

# Gender Equity and Equality in Promoting Employees' Engagement at Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

The main aim of the present study is to examine the role of gender equity and equality in promoting employee engagement at Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya, a key player in Sri Lanka's apparel industry. The research addresses the persistent challenges of gender disparities, including wage gaps, limited career advancement for women, and workplace discrimination, which affect the employee motivation and job satisfaction which will lead to the employee engagement. The primary objectives were to explore employees' perceptions of gender equity and equality; understand the challenges and opportunities in implementing related policies; and provide recommendations for improving the practices. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 15 employees, encompassing both operational staff and top-level management who are directly affected by the gender policies. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that while gender equity policies exist, their effectiveness is hindered by weak enforcement, unconscious biases in career advancement, and a significant underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles. Challenges such as work-life balance conflicts and a lack of awareness about existing policies further worsen the issue. However, initiatives like leadership training and participation of women in decision making were noted as positive steps. The study concludes that a more robust and monitored approach is needed to translate policy into practice. Recommendations include strengthening policy implementation, ensuring transparent promotion and wage structures, providing gender sensitivity training, and introducing flexible work arrangements to foster a more inclusive and engaging work environment for all employees.

**Keywords:** Apparel Industry, Employee Engagement, Gender Equality, Gender Equity, Sri Lanka

## Introduction

Gender equity and equality in the workplace have been considered as prominent themes in global arena on sustainable business practices and ethical human resource management. These principles are not only merely moral imperatives but also critically linked to organizational success, influencing key outcomes such as employee engagement, job satisfaction, and overall productivity (Olgiati & Shapiro, 2001). In the apparel industry, which employs a significant proportion of women, presents a crucial

context for examining these issues. Despite being a major employer, particularly for women from diverse backgrounds, this sector often grapples with persistent gender disparities, including wage gaps, limited career advancement opportunities for women, and deeply ingrained workplace stereotypes (Imron, 2017; Hancock, Carastathis, Georgiou, & Oliveira, 2016). In Sri Lanka, the apparel industry is a cornerstone of the national economy, and companies like Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya is recognized for their commitment to ethical and sustainable operations (Goger, 2013). Therefore, the gender equity and equality prac-



tices in an apparel industry to understand the work place practices and job satisfaction is very important for the sustainability of the business. However, a gap often exists between the establishment of gender-inclusive policies and their effective implementation in daily workplace dynamics, a challenge noted in the broader Sri Lankan context (Samarakoon, Grant-Smith, Mayes, & Wijetunga, 2022). This study therefore aims to assess the role of gender equity and equality in promoting employee engagement at Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya in order to bridge the gap in the existing literature. The specific objectives are to explore employees' perceptions and experiences regarding gender equity and equality to understand the challenges and opportunities in implementing related policies, and to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing these initiatives. The rationale for this research lies in its potential to bridge the gap between policy and practice, offering valuable insights that can help the organization strengthen its inclusive workplace culture, and boosting employee morale and driving long-term business performance.

## Literature Review

The concepts of gender equity and equality are fundamental to understanding modern workplace dynamics. Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of all individuals, regardless of their gender. In contrast, gender equity involves fairness in treatment, which may require specific measures to compensate for historical and social disadvantages that prevent women from operating on a level playing field (Olgati & Shapiro, 2001). Theoretically, when organizations embed these principles, they lay the groundwork for enhanced employee engagement, which is a state of emotional and intellectual commitment that leads to discretionary effort (Kahn, 1990).

Globally, the pursuit of gender equality in the workplace remains a significant challenge. The World Economic Forum (2024) reports that the gender gap is closing at a slow pace, with substantial disparities persisting in economic participation and opportunity. Research consistently shows a correlation between gender-inclusive practices and positive organizational outcomes.

Companies that actively promote gender diversity and inclusion tend to experience higher levels of employee satisfaction, better financial performance, and greater innovation (Amur, 2024). However, barriers such as the gender pay gap and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles continue to be pervasive issues across industries. Therefore, the literature in the western scenario highlight that there is a gap between the remuneration paid to different genders and other practices in organizations.

Kahn (1990) describes work engagement as the employment of oneself physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performance. It is argued in the literature that work engagement cures most organizational problems (Banihani, Lewis, & Syed, 2013). According to Schaufeli *et al.* (2002), work engagement entails a positive, fulfilling and work-related state of mind that is characterized by three components: vigour, dedication and absorption. Vigour relates to elevated levels of energy and mental resilience when a person is occupied with a work activity, the willingness to invest effort in one's work activity and showing perseverance when faced with difficulty. Thus, employees who feel great vigour at work are highly motivated by their jobs and are likely to remain persistent when encountering difficulties (Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007). Dedication is characterized by a strong involvement and pride in one's work, coupled with a sense of significance, passion and inspiration. Absorption is characterized by being so completely focused and absorbed in one's work that time passes rapidly and one has difficulty detaching oneself from a work activity. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence in the literature which assumes that work engagement is gender-neutral and that women and men can equally demonstrate their engagement in the workplace (Banihani *et al.*, 2013). However, the quantitative study among the employees of the South African University showed that there is no statistically significant relationship between gender and employee engagement (Tshilongamulenzhe & Takawira, 2015).

In the Asian context, deep-rooted cultural norms and traditional gender roles significantly influence workplace equality. The Asian Development Bank (2023) highlights that women in South and Southeast Asia are often concentrated in low-paying, low-skill jobs with limited upward mo-

bility. This is particularly evident in the apparel industry, a major economic driver in the region. Studies on countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam indicate that while women constitute the majority of the production-line workforce, they are severely underrepresented in supervisory and managerial positions (?, ?). This occupational segregation is often reinforced by unconscious biases and a lack of systematic leadership development programs and training for women.

Within Sri Lanka, the apparel industry is a critical source of employment, especially for women from rural areas. Despite high literacy rates and educational attainment among Sri Lankan women, their labor force participation remains lower than men, and they face a "glass ceiling" that blocks access to top roles (World Bank, 2024). Studies specific to the Sri Lankan apparel sector confirm that female workers frequently encounter wage discrimination, limited career advancement pathways, and gender-based occupational segregation (Hancock *et al.*, 2016; Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020). Furthermore, socio-cultural expectations place a disproportionate burden of household and caregiving responsibilities on women, which directly impacts their ability to work overtime or accept promotions, thereby hindering their career progression (Appuhamilage & Gaya, 2021).

By considering both the global and local literature, it is apparent that there are similarities in the practices in gender equity and equality. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate these practices in an apparel company in Sri Lanka.

While companies like Hirdaramani have made public commitments to ethical sourcing and sustainable practices, empirical research on the internal implementation of gender policies within such firms is less common. Existing literature suggests that even in organizations with progressive policies, a significant gap often exists between policy on paper and practice on the factory floor (Samarakoon *et al.*, 2022). Challenges such as a lack of awareness among employees about their rights, insufficient monitoring of policy implementation, and resistance to changing entrenched cultural norms can undermine the effectiveness of gender equity initiatives (Hettiarachchi, 2023).

Thus, the past literatures establish a clear con-

nection between gender equity, equality, and employee engagement, while also identifying persistent challenges within the global and Sri Lankan apparel industry. However, it also reveals a need for more focused, qualitative investigations into how these dynamics play out within specific, leading companies that are already attempting to address these issues. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the perceptions and experiences of employees at Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya, by understanding the barriers and to facilitate in achieving a truly gender-equitable and engaging workplace.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of gender equity and equality in employee engagement at Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya. A qualitative design was deemed most appropriate as it facilitates the exploration of complex social phenomena, such as perceptions and experiences, through detailed, narrative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, this study constitutes a qualitative interpretive research method.

The study utilized a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who could provide rich, relevant information pertaining to the research objectives. The sample consisted of 15 employees from Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya, comprising 10 operational-level employees and 5 top-level managers. This stratification ensured that perspectives were gathered from both those directly affected by the gender policies and those responsible for their formulation and implementation in connection with gender.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen since it allows for consistency through a set of guiding questions while providing the flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). An interview protocol was developed, focusing on key areas such as perceptions of fairness in promotions, access to training, work-life balance, and the implementation of company policies. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, was conducted in a private setting, and was audio-recorded with participants' informed con-

sent for accuracy in transcription.

The data analysis followed the systematic process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved a series of steps: first, familiarizing oneself with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; second, generating initial codes; third, searching for themes by collating relevant codes; fourth, reviewing and refining potential themes; fifth, defining and naming themes; and finally, producing the report. This rigorous process ensured that the findings were firmly grounded in the participants' accounts. The analysis was supported by manual coding and organization of the data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study and increase validity, several measures were taken by the researchers. Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with the data and member checking, where summaries of interpretations were shared with participants for verification. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail of the research process and analytical decisions (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the research and ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent after being thoroughly briefed on the study's purpose and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was anonymized during transcription and analysis, with participants referred to as P1, P2... in the reporting of findings.

## Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the key findings from the thematic analysis of the interview data, integrating them with existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics at Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya.

A predominant theme that emerged was the perception of gender bias in career advancement. A significant number of operational-level female employees felt that men were promoted faster, even though they have the equivalent qualifications and experience.

As one participant stated, "I see men getting promoted faster than women, even though we

have the same experience and skills. Sometimes, it feels like we need to work harder to be recognized" (P4).

This perception aligns with the findings of Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi (2020), who identified the "glass ceiling" as a persistent barrier in Sri Lanka's apparel sector. While management acknowledged this issue, their explanation often pointed to systematic rather than intentional biases.

One of the managers noted, "We have policies in place to ensure equal promotion opportunities, but sometimes unconscious biases influence decisions" (P11).

This indicates a critical gap between policy intent and managerial execution, where unconscious biases can undermine formal equity structures.

Closely related to career advancement was the issue of limited female representation in decision-making roles. Participants consistently observed a male-dominated leadership structure. One of the participants stated,

"I have worked here for several years, but I rarely see women getting promoted to managerial positions. It feels like leadership is still seen as men's role" (P4).

This finding echoes the occupational segregation highlighted in global reports on the garment industry (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A managerial perspective suggested that fewer women apply for such roles, often due to external pressures:

"The challenge is that many women do not apply for these roles due to other responsibilities" (P11).

This points to a complex interplay between workplace opportunity and socio-cultural constraints, a phenomenon well-documented in the Sri Lankan context where traditional gender roles significantly impact women's career trajectories (Appuhamilage & Gaya, 2021).

The challenge of work-life balance was another significant barrier identified. Female employees reported that domestic and caregiving responsibilities limited their ability to work overtime or take on additional duties, which are often prerequisites for promotion.

"I cannot stay for extra shifts like my male colleagues because I have to take care of my family. This affects my chances of getting promoted" (P6).

Table 1: Sample Profile

Participant Code	Age	Experience (Years)	Gender	Employee Category
P1	28	5	Female	Operational-Level Employee
P2	32	7	Male	Operational-Level Employee
P3	26	3	Female	Operational-Level Employee
P4	35	10	Female	Operational-Level Employee
P5	30	6	Male	Operational-Level Employee
P6	27	4	Female	Operational-Level Employee
P7	40	12	Female	Operational-Level Employee
P8	29	5	Male	Operational-Level Employee
P9	31	8	Female	Operational-Level Employee
P10	33	9	Male	Operational-Level Employee
P11	45	20	Male	Top-Level Employee
P12	42	18	Female	Top-Level Employee
P13	50	25	Male	Top-Level Employee
P14	38	15	Female	Top-Level Employee
P15	47	22	Male	Top-Level Employee

This finding directly supports the arguments of Samarakoon *et al.* (2022) that the unequal distribution of domestic labor is a structural impediment to gender equality in the workplace, effectively penalizing women for adhering to societal expectations.

A critical finding across participant groups was the inconsistent implementation of gender equity policies. Many employees expressed skepticism about the real-world impact of these policies.

“The company has policies for gender equality, but I don’t see much change in how promotions or workload distribution happen” (P3).

A manager corroborated this, citing a “lack of proper monitoring and enforcement” (P11).

This gap between policy and practice is a common challenge in institutionalizing gender equality, as noted by Hettiarachchi (2023), who emphasizes that without robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms, policies remain symbolic.

Furthermore, a lack of awareness and training was found to weaken policy effectiveness. Several operational-level employees were unaware of the specifics of existing gender policies.

“I don’t really know the details of the gender policies here. If there are benefits for women, they are not properly explained to us” (P7).

This suggests that communication channels are inadequate, preventing policies from trickling down effectively to the shop floor, a recurring

issue in large organizational settings.

Despite these challenges, the study also uncovered positive outcomes associated with gender-focused initiatives. Participants acknowledged that efforts like leadership training and flexible work arrangements had a positive influence.

“I see more women getting leadership training now. It feels like the company is trying to make the workplace fairer” (P8).

This aligns with the established theory that when employees perceive organizational support and fairness, their level of engagement increases (Kahn, 1990).

A manager confirmed this, stating, “When we actively focus on gender inclusion, the work environment improves. Employees feel valued, and productivity increases” (P15).

This observation supports the arguments of Etta Olgiati & Shapiro (2001) that gender equity is not just an ethical pursuit but a strategic one, leading to a more motivated and productive workforce.

In summary, the findings reveal a workplace in transition. Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya has established a foundation for gender equity through its policies, but its full potential is unrealized due to implementation gaps, cultural biases, and structural barriers like work-life conflict. The discussion confirms that addressing these issues is essential for transforming policy into meaningful practice that enhances employee engagement and organizational performance.

## Conclusion

This study assessed the role of gender equity and equality in promoting employee engagement at Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya. The findings lead to the conclusion that while the organization has established a foundational framework of gender-inclusive policies, the full benefits of these initiatives are curtailed by a significant rift between policy and practice. The study confirms that persistent challenges, including unconscious gender bias in career advancement, the underrepresentation of women in leadership, and work-life balance conflicts worsened by traditional gender roles, continue to hinder the achievement of a truly equitable workplace (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020; Appuhamilage & Gaya, 2021).

Ultimately, it is concluded that the mere existence of policies is insufficient in apparel industry in Sri Lanka. The lack of rigorous monitoring, enforcement, and awareness among employees has rendered many of these initiatives less effective than intended, a challenge also noted in broader Sri Lankan industrial studies (Hettiarachchi, 2023). Consequently, despite the company's ethical commitments, employee perceptions of inequality—particularly regarding promotions and wages—negatively influence on their motivation and engagement. However, the study also concludes that targeted interventions, such as leadership training for women, and women participation in decision making are recognized positively by employees and hold the potential to improve engagement, affirming the link between perceived organizational support and employee commitment (Kahn, 1990). Eventually, for Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya, transforming its gender equity aspirations into tangible outcomes requires a more systematic, enforced, and culturally-sensitive approach to maintain the gender equity and equality and the long-term retention of employees as well.

## Contributions

This research makes several distinct contributions to both theory and practice.

**Theoretical Contributions:** The study contributes to the body of knowledge on gender dynamics in developing economies by applying and validating established concepts like the “glass

ceiling” and “unconscious bias” within the specific context of a leading Sri Lankan apparel company (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020). The findings demonstrate that the pathway from policy to engagement is not direct but is significantly disrupted by cultural and structural barriers which leads for refining existing theoretical frameworks and develop new models which would be the fruitful sources for the potential researchers in this discipline.

**Practical Contributions:** In practical, this study offers valuable, evidence-based insights for Hirdaramani Knit Vavuniya and the wider apparel industry in Sri Lanka. It provides a clear understanding and necessity for gender inclusion in an apparel industry. Moreover, generic recommendations to highlight the urgent need for strengthened monitoring, transparent communication, and gender-sensitive leadership training. The recommendations, such as establishing a dedicated task force for policy enforcement and introducing flexible work arrangements, provide an actionable roadmap for the company to enhance its workplace inclusivity. For policymakers, this study underscores the necessity of supporting corporate gender policies with awareness campaigns and perhaps incentives for practical implementation, contributing to the national goal of women's economic empowerment (World Bank, 2024).

In summary, this research provides a subtle understanding that can help bridge the gap between corporate policy and lived employee experience, contributing to the creation of more engaged, equitable, and productive work environments. Future directions could be extended to other industries in the private sector and public sector organizations as well with a large sample size by adopting quantitative research methods.

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