

EXPLORING THE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WORKING WOMEN: KATUNAYEKE FREE TRADE ZONE

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Abstract

Women working in Free Trade Zones continue to face violence and harassment in and outside the workplace without adequate recourse and redressal mechanisms. Sri Lanka's total labor force participation is 49.8%. but females' contribution to the labor force is only 32.1%. The Free Trade Zone's women employees face violence and harassment in the world of work, thus applying to violence and harassment in the course of work, that is linked with or arises out of work. Accordingly, the research problem of this study is, What are the gender-based violence faced by working women? The general objective of this study is to identify the diversity of violence against women in the workplace. To study the research problem, women employees in the Katunayake FTZ were considered the target population; 50 women employees were selected out of the 200 population. The sample was selected by using purposive sampling. This study is based on mixed research methods. The finding reveals that 60% of women were reported as Manpower workers. Katunayake factories consist of women workers, especially in the age group of 18-28 years. They do not have permanent residency in Katunayake. Relatively high rates of secondary education among them notwithstanding, these women have been committed to low-paid and insecure jobs without specialization. 38% of working women are victims of psychological abuse. 52% of employees have expressed dissatisfaction regarding health, safety, and hygiene. To reduce this situation, it is essential to formalize the protection of women under labor laws and enhance their welfare and safety at the institutional level.

Keywords: discriminate, gender, victims, working women, workplace

Introduction

The term violence against women has been used to describe a wide range of acts, including murder, rape and sexual assault, physical assault, emotional abuse, battering, stalking, prostitution, genital mutilation, sexual harassment, and pornography (Shree and Dey, 2015). In this way, women are subjected to violence in different ways because of their gender. Thus, violence against women is partly a result of gender relations that assume men to be superior to women. There is no single universally agreed

definition of gender-based violence. GBV can be any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats. Gender-based harassment against women is an issue occurring globally, having both occurred and occurring in very many diversities of social, cultural, and economic variables. These are usually based on systematic gender inequalities, cultural beliefs, and power imbalances that enforce patriarchal structures of marginalization and victimization against

women. It exists in private and public spheres of life, from workplaces to educational institutions and online platforms. When considering the Sri Lankan society, Violence against working women has been seen in the context of the Sri Lankan society in transition which has committed itself to the values of equality and justice. Accordingly, this research, it is expected to study the violence against women in the workplace in depth.

Gender-based violence is more prevalent in developing countries. Also, GBV reflects unequal power relations between women and men in society and at work and it is a serious human rights violation. Kapombe's (2015) definition of violence against women can be presented as, "Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (Kapombe, 2015). According to Kapombe defines violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination, constituting any gender-based act that causes or is likely to cause harm, whether physical, sexual, psychological, or economic. This definition will include acts of violence and threats, coercion, or unjust restrictions on freedom in both the private and public spheres. Also, The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) defines it as "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (Kapombe, 2015). In addition, Kapombe introduced the specific forms of gender-based violence at the women work place. They are : Sexual coercion, Gender -based

workplace discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion, Sexual harassment and intimidation, Sexual exploitation and abuse, Trafficking for forced labour and sex work within and across borders (Kapombe,2015).

Moreover, GBV often exploits power dynamics, with perpetrators exerting influence over their authority or female employees, leaving women vulnerable and reluctant to report such behavior. These experiences can have severe psychological consequences, leading to anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, and they often force women to make an unfair choice between enduring the abuse or risking their livelihoods by speaking out. The lack of effective reporting systems and safeguards exacerbates the problem, as women often avoid seeking help for fear of reprisals or further victimization. In many industries, male-dominated cultures or rigid hierarchies make it difficult for women to voice their concerns, and create an environment where GBV can go unchallenged. above facts present that gender-based violence against women at workplaces needs further in-depth study. It is among the most important current social issues which have been addressed by researchers around the globe, and that studies are presented below.

Literature Review

As Biswas (2017) has tried to explain in his study, violence against working women was also continuing in India as part of a serious challenge to gender equality and personal safety in workplaces. Besides, working women from different sectors, like garment manufacturing, are often faced with physical and verbal harassment. Furthermore, research findings have shown that many women do not report violence due to a patriarchal society. Moreover, as presented by India's National Crime Bureau Statistics, in 2022 alone, over 400,000 cases of crimes against women were recorded, with workplace harassment forming a significant portion of

reported incidents. The highest rates of these crimes were reported in urban areas like Delhi, yet underreporting remains an issue in rural areas. further explained in this report Efforts to improve women’s safety at work require stronger law enforcement and systemic reforms, including improved infrastructure, accessible support systems, and continued public awareness campaigns that challenge societal norms. (Kaphle et al,2015).

Kaphle et al (2015) have explained in their study that violence against women in India is a widespread and deep-rooted problem that affects women across age groups, regions, and social backgrounds. This violence takes many forms, including domestic abuse, sexual assault, harassment, dowry-related violence, trafficking, and honor-based crimes. Findings show that domestic violence is the most common form, with many cases going unreported due to social stigma, fear, and lack of access to support systems. And, as Kaphle further stated, cultural norms, traditional gender roles, and historical patriarchy contribute to a society where violence against women is often normalized or excused, making it difficult for victims to seek justice (Kaphle ,2015). Chaiyunukiji (2004) has described the more than 100,000 illegal migrant women workers working in Thailand. They come from the countries of the Mekong sub-region, namely Myanmar Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam and China (Yunnan Province). Because they arrive illegally and have little education and work skills, they are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse or violence. Generally, they work in small factories, domestic work and restaurants. They work in conditions such as forced begging, forced prostitution or slavery. chaiyunukij further stated that the root causes of illegal migration and violence against women (VAW) are interrelated and occur in both sending and receiving countries of migrant workers. Poverty, demand and supply aspects of labour, level of

education, lack of knowledge of one's rights, influence of capitalism and gender issues are mentioned as the root factors of migration and VAW. Also, chaiyunukij has presented legal perspective of these conditions. The Thai government has a national policy, plan, strategy and measures to deal with illegal labor migration. Not only are government agencies active in solving the problems of women migrant workers and helping them, but non-governmental and international organizations as well as UN agencies are also working seriously to support them and protect their rights (chaiyunukij, 2105).

According to Kahn's (2015) research, the high number of women working in the garment industry in Bangladesh is a significant factor in workplace violence. Women in this industry have faced sexual harassment, verbal abuse and even threats to their safety. Despite labor laws that in theory protect workers, enforcement is inconsistent and victims often have limited recourse. Research findings show that NGOs and international organizations are working to address these issues, offering legal aid, counseling and advice, but progress has been slow due to entrenched economic and social factors. Moreover, under sexual harassment of working women, Kahn has further stated unwanted advances, verbal abuse and unwanted physical contact. It is also mentioned that women often face harassment from higher officials or colleagues (Kahn, 2015).

According to Robinson (2023), research has revealed that violence against women in America has been rampant and affects women across all divides and cadres. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that every minute, about 20 people are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States alone. Also, Robinson explains Women suffer from different types of abuses. such as: physical assault, sexual violence, stalking, and emotional abuse. According to Robinson, such violence

results in long-term consequences with serious effects on the mental and physical health of the targeted woman, which leads to heightened depression, anxiety, PTSD, and chronic physical conditions as a result of long-term stress and trauma. It also contains social and economic repercussions, since the victim usually experiences job instability, financial insecurity, and a reduction in educational or career opportunities while processing the aftermath of such abuse (Robinson, 2023). Considering the all factors about the violence, Robinson has investigated only the violence against women. But Robinson not further study or attention about the working women's violence.

As Kerley (2011) explains, violence against women in Thailand is a complex problem shaped by cultural, economic and social factors, affecting women across the country in a variety of ways, from domestic abuse to trafficking and workplace harassment. Although awareness of the issue is growing, many Thai women still face significant challenges in achieving protection and justice. Domestic violence is widespread and often underreported due to cultural stigma and pressure to "protect family unity." Gender norms in Thailand traditionally assign women the role of caretakers and housekeepers, leading some women to endure abuse in silence to avoid social judgment. Moreover, as Kerley notes, Thailand is grappling with issues of human trafficking and exploitation, which disproportionately affect women and girls, particularly in rural and poor areas. Trafficking networks exploit economic disparities, promising young women jobs in urban areas or abroad only to trap them in forced labor or sex work. Also, despite efforts by governments and international organizations to combat trafficking, the industry continues to survive due to corruption, economic hardship, and limited law enforcement resources. Women who are trafficked or exploited often face physical and psychological abuse, and may face

barriers to access to social services, legal aid, or even reintegration into their communities once rescued (Kerley, 2011). When considering about the Sri Lankan society, Violence against women is a serious and multifaceted problem in Sri Lankan society, with high rates of domestic violence, sexual violence and social discrimination affecting women across the country. Also, in attention the violence against women in Sri Lanka, various investigators have conducted research, which can be presented as follows.

According to research done in a remote area in the central province in Sri Lanka, it was discovered that 68% of the sample size selected was unaware that physical harm was not the only type of violence, but they could be also harmed economically, and emotionally and also 47.6% had believed that a visible physical injury was essential to take actions in the field of law. This situation might have occurred due to lack of help providing institutes such as counselling services established within the rural areas, and it also can be due to suppression of women within the family and cultural beliefs that exist strongly, especially in rural areas. In this research, alcoholism was concluded as the major cause for domestic violence by 74% of the participants, but researcher has mentioned that it is also important to understand that other factors such as drug abuse such as cannabis, thul and heroine can also contribute to domestic violence (Panadare et al, 2021). The research mentioned above has only focused on domestic violence against women.

Sexual violence against women is a critical issue in Sri Lanka, influenced by social norms, inadequate legal protections and social stigma that hinders reporting. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), one in three women in Sri Lanka has experienced some form of gender-based violence, and sexual violence is particularly underreported due to shame and fear

of retaliation. Social expectations and patriarchal norms play a significant role, as women are often held to strict moral standards, blaming them for incidents of sexual violence instead of holding the perpetrators accountable. In many communities, survivors face stigma, isolation or even punishment, discouraging them from seeking help or justice (Panadare et al, 2021).

According to Jayasuriya (2013) although accurate statistics on sexual violence are difficult to obtain due to under-reporting, it is widely accepted that women in Sri Lanka face sexual harassment, abuse and assault in both public and private settings, as well as sexual violence and harassment in the workplace. Takes many forms, including domestic abuse and assault in public places, and women often fear stigma or retaliation if they speak out. Because of traditional values and cultural taboos, many women remain silent. Also, Jayasuriya has stated that through his research, social norms and patriarchal attitudes contribute significantly to the spread of sexual violence in Sri Lanka. Gender roles can lead to the normalization of harassment and abuse against women. Cultural expectations of women to maintain family honor or bring shame to their families often prevent them from reporting incidents. This tendency to avoid public acknowledgment of sexual violence may also be reinforced by community attitudes that blame victims rather than perpetrators. As a result, the participant further stated in his study that many women do not take their complaints seriously or feel that their social status may be harmed and continue to face harassment or abuse without seeking justice or support (Jayasuriya, 2013).

As a result of all the information mentioned above, various researchers of the world have conducted their research from different perspectives on violence against women. Especially researchers in Sri Lanka have studied

in-depth about domestic violence and sexual violence faced by women, but the problems faced by women in the workplace have not been studied in depth. Thus, it is very important to research the above problem. Hence, this study has been carried out on Katunayake Free Trade Zone and the research problem of this study is to identify what are the gender-based violence faced by working women. The following objectives will be emphasized in relation to the above research problem: To determine the diversity of violence against women in the workplace, to identify the facilities available in workplaces for women, and to Identify the legal standards and labor rights that all women workers, especially in the free trade zone

Methodology

Katunayake Free Trade Zone was selected for this study because Katunayake is the country's first FTZ, it has attracted numerous multinational corporations, mainly in apparel manufacturing, electronics, and service industries. Based on the objective of the study, the sample size for the study was determined by considering the operational factories during the research period within the Katunayake Free Trade Zone. Five factories were selected from the 25 operational total number of factories from simple random sampling for data collection. The final sample size was calculated based on these selected factories' 200 women workforce population. The target population was selected 50 women employees out of 200 population selected by using purposive sampling which is one of the non-probability sampling methods. In addition, this research was conducted using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods with data sources used including primary data and secondary data. Primary data were gathered using an interview method during the two months in which this research was conducted also information was obtained under participation observation during this period. In this study,

secondary data were obtained from literature (journals and books). Finally, data analysis was the using mix method analysis which interprets the interview and observation.

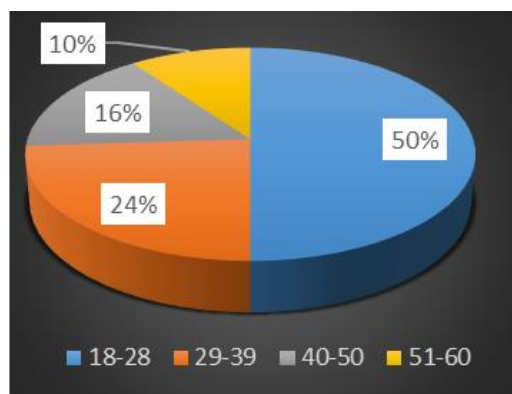
Result and Discussion

Gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace includes various forms of discrimination, harassment, and abuse targeting women because of their gender. Working women often face verbal, physical and psychological harassment from colleagues, supervisors or clients, creating a hostile work environment that undermines their safety, self-esteem and career growth. According to obtained data results can be presented as follows.

According to the data obtained from the data contributors who worked in the Katunayake free trade zone, considering their age, the data can be presented as follows:

Personal information of the data contributors

Figure 01: Age of the data contributors



Source: Sample Survey

According to the data presented, 50% of the women in the sample were between the ages of 18 and 28, 24% were between 29 and 39, and 10% were between 40 and 50 years. The smallest age group was those between 51 and 60. Regarding ethnicity, 30% of the contributors were Sinhalese women, while 70% were Tamil

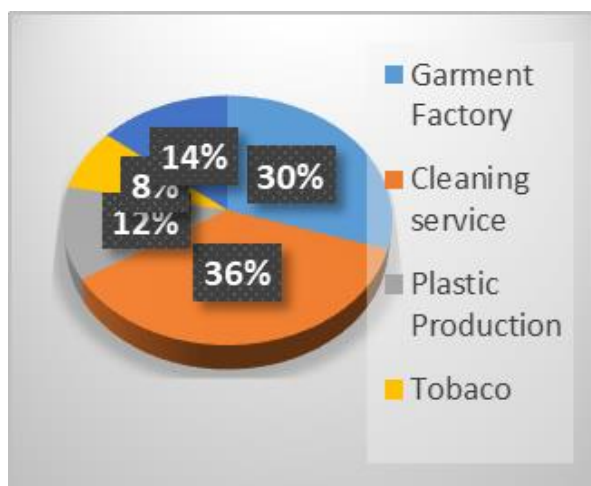
women. One remarkable noticed during data collection was that no sampled women were permanent residents of the Katunayake area. Their hometowns were reported as Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Vavuniya, Nuwara Eliya, Medawachchiya, Polonnaruwa, Badulla, and Mannar. Out of these, 80% reported to have been temporary residents in Katunayake for more than five years.

In terms of marital status, 60% of the women were married, 10% were cohabitating, 20% were unmarried, 4% were single mothers, and 6% were divorced. remarkably, all the single mothers in this sample were between the ages of 18 and 28.

Nature of the Employment

In terms of employment status, 60% of the women were engaged as manpower workers, while the remaining 40% held permanent positions. The manpower workers reported undertaking a wide range of tasks to secure a day's wage, with daily earnings typically between 1,800 and 1,900 rupees. Additionally, these workers did not have designated roles or specialized duties in their employment. Based on the educational backgrounds of the data contributors, 24% had attained primary education, while 74% had completed secondary education. Only 2% of the contributors, all women, had received tertiary education. The most special thing reported here is that all the respondents between the ages of 18 and 28 have received secondary education. Considering the nature of work of data contributors, it can be presented as follows:

Figure 02: Nature of the data contributors



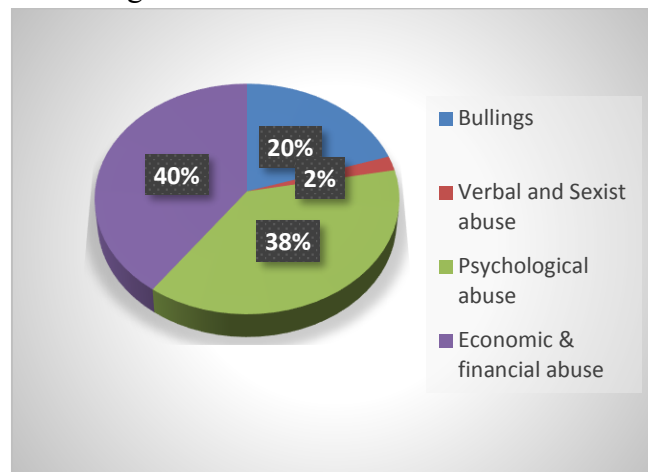
Source: Sample Survey

According to the data obtained, 30% of the participants were employed in the cleaning sector, with the majority working as manpower laborers. Another 30% were engaged in the clothing sector, primarily in the production of apparel items such as underwear, hand socks, and T-shirts. Notably, these individuals reported longer service durations compared to those in other sectors. It was noted that employees working beyond their scheduled shifts are eligible for additional allowances for those extra hours. Furthermore, 12% of the female participants were reported to be employed in food production sectors, specifically in chicken, sausage, and fish packaging. All individuals working in these production sectors were classified as manpower workers. Additionally, 14% of participants were engaged in plastic goods production, while 8% worked in the tobacco industry. It was reported that workers in the tobacco sector received comparatively fewer facilities and benefits.

Violation of the working women

When considering the violence faced by women in the workplace, it can be presented as follows:

Figure 03: Nature of the Violation



Source: Sample Survey

When examining workplace violence against women, 40% of women have reported being victims of economic violence. This includes gender-based wage disparities, with manpower employees being disproportionately affected. Instances of economic violence include reduced wage increases, non-payment of due wages, and a lack of access to debt relief mechanisms. Additionally, 38% of women reported experiencing psychological abuse at work. Key issues identified under psychological abuse include increased stress levels, challenges in balancing work and family life, job insecurity, manipulation of benefits, unfair workloads, unequal opportunities, blame-shifting, and distortion of reality. Notably, all manpower employees unanimously agreed on facing job insecurity and benefit manipulation. Bullying was reported by 20% of women, encompassing behaviors such as insults, name-calling, the use of threatening tones, and obstructive actions. Furthermore, 2% of working women reported being victims of sexual violence. When asked about their satisfaction with the justice administered by relevant institutions after facing workplace violence, only 40% expressed satisfaction, while 60% were dissatisfied. Here the victims stated that they are not being served justice by the relevant institutions.

Health, Safety & Hygiene

Moreover, with regard to the facilities provided by the organization to the employees, it was not satisfactory as reported by 52%. Similarly, insurance was not provided to women working as manpower workers and the company was not even responsible in case any accidents occurred at the workplace. They were also said to have been given no permanent salary, no provision of protective clothes and face masks, no food provided by the institution, and no provision for essential leave. Also, another point to be mentioned is that the institution does not provide food to all the manpower workers but the permanent employees who work in those institutions. It has been mentioned that all permanent employees will get all the facilities. Based on the data analyzed, it seems that temporary workers are more vulnerable to various forms of workplace violence compared to their permanent counterparts. This heightened vulnerability can be related to the lack of enforcement of labor laws that should ideally protect them. Also common is that the sector in which they are employed includes dangerous conditions and irregular or non-compliant legal frameworks which further expose the people involved to exploitation and mistreatment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is pointed out that the dominant workforce in the Katunayake factories consists of women workers, especially in the age group of 18-28 years. They do not have permanent residency in Katunayake, and along with temporary employment, it overemphasizes their vulnerable social and economic position. Relatively high rates of secondary education among them notwithstanding, these women have been committed to low-paid and insecure jobs without specialization, adding to their vulnerability. Workplaces are sites of violence, which is critical: 40% reported economic violence in the form of wage disparity and non-payment of

wages. Psychological abuse, all-pervasive, reported by 38%, includes stress, unfair workload, and job insecurity. Bullying affects 20% of the participants, while 2% reported sexual violence, thereby bringing out the exploitative nature of the work environment. The unanimity among the manpower employees regarding benefit manipulation and insecurity underlines the systemic inequalities between temporary and permanent workers. Besides, dissatisfying institutional justice, aggravated by inadequate organizational facilities, there is discontent that adds to the distress faced by these women. Over half were dissatisfied with workplace provisions on account of lack of insurance, protective gear, and food support for manpower workers, though permanent employees receive all possible benefits, thus increasing the agony. Lack of basic labor protections puts manpower workers at risk from workplace accidents and other forms of exploitation. It shows that temporary workers are unusually susceptible due to poor enforcement of labor laws and legal frameworks full of non-compliance. Such hazardous working conditions and exploitative practices need urgent reforms for equal treatment, fair remunerations, and greater protection. Unless the root cause of these systemic problems is attended to, bringing about better welfare and safety for women in such employment is difficult. Accordingly, to these facts, the suggestions can be presented as follows To promote gender equality in the workplace, it is essential to strengthen laws on harassment and discrimination, ensuring clearer protections and legal obligations for employers to prevent gender-based harassment. Amending labor laws to provide better protection, especially for women, will contribute to a safer and more inclusive work environment by providing more protection to employees. In addition, employers should implement mandatory policies against workplace violence to establish enforceable guidelines necessary to take preventive and

corrective action. These policies will address physical, emotional, and psychological violence, and will ensure a serious and immediate response to such issues, thereby promoting a safe work environment for all employees. Further, A collaborative effort between the Department of Labor and the Board of Investment (BOI) is critical to streamlining labor rights regulations, especially for vulnerable workers in the manpower sectors. By improving consistency and efficiency in labor management, these partnerships can close gaps in labor protection and reduce the potential for exploitation. Furthermore, creating programs to improve the welfare of working women and increase their economic opportunities will reduce their vulnerability to abuse and clear reporting mechanisms will empower them and support long-term gender equality in the workplace.

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