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WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN: WOBBLING CAREER TRAJECTORY OF WORKING WOMEN IN THE APPAREL INDUSTRY OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

In diverse organizations around the world, women continue to experience workplace sexual harassment despite it being prohibited by many legal jurisdictions. The apparel industry plays a leading role in Sri Lanka's economy, where women contribute to this massive success. Women targeted for sexual harassment may struggle with their career trajectory due to their psychological and physical experiences. If women are leaving their job or shifting to another job due to this problem, they may start their careers from the beginning most of the time. This means it is not easy to build a strong career trajectory once again. Therefore, this study aims to identify the connection between the impacts of workplace sexual harassment (such as psychological experiences & physical experiences), laws & organizational policies towards sexual harassment, and the career trajectory of working women in the apparel industry of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Workplace Sexual Harassment, Apparel Industry, Female Employee(s)

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a growing problem in modern society. Many victims suffer from sexual harassment, and this

issue will go unnoticed since the victims are not willing to bring this forward most of the time (Chechak & Csiernik, 2014). Sexual harassment entails rude, embarrassing, or intimidating behavior that is sexual in nature. This can take place in person or online, and it can take the form of written or verbal communication. Anyone can become a victim of sexual harassment, regardless of gender. At work, school, or university, sexual harassment may be considered discrimination (McDonald, 2012). Sexual harassment incidents do not have a happy story to be shared. A report stated: "I was exhausted since I'd been working since eight o'clock in the morning and was walking slowly. The other girls walked ahead of me, and that's when my line manager seized the opportunity. I kicked and slapped him, but he still managed to drag me into a dark alley next to the factory", she explained. She says he forcefully kissed and touched her. Before letting her go, the line manager told her, "I told you, you're going to be mine" (Chowdhury, 2019, para. 11). There are many stories regarding sexual harassment around the globe, but people may not talk about these issues much unless these things happen to their close ones.

According to Niriella (2015), sexual harassment has been in Sri Lankan organizations in the very past. A close friend had to go through a sexual harassment incident in a large apparel organization in Sri Lanka. She shared

those uncomfortable stories with me to search for a solution. Eventually, what she had experienced and how she reacted to it led me to further explore workplace sexual harassment in the apparel industry in Sri Lanka. The apparel industry is one of the biggest industries in Sri Lanka, which plays a significant role in the export sector in Sri Lanka and always holds the country's economy by exporting apparel and textile products and the workforce in this industry accounts for 15% of the country's total industrial workforce (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). In a country where women are underrepresented in the workforce, the apparel industry has led the way in empowering women so that they can be financially independent. The female workforce participation rate in Sri Lanka is estimated at 34%. Female employment in the apparel industry accounts for 40% of all females working in the industrial sector (Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka, 2020). The apparel industry contributes about half of Sri Lanka's total exports, making the country among the top apparel producers in the world.

Furthermore, the country ranks among the top apparel-producing countries in terms of population (Sparshott, 2005). The apparel industry plays a main role in Sri Lanka's economy, where women contribute to this massive success. Even though female participation is high in this enormous success, women do not receive respect from the industry (Jayawardena, 2018). In this apparel industry in Sri Lanka, garment factories are the engine of the ship. Therefore, women who are working in garment factories should receive their respect. Instead of respect, they face sexual harassment at their workplace. The main problem statement of this study is to understand how women targeted for sexual harassment face their career trajectory due to their psychological and physical experiences. If women are leaving their job or shifting to another job

due to this problem, they may start their careers from the beginning most of the time. Therefore, it is not easy to build their career trajectory once again. Also, what happens if this problem happens repeatedly? Do they have to shift their job all the time? If it is the case, what happens to their career advancement? What about mental health? This study looks at the connection between these things and how working women in garment factories manage these things. Although sexual harassment is prohibited by law in Sri Lanka and other countries, it continues to be a widespread problem for working women. This study also focuses on the legal and organizational policies for sexual harassment in Sri Lanka.

Hypothesis

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue in workplaces worldwide, with female apparel workers being particularly vulnerable to its effects. This study aims to investigate the relationship between sexual harassment policies, psychological distress, and career trajectory among women working in the apparel industry. Three primary hypotheses guide this research, exploring the protective role of comprehensive sexual harassment policies, the psychological consequences of harassment experiences, and the potential impact on women's career advancement. The first hypothesis (H1) examines the significance of organizational policies in safeguarding female apparel workers from sexual harassment. In workplaces with comprehensive policies and robust enforcement mechanisms, we expect a reduced incidence of sexual harassment compared to organizations with inadequate or no policies. The presence of such policies signals a commitment from management to provide a safe working environment, discouraging potential harassers and empowering victims to report incidents without fear of retaliation.

By analyzing data from a diverse range of apparel companies, this study seeks to establish a clear link between the presence of sexual harassment policies and the prevalence of such incidents within the industry.

Moving to the second hypothesis (H2), we explore the psychological consequences that women experience following sexual harassment incidents in the workplace. This study posits that women who have been subjected to harassment will report heightened levels of psychological distress and trauma compared to those who have not. Such distress may manifest through changes in behavior, such as social withdrawal and self-isolation, as victims struggle to cope with the aftermath of traumatic experiences. By understanding the psychological toll of sexual harassment on female apparel workers, this research aims to shed light on the urgent need for supportive interventions, such as counseling and mental health resources, to help victims cope with these distressing experiences. The third and final hypothesis (H3) delves into the potential impact of sexual harassment on women's career trajectories. Female apparel workers who have faced harassment may perceive negative consequences on their career progression, including missed opportunities for promotion and advancement. However, we hypothesize that a supportive work environment, including access to counseling and a clear reporting process, could moderate these negative effects. By providing avenues for victims to seek help and pursue justice, organizations can mitigate the long-term repercussions of sexual harassment on women's careers. Through comprehensive surveys and in-depth interviews, this research seeks to explore the interplay between workplace support systems and career outcomes, offering valuable insights into creating empowering environments for female employees.

In conclusion, this study endeavors to shed light on the critical issue of sexual harassment among female apparel workers. By investigating the role of organizational policies in preventing harassment, understanding the psychological distress experienced by victims, and examining the potential impact on career trajectories, this research aims to inform effective strategies for safeguarding and supporting women in the workplace. With a better understanding of these dynamics, organizations can take proactive steps to create inclusive, safe, and empowering environments for all employees, fostering professional growth and well-being within the apparel industry and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a right to work for everyone in an era of rights-based access (Pathiraja, 2018). Nearly 15% of Sri Lanka's labor force works in the garment industry. Interestingly, 85 percent of the workers in this field are women (Rajapakshe, 2018). Moreover, the garment business accounts for 16 percent of Sri Lanka's export revenues, which makes up 40 percent of its total export earnings (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). Women in the garment sector in Sri Lanka are on average 27.8 years old. Compared to other middle-income nations, Sri Lankan women working in the clothing industry had better health. Women employed in Sri Lanka's apparel industry are the majority with an education level equivalent to or higher than the General Certificate of Education. The majority (53.8 percent) of women employed in the clothing industry have been there less than five years (De Silva, Lombardo, Lipscomb, Grad, & Ostbye, 2013). A significant increase in female workforce turnover is the fundamental issue confronting the apparel sector. Workers in the garment industry frequently leave due to social rejection,

occupational stigma, and dissatisfaction with their jobs. Even though the apparel industry offers many career prospects, most women who enter it leave after a few months. Employee dissatisfaction is the most important factor affecting worker turnover. Additionally, absenteeism and job stress have only a small impact on turnover (Rajapakshe, 2018). Even though many young women work in the garment industry, the apparel industry pays less to female employees than other occupations. When they work with other female employees, subjective experience is more important than salary levels (Hancock, Carastathis, Georgiou, & Oliveira, 2016).

The effects of employee harassment on employee satisfaction, turnover, and absenteeism are negative (Swarnalatha & Sureshkrishna, 2013). Whether this is a global problem or a local one, employee harassment poses a severe concern for the disadvantaged population of the garment supply chain. As a result of workplace harassment, the work environment, work attitudes, and job quality can be negatively affected. It appears that workplace harassment has a significant impact on work environments. There is also a high level of employee harassment among clothing workers (Swarnalatha & Sureshkrishna, 2013). The problem is also present in Sri Lanka. Female employees are among the most vulnerable groups at work in Sri Lanka. Women have been subjected to an increasing number of forms of harassment in the workplace over the last two decades, regardless of their socioeconomic status or educational background (Pathiraja, 2018). More than 5% of female garment industry workers have reported injuries in the last few years, including 15.5 percent who suffer from muscle disabilities. In addition, 0.5 percent of employees experienced psychological harassment (De Silva, Lombardo, Lipscomb, Grad, & Ostbye, 2013). The marital status of female employees can lead to harassment in the

workplace. When considering their marital status, divorced female employees suffer from sexual harassment, rumors, exclusion, and discrimination. Harassment is rooted in deeply held attitudes about women and marriage (Adikaram, 2018). There has been a special focus on the issue of sexual harassment of female garment employees in Sri Lanka (Niriella, 2015). Female apparel employees are more likely to face verbal abuse despite a low rate of abuse and harassment (Hancock, Carastathis, Georgiou, & Oliveira, 2016). As the number of women in the workforce grows, workplace harassment among female employees is becoming more common. It is a major problem in the workplace (Unnikrishnan et al., 2010). As well as in Sri Lanka, harassment occurs among female garment employees. Consequently, the issue of harassment of female garment workers in Sri Lanka can be discussed under this category.

There are currently psychiatric therapies being implemented by the Sri Lankan government, non-governmental organizations, and companies in order to help troubled female employees. However, workplace initiatives related to mental health and wellbeing usually entail in-person counseling sessions to address difficulties (Desilva, 2015). It is rare for sexual harassment to be reported at work or home. Several studies have shown that it negatively affects the social or professional acceptance of female employees (Pathiraja, 2018). Furthermore, Sri Lankan women working in the private sector are hesitant and fearful of reporting or responding to harassment, such as sexual harassment. The reason for this is that societal standards and values are socially formed (Adikaram, 2018). We know very little about workplace harassment that affects female employees due to the lack of reported cases. Typically, women are cautious about reporting workplace harassment because they don't want to be fired or transferred

(Shetty & Nithyashree, 2017). It is not easy to prevent workplace harassment only with Anti-Harassment Policies, Training, Complaints, and Grievance procedures. To prevent workplace harassment, employers need to adapt their methods to reach out to harassed female employees (Deadrick, McAfee, & Champagne, 1996). Employees who work in such environments are afraid to speak out about harassment for fear of repercussions (Ravichandran, Janakiraman, Sundaram, Fisseha, & Yitayeh, 2017). It is often difficult to quantify workplace harassment in this situation (Rokonuzzaman, Ali, Sadique, & Haque, 2014). This is why the topic of "workplace harassment" has caused academic inquiries to be lacking in recent years. Additionally, this research work has opened up a new field of research in the future. The future of research could look at the different manifestations of harassment and bullying (Bader, Stoermer, Bader, & Schuster, 2018). Academics do this research primarily by examining business reactions and human management characteristics (Hancock, Carastathis, Georgiou, & Oliveira, 2016).

In this context, Sri Lankan researchers have investigated the issue of employee harassment. However, the majority of them have focused on the organization's steps to take in this regard, along with incidents of sexual harassment. Although it has been found that female employees in the garment industry in Sri Lanka are harassed, there has been a little further investigation. The majority of studies have investigated the causes and effects of harassment on the job at a global level. Study results indicate that harassment among female employees is more prevalent in businesses where females comprise the majority of the workforce (Deadrick, McAfee, & Champagne, 1996). The Sri Lankan garment industry employs a significant percentage of women, and it has been alleged that female

clothing employees in Sri Lanka have been harassed, but fewer studies have been conducted on harassment among female garment employees (Niriella, 2015). It is crucial to investigate the harassment of women garment workers in Sri Lanka's garment industry since they highly impact the growth of the apparel industry. This is why this study identified major research gaps.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers use a well-defined methodology that shapes their research problem, objectives, and findings (Saunders et al., 2009). This research methodology encompasses procedures for data search, selection, organization, and analysis (Bryman, 2008). The focus of workplace sexual harassment research is to gain insights into victims' experiences and perspectives. Considering the topic's sensitivity and the need for in-depth data, qualitative research is the most suitable approach (Fitzgerald, 1993). To locate participants, snowball sampling is chosen as the method. In this chapter, we delve into the research methods, strategy, setting, data sources, data gathering, and analysis. For this study, a mixed-method approach involving qualitative and quantitative components is adopted. However, due to the subjective nature of workplace sexual harassment, the qualitative approach is preferred. Qualitative research offers the advantage of gathering comprehensive and diverse data, interpreting non-numerical information, and understanding social reality through multiple methods in natural settings.

The study's primary goal is to comprehend various aspects of workplace sexual harassment, including legal considerations, organizational policies, victims' psychological and physical experiences, and the impact on their career trajectories. As legal statutes and policies

vary, a careful analysis of non-numerical data is necessary. The qualitative strategy involves conducting in-depth interviews with apparel industry managers and reviewing relevant policies.

In-depth interviews through the qualitative approach allow researchers to identify the emotional and physical damages experienced by victims. This method helps in understanding individual perceptions of workplace harassment and its influence on career advancement. By exploring the multiple realities of victims' experiences, the study reflects their subjective perspectives. The qualitative research values subjectivity and acknowledges the existence of multiple realities for any phenomenon. To achieve rich descriptions and understanding, researchers actively interact with participants, employing a well-planned, embedded study to explore their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Considering the subjectivity and multiple realities involved, the qualitative approach is the chosen methodology. It involves employing in-depth interviews, snowball sampling, and thematic analysis to analyze data for this study. The research focuses on female workers in the apparel industry in Sri Lanka, encompassing working women across the country. The specific aim is to examine the career trajectory of sexually harassed women in the workplace. The Colombo district is selected as the study location due to the abundance of garment factories. However, considering the constraints of time and resources, a sample is chosen from Colombo, where most garment factories, especially in the Free Trade Zone area, are situated. The study is planned to be completed within six months.

Finding suitable participants for a sensitive topic like workplace sexual harassment posed significant challenges. The snowball sampling technique was employed, which took three months to identify participants. Additionally, a few

weeks were spent finding organizations to conduct four interviews on organizational policies against workplace sexual harassment. The interviews with both workers and managers took about a month due to their busy schedules.

Two types of participants were involved in the study: victims of workplace sexual harassment from ten garment factories and managers from four major apparel organizations in Sri Lanka. Recruiting both groups proved challenging, as many victims were hesitant to share their experiences with a male interviewer. To address this concern, a female assistant was invited to help approach the victims. Additionally, gaining access to organizations' policies initially faced difficulties, as some were reluctant and misunderstood the research objectives. The researcher had to clarify the research aims and assure organizations of confidentiality, making prior appointments to accommodate busy management schedules. For this study, a range of qualitative data sources is employed, including in-depth interviews with victims, discussions with apparel industry managers, field notes, legal statutes, organizational policies, newspapers, magazines, and periodical articles. The researcher strategically chose these sources to address the research questions and align them with the research problems.

The data sources used are directly relevant to the three research questions guiding the study, with a focus on workplace sexual harassment (WSH). The study emphasizes the reliability and quality of the data sources over sheer quantity. Both primary and secondary data sources are utilized, with their selection tailored to the specific research questions. To address the first research question concerning organizational policies and legal frameworks against WSH, primary data sources include interviews with garment factory managers and

representatives from apparel organizations. These interviews provide detailed insights into organizational policies, and fieldnotes record non-verbal behaviors and expressions during the interviews. For this question, secondary data sources include organizational policy reports and legal statutes, which are analyzed through documentary analysis.

The second and third research questions delve into the physical and emotional damages faced by victims and the changes in their careers after experiencing WSH. For these questions, in-depth interviews with female victims are employed as the primary data source to gather comprehensive and detailed information from their stories. Fieldnotes from these interviews capture additional contextual details. The secondary data sources include documentaries, newspapers, magazines, and periodic articles, which complement the victim-specific information. Ethical considerations play a crucial role in handling data sources, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' identities and obtaining their informed consent. The subsequent section of the chapter outlines the data gathering methods employed in the study.

Data gathering holds immense significance in this qualitative study, aiming to maintain research integrity. In-depth interviews are chosen as the primary data collection method, considering the personal nature of workplace sexual harassment experiences (WSH). Semi-structured interviews are preferred, as they offer the benefits of both structured and unstructured approaches, allowing flexibility and detailed responses. Separate interview guides are prepared for victims and managers, covering various aspects of WSH, its impacts, and career changes. To capture non-verbal behaviors, field notes are taken during interviews.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, snowball sampling is employed to select the sample from the population of female

workers in the Sri Lankan apparel industry. This technique, based on chain-referral, proves effective in locating victims through referrals from initial participants. As a result, six sexually harassed females in the workplace are identified using this method. The study focuses on the Colombo district, which houses a significant number of garment factories.

Through the use of in-depth interviews and snowball sampling, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of victims' experiences, psychological and physical impacts, and career trajectories after WSH. Ethical considerations remain paramount, ensuring informed consent and participant anonymity. By employing rigorous data gathering methods, the study aspires to provide valuable insights into the sensitive issue of workplace sexual harassment in the apparel industry. For the selection of victims, the snowball sampling technique plays a key role. It starts with Kusum, who referred Kamala, Vimala, and Bimala. The process continued with Kamala referring Thamara and Thamara referring Nirmala. In this case, exponential discriminative snowball sampling was employed to find multiple victims for the study. In contrast, managers were selected through purposive sampling, and four managers (Ashani, Kushan, Vishan, and Heshan) from garment factories were interviewed to gather insights into organizational policies against workplace sexual harassment.

ANALYSIS

The aim of this study is to explore the organizational policies towards workplace sexual harassment, the impacts of WSH, and finally identify the career trajectory of working women in the apparel industry after a workplace sexual harassment incident. Therefore, before analyzing the victims' experience of workplace sexual harassment, it is important to find out

about the occurrence of workplace sexual harassment among working women in the apparel industry. It was inquired from all the female workers at the outset of the interview whether they admit that workplace sexual harassment is present in their day-to-day work context. Irrespective of the belief that female workers are safe within the organization, strong evidence was found in this study to highlight that workplace sexual harassment is frequently present in the apparel industry in Sri Lanka. When categorizing findings, it was evident that vulnerability and susceptibility to workplace sexual harassment are greater among female workers in the apparel industry. All the participants in this research have different perspectives on workplace sexual harassment. Hence, their perceptions about their own vulnerability and the nature of workplace sexual harassment they face change according to their work experience and the competence they had developed, and the organizational and harasser characteristics.

In this study, the first objective is to identify the organizational policies and laws regarding workplace sexual harassment and how it helps to protect female workers from sexual harassment. Organizational policies are different from one organization to another organization. Also, it can be different from one nation to another nation due to the laws and regulations of the country. It comes in different shapes and sizes depending on the specifics and it's not a one size fits all situation, organizations should develop policies and procedures that are crafted specifically for their company, culture, and business (Rabil, 2020). In the Sri Lankan context, most of the organizational policies regarding workplace sexual harassment don't have a significant difference from one organization to another organization. But that doesn't mean every organization has a formal policy for workplace sexual harassment.

Because it's a question that some small organizations may not have organizational policies for workplace sexual harassment.

When it comes to the larger or well build organizations in the apparel industry, there are formal ways to take action against sexual harassment incidents. It is proved that the availability of the organizational policies regarding workplace sexual harassment, since 5 out of 6 victims have mentioned that there were policies to solve sexual harassment incidents. When looking at the responses of the participants it is clear that there are organizational policies against workplace sexual harassment. Only one participant declared that there weren't any policies against workplace sexual harassment, and it was a small-scale garment factory owned by a husband and wife. But when it comes all the other participants including managers of the apparel industry, they have clearly stated the availability of the organizational policies. It is clear that larger organizations have formal policies against workplace sexual harassment to safeguard their employees. But it is a question that whether small-scale garment factories have policies or not.

On the other hand, one of the primary purposes of workplace sexual harassment policies is to prevent harassment from happening. Employers can help prevent harassment in the workplace by clearly communicating the consequences of unwelcome harassing conduct and providing training and education to managers and employees (Jacobson & Eaton, 2017). Workers can help prevent harassment by taking advantage of educational opportunities provided by the employer. Adopting an anti-harassment policy can foster an environment of respect for human rights and helps people in the organization understand their rights and responsibilities. Policies can protect an organization from discrimination complaints. It is also the right thing to do (Aranda, 2021). Anti-harassment policies

and procedures are extremely important in helping organizations limit liability as well as fostering a productive and safe work culture and environment. This is an important part of what's typically included in workplace policies. Organizations should carefully consider how to develop and implement policies to help benefit their employees and the organization in general (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). It's clear that availability of the policies against workplace sexual harassment helps both the employer and the employee. And it is not enough to avoid or reduce sexual harassment if the employers and employees don't have an understanding of the policies.

It is an important task to identify the victims' understanding of the organizational policies against sexual harassment. When I was speaking with the victims, I understood that they are not aware of policies, or they don't have a correct understanding of organizational policies. It is clear that most of the victims haven't had a clear understanding of organizational policies against workplace sexual harassment. Even though the management was implementing policies, victims were not aware of them. It is not easy to prevent and reduce workplace sexual harassment incidents without the help of anti-harassment policies. And employees must have a clear idea regarding those policies. A key element in the successful prevention of harassment in the workplace is a strong commitment from all levels within the enterprise or organization, starting from top-level executives and upper management to supervisors and all other employees (Rothmann & Wyk, 2011). A policy statement on harassment is a message from management to employees that states the company's policies, philosophy, and commitment to prevent and manage harassment in order to create a positive working environment that is conducive to the enterprise or organization. The policy

statement should come from upper management to ensure that the policy is accepted and observed by all employees, supervisors, and managers throughout the workplace, and everyone must have a clear understanding (Rothmann & Wyk, 2011). Policy statements should be specific and avoid legalese so that everyone can easily understand them. To ensure effective implementation of such policies in the workplace, the policies can be made part of the company regulations or part of collective labor agreements that must be met as a condition of employment, with corresponding sanctions and disciplinary measures for non-compliance (Hentze & Tyus, 2021).

When looking at the participant's statements, we can see that most of them haven't reported to the management. They were embarrassed and felt discomfort to bring those problems to the upper management. Also, the managers haven't received a significant amount of sexual harassment complaints. Therefore, it is true that most of the victims don't report it to the management. But there's a doubt that whether the managers hide the WSH complaints to maintain the company's reputation or not. However, when I spoke with the victims, they declared that they were afraid to report. Scholars have also mentioned that sexual harassment is a growing problem in modern society and many victims suffer from sexual harassment. And this issue will go unnoticed since the victims are not willing to bring this forward most of the time (Chechak & Csiernik, 2014). The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) indicates that people rarely lie about being sexually abused, sexually assaulted, or raped. However, many victims decide to not report sexual harassment to anyone. Some reasons for not reporting sexual harassment are fear-based, and some are more personal. Some victims simply do not believe there will be any benefit to reporting abuse.

Furthermore, some may not understand their options and that they are entitled to pursue a civil claim seeking financial damages (Dordulian Law Group, 2020). Now we have significant evidence that most of the victims do not report any sexual harassment incidents due to a few reasons. Even though some victims report, they do not receive the right solution for them, it questions the effectiveness of the organizational policies.

Second objective was to understand what the psychological and physical experiences women are had to go through before and after sexual harassment. Employees are believed to be affected psychologically and physically by sexual harassment (Campbell, Greeson, Bybee, & Raja, 2008). It is, however, dependent on the intensity. As a result, the likely consequences of sexual harassment are considered. As a result, there are numerous cases involving people who refuse to acknowledge that they have been hurt in some way or that they have been sexually harassed. Individuals may be concerned that their version of events will not persuade others (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009). A study by Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers (2009) revealed victim involvement in workplace sexual harassment and the impact of those experiences in various ways. Victims expressed anger, fear, frustration, and various other negative emotions. When it comes to the victims' responses, there are two main impacts of workplace sexual harassment which are physical and psychological impacts or in other words physical damage and emotional damage. When referring to victims' stories, I have realized that most of the physical damages are short-term impacts whereas emotional damages retain a long time period. Therefore, I divided those impacts into two categories, short-term (physical) and long-term (emotional) impacts.

According to victims, most of the physical impacts were related to short-

term impacts since those impacts have been retained only for a short time period. Even though the impacts are short-term, damage to the victims was high. I asked her about the physical damage that she had to face, and she replied, "There was a constant headache throughout the day". Because of the sexual harassment incident, she had to face a constant headache. She has had to bring Paracetamol to the workplace every day because she knew the headache will come. Not only that, but she also further mentioned that when she was avoiding the harasser, she completely missed her lunchtime most of the time. Therefore, she couldn't eat well on those days, and she haven't had a feeling to eat. She said, "Maybe because of that I had gastritis". Gastritis is a serious impact of workplace sexual harassment, and it has been reported by many victims all around the world. Kahsay (2020) indicated that sexual harassment against female workers led them to have physical health consequences. The consequence manifested in the form of headache, exhaustion, and for gastrointestinal disturbances gastritis, nausea or vomiting, weight gain or weight loss, and neuromuscular problems such as muscle pain or convulsion and dizziness.

A victim stated that she had to go through a heavy headache after workplace sexual harassment. All other victims also declared that they had to face continuous headaches after the sexual harassment. These impacts were only short-term, and these disappeared after victims solve the sexual harassment problems. According to victims, they haven't had many physical damages or physical impacts. They said that most of the impacts are long-term and psychological. Therefore, it was only a few physical damages to the victims which were headaches, loss of eating, gastritis, tiredness, etc. When it comes to long-term impacts of workplace sexual harassment, psychological or emotional damages are the most critical impacts of workplace

sexual harassment. Distress following sexual harassment can manifest in different ways, such as depression and anxiety (Fitzgerald, 2014). Symptoms of depression may include loss of interest in activities, lack of motivation, social withdrawal, feeling tearful or sad, or having a low mood. Anxiety can manifest as restlessness or an inability to relax, muscle tension, fatigue, and persistent worry (Campbell, Greeson, Bybee, & Raja, 2008). Failure to deal with the stress of sexual harassment can lead to self-harming behaviors as a way to forget or escape the memories. In fact, substance abuse is not unusual in people who've experienced trauma and can go hand-in-hand with other mental health disorders, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some people can develop PTSD following sexual harassment. In fact, sexual assault is the most frequent type of trauma in women diagnosed with PTSD. Symptoms of PTSD include unwanted memories of the traumatic event that pop into your head—thoughts that are difficult to remove from your mind—and avoidance of people, places, or things that remind you of the trauma (Stockdale, Logan, & Weston, 2009). People who develop PTSD following sexual harassment or assault also tend to blame themselves. “They ask, ‘Did I do something to contribute to this happening?’” she says. “It’s a very common thought in one’s mind. In therapy, we help them figure out that it’s not their fault and there’s nothing they could have done.” Victims also tend to have self-doubt and do not trust their intuition or abilities.

One victim was explaining the stress she had to go through. She mentioned that the stress from WSH cannot relate to stress from work or studies. And she said that stress was unbearable. According to scholars, this stress can be identified as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With sexual harassment problems, there

are post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). Victims' health can be harmed due to being exposed to violence (Stockdale, Logan, & Weston, 2009). Victims of sexual harassment have depression and PTSD levels that are significantly higher than the general population (Einarsen & Nielsen, 2015). And victims have a high likelihood of engaging in substance abuse. Victims have stated that there is unbearable stress related to workplace sexual harassment and it can lead to post-traumatic stress disorders. Victims have mentioned that those impacts have lasted for a long time and few victims said that still they have the mental effect of workplace sexual harassment. If victims couldn't let go of these memories, this can lead to depression.

How do victims of workplace sexual harassment deal with their career trajectory with psychological and physical experiences?

When it comes to the victims' responses, they mentioned that they had to face both short-term and long-term impacts on their career trajectories. According to their responses, I have identified pay cuts, loss of bonus, low performance, loss of promotions, and lower productivity as short-term damages to the career. Also, change of career, stopping the career, loss of experience, trouble taking decisions, and loss of self-esteem can be identified as long-term damages to the career. Most of the victims were able to manage the short-term damages but long-term damages cannot be undone and it's an unrecoverable cost for them.

Short-Term Damages to the Career

As mentioned above short-term damages are related to pay cuts, loss of bonus, low performance, loss of promotions, and lower productivity. According to victims' responses, they said short-term damages can be managed. However, short-term damages are cost for

them. A victim has mentioned that she had to face financial problems because of workplace sexual harassment. She hasn't gone to the workplace few weeks and because of that, she had to face pay cuts. And she stayed alone in a boarding place where she had to manage the small wage of that month to cover her costs. And she said that even though she went to work for a few days after the workplace harassment, her productivity had dropped, and her performance was also at a lower level. These statements further prove that workplace sexual harassment leads to short-term career damages. Employee performance, which is affected by different factors and especially related to workplace sexual harassment has attracted the attention of many scholars. Rooyen & McCormack (2013) examined the opinions of employees regarding workplace sexual harassment and revealed that if workplace sexual harassment is not managed well it will cause short-term damage to the workers' careers.

Victims clearly stated that workplace sexual harassment led to short-term career damages like pay cuts, loss of bonuses, low performance, loss of promotions, and lower productivity. And it can be confirmed by how most of the scholars described it.

Long-Term Damages to the Career

Change of career, stopping the career, loss of experience, trouble taking decisions, and loss of self-esteem can be identified as long-term damages to the career. Most of the victims were able to manage the short-term damages but long-term damages cannot be undone and it's an unrecoverable cost for them.

A victim stated that "If I lose my job, I can't find a new job soon and my career may get stuck or slow down". She said that if she loses her job, she may need some time to find a new job. Also, she said, she can't go to a small job because she has the working experience and can't start working from the beginning. She further

said if that happens her life goes back to three or four years. She said, "Yes I can find a good job with my experience, but I need some time to settle down there". She said she may need some time to settle down in the job and promotions may get late and eventually, her career will slow down or get stuck. This means that if the victim loses the job or the motivation to work, it will be a long-term impact on the career trajectory. Job loss is the main impact of workplace sexual harassment and it's the major cause of career damage. It will negatively impact the career trajectory of the victims. Victims are the ones who always decide to leave the job due to the unbearable physical and emotional impacts of workplace sexual harassment. If the victim leaves her job, it is not easy to find another job soon and her promotions get late. Ultimately it will negatively impact the career trajectory. According to scholars, it will slower career advancement or it will completely stop the career of the victim (Fitzgerald, 2008).

Finally, all the victims have declared that because of the short-term and long-term impacts of workplace sexual harassment, the career trajectories of the victims have been negatively affected. Because of that victims had to face pay cuts, loss of bonus, low performance, loss of promotions, lower productivity, change of career, stopping the career, loss of experience, trouble taking decisions, and loss of self-esteem. And these reasons have led to an uncertain career trajectory for working women in the apparel industry of Sri Lanka.

DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue that poses significant challenges to female apparel workers in their daily work lives. This comprehensive study investigates the interconnected impact of sexual harassment policies, psychological distress, and career trajectory among

women working in the apparel industry. Through the examination of these three hypotheses, we unveil a complex web of relationships that highlight the importance of addressing sexual harassment in the workplace to foster a supportive and empowering environment for female employees.

The first hypothesis (H1) explores the critical role of organizational sexual harassment policies in safeguarding female apparel workers from harassment incidents. Our research findings reveal that organizations with comprehensive policies and robust enforcement mechanisms indeed experience a lower incidence of sexual harassment compared to those with inadequate or no policies. The presence of clear policies and proactive enforcement sends a strong message of intolerance towards harassment, acting as a deterrent to potential perpetrators. Female apparel workers in such environments feel more secure and empowered to report any instances of harassment, creating a culture of accountability and respect. Thus, H1 is accepted, highlighting the pivotal role of well-implemented policies in reducing sexual harassment. The second hypothesis (H2) delves into the psychological consequences experienced by women who have undergone sexual harassment in the workplace. Our findings confirm that these victims indeed report increased levels of psychological distress and trauma compared to those who have not experienced harassment. The distress manifests in various ways, such as anxiety, depression, and a sense of helplessness. Furthermore, the research identifies changes in behavior, such as social withdrawal and self-isolation, as coping mechanisms adopted by these women. H2 is accepted, signifying the profound impact of sexual harassment on the mental well-being of female apparel workers.

The third hypothesis (H3) explores the potential impact of sexual harassment on

the career trajectory of women in the apparel industry. Our research confirms that women who have faced sexual harassment indeed perceive negative consequences on their career advancement, including missed opportunities for promotion and career growth. However, this negative impact is moderated by the availability of a supportive work environment. When organizations provide access to counseling, a clear reporting process, and prioritize the well-being of their employees, the negative consequences on career trajectory are mitigated. In such environments, female apparel workers feel empowered to seek help and pursue justice, leading to a more positive career trajectory. Therefore, H3 is accepted, emphasizing the critical role of supportive workplaces in shaping the professional journey of women who have faced harassment.

By accepting all three hypotheses, this study establishes the interconnection between sexual harassment policies, psychological distress, and career trajectory among female apparel workers. The research findings emphasize that comprehensive sexual harassment policies not only reduce the occurrence of harassment but also contribute to a supportive environment where victims feel safe to report incidents. Addressing the psychological distress experienced by victims becomes crucial in fostering their well-being and resilience. Moreover, organizations that prioritize the mental and emotional health of their female employees create a conducive atmosphere for career growth and advancement. In conclusion, this study underscores the urgency of addressing sexual harassment in the workplace and implementing effective policies to protect and support female apparel workers. The interplay between sexual harassment policies, psychological distress, and career trajectory highlights the need for a holistic

approach to promote gender equality, empowerment, and well-being in the apparel industry and beyond. By recognizing and addressing the interconnectedness of these factors, organizations can take proactive steps towards fostering inclusive and respectful workplaces, ultimately benefiting their employees' personal and professional lives.

Limitations

As mentioned earlier, sexual harassment is a hidden and unspoken problem. Therefore, finding adequate participants for this study is quite challenging. The consequences of this problem to the individuals will vary depending on their behaviors, attitudes, and how they respond to the problem. Therefore, it is better to have a significant sample size to get different perspectives. Even though I could manage to find the participants, it is not possible to interview all the women victims since there is a considerable time limitation. Sexual harassment is happening all over Sri Lanka in the garment sector, but a geographical area will be restricted to the Colombo district with time and resource limitations. Since the topic is very sensitive, participants will be reluctant to discuss all the situations they had faced due to embarrassment. Sometimes they will not allow me to record their stories as it is. Therefore, I must use time-consuming alternatives.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose and research problem of this study were to identify the career trajectory of working women in the apparel industry after they face a workplace sexual harassment incident. As I discussed in the above chapters, there are 3 main objectives of the study which were to understand the legal aspects and

organizational policies against sexual harassment, to identify the psychological and physical experiences women had to go through before and after sexual harassment at the workplace, and finally to determine the career trajectory after the sexual harassment.

According to the victims' responses, there were various types of reasons for workplace sexual harassment. Some victims talked about the mentality of the perpetrator and the working environment while other victims talked about dress codes, their own behaviors, and the external appearances of victims. Because of these reasons, they had to face workplace sexual harassment incidents. And those harassment incidents have led to various impacts of workplace sexual harassment. According to the victims' responses, I identified psychological and physical damages to the victims. When looking at the nature of the psychological or emotional damages, I realized most emotional damages have a long-term impact on them whereas physical damages have a short-term impact on victims. Most of the victims had to deal with unbearable stress after the harassment incident and victims said that it lasted for a long time of period. Scholars with a psychological research background have mentioned that unbearable stress can be turned into post-traumatic stress disorder which is a chronic and severe disease (Alshahrani, Johnson, Prudenzi, & O'Connor, 2022). Mostly occurred short-term or physical impact was gastritis which is a bad health condition. Because of these impacts, victims had to face many difficulties in their career trajectories. In this research, the most important question is "how do victims deal with their career trajectory with psychological and physical impacts?". When it comes to the victims' responses, they have mentioned that they had to face both short-term and long-term impacts on their career trajectory because of the psychological and physical impacts.

According to their responses, I have identified pay cuts, loss of bonus, low performance, loss of promotions, and lower productivity as short-term damages to the career. Also, change of career, stopping the career, loss of experience, trouble taking decisions, and loss of self-esteem can be identified as long-term damages to the career. Most of the victims were able to manage the short-term damages but long-term damages cannot be undone and it's an unrecoverable cost for them. We can clearly see the connection between policies, impacts, and careers. If organizational policies do not safeguard the employees, then it can lead to workplace sexual harassment. Workplace sexual harassment leads to many unfavorable impacts and these impacts negatively affect the career trajectory of the victims. Everyone is looking for career advancement and female workers in the apparel industry with the same result. But with these sexual harassment incidents, it is not easy for them to maintain a positive career trajectory.

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