

The Influence of Socioeconomic Factors on Women’s Career Advancement in Sri Lanka’s Apparel Industry: The Mediating Role of Educational Attainment

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Abstract	Article Info
<p>Although women represent most of the workforce in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry, their progression into executive and leadership positions remains limited. This persistent gap highlights the influence of deeper socioeconomic constraints that shape women’s career trajectories. Factors such as family background, limited access to credit, unequal access to professional resources, and restrictive organisational practices continue to hinder women’s advancement into senior roles. This concept paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework to examine how these socioeconomic factors influence women’s career advancement, with educational attainment positioned as a key mediating mechanism. Drawing on Human Capital Theory, Social Role Theory, and Glass Ceiling Theory, the framework explains how education can serve as a strategic tool that enables women to convert socioeconomic disadvantages into professional growth opportunities, while also reconising the structural and cultural barriers that continue to restrict leadership access. By synthesising multidisciplinary literature, this study highlights the complex interaction between personal, social, and organisational factors that shape women’s leadership outcomes in the apparel sector. The proposed framework contributes theoretically by integrating multiple perspectives into a unified model and offers practical implications for policymakers, industry leaders, and educational institutions seeking to strengthen women’s leadership development and promote gender equity within Sri Lanka’s apparel industry.</p>	<p>Keywords: <i>Socio-Economic Factors, Education Attainment, Women’s Career Advancement, Apparel Sector, Gender Equality, Sri Lanka</i></p>

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INTRODUCTION

Women's career advancement has become a central concern in contemporary labour market discourse, particularly in industries where women constitute the majority of the workforce but remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions. Sri Lanka's apparel industry presents a compelling example of this paradox. While women make up a substantial proportion of employees and contribute significantly to the sector's productivity and export performance, their progression into managerial and executive roles remains disproportionately low (Hansadhi, Wijerathne, & Thenuwara, 2024). This imbalance raises important questions about the structural and socioeconomic conditions that shape women's professional trajectories within the industry.

The apparel sector is a critical driver of Sri Lanka's economic development, generating foreign exchange earnings and providing large-scale employment opportunities for women. For many women, employment in this sector represents an entry point into formal labour participation and economic independence. However, despite this participation, career advancement opportunities remain constrained. Women continue to face systemic barriers rooted in socioeconomic realities such as family background, limited access to credit facilities, and unequal access to professional development resources (Better Work, 2023). These factors collectively hinder upward mobility and restrict women's representation in leadership pipelines. Therefore, understanding how these socioeconomic determinants influence women's career progression has become both a scholarly and policy imperative.

Importantly, this issue is not confined to Sri Lanka. Across global apparel supply chains, similar patterns persist. The worldwide apparel industry employs approximately 60 million workers, of whom nearly 75% are women (Textile Focus, 2025). Despite this overwhelming presence, women are consistently underrepresented in decision-making and executive roles. Research highlights persistent gender discrimination, workplace harassment, and organisational practices that limit women's professional growth. For example, studies from Bangladesh reveal that women earn approximately 20% less than men even when occupying similar positions (Menzel et al., 2021). Such disparities reflect broader structural inequalities embedded within industry systems rather than isolated organisational failures.

Scholars argue that these leadership gaps are deeply intertwined with socioeconomic conditions that shape women's access to opportunities. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often encounter compounded disadvantages, including restricted access to professional networks, limited educational pathways, and constrained social mobility (Alanazi et al., 2025). Although the apparel industry can function as a gateway to workforce participation, sustainable career advancement requires supportive institutional mechanisms. The World Bank (2021) emphasises that without complementary policies addressing barriers to higher-paying roles and long-term employment, workforce participation alone cannot translate into leadership representation. Consequently, there is a pressing need to examine how socioeconomic factors influence women's career advancement within Sri Lanka's apparel sector.

Among these determinants, family background plays a particularly influential role. Family structures, caregiving responsibilities, cultural expectations, and household income levels significantly shape women's career decisions and progression opportunities. Family encouragement, exposure to career guidance, and financial stability often determine whether women can pursue higher education or leadership-oriented career paths (Dabindu Collective, 2025). Compared to their male counterparts, many women in the apparel industry must balance professional responsibilities with domestic obligations, which can slow their advancement into supervisory or executive roles. These dynamics illustrate how career progression is not solely determined by individual competence but is embedded within broader social and familial contexts.

Access to credit facilities represents another critical dimension influencing women's professional growth. Financial inclusion enables women to invest in education, skill development, and entrepreneurial ventures within the apparel value chain. However, women frequently face barriers in accessing formal credit systems. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2024), limited credit access constrains women's ability to undertake professional development initiatives. Globally, women-oriented enterprises receive 39% less credit than male-managed firms, and the gap widens to 54% in contexts with traditional gender norms (Grover & Viollaz, 2025). In Sri Lanka, structural barriers such as high lending rates, stringent collateral requirements, and documentation challenges further restrict women's access to financial resources (AFI, 2021).

Even more concerning is the interplay between gender, education, and financial inclusion. Evidence suggests that being male, formally employed, and more educated increases the likelihood of obtaining credit facilities in Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2020). This highlights a persistent gender gap in financial inclusion despite women comprising 52% of the national population. Restricted access to credit not only limits immediate professional opportunities but also indirectly constrains women's ability to pursue higher education and structured training programmes. Such investments are often prerequisites for promotion into senior roles within the apparel sector. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL, 2024) underscores the need for gender-sensitive banking services, financial literacy programmes, and bias-free digital lending platforms to address these systemic inequities. Household financial support further illustrates the intersection between socioeconomic context and career advancement. Research indicates that women with financial backing from parents or spouses are more likely to invest in their professional development and pursue leadership opportunities compared to those without such support (VoxDev, 2024). Thus, credit accessibility functions both as a direct determinant of career advancement and as an indirect enabler through educational attainment. This dual influence underscores the importance of examining these relationships within an integrated analytical framework.

Resource accessibility constitutes another vital factor shaping women's career trajectories. Professional growth depends heavily on access to training programmes, mentorship networks, leadership development initiatives, internships, and skill-building workshops. However, women often have unequal access to these developmental resources. Globally, less than 10% of women report having formal mentors compared to 15% of men (Ajuwon et al., 2024; WorldatWork, 2025). Women are also 12% less likely to receive leadership skills training and 15% less likely to be assessed for leadership potential. Furthermore, four in ten entry-level women have not received promotions, stretch assignments, or leadership development opportunities within the past two years (DDI, 2024; McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2025).

In Sri Lanka, disparities are further compounded by digital divides and uneven access to innovation spaces. National digital literacy stands at 57.2%, with rural rates (55.2%) significantly lagging behind urban areas (72%) (Senanayake, as cited in UN Women Sri Lanka, 2023; Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2021). Limited access to digital platforms restricts women's ability to participate in emerging managerial and technology-driven roles within the apparel industry. Consequently, resource disparities interact with socioeconomic constraints to exclude many women from leadership pipelines (Better Work, 2023; Dabindu Collective, 2025).

Within this complex landscape, educational attainment emerges as a significant mechanism linking socioeconomic conditions to career advancement outcomes. Education equips women with knowledge, technical competencies, confidence, and credentials necessary for managerial roles (ILO, 2024). It enhances productivity and expands access to formal labour markets. Empirical evidence demonstrates that women with bachelor's degrees or higher exhibit labour force participation rates of approximately 70%, compared to only 34% among women who have not completed high school (Eye on Housing, 2025; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Moreover, education significantly contributes to economic empowerment and income generation (UN Women, 2025).

However, educational attainment alone does not guarantee leadership access. Structural and cultural barriers often limit the translation of qualifications into executive positions. UNESCO (2025) and Bush et al. (2022) note that institutional biases, limited mentoring opportunities, and discriminatory promotion systems can obstruct educated women from reaching senior leadership roles. Thus, while education serves as a critical mediating mechanism between socioeconomic factors and career advancement, its effectiveness depends on supportive organisational reforms and inclusive workplace cultures.

Organisational dynamics therefore represent a crucial contextual influence. Workplace culture, gender norms, performance evaluation systems, and promotion policies collectively shape women's career trajectories (Better Work, 2023). Even in contexts where women possess educational and socioeconomic advantages, rigid hierarchies and male-dominated leadership structures may inhibit upward mobility (World Bank, 2020). These cumulative barriers contribute to what scholars describe as the "leaky pipeline," where women gradually exit career pathways at successive stages despite demonstrating competence and ambition (Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2024).

While the leaky pipeline metaphor has been widely used, contemporary critiques argue that it oversimplifies the phenomenon. Rather than passively "leaking" from career ladders due to personal choices, women are often

actively pushed out by systemic impediments such as unconscious bias, work–family conflict, inadequate mentorship, and exclusionary organisational cultures (Miranda, 2021; Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2024). Recognising these structural dynamics is essential for developing comprehensive strategies that address both individual and institutional barriers.

Against this backdrop, this concept paper seeks to examine women's career advancement in Sri Lanka's apparel industry not merely as an organisational outcome but as a reflection of broader socioeconomic conditions. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) investigate the impact of family background on women's career advancement; (2) examine the effect of accessibility to credit facilities; (3) assess the relationship between resource accessibility and career progression; (4) analyse the mediating role of educational attainment; and (5) identify gaps in organisational dynamics affecting women's advancement.

Drawing on Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), and Glass Ceiling Theory (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987), this study conceptualises career advancement as an outcome shaped by the interaction between individual capabilities and structural constraints. By integrating these perspectives, the paper proposes a comprehensive framework to better understand how socioeconomic factors and educational attainment jointly influence women's career trajectories within Sri Lanka's apparel sector. In doing so, this study contributes to ongoing debates on gender equity, leadership representation, and inclusive organisational development, while offering practical insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders seeking to strengthen women's participation in executive leadership roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career advancement has become a significant area of inquiry within organisational research, particularly in industries such as apparel manufacturing where women constitute the majority of the workforce but remain markedly underrepresented in executive and decision-making roles. In this context, career advancement is not merely an organisational outcome; it is also a mechanism through which women negotiate socioeconomic constraints and seek upward mobility within competitive professional environments (Better Work, 2023; Dabindu Collective, 2025). Women's progression into leadership roles depends not only on their individual competence and educational attainment but also on the availability of organisational support systems, professional networks, and access to developmental resources (Hansadhi, Wijerathne, & Thenuwara, 2024; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2024).

Understanding women's career advancement in the apparel sector therefore requires a multidimensional perspective that integrates individual, organisational, and socioeconomic determinants.

The literature broadly conceptualises career advancement as upward occupational mobility, reflected in promotions, access to leadership roles, increased authority, and enhanced professional status. Within the context of women's empowerment, career advancement is often viewed as a tangible indicator of gender equity and organisational inclusivity (ILO, 2024; Sunday Times, 2024). However, empirical studies consistently demonstrate that women's progression into higher positions is shaped by multiple socioeconomic influences.

Scholars identify key antecedents including family background, access to financial resources, and resource accessibility such as training, mentorship, and professional networks (Dabindu Collective, 2025; Better Work, 2023). Some studies categorise these determinants into family-related factors, organisational antecedents, and individual-level attributes (Hansadhi et al., 2024; ILO, 2024). Among these, family background has received considerable attention. Caregiving responsibilities, cultural expectations, and household income levels significantly influence women's career decisions and their ability to pursue leadership opportunities (Dabindu Collective, 2025; Better Work, 2023).

Despite this growing body of research, limited empirical attention has been directed toward the integrated impact of credit accessibility and resource availability on women's career advancement in the apparel industry. While family dynamics are widely acknowledged, the role of financial inclusion and access to professional development infrastructure remains underexplored. Addressing this gap requires a comprehensive framework that situates educational attainment and organisational dynamics within broader socioeconomic structures.

To advance this understanding, the present study draws upon Human Capital Theory and Glass Ceiling Theory as complementary lenses, positioning educational attainment as a central mechanism that connects socioeconomic conditions with leadership outcomes.

Socioeconomic factors represent foundational determinants that shape women's capacity to transition into managerial and executive roles. These factors are often intertwined with cultural norms, informal institutional practices, and organisational structures (Hansadhi et al., 2024). Research indicates that entrenched gender stereotypes and systemic biases frequently disadvantage women in promotion processes. For example, studies initiated by RISE highlight how management practices may implicitly prioritise male employees for leadership roles while requiring women to meet higher performance thresholds to demonstrate equivalent competence (BSR, 2024).

At a global level, evidence further illustrates a disconnect between educational attainment and leadership representation. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2025) reveals that although women with tertiary education constitute 40.3% of the workforce, only 29.5% reach top leadership positions. Notably, this gap widens as educational levels increase, suggesting that organisational barriers persist even among highly qualified women. Such findings indicate that career advancement constraints are embedded within structural systems rather than being solely attributable to individual limitations.

These structural barriers are particularly salient in labour-intensive industries such as apparel manufacturing. Women's career mobility is shaped not only by their qualifications but also by access to financial capital, social networks, and institutional support. Socioeconomic disadvantage can restrict women's opportunities to invest in education, professional development, and entrepreneurial initiatives, thereby limiting their long-term career prospects.

Educational attainment refers to the formal and informal learning experiences that equip individuals with knowledge, technical skills, credentials, and professional confidence required for leadership roles (ILO, 2024). Within the apparel sector, education serves as a critical enabler that enhances women's productivity, decision-making capacity, and eligibility for managerial positions. Empirical evidence suggests that women with higher levels of education are more likely to secure executive roles, receive higher compensation, and sustain leadership positions over time (Hansadhi et al., 2024).

Human Capital Theory provides a foundational explanation for this relationship. Becker (1993) argues that education constitutes an investment that enhances individual productivity and increases returns in the labour market. From this perspective, educational attainment should naturally facilitate upward mobility and career advancement.

However, Social Role Theory introduces a critical nuance by highlighting how societal expectations and gender norms constrain women's ability to fully leverage their qualifications (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Even when women possess equal or superior educational credentials, entrenched cultural assumptions regarding caregiving roles and leadership suitability may limit their progression.

Complementing these perspectives, Glass Ceiling Theory underscores the presence of invisible structural barriers that prevent women from ascending to senior leadership positions despite demonstrated competence (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987). When integrated, these three theoretical frameworks suggest that while education enhances women's capabilities, structural and cultural impediments can obstruct the translation of educational attainment into equitable career outcomes. Thus, education functions not merely as a predictor of advancement but as a mediating mechanism operating within broader socioeconomic and organisational contexts.

Organisational dynamics, including workplace culture, promotion policies, leadership norms, and performance evaluation systems, play a decisive role in shaping women's career trajectories. Supportive organisational environments that prioritise gender equity are more likely to facilitate women's advancement into executive positions (Better Work, 2023; ILO, 2024). Conversely, rigid hierarchies, opaque promotion systems, and male-dominated leadership cultures can significantly limit upward mobility (Dabindu Collective, 2025).

The intersection of family responsibilities, resource access, credit availability, and organisational practices generates layered challenges for women in Sri Lanka's apparel sector. According to McKinsey & Company (2025), women hold only 29% of C-suite positions, reflecting persistent structural impediments throughout the leadership pipeline. Similarly, research within global apparel supply chains reveals that inadequate family support and non-transparent performance standards often discourage women from pursuing promotions (BSR, 2024).

These findings highlight that career advancement cannot be examined in isolation from organisational systems. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between individual qualifications, socioeconomic resources, and

institutional practices. Understanding this interplay is essential for developing comprehensive strategies that promote equitable leadership development.

Despite extensive scholarship on gender equity and women's empowerment in the apparel sector (Better Work, 2023; Dabindu Collective, 2025), three major gaps remain evident.

First, a theoretical gap exists due to the absence of an integrated model combining Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), and Glass Ceiling Theory (Morrison et al., 1987) to examine the mediating role of educational attainment in women's career advancement. Existing studies often apply these theories independently rather than synthesising them into a unified explanatory framework.

Second, an empirical gap persists in relation to the collective examination of family background, credit accessibility, resource availability, and organisational dynamics within a single analytical model, particularly in the Sri Lankan apparel context (Hansadhi et al., 2024; ILO, 2024). While individual factors have been studied separately, limited research addresses their integrated influence on executive-level advancement.

Third, a contextual gap is apparent due to the limited focus on women executives in Sri Lanka's apparel industry, despite the sector's significant contribution to national economic development. Given women's dominant representation in the workforce, understanding the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder their leadership progression is crucial.

In response to these gaps, this concept paper proposes a comprehensive framework that integrates socioeconomic determinants, educational attainment, and organisational dynamics to better explain women's career advancement in Sri Lanka's apparel sector. By synthesising multiple theoretical perspectives, the study aims to provide a stronger conceptual foundation for future empirical investigation and policy development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is designed as a conceptual framework development paper, focusing on theory building rather than empirical data analysis. In line with the principles outlined by Jaakkola (2020) and Snyder (2019), the primary objective is to develop a theoretically grounded framework that explains the relationship between socioeconomic factors and women's career advancement in Sri Lanka's apparel sector. Instead of testing hypotheses using primary data, this paper systematically synthesises existing literature to construct an integrated conceptual model.

The central aim of the proposed framework is to explain how key socioeconomic determinants, namely family background, accessibility to credit facilities, and resource accessibility, shape women's career advancement. Within this structure, educational attainment is positioned as a mediating variable that links socioeconomic conditions to career outcomes, while organisational dynamics are conceptualised as a moderating factor that influences the strength and direction of these relationships. By incorporating both mediating and moderating mechanisms, the framework captures the complex interplay between individual capabilities, structural constraints, and organisational environments.

The framework is developed in accordance with established principles of theory construction in management and social sciences. Conceptual development involves identifying key constructs, defining their relationships, integrating relevant theoretical foundations, and positioning the framework within existing scholarly debates (Jaakkola, 2020). Accordingly, this study contributes to the advancement of conceptual scholarship by synthesising insights from Human Capital Theory, Social Role Theory, and Glass Ceiling Theory to explain women's career advancement within a specific industrial and national context. The outcome is a structured theoretical foundation intended to guide future empirical investigations.

The literature review underpinning this conceptual development draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical papers, industry reports, and conference proceedings published between 2013 and 2025. The selection of 2013 as the starting point reflects the period during which global and local discourse on women's empowerment and gender equality intensified, particularly within the garment and apparel sector. This shift was influenced by initiatives led by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Better Work Programme in Sri Lanka, which placed increased emphasis on gender equity and leadership inclusion (ILO, 2014; Better Work, 2023).

Relevant literature was retrieved from major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. In addition, institutional reports from international organisations such as the ILO, as well as publications from local advocacy groups such as the Dabindu Collective, were incorporated to ensure

contextual depth. This approach allowed for the integration of both theoretical and industry-specific perspectives.

To ensure comprehensive coverage, a range of keywords and search phrases were employed. These included “socioeconomic factors,” “family background,” “accessibility to credit facilities,” “resource access,” “educational attainment,” and “organisational dynamics.” Theoretical keywords such as “Human Capital Theory,” “Social Role Theory,” “Glass Ceiling Theory,” “gender equality in the apparel industry,” and “women leadership” were also utilised. These search terms facilitated the identification of empirical findings, theoretical arguments, and contextual discussions relevant to the study.

Through systematic synthesis of this literature, empirical, theoretical, and contextual gaps were identified and used as the foundation for conceptual framework development. The resulting model examines how socioeconomic factors influence women’s career advancement, with educational attainment functioning as a mediating mechanism and organisational dynamics operating as a moderating influence. This conceptualisation provides a structured basis for future empirical validation within the Sri Lankan apparel sector and beyond.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on existing literature, this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework to examine the relationship between socioeconomic factors and women’s career advancement in Sri Lanka’s apparel sector, incorporating the mediating role of educational attainment and the moderating effect of organisational dynamics. The proposed framework is grounded in Human Capital Theory, Glass Ceiling Theory, and Social Role Theory to explain how socioeconomic determinants, including family background, accessibility to credit facilities, and resource accessibility, interact with educational attainment and organisational dynamics to influence women’s progression into leadership roles. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the framework provides a comprehensive explanation of how structural, individual, and organisational elements collectively shape women’s career trajectories within the apparel industry.

Within the conceptual model, women’s socioeconomic profiles are recognised as critical antecedents influencing their ability to access leadership opportunities and progress upward along organisational hierarchies. Family background plays a significant role in shaping women’s capacity to balance parenting responsibilities with professional aspirations. Women from supportive family environments may have greater flexibility and encouragement to pursue leadership pathways, whereas those facing restrictive cultural expectations or caregiving burdens may encounter structural constraints (Better Work, 2023; Dabindu Collective, 2025). Similarly, access to credit facilities determines whether women can invest in career-enhancing opportunities such as higher education, professional certification, or entrepreneurial ventures. Financial limitations often restrict women’s ability to pursue executive training or business expansion, thereby limiting long-term advancement potential.

Resource accessibility further strengthens or weakens women’s readiness for executive positions. Access to training programmes, mentorship opportunities, leadership development initiatives, and professional networks significantly enhances women’s preparedness for senior roles (Hansadhi, Wijerathne, & Thenuwara, 2024). In the apparel sector, where women constitute the majority of the workforce yet remain underrepresented in top management, unequal access to such resources reinforces vertical segregation. Therefore, socioeconomic factors are not merely background characteristics; rather, they operate as structural conditions that either enable or restrict women’s advancement.

Educational attainment emerges as a significant mechanism within this framework. The level of education achieved by women employees, whether primary, secondary, tertiary, or postgraduate, plays a decisive role in shaping their professional mobility. Education equips women with technical knowledge, managerial competencies, strategic thinking abilities, and self-confidence necessary for leadership roles. However, education does not operate in isolation. Its effectiveness in translating socioeconomic advantages into career advancement depends significantly on organisational dynamics. Promotion policies, workplace culture, leadership styles, communication systems, teamwork structures, and gender inclusivity practices collectively determine whether women can convert their qualifications into tangible upward mobility.

Organisational dynamics therefore function as a moderating force within the proposed model. Even highly educated women may encounter barriers if organisational hierarchies remain rigid or if implicit biases restrict leadership access. Conversely, supportive organisational cultures that emphasise merit-based promotion,

inclusive leadership, and gender-sensitive policies can strengthen the positive impact of education and socioeconomic resources on career advancement. Organisational behaviour elements, including internal culture, learning opportunities, leadership approaches, and gender equality practices, work in tandem to shape women's career trajectories within institutional settings.

Importantly, the framework positions educational attainment as a mediating variable rather than a direct predictor. Education serves as the mechanism through which socioeconomic conditions influence career advancement. Women's ability to make informed career decisions, access professional development opportunities, and demonstrate leadership competence is heavily dependent on their educational background. In this sense, education transforms socioeconomic resources into strategic advantages. The International Labour Organisation recognises that educated women possessing relevant skills, credentials, and self-assurance are better positioned to challenge discriminatory practices and sustain leadership roles within organisations (ILO, 2024).

Thus, rather than assuming that favourable socioeconomic conditions automatically guarantee career progression, this concept paper emphasises that educational attainment enhances the linkage between socioeconomic factors and women's career advancement. This argument aligns with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), which posits that investment in education increases productivity, competence, and labour market outcomes. At the same time, Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) explains how societal expectations and gender norms embedded within family structures and social institutions shape women's occupational opportunities. Complementing these perspectives, Glass Ceiling Theory (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987) highlights the invisible yet persistent organisational barriers that prevent women from advancing into senior leadership positions despite possessing adequate qualifications. Together, these theoretical foundations create a coherent and multi-layered framework explaining both opportunity structures and institutional constraints.

Within this conceptualisation, women's career advancement is defined as a critical indicator of empowerment and organisational inclusivity in the apparel sector. Advancement is not limited to job promotion; rather, it reflects upward mobility into leadership roles, enhanced decision-making authority, and access to executive-level responsibilities. It serves as a measurable benchmark of gender equity and the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives within organisations (ILO, 2024; Hansadhi et al., 2024). Career advancement is also influenced by socioeconomic background, educational access, and organisational support systems (Better Work, 2023; Dabindu Collective, 2025). Moreover, women's professional progression in the apparel industry can be interpreted as an organisational performance indicator reflecting inclusive governance and equitable workplace practices (ILO, 2024; Sunday Times, 2024). Importantly, educational attainment mediates the relationship between socioeconomic variables and leadership opportunities by enabling women to recognise, access, and utilise development pathways effectively (Becker, 1993; Hansadhi et al., 2024).

The antecedents of women's career advancement identified in this framework operate at both individual and organisational levels. At the individual level, family background shapes caregiving responsibilities, household income constraints, and cultural expectations (Hansadhi et al., 2024; Dabindu Collective, 2025; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Resource accessibility encompasses training, mentorship, leadership programmes, and professional networking opportunities (Hansadhi et al., 2024; ILO, 2024; Sunday Times, 2024). Credit accessibility involves financial support mechanisms, institutional credit schemes, and structural barriers limiting women's financial inclusion (ILO, 2024; Better Work, 2023; Dabindu Collective, 2025). Educational attainment includes formal education levels, executive training, and skill development initiatives (Becker, 1993; ILO, 2024; Hansadhi et al., 2024; Better Work, 2023). At the organisational level, dynamics such as promotion policies, workplace culture, and gender inclusivity practices significantly influence whether individual capabilities translate into advancement outcomes (Better Work, 2023; ILO, 2024; Dabindu Collective, 2025).

The academic contribution of this concept paper lies in its theoretical integration. While prior studies have examined socioeconomic barriers, education, or organisational constraints independently, there remains a lack of comprehensive models that simultaneously incorporate mediating and moderating mechanisms within the apparel sector context. By integrating Human Capital Theory and Social Role Theory to explain individual and contextual determinants, and Glass Ceiling Theory to explain structural barriers, this framework fills an identified theoretical gap. It provides a holistic explanation of how internal competencies and external socioeconomic conditions interact within organisational environments to shape career outcomes.

Furthermore, the framework offers directions for future empirical research. It provides a structured basis for testing mediated and moderated relationships using quantitative approaches such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Researchers may examine the extent to which educational attainment mediates the influence of family background, credit accessibility, and resource availability on career advancement, while simultaneously assessing the moderating effect of organisational dynamics. Beyond the Sri Lankan context, the framework can be expanded for cross-national comparative studies and adapted to other sectors, including service industries and alternative manufacturing domains, thereby enriching cross-cultural and sectoral perspectives on women's leadership development.

From a practical standpoint, the insights derived from this framework have implications for organisational decision-making, human resource management, and policy formulation. Training departments can design leadership development programmes that specifically address educational gaps and resource inequalities. Human resource managers can implement inclusive promotion policies and mentorship systems that reduce structural bias. Government agencies can formulate targeted interventions to enhance women's educational access and leadership readiness. Institutions such as the Sri Lanka Board of Investment (BOI), Export Development Board (EDB), Apparel Exporters Association, and the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs may support nationwide career development initiatives aligned with gender-inclusive organisational strategies. By synchronising educational empowerment with supportive organisational dynamics, the apparel sector can strengthen women's representation in executive roles while simultaneously improving organisational competence and contributing to national economic development (Better Work, 2023; Dabindu Collective, 2025).

Therefore, this conceptual framework presents a structured and theoretically grounded model explaining how socioeconomic factors influence women's career advancement through educational attainment within organisational contexts. By recognising education as an enabling capability and organisational dynamics as a conditional influence, the study advances a nuanced understanding of women's leadership development in Sri Lanka's apparel industry. The integration of multiple theoretical lenses provides both academic rigor and practical relevance, offering a solid foundation for future empirical validation and policy-oriented application.

CONCLUSION

The apparel industry plays a significant role in the economic development of emerging economies such as Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of employment generation and women's participation in the labour force. As one of the largest contributors to national exports, the sector has created significant opportunities for women, who constitute the majority of its workforce. However, despite this strong representation at operational levels, women continue to face persistent barriers to career advancement. Structural and socioeconomic constraints, including family responsibilities, limited access to credit facilities, and unequal access to professional resources, continue to restrict their upward mobility into executive and leadership positions.

Against this backdrop, the present study set out to develop a conceptual framework that explains how addressing these socioeconomic challenges can enhance women's career advancement in the apparel sector. Central to this framework is the mediating role of educational attainment. Rather than assuming that favourable socioeconomic conditions directly result in career progression, this study argues that education functions as a transformative mechanism through which women can leverage available resources and overcome structural disadvantages. Education equips women with the competencies, confidence, and credentials necessary to navigate professional hierarchies and compete for leadership roles.

To construct this framework, a comprehensive and multidisciplinary literature review was undertaken, drawing on scholarship related to socioeconomic determinants, educational attainment, and organisational dynamics. The study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives to strengthen its conceptual grounding. Social Role Theory explains how societal norms and gender expectations shape women's occupational opportunities and influence their career pathways. Human Capital Theory positions education as a strategic investment that enhances individual productivity, capability, and career outcomes. Meanwhile, Glass Ceiling Theory highlights the invisible organisational barriers that continue to obstruct women's advancement into senior leadership positions despite qualifications and experience.

Within this integrated model, educational attainment is conceptualised as a mediating factor that enables women to interpret, access, and effectively utilise socioeconomic resources in pursuit of career advancement.

Organisational dynamics, such as promotion policies, workplace culture, and inclusive practices, are recognised as critical contextual influences that either facilitate or constrain this progression. Career advancement itself is framed as a key performance outcome reflecting both organisational inclusivity and women's empowerment. In this sense, women's upward mobility serves not only as an individual achievement but also as an indicator of institutional fairness and gender equity within the apparel sector.

Overall, the proposed conceptual framework provides a comprehensive model linking internal capacities with external socioeconomic conditions. By integrating individual, social, and organisational dimensions, the study offers a structured foundation for future empirical investigation, particularly through quantitative methods such as Structural Equation Modelling. Furthermore, the framework provides practical insights for policymakers, industry leaders, and educational institutions seeking to design targeted interventions that strengthen women's leadership development. Ultimately, promoting educational attainment and inclusive organisational practices can accelerate women's career advancement, enhance organisational performance, and contribute to sustainable economic growth in Sri Lanka's apparel industry.

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