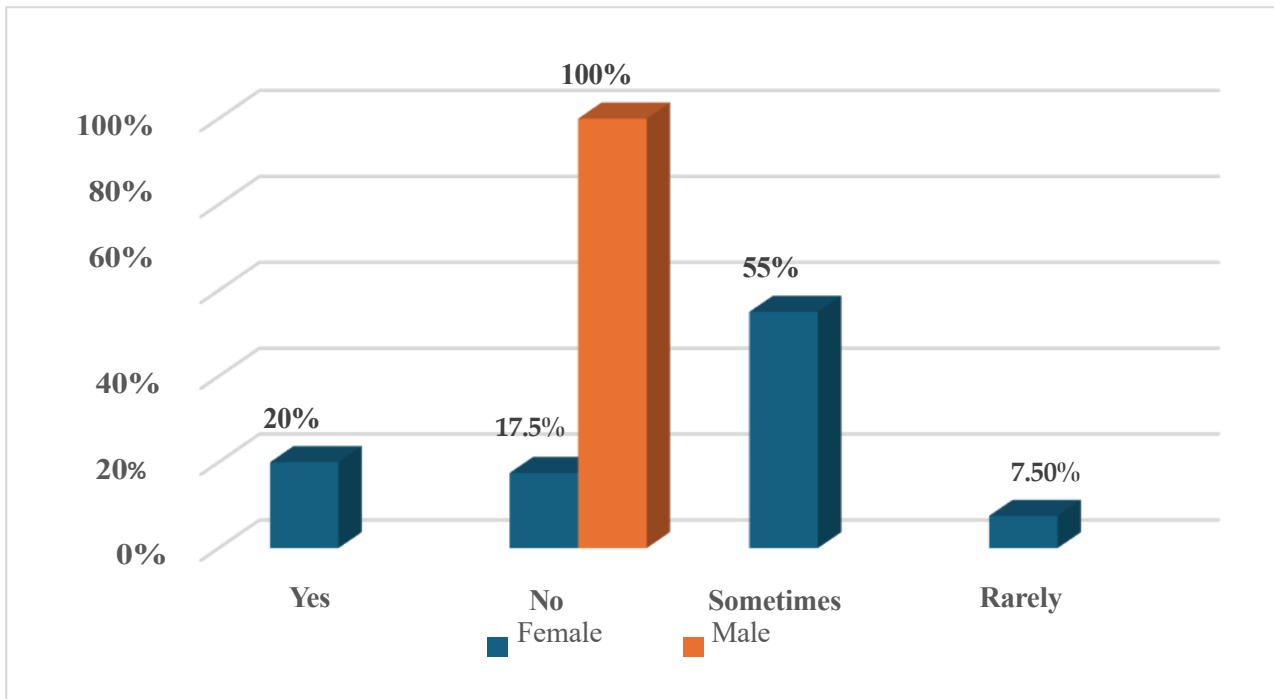


Fig. 2. Safety Situation When Coming Back After a Night Shift

### 5.3 Silence on Sexual Harassment

The survey data reveal that male workers reported no personal experience with sexual harassment. Among female respondents, verbal harassment was the most reported form, cited by 48.3% of respondents. This includes inappropriate suggestions, sexually explicit jokes, and unwelcome discussions of sexual topics. Non-verbal harassment such as offensive gestures, facial expressions, or intimidating body language was reported by 43.3% of respondents.

The data indicate that sexual harassment is widespread in these workplace environments and tends to occur primarily among individuals at the same hierarchical level. Despite its prevalence, a striking 75% of respondents who experienced harassment chose not to report it, citing fears of retaliation, social stigma, and a lack of confidence in the reporting process. Interestingly, many workers expressed the belief that if they did report to the Human Resources (HR) department, an investigation would take place, and appropriate action would be taken yet they remained hesitant to come forward. This disconnect between policy and practice represents a significant barrier to achieving SDG 5.

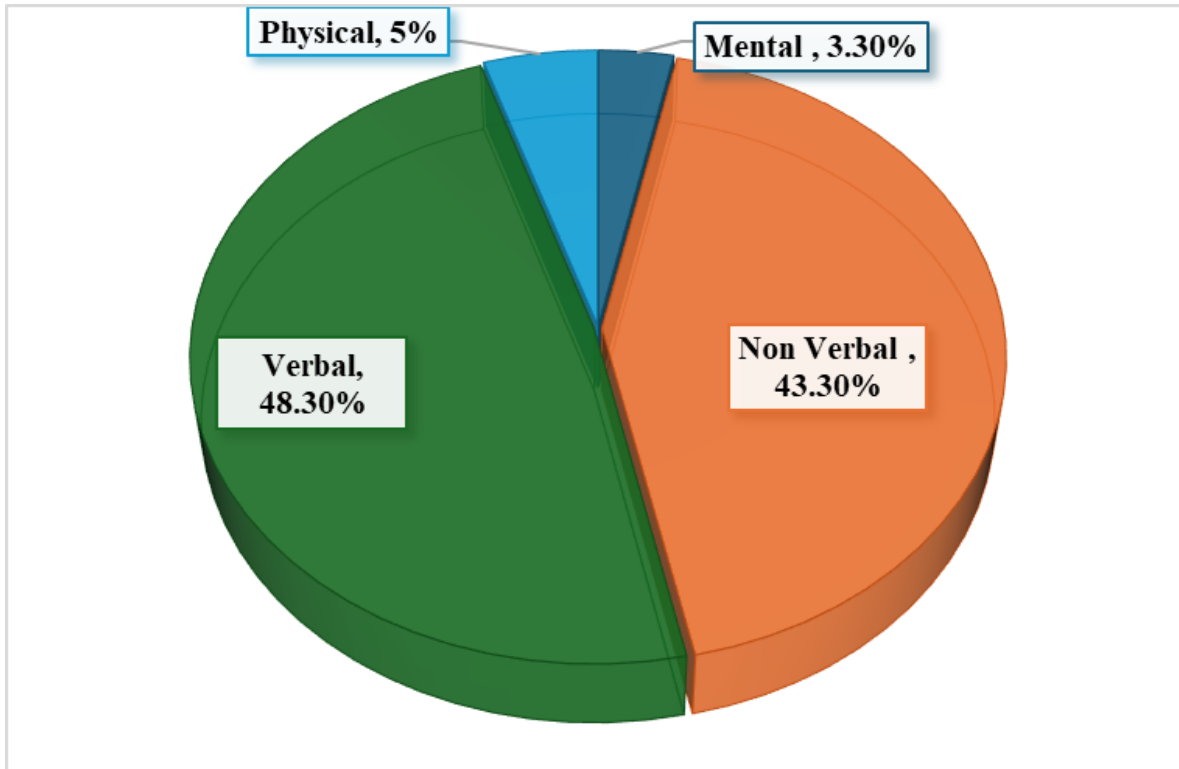


Fig.3.Types of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

#### ***5.4 Gender Stereotypes and Barriers to Leadership***

The qualitative data analysis revealed persistent societal norms and stereotypes that frame leadership roles in the apparel industry as more appropriate for men. These ingrained biases influence hiring decisions and promotion practices, limiting women's pathways to advancement. One female group leader, a mother of two shared a compelling account. She initially joined the organization as a machine operator while she was single and, through consistently strong performance, was promoted first to team leader and then to group leader. After getting married and having children, she believes she has been passed over for a supervisory promotion due to gender bias. She noted that her supervisors question her ability to perform effectively or maintain a healthy work-life balance because of her caregiving responsibilities.

#### ***5.5 Work-Life Balance Challenges***

Women in the apparel sector face significant challenges in balancing professional responsibilities with caregiving duties and household obligations. The lack of supportive structures such as flexible work arrangements and on-site childcare facilities disproportionately impacts their ability to pursue career advancement. One female worker shared that she had joined her workplace six years prior, worked diligently, and was even promoted to team leader. However, after having her first child, she found it impossible to balance childcare with her work responsibilities and ultimately resigned. She has since joined the company again as a new employee and expressed regret at being unable to continue her leadership trajectory due to the lack of institutional support.

#### ***5.6 Gender Bias Among Female Colleagues***

An unexpected finding of this study is the presence of gender bias among female workers themselves. Many women reportedly resist or undermine the advancement of other women, often by

spreading rumors or false allegations including claims that female supervisors received promotions in exchange for sexual favors. This dynamic adds an additional layer of stress for women in leadership roles. A male supervisor described a situation in which a female colleague from another plant of the same company was promoted to a supervisory position, only to face a campaign of rumors and mistreatment from other female machine-line workers, ultimately forcing her to leave her role.

## **6. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY**

Beyond identifying challenges, this study also sought to highlight existing opportunities for advancing gender equality within Sri Lanka's apparel sector.

### ***6.1 Equal Access to Leadership Opportunities***

A majority of respondents (71.7%) reported that their workplaces provide equal leadership opportunities regardless of gender. Workers who responded affirmatively noted that all individuals have equal access to leadership roles based on skills, initiative, and experience, not gender. For example, a young female employee described starting as a machine operator and, after six months of strong performance, being promoted to team leader. She subsequently advanced to group leader within two years. 28.3% of workers who reported unequal access indicated that bias in leadership selection exists and is often driven by individuals in higher positions who create a tilted playing field. Some workers also noted that leadership opportunities are, in some cases, contingent on personal preferences of those in authority.

### ***6.2 Women's Empowerment Initiatives***

The study found that women's empowerment efforts are concentrated in one of the two workplaces studied, a leading apparel company. Approximately half of the respondents, all from this company, reported access to the following programs:

- Training and skill development programs
- Competition and award ceremonies
- Educational opportunities and low-interest educational loans

Notable programs include the Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement (P.A.C.E.) program, which equips female workers with life and professional skills through continuous learning. The company also runs a women's empowerment competition, which celebrates women for their work performance, talents, and abilities. A monthly marketplace, which provides self-employed female workers with a platform to sell handmade goods including sewn items and baked goods followed by award ceremonies to recognize their contributions. In addition, the company offers free evening courses in English, design, and baking for workers who wish to develop new skills outside of working hours. Despite the availability of these programs, participation remains low due to demanding work schedules and workers' desire to rest after long shifts.

### ***6.3 Healthcare and Workplace Support***

Medical facilities are provided at both workplaces. On-site nurses are available to address workers' health concerns, and a physician visits the first workplace twice a month. Workers can consult the doctor and obtain prescribed medications on-site. Employees who regularly handle chemicals receive

monthly medical check-ups to monitor their health status. Regarding maternity support, both workplaces comply with Sri Lankan labor laws in providing maternity benefits. The leading apparel company also offers pregnant workers the option to use seated machinery rather than standing equipment and provides a rest room for workers who feel unwell during their shifts.

## 7. DISCUSSION

A central finding of this research is that low salaries and restricted earning opportunities represent the most significant economic challenge facing female workers in the Sri Lankan apparel sector. Despite the garment industry's pivotal role as a driver of national export revenue, workers particularly women continue to receive wages that are insufficient to meet basic living needs. According to data visible in Clean Clothes Campaign (2021), Sri Lankan garment workers earn lower wages than their counterparts in comparable Asian economies, including Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar, and India. The primary data from this study confirm that 50% of workers across both genders earn below LKR 35,000 per month, with female workers further constrained by overtime restrictions. Madurawala (2017) observed that while labor laws mandate equal pay, women in the global garment sector are often concentrated in low-wage production roles and systematically excluded from supervisory positions a pattern clearly reflected in the findings of this study. The resulting income insufficiency disproportionately affects female workers' ability to cover basic expenditures, including food, healthcare, and their children's education.

With respect to sexual harassment, the findings are consistent with established global patterns. Sexual harassment and workplace violence have been endemic for women in the garment industry worldwide (International Labour Organization, 2023). A survey conducted by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) involving nine Sri Lankan businesses found that nearly 68% of female participants had experienced some form of workplace violence or harassment (IFC, 2016). This study corroborates those findings and adds that the majority of affected workers choose to remain silent. An ILO survey of 500 women (2016) found that three-fifths would be willing to work if guaranteed freedom from sexual harassment a striking statistic that underscores the direct economic impact of harassment on female labor force participation.

On the opportunities side, the findings point to genuine, if uneven, progress. In both workplaces, the majority of respondents acknowledged that equal access to promotions and leadership roles exist formally, with advancement based on skills, initiative, and experience. However, 71.7% of workers recognized equal promotion policies, while gender stereotypes particularly around motherhood continue to hinder women's real-world advancement. Work-life balance challenges, including the lack of childcare support, have caused women to leave leadership roles after having children. Positive findings include robust healthcare provisions at both workplaces a contrast to the challenges documented by Thatshayini and Rajini (2018), who identified health and safety as persistent concerns in the Sri Lankan apparel industry.

Women's empowerment programs, such as "Abhimaani" and "Diriya Pola," represent meaningful corporate-led interventions aligned with the ILO's (2021) recommendations for closing gender gaps in the workplace. However, these initiatives are limited to one workplace, and even there, participation rates are low due to demanding work schedules and family obligations. The absence of

comparable initiatives at the second workplace underscores the importance of industry-wide commitment to gender equality, rather than leaving such progress to individual companies.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This research set out to identify the challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality within Sri Lanka's apparel sector. The major challenges identified include low salaries and limited earnings for female workers, a heavier socio-economic burden on women, poor working conditions, safety risks associated with nighttime transportation, widespread silence around sexual harassment, and gender bias in promotion decisions. Concurrently, the study identified meaningful opportunities for progress, including formally equal access to leadership roles at both workplaces studied, and a range of women's empowerment, skill development, and healthcare programs offered at one leading company.

The findings reveal that, despite notable progress among some leading apparel firms, gender-based challenges continue to prevent workers particularly women from fully realizing their potential. Structural factors such as workplace culture, entrenched gender norms, and unequal access to leadership remain significant barriers. Nevertheless, the leading company in this study demonstrates encouraging trends through the implementation of gender-responsive initiatives.

To overcome these challenges, gender-sensitive policies and practices must be adopted across the industry. This includes reviewing existing labor laws particularly those governing working hours, overtime, and occupational safety to ensure gender neutrality and fairness. Establishing gender-sensitive workplace policies that promote equal access to training, overtime, and leadership development will be critical to creating more inclusive environments. Enforcing anti-discrimination policies with confidential reporting mechanisms can help protect workers against gender-based harassment and bias. Expanding continuous education, skill development, and career advancement opportunities for women will further strengthen their position within the industry. Capacity-building programs, workshops, and awareness campaigns can deepen both male and female workers' understanding of gender equality and foster a shared sense of responsibility for workplace inclusivity.

Ultimately, achieving gender equality in the Sri Lankan apparel sector requires a collective commitment from policymakers, industry leaders, and employees at all levels. By addressing structural barriers and building an equitable workplace culture, the industry can unlock its full potential and serve as a model for inclusive and sustainable development.

## 9. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## 10. DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## 11. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, informed consent (verbal) was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.

## 12. CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Participants were informed that the collected information would be used for research and publication purposes, while ensuring anonymity.

## 13. DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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