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Impact of Glass Ceiling Barriers on Women's Career Development: A Study of the Sri Lankan Apparel Sector with Marital Status as A Moderator

CDR Ponnampuruma¹ and GKH Ganewatta ^{2,*}*Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management and Finance,
University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka.*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors contributing to the glass ceiling and their impact on women's career development in Sri Lanka's apparel sector with a focus on the moderating role of marital status. Quantitative data was collected from 100 female employees in a selected apparel company within the Koggala Free Trade Zone using a structured questionnaire. The analysis was conducted using SPSS and the PROCESS macro. The findings reveal that personal and social barriers significantly negatively impact women's career development. Further, marital status moderates the relationship between glass ceiling factors and women's career development. These findings provide empirical evidence for the challenges faced by women in the apparel industry. These findings suggest the need of addressing glass ceiling factors (such as personal and social factors) to promote female upward mobility within the apparel sector organization in Sri Lanka. It also highlights the targeted interventions to mitigate challenges faced by married women in their professional growth.

Keywords: Career Development, Glass Ceiling, Personal Factors, Social Factors, Organizational Factors

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E-mail Address:

hemamali@badm.ruh.ac.lk

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, the effective utilization of human resources has become increasingly important as countries strive for economic growth and development. Women represent a vital segment of the workforce, particularly in developing countries where their workforce participation has significantly increased in recent decades. However, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior managerial roles despite their growing presence and contributions. Different types of barriers continue to hinder women's career progression although advancements in education and professional development have expanded opportunities for them.

One of the prevalent barriers is the glass ceiling that women experience while seeking to climb up the career ladder (De Alwis & Bombuwela, 2013). Researchers have acknowledged that the glass ceiling, the apparent barriers that prevent women and minorities from reaching the top of the corporate hierarchy. (Pai, & Vaidya, 2009. This refers although women capable of moving to upper levels, at some point they are stopped by an invisible barrier (De Alwis & Bombuwela, 2013). It is an invisible, but powerful barrier that prevents qualified women from advancing into leadership positions.

Various research studies have identified different kinds of glass ceiling barriers. Due to social expectations, familial limitations, marital status, parenthood, and job problems, women have different experiences and challenges in their social positions than men (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020). The career trajectories of men and women often differ because women's careers are more likely to experience challenges and changes due to family obligations (Amin et al., 2020). Addressing the barriers larding to glass ceiling is crucial for women's career progression and for fostering a workplace where men and women can equally advance into leadership positions. Therefore, it is important to identify numerous barriers causing the glass ceiling effect in order to develop policies and organizational practices that promote an inclusive work environment within organizations. Research has identified different type of factors causing the glass ceiling effect including Personal Barriers (PB), Organizational Barriers (OB), and Social Barriers (SB).

Problem Statement

According to the 2017 annual industry assessment in Sri Lanka's apparel industry, 85% of workers are women, making it a women-oriented industry (De Alwis and Bombuwela, 2013). To some extent, female employees are overrepresented in middle-management positions in this industry, but not at the upper levels (2017 Annual Industry Survey). However, almost all senior managerial roles are held by men, and female employees are stagnant at certain levels, even though the apparel business is feminized, with 75% of female employees being female (Thilakarathna, 2023). As a result, this research was conducted to understand the factors affecting the glass ceiling that impact women's career development in apparel sector organizations in Sri Lanka.

Many research studies have investigated the glass ceiling effect in various fields such as the commercial sector (De Alwis & Bombuwela, 2013; Victor & Shamila, 2018), healthcare sector (Amin et al., 2020; Khoshbahari et al., 2022), banking sector (Jayatilaka. W & Uduwella, U. K. S. M, 2018), and hotel industry (Damunupola^a & Sutha, 2019; Fathy & Youssif, 2020) so on. However, an inadequate study has been undertaken on the glass ceiling's influence on the Sri Lankan apparel companies. Moreover, existing research examining different types of glass ceiling barriers in Sri Lanka remains outdated (De Alwis & Bombuwela, 2013), limited, or regionally focused.

Although a recent study by Kuruppuarachchi and Surangi (2019) identified individual, organizational, and social barriers hindering women's upward mobility, they used qualitative methodology, offering rich descriptions but lacking measurable evidence on the extent of these barriers. Given Sri Lanka's evolving labor market, characterized by shifting gender roles and the feminization of the workforce, along with the economic significance of the apparel industry, assessing different types of glass ceiling barriers within the apparel sector is crucial.

Additionally, the role of marital status in moderating these career barriers remains an underexplored area in the Sri Lankan context. Although research acknowledges that married women face additional constraints due to societal expectations and work-family responsibilities (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020), no systematic quantitative study has examined its impact within

Sri Lanka's apparel industry. Addressing these gaps, this study aims to quantitatively examine how different types of glass ceiling barriers such as Personal Barriers (PB), Organizational Barriers (OB), and Social Barriers (SB) impact women's career development and assess how marital status moderates the effect of the glass ceiling on women's career development.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Glass Ceiling

The set of barriers that hinder women from advancing to top-level professions has created an unseen glass ceiling that women find difficult to shatter. The scenario is referred to as a "ceiling" since upward advancement is restricted, and "glass" (transparent) because the constraints are not directly visible (Kuruppuarachchi & Sarangi, 2020). Ann Morrison introduced the phrase back in the 1980s. Morrison (1980) defines the glass ceiling as "unseen barriers or obstructions that create steepchases for women and other minorities in rising to top-level leadership positions" (Kuruppuarachchi & Sarangi, 2020).

Relationship between Glass Ceiling Factors and Women's Career Development

Researchers acknowledge that the glass ceiling issue has a significant impact on women's jobs. According to De Alwis and Bombuwela (2013), the glass ceiling has significant negative influence on women's career development among female middle-level professionals working in the private sector in Sri Lanka. According to Oakley J.G (2000), explanations for the exceptionally low percentage of women in CEO and other senior management positions extend beyond business policies and procedures to include the impact of gender-based behavioral dynamics. Many jobs are still viewed as men's or women's jobs, and this influences the initials of a specific gender in organizations. (Victor & Shamila, 2018b). According to Cotter D.A et al (2001), glass ceiling inequality represents a gender or racial disparity in the opportunities for an individual to advance to higher levels. Female middle managers face a glass ceiling in their work environment, which prevents the promotion of female managers and creates a barrier to women's career development opportunities, as well as a lack

of organizational support such as networking, mentoring, and family-friendly initiatives. Furthermore, women are underrepresented in positions of power. Moreover, Cotter D.A et al in (2001) stated that this is because society believes that women do not and cannot perform well as managers. Management is considered more suitable for men.

Factors Affecting the Glass Ceiling Effect

There are various barriers that hinder women from ascending to the highest levels of business leadership. As Edirisinghe (2017) defines, “Barriers can be described as a factor, event, or occurrence that prevents or controls access to individuals, and obstacles might be material or intangible, actual or perceived by the recipient.” Damunupola and Sutha (2019) identify five barriers that prevent women from obtaining upper-level positions in Sri Lanka’s hotel industry: internal business structural barriers, societal barriers, governmental barriers, situational barriers, and personal barriers. In contrast, Edirisinghe (2017) focuses only on individual and organizational barriers, suggesting that these may be the primary contributors to the glass ceiling effect in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry. Moreover, Khoshbahari et al. (2022) explored the glass ceiling for women in health centers and identified three key barriers: personal, organizational, and social. These studies indicate that recognized glass ceiling barriers vary across different industries in the Sri Lankan context. Similarly, various research studies have identified different types of barriers depending on the industry or organizational setting, demonstrating that glass ceiling barriers are not universally applicable but instead vary from sector to sector.

By analyzing the literature, this study selects the three most commonly discussed glass ceiling barriers: personal, organizational, and social for investigation. The selection of these three barriers is based on the limitations noted in previous research. Several studies (Edirisinghe, 2017; Edirisinghe & Thalgaspitiya, 2016; Sharma & Kaur, 2019; Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020) have examined these three major barriers as significant factors influencing the glass ceiling effect in apparel sector organizations.

Personal Barriers

Personal barriers are the level to which individual reasons are imminent from themselves and affect their career advancement (De Alwis & Bombuwela, 2013). Personal barriers are internal limitations or characteristics that hinder an individual's career progression, stemming from their skills, traits, attitudes, or behavior (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020). These barriers stem from human capital factors (such as education, experience, and personality traits) and family responsibilities as well as challenges in balancing work and family commitments.

According to prior research findings, using executive level female employees who are working in private sector organizations in Sri Lanka, De Alwis and Bombuwela (2013) found that individual factors are significantly negatively for the women Career advancement and as the most compelling reason for female career advancement and based on that following hypothesis can be formulated.

H1: Personal barriers to the glass ceiling negatively impact women's career development.

Organizational Barriers

Organizational barriers hinder women's career advancement through institutional structures, policies, practices, and managerial attitudes, including gender-biased norms and limited opportunities. Specifically, organizational structure can impede women's entry and progression in the workforce (Gunatilaka, 2019). The support of top management and colleagues is crucial for women to advance equally. Conversely, a lack of support places significant strain on women, impeding their progression to top-level management. This suggests the substantial impact of organizational barriers on women's career development. Edirisinghe and Thalgaspitiya (2016) found that, among individual, organizational, family, cultural, and governmental barriers, organizational barriers are the second most influential factor contributing to the glass ceiling effect for female executives in the apparel sector.

H2: Organizational barriers to the glass ceiling negatively impact women's career development.

Social Barriers

Social barriers are cultural norms, beliefs, and practices in a society that perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's career advancement, including, gender stereotypes, social exclusion that disadvantage women in professional settings. Society's expectations, from a young age, that women be soft, emotional, and dependent on men can make them feel less confident and discourage them from leadership roles, hindering their professional advancement and growth (Kaur & Mittal, 2022). Sri Lankan women experience unique challenges in their career development due to marital status, parenthood, family obligations, and societal expectations (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020).

H3: Social barriers of the glass ceiling negatively impact women's career development.

Moderating Effect of Marital Status on The Relationship between Glass Ceiling Factors and Women's Career Development

For this research study, marital status acts as a moderating effect with glass ceiling factors and women's career development. Many researchers have highlighted the high level of the glass ceiling that married women face because of household commitments. Jordan and Zitek (2012) discovered that a newly married woman's dedication and job performance decreased while a newly married man's dedication and job performance increased, and this difference made a married woman more inclined to quit than a married man. Baruch and Barnett (1987) discovered that women having numerous life roles (e.g., employee, wife, mother) had less despair and higher self-confidence than unmarried, unemployed, or childless women. Accordingly, it is assumed that when women are not married, they will be more likely to advance their career into managerial positions, and it is assumed that when women are married, they will be less likely to advance their career into managerial positions.

H4: Marital status moderates the effect of the glass ceiling on women's career development.

This study selected a set of independent variables: personal barriers, organizational barriers, and social barriers such as glass ceiling factors. The dependent variable is women's career development. and moderating variable is

marital status. Figure 1 illustrates the Conceptualization of Variables in this study.

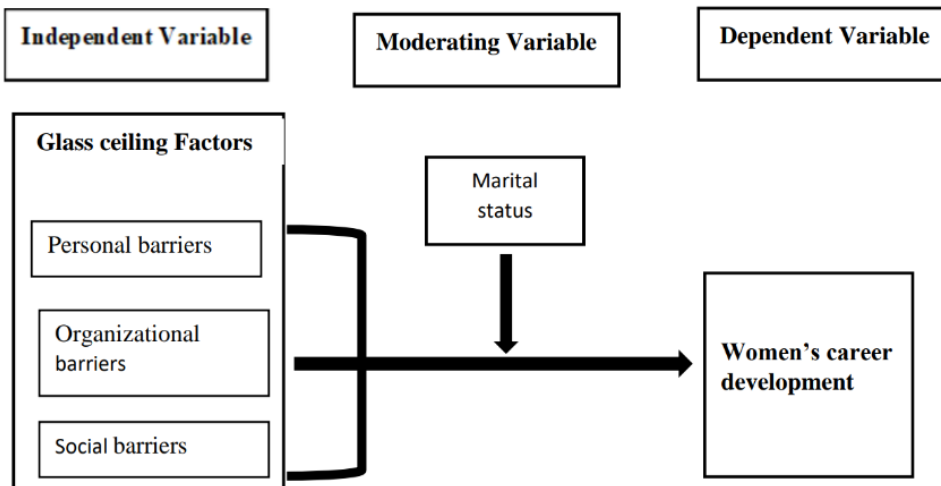


Figure 1: Conceptualization of Variables

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the term "population" refers to the entirety group of individuals, events, or things of interest that researchers seek to explore. The theoretical population of this study comprises middle-level female employees in Sri Lanka's apparel industry. The accessible population was defined as middle-level female employees at a selected apparel company located in the Free Trade Zone of Koggala, Southern Province, Sri Lanka. Sekaran (2003) defines sampling as the process of selecting a sufficient number of elements from a population, where a sample represents a subset of that population. This study employed a sample of 100 middle-level female employees from the selected apparel company. Sekaran (2003) defines sampling as the process of selecting a sufficient number of elements from a population, where a sample represents a subset of that population. This study employed a sample of 100 middle-level female employees from the selected apparel company. Stratified random sampling was utilized to ensure equal representation from each of the five departments within the selected apparel company. This method involved randomly selecting 20 female executives from each department, resulting in a total sample size of 100 participants. Data

collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire, designed to assess the influence of independent, moderating, and dependent variables. The questionnaire was administered in English, which is the most frequently used language within the selected organization. Out of 115 questionnaires distributed, 100 were considered usable for analysis, yielding a response rate of 87%.

Measurement

The questionnaire consisted of six sections. The first section focused on demographic information, including age, educational level, marital status, and number of children. The remaining sections examined variables related to glass ceiling barriers and women's career development. Personal barriers were measured using 12 items adapted from Sharma and Kaur (2019). Organizational barriers were assessed using 16 items and social barriers were evaluated through 11 items from the same source. Women's career development was measured using 10 items from Afza and Newaz (2008). The demographic questions in the first section employed multiple-choice formats and open-ended responses for numerical data. Other sections included a five-point Likert scale, where respondents rated their level of agreement with each statement, with responses ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, were calculated. Regression analysis was performed to examine the relationships between the variables. To determine the moderating effect of marital status, Andrew Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS was utilized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Characteristics

The demographic variables included: (a) age, (b) educational level, (c) marital status, and (d) number of children. Among the 100 respondents, the majority were between 21 and 30 (44%); 35% of the participants' ages were

between 31 and 40; 20% of the participants' ages were 41 and above; and only 1 participant (1%) were below 20 years old. In terms of educational level, 49% of the respondents graduated from university. 43% of female employees have completed their master's while only 8% of females are at diploma level. Among the 100 respondents, more than half of the participants' (71%) were married and only 29% of female employees are still un-married. Among the 71 married employees, the "Not yet" category represents individuals who do not have children yet (21%). 22% of the sample has 1 - 2 Children and 28% majority of the sample has 3 - 4 Children.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	WCD	OB	PB	SB	Tolera:	VIF	Skew:	Kurt:
WCD	3.85	.395	(.696)						-.187	.848
OB	3.92	.374	.203*	(.848)			.322	3.10	-.963	.209
PB	3.61	.710	-.182	.705**	(.978)		.457	2.18	-1.17	-.489
SB	3.91	.437	-.210	.690**	.794**	(.874)	.336	2.98	-1.13	.569

Notes: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Values in parenthesis along the diagonal are reliability values (Cronbach's alpha)

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables, along with measures of skewness and kurtosis to assess normality, and tests for multicollinearity (tolerance and VIF). These analyses provide an important context for interpreting the main results.

Assessment of Normality

Skewness values for all variables were negative (ranging from -0.187 to -1.17), indicating a left-skewed distribution, with the majority of responses concentrated on the higher end of the scale. Kurtosis values indicated a leptokurtic distribution for women's career development (0.848), organizational barriers (0.209), and social barriers (0.569), suggesting peaked distributions with more extreme values. All skewness and kurtosis values fell within the acceptable range of ± 2 . This suggests that the data meet the assumptions of normality required for many statistical tests. (Hair et al., 2006).

Correlations and Multicollinearity

Table 1 also includes the correlation between the variables. Personal barriers showed a weak negative correlation with women's career development ($r = -0.182$), organizational barriers showed a weak positive correlation ($r = 0.203$), and social barriers showed a weak negative correlation ($r = -0.210$). Tests for multicollinearity were conducted, and the results were as follows: Tolerance values ranged from 0.322 to 0.457, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 2.18 to 3.10. Since tolerance values are above 0.10 and VIF values are below 10, these results indicate no significant multicollinearity issues.

Means and Standard Deviations

Mean scores for Women's Career Development ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.395$), Organizational Barriers ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.374$), Personal Barriers ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.710$), and Social Barriers ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.437$) indicate the average level of agreement among respondents. Standard deviations, all below 1, suggest that responses were generally close to the mean for each variable, indicating relatively low variability.

Reliability

Cronbach's alpha values (presented in parentheses in Table 1) for all variables were at or near 0.7, demonstrating strong internal consistency and acceptable reliability of the measurement scales.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 2: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.565 ^a	.319	.298	3.32965

A multiple linear Regression was conducted to examine the impact of personal barriers, organizational barriers, and social barriers on women's career development. The R-squared value of 0.319 indicates that 31.9% of the variance in women's career development is explained by the model. The

adjusted R-square value of 0.298 suggests that, after adjusting for the number of predictors, 29.8% of the variance in the dependent variable is accounted for by personal, organizational, and social barriers.

Table 3: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	499.527	3	166.509	15.019	.000 ^b
Residual	1064.313	96	11.087		
Total	1563.840	99			

Table 3 shows the ANOVA results, which assess the overall significance of the regression model. The results indicate that the overall regression model was significant. $F(3, 96) = 15.02$, ($P < 0.001$) suggesting that independent variable collectively predict women's career development.

Table 4: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	30.234	4.105		7.366	.000
	Personal barriers	-.173	.069	-.370	-2.495	.014
	Organizational barriers	.514	.083	.775	6.224	.000
	Social barriers	-.372	.120	-.451	-3.101	.003

According to the regression results in Table 6, personal barriers significantly negatively predict women's career development ($B = -0.173$, $T(96) = -2.5$, $P = 0.14$).

This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 1, as well as previous research suggesting that individual factors have a substantial influence on women's advancement (Bombuwela & De Alwis, 2013).

Further, social barriers negatively affect career development ($B = -0.372$, $T(96) = -3.10$, $P = 0.03$) supporting our second hypothesis. It aligns with previous research which highlighted sociocultural obstacles as a major impediment to women's career growth. (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020), The negative effects of personal and social barriers suggest that women encountering these obstacles may face challenges such as work-life conflict, reduced confidence, workplace discrimination, and societal expectations, all of which can restrict their career growth.

However, contrary to our expectations and Hypothesis 3, organizational barriers demonstrated a significant positive relationship with career development ($B = 0.514$, $t(96) = 6.22$, $p < 0.001$).

Several potential explanations may account for this unexpected positive effect of organizational barriers. One possibility relates to the characteristics of the data set and limitations in sample size. The current research employed a sample of 100 employees, and it may not adequately fully capture the complexity of the relationship between organizational barriers and women's career development. Another potential explanation is that this study might have surveyed only those who remained in the workforce, excluding women who left due to high organizational barriers. It is also likely that Tough organizational settings may unintentionally create an environment where only the most persistent and high-performing women remain, leading to a sample skewed towards success. Facing organizational barriers may help women develop stronger problem-solving skills, enhanced leadership, negotiation, the by helping women to improve career growth. It is also possible that diversity and inclusion policies recently implemented within the company have led to increased mentorship, training, and career advancement opportunities for women.

Moderation Analysis

A moderation analysis was conducted to examine whether marital status moderates the relationship between the glass ceiling and women's career development. The overall model was significant, $F(3, 96) = 3.10$, $p = .031$, explaining 8.82% of the variance in women's career development ($R^2 = .088$).

Table 5: Overall Model Fit Indices for Moderation Analysis

R	R Square	MSE	F	df1	Df2	p
.2970	.0882	0.1485	3.0955	3	96	.0305

Table 5 presents the coefficients, Standard Errors, t-values, p-values, and 95% confidence intervals for the variables in the moderation Model. The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between the glass ceiling and marital status ($\beta = 0.239$, $p = .0126$). This indicates that the relationship between the glass ceiling and women's career development is moderated by marital status.

Table 6 : Parameter Estimates, Standard Errors, and Significance Tests for Moderation

	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	40.5305	3.0550	13.2671	.0000	34.4664	46.5946
Glass Ceiling	-.2874	.1326	-2.1673	.0327	-.5506	-.024
Marital Status	-1.8340	1.7064	-1.0748	.2852	-5.2212	1.5531
Int_1	.2396	.0943	2.5413	.0126	.0525	.4268

Implications of the Study

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the glass ceiling phenomenon by providing a quantitative analysis of the barriers affecting women's career advancement within the Sri Lankan apparel sector. It extends from previous research by incorporating marital status as a moderating variable, offering new insights into how personal, organizational, and social barriers influence career development. Additionally, the study aligns with gender role theories and career progression models, reinforcing the argument that institutional and societal structures continue to hinder women's upward mobility in corporate settings.

The study provides quantifiable evidence of the impact of personal, organizational, and social barriers on women's career development, specifically in Sri Lanka's apparel industry. Using SPSS and Andrew Hayes' Process Macro, the research establishes statistically significant relationships between these barriers and career progression. Moreover, the moderating role of marital status confirms that married women experience distinct challenges in career advancement, adding empirical validation to qualitative studies that highlight work-family conflicts as a critical constraint. These findings provide a data-driven basis for shaping gender policies and organizational interventions within Sri Lanka's labor market.

The study's findings have significant implications for HR professionals, policymakers, and business leaders who are committed to promoting gender equity in organizations. Even though this study is focused on Sri Lanka's apparel sector, the findings may be relevant to other industries and contexts within the Sri Lankan environment. This research can contribute to addressing the persistent issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership within the apparel industry by informing strategies that support more women in attaining

upper-level leadership positions. Therefore, organizations should consider implementing and strengthening flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options, flexible work hours, and enhanced parental leave policies, to provide support to women in managing their professional and family responsibilities. Furthermore, investing in women-focused leadership development programs and mentorship initiatives can be instrumental in helping female employees navigate organizational and social barriers, while also equipping them with the skills and support necessary for success in senior management roles. In addition, organizations should implement awareness programs and training focused on gender biases and stereotypes, with the goal of cultivating a more inclusive work environment where female career progression is actively supported and valued. Finally, collaboration among apparel sector organizations, women's advocacy groups, trade unions, and industry associations can facilitate the development and implementation of sector-wide policies aimed at mitigating the glass ceiling effect and fostering greater gender diversity in leadership positions. By adopting these strategies, organizations can make substantive progress in enhancing gender diversity, improving employee retention, and cultivating a more inclusive leadership culture, which will ultimately contribute to organizational success and broader national economic development.

LIMITATION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the scope of this study was primarily limited to the apparel industry in Sri Lanka, with data collected from a single apparel sector company in the Koggala Free Trade Zone. This focus may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Further, this study used the cross-sectional nature of the study design. Therefore, future research using longitudinal studies could provide a more dynamic understanding of the phenomena investigated. Further, the measurement scales used in this study could also be explored further as the result of organizational barriers may yield different insights. Also, this study included only the moderating effect of marital status and other moderating variables such as age, work experience, and educational qualifications, which may also influence women's career development, were not included due to time constraints and to maintain the study's focus. Future research should investigate the impact of these additional

moderating variables. Moreover, future research could also expand the conceptual framework by incorporating other independent variables and dimensions not addressed in the current study, such as governmental, familial, and religious factors, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's career development. Replicating this study in different industries and with larger, more diverse samples would also strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to a broader understanding of the glass ceiling and its impact on women's career development. Employing a quantitative methodology, this study found a negative impact of glass ceiling factors on the career development of female executive employees working in an apparel sector organization in Sri Lanka. Additionally, this study found that marital status moderates the effect of the glass ceiling on women's career development within the selected apparel company. These results, supported by existing literature, emphasize the need for organizations to implement possible interventions to eliminate glass ceiling barriers and promote an inclusive environment where women can advance their careers.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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