



EURASIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

2026; I (I): 117-130

Published online 01.07.2026 (<https://eurasiancampus.edu.journals.lk/>)

Enhancing Employment Opportunities for Women in Multilateral Donor-Funded Development Projects in Sri Lanka: A Gender-Responsive Framework for Inclusive Economic Growth and Sustainable Development

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To cite this article:

Ariyaratne, A. Enhancing Employment Opportunities for Women in Multilateral Donor-Funded Development Projects in Sri Lanka: A Gender-Responsive Framework for Inclusive Economic Growth and Sustainable Development. *Eurasian Journal of Education and Psychology*. Vol.1, No.1, ISSN 3121-4363, pp.117.

Received: 14 03, 2026; **Accepted:** 17 05, 2026; **Published:** 01 07, 2026

Abstract : Women's participation in the labour force is a critical driver of inclusive economic growth, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Despite Sri Lanka's high levels of female literacy, educational attainment, and human development, female labour force participation remains substantially lower than that of men, limiting the country's economic potential and inclusive development. Multilateral donor-funded development projects financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and other development partners have increasingly integrated gender equality and women's economic empowerment into their development strategies through employment generation, skills development, entrepreneurship promotion, and value chain integration. This study examines the contribution of these donor-funded projects to enhancing women's employment opportunities in Sri Lanka and proposes a gender-responsive framework to strengthen inclusive economic growth and sustainable development. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, utilizing secondary labour market statistics, policy and project document analysis, gender and development literature, and comparative case studies of selected donor-funded projects. The findings reveal that, despite significant policy commitments and gender mainstreaming initiatives, women's participation in project-related employment remains constrained by socio-cultural norms, occupational segregation, limited access to technical and vocational training, inadequate representation in leadership positions, workplace safety concerns, unpaid care responsibilities, and institutional weaknesses in project implementation and monitoring. The study proposes a comprehensive gender-responsive framework encompassing inclusive project design, gender-responsive procurement and recruitment, targeted capacity-building programmes, safe and supportive work environments, strengthened institutional accountability, and robust monitoring and evaluation systems. The framework provides practical guidance for policymakers, development partners, and implementing agencies to enhance women's employment outcomes, strengthen gender equality, and maximise the contribution of donor-funded development projects to sustainable and inclusive economic development in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Women's Employment , Gender-Responsive Development , Multilateral Donor-Funded Projects

1. Introduction

Gender equality has become one of the most significant priorities in international development policy over the past several decades. It is widely recognized that achieving sustainable economic growth, reducing poverty, and promoting social inclusion are impossible without ensuring equal opportunities for women and men. International organizations, including the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and other multilateral development partners, increasingly integrate gender equality into development planning and investment strategies. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 reinforced this global commitment, particularly through SDG 5 (Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls) and SDG 8 (Promote Sustained, Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth, Full and Productive Employment and Decent Work for All). These goals recognize that increasing women's participation in the labour force is not only a matter of social justice but also a key driver of economic development, innovation, productivity, and national competitiveness.

Numerous international studies have demonstrated that greater female labour force participation contributes significantly to economic growth. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), narrowing gender gaps in employment can substantially increase gross domestic product (GDP), improve household incomes, reduce poverty, and strengthen economic resilience. Likewise, the World Bank emphasizes that empowering women economically creates multiplier effects, including improved child health, higher educational attainment, enhanced household welfare, and stronger community development. Consequently, promoting women's employment has become an essential component of development assistance provided by multilateral donor agencies across developing countries.

Sri Lanka presents a unique and somewhat paradoxical case in the relationship between human development and women's economic participation. The country has long been recognized for its exceptional achievements in education, healthcare, and social development relative to other lower-middle-income nations. Successive investments in free education and universal healthcare have resulted in high levels of human capital development among women. Female literacy exceeds 93 percent, and

women consistently outperform men in secondary and tertiary education enrolment. Sri Lanka also records favourable indicators in maternal health, life expectancy, and gender parity in educational attainment. These achievements reflect decades of public investment in human development and have positioned Sri Lanka as one of South Asia's strongest performers on several gender-related social indicators.

Despite these remarkable accomplishments, women's participation in the labour market remains persistently low. The country's female labour force participation rate has shown only modest improvement over the past two decades and continues to lag far behind that of men. According to the World Bank, female labour force participation was approximately 31.6 percent in 2024, compared with nearly 70 percent for males. Women account for only about one-third of Sri Lanka's total labour force despite representing more than half of the national population and possessing educational qualifications that often exceed those of their male counterparts. This discrepancy represents one of the lowest female labour force participation rates among middle-income countries in Asia and highlights a significant underutilization of human capital.

The persistence of low female labour force participation reflects a complex interaction of economic, institutional, cultural, and social factors. Traditional gender norms continue to assign women primary responsibility for unpaid household work, childcare, and elderly care, limiting their availability for formal employment. Workplace discrimination, occupational segregation, unequal wages, limited career advancement opportunities, and inadequate workplace facilities further discourage women's participation in the labour market. In addition, insufficient access to affordable childcare services, safe transportation, flexible working arrangements, and social protection mechanisms creates substantial barriers to women's economic engagement. Rural women, women from low-income households, and women affected by conflict or natural disasters often experience these challenges more severely, resulting in greater socioeconomic exclusion.

These challenges have become increasingly significant in the context of Sri Lanka's ongoing economic recovery and development agenda. Following the country's recent economic crisis, expanding employment opportunities and increasing labour force participation have become

national priorities. Enhancing women's participation in productive employment is widely recognized as an effective strategy for accelerating economic recovery, improving household resilience, reducing poverty, and increasing national productivity. Consequently, both the Government of Sri Lanka and international development partners have emphasized gender-inclusive growth as an important component of future development policies and investment programmes.

Multilateral donor-funded development projects play an increasingly influential role in supporting Sri Lanka's economic and social development. Organizations such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations agencies, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and other bilateral and multilateral partners finance a broad range of projects across sectors including agriculture, livestock development, irrigation, infrastructure, water supply, sanitation, transport, urban development, climate resilience, rural livelihoods, enterprise development, environmental management, education, and community-based development. These projects create substantial employment opportunities through both direct project implementation and indirect economic activities generated by project investments.

In recent years, donor agencies have increasingly incorporated gender mainstreaming into project design and implementation. Gender action plans, gender-responsive budgeting, inclusive procurement practices, skills development programmes, and gender-sensitive monitoring frameworks have become common features of development interventions. Many projects explicitly aim to increase women's access to employment, entrepreneurship, financial services, vocational training, leadership opportunities, and productive assets. Furthermore, international financing institutions increasingly require borrowing governments to demonstrate compliance with gender safeguards and social inclusion policies as part of project approval and implementation processes.

Nevertheless, evidence suggests that women remain underrepresented in many donor-funded employment opportunities, particularly in sectors traditionally dominated by men such as construction, transport, irrigation, infrastructure development, engineering, and water resource management. Women's participation is often concentrated in lower-paid, temporary, or less-

skilled positions, while leadership, technical, and decision-making roles remain predominantly occupied by men. In several projects, gender targets focus primarily on beneficiary participation rather than sustainable employment creation or long-term economic empowerment. Moreover, project implementation frequently encounters institutional capacity constraints, inadequate gender expertise, insufficient monitoring systems, and deeply rooted cultural norms that limit the effectiveness of gender interventions.

Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of the factors that influence women's participation in donor-funded development projects and the effectiveness of existing gender mainstreaming strategies. It is important to assess whether current project designs adequately respond to women's needs, whether institutional arrangements support inclusive employment practices, and whether project outcomes contribute to meaningful and sustainable economic empowerment rather than merely fulfilling numerical participation targets. Such analysis can provide valuable evidence for improving future development programmes and strengthening the contribution of donor investments to gender equality.

Against this background, this study investigates how multilateral donor-funded development projects can become more effective vehicles for promoting women's employment and economic empowerment across Sri Lanka. The research seeks to examine the institutional, social, economic, and policy factors that influence women's access to project-related employment opportunities and to evaluate the effectiveness of current gender mainstreaming approaches adopted by development partners and implementing agencies. Furthermore, the study aims to identify practical strategies that can enhance women's participation in skilled employment, leadership positions, entrepreneurship, and income-generating activities within donor-funded projects.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to both academic knowledge and development practice by generating evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, donor agencies, project implementing institutions, and other stakeholders involved in development planning. Strengthening women's employment through donor-funded projects has the potential not only to advance gender equality but also to

improve project effectiveness, promote inclusive economic growth, strengthen community resilience, and support Sri Lanka's long-term sustainable development objectives. As the country seeks to build a more inclusive and resilient economy, ensuring that women can fully participate in and benefit from development investments will remain a critical priority for achieving equitable and sustainable national development.

2. Problem Statement

Despite sustained national and international commitments to promoting gender equality, women's participation in Sri Lanka's labour market remains significantly lower than that of men. This persistent gender gap exists despite the country's notable achievements in female education, literacy, and human development. Women account for more than half of the population and consistently demonstrate high educational attainment; however, female labour force participation has remained at approximately one-third of the working-age female population. This disparity represents a substantial underutilization of human capital and limits Sri Lanka's ability to achieve inclusive economic growth, poverty reduction, and sustainable development.

Multilateral donor-funded development projects financed by organizations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and other development partners are expected to contribute to women's economic empowerment by creating employment opportunities, strengthening vocational and technical skills, supporting entrepreneurship, and improving access to productive resources. Most donor-funded projects incorporate gender mainstreaming through Gender Action Plans (GAPs), gender-responsive procurement, capacity-building programmes, inclusive consultation mechanisms, and gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Nevertheless, evidence indicates that the employment benefits generated by these projects are not distributed equally between women and men.

Women continue to be underrepresented in project-related employment, particularly in technical, managerial, engineering, infrastructure, transport, irrigation, and construction sectors where donor investments are substantial. Their participation is often concentrated in temporary, low-skilled, or lower-paid positions, while

opportunities for long-term employment, leadership, and decision-making remain limited. In many instances, project gender indicators emphasize participation rates or the number of female beneficiaries rather than measuring sustainable employment outcomes, income generation, career progression, or long-term economic empowerment. Furthermore, institutional capacity constraints, inadequate gender expertise, weak implementation of gender action plans, insufficient monitoring systems, and deeply embedded socio-cultural norms continue to undermine the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming initiatives.

Although numerous studies have examined female labour force participation and gender equality in Sri Lanka, relatively limited research has specifically investigated the effectiveness of multilateral donor-funded development projects in creating sustainable employment opportunities for women across different sectors. Existing studies often focus on individual projects, specific sectors, or policy implementation without providing a comprehensive assessment of the institutional, economic, social, and cultural factors influencing women's employment outcomes within donor-funded interventions. Consequently, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding the extent to which current project designs, implementation mechanisms, and monitoring systems effectively promote women's economic participation and address structural barriers to employment.

This research seeks to address this gap by examining the factors influencing women's employment in multilateral donor-funded development projects in Sri Lanka and evaluating the effectiveness of existing gender-responsive approaches. Specifically, the study seeks to answer four key questions: (1) Why does female labour force participation remain low despite high levels of educational attainment? (2) What economic, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers prevent women from benefiting equally from donor-funded development projects? (3) How can donor-funded development projects be redesigned to maximize women's access to quality employment, leadership opportunities, and economic empowerment? and (4) What lessons can be drawn from successful donor-funded interventions to develop a comprehensive gender-responsive framework for future development projects in Sri Lanka? Addressing these questions will provide evidence-based

recommendations for policymakers, development partners, and implementing agencies to strengthen gender-responsive project design, enhance women's employment outcomes, and contribute to inclusive economic growth and sustainable development.

3. Research Objectives

General Objective

To assess strategies for enhancing women's employment opportunities in multilateral donor-funded development projects in Sri Lanka.

Specific Objectives

- Examine the current status of women's labour force participation in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to employment within multilateral donor-funded development projects.
- Analyze the gender-related barriers and challenges that limit women's participation and employment in multilateral donor-funded development projects.
- Review and evaluate the experiences, policies, and outcomes of selected multilateral donor-funded development projects in promoting women's employment and gender inclusion.
- Develop a policy framework to enhance women's employment opportunities and strengthen gender-responsive practices in multilateral donor-funded development projects.
- Recommend institutional, operational, and policy reforms to improve women's participation, employment outcomes, and gender equality within multilateral donor-funded development projects in Sri Lanka.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Human Capital Theory, the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory and the Capability Approach. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive basis for examining women's employment opportunities in multilateral donor-funded development projects in Sri Lanka. While Human Capital Theory explains how investments in education and skills enhance employability, GAD Theory highlights the structural and institutional factors that shape gender inequality. The Capability Approach extends the analysis

by emphasizing the expansion of women's freedoms, agency, and opportunities beyond employment alone.

2.1 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, developed by Becker (1964), posits that investments in education, training, and skills development increase individuals' productivity, earning potential, and employment opportunities. The theory suggests that human capital accumulation contributes to both individual economic advancement and broader economic growth by improving labour market efficiency and productivity.

Within the context of multilateral donor-funded development projects, Human Capital Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how vocational training, technical education, entrepreneurship development, and capacity-building initiatives enhance women's employability. Development interventions supported by international donors frequently invest in skills development programs aimed at improving women's access to formal employment, self-employment, and income-generating opportunities. However, while human capital investments are necessary for improving employment outcomes, they may not be sufficient to overcome structural gender inequalities that continue to limit women's labour market participation.

2.2 Gender and Development (GAD) Theory

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach emerged during the 1980s as a response to earlier Women in Development (WID) perspectives, shifting the focus from women's individual disadvantages to the broader social, economic, political, and institutional structures that produce gender inequality. Rather than viewing women as isolated beneficiaries of development interventions, GAD emphasizes transforming unequal gender relations and promoting equitable access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making.

The GAD framework recognizes that women's employment outcomes are influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including prevailing social norms, discriminatory institutional arrangements, unequal power relations, and differential access to productive resources. These structural constraints often persist even when women possess comparable education and skills to men. Consequently, the GAD perspective provides an

appropriate analytical lens for assessing whether donor-funded development projects address the systemic barriers that restrict women's employment and economic empowerment in Sri Lanka.

2.3 Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999), conceptualizes development as the expansion of individuals' freedoms and capabilities to achieve the lives they value. Unlike conventional economic approaches that measure development primarily through income or employment, the Capability Approach emphasizes the importance of expanding people's substantive opportunities, agency, and choices.

Within multilateral donor-funded development projects, this perspective suggests that successful employment interventions should extend beyond job creation to strengthen women's capabilities through skills development, increased decision-making power, economic independence, and social inclusion. Employment should therefore be viewed not merely as an economic outcome but as a means of enhancing women's overall well-being, autonomy, and participation in society. This framework is particularly relevant for evaluating the broader social and developmental impacts of donor-funded initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and inclusive economic growth.

2.4 Conceptual Integration

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for this study. Human Capital Theory explains how investments in education and skills can improve women's employability, GAD Theory highlights the structural and institutional barriers that may constrain employment despite such investments, and the Capability Approach emphasizes the broader objective of enhancing women's freedoms, agency, and overall well-being. Collectively, these theories offer a robust foundation for analysing the effectiveness of multilateral donor-funded development projects in expanding women's employment opportunities and promoting gender-responsive development in Sri Lanka.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of strategies for enhancing women's employment opportunities in multilateral donor-funded development projects in Sri Lanka. The mixed-methods approach enables the study to combine statistical analysis of labour market trends with an in-depth examination of policy frameworks, project experiences, and institutional practices. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence facilitates a more robust understanding of the factors influencing women's employment and the effectiveness of donor-funded interventions.

3.2 Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from reputable national and international sources.

Quantitative Data

Secondary quantitative data are collected from the following sources:

- World Bank Gender Data Portal
- International Labour Organization (ILO)
- Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), Sri Lanka
- Asian Development Bank (ADB)
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
- Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

These datasets provide information on labour force participation, employment trends, gender disparities, educational attainment, and other socioeconomic indicators relevant to women's employment in Sri Lanka.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data are obtained through a comprehensive review of documentary sources, including:

- Project completion reports of multilateral donor-funded development projects;
- Gender Action Plans (GAPs);
- National policy documents and sectoral strategies;
- Project evaluation and implementation reports;

and Peer-reviewed academic literature, institutional publications, and research reports on gender, employment, and development.

The qualitative evidence is used to examine policy implementation, institutional arrangements, project outcomes, and the barriers and enabling factors affecting women's employment within donor-funded development initiatives.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to examine trends in women's labour force participation, employment patterns, and gender disparities in Sri Lanka. Qualitative data are analyzed using thematic content analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to gender barriers, institutional practices, policy implementation, and the effectiveness of multilateral donor-funded projects. The findings from both approaches are integrated to provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening women's employment opportunities and promoting gender-responsive development.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Findings

The analysis demonstrates that despite Sri Lanka's strong achievements in female education and human development, women's participation in the labour market remains considerably lower than that of men. Evidence from the World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), and project completion reports from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) indicates that multilateral donor-funded development projects have contributed to improving women's economic participation, although the overall employment outcomes remain below their potential.

The quantitative findings reveal persistent gender disparities in labour force participation, while qualitative evidence from donor-funded projects suggests that targeted gender-responsive interventions can substantially improve women's employment, entrepreneurship, leadership, and income generation. However, structural barriers including socio-cultural

norms, occupational segregation, inadequate technical skills, workplace safety concerns, discriminatory recruitment practices, and unpaid care responsibilities continue to limit women's full participation in development initiatives.

The findings are discussed under four broad themes: (i) women's labour force participation in Sri Lanka, (ii) women's employment outcomes in donor-funded development projects, (iii) barriers affecting women's employment, and (iv) implications for gender-responsive project design.

4.2 Women's Labour Force Participation in Sri Lanka

The analysis confirms that Sri Lanka exhibits one of the largest gender gaps in labour force participation among upper-middle-income countries in Asia. Although women account for more than half of the country's population and have achieved educational outcomes comparable to or exceeding those of men, their participation in formal employment remains significantly lower.

Table 1. Labour Market Indicators by Gender (2024)

Indicator	Women	Men
Labour Force Participation Rate (%)	31.6	69.7
Share of Total Labour Force (%)	33.2	66.8
Unemployment Rate (%)	8.0	3.5
Literacy Rate (%)	>93	~92
Population Share (%)	52	48

(Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal; ILOSTAT; Department of Census and Statistics, 2024)

The statistics illustrate a striking paradox. Female literacy exceeds 93%, and women outperform men in several educational indicators, yet these achievements have not translated into comparable labour market participation. Female labour force participation (31.6%) is less than half that of men (69.7%), while unemployment among women remains more than twice the male unemployment rate.

This disparity indicates that educational attainment alone is insufficient to ensure women's economic inclusion.

Instead, labour market outcomes are shaped by institutional, cultural, and structural constraints that continue to limit women's access to decent employment.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), increased investment in education should improve labour productivity and employment opportunities. However, the findings suggest that the returns to women's education remain constrained by labour market discrimination, occupational segregation, and unequal access to employment opportunities. Consequently, improving women's skills without addressing structural barriers is unlikely to substantially increase female employment.

6.3 Women's Employment in Multilateral Donor-Funded Development Projects

A comparative review of major donor-funded projects indicates that gender mainstreaming has become an integral component of project planning across multilateral development agencies. Most projects now include Gender Action Plans (GAPs), gender-sensitive monitoring indicators, and targets for women's participation. Nevertheless, the extent to which these measures translate into actual employment varies considerably across projects.

Table 2. Gender-Responsive Components in Selected Development Projects

Donor Agency	Project Focus	Key Gender Interventions	Employment Outcomes for Women
Asian Development Bank	Smallholder Agribusiness and Resilience Project	Farmer organizations, agribusiness training, value-chain development	Increased participation in agricultural enterprises and producer organizations
Asian Development Bank	Integrated Road Investment Program	Community maintenance work, road safety,	Expanded local employment and

		enterprise development	income opportunities
World Bank	Climate Smart Irrigated Agriculture Project	Farmer producer groups, climate-smart agriculture, processing activities	Greater involvement in value addition and agricultural enterprises
IFAD	Rural Livelihood Development Projects	Rural entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, producer organizations	Improved income generation and household decision-making
JICA	Technical Cooperation Programmes	Skills development, vocational training, community capacity building	Enhanced employability and technical competencies

The comparative analysis demonstrates that donor-funded projects have contributed to women's employment through multiple pathways rather than direct wage employment alone. These include:

- agricultural value chain participation;
- rural entrepreneurship;
- vocational and technical skills development;
- producer organizations;
- financial inclusion;
- community-based infrastructure maintenance; and
- small enterprise development.

Among the reviewed agencies, IFAD projects showed particularly strong outcomes in promoting women's participation in producer organizations and rural entrepreneurship. Women involved in these projects reported improved household incomes, greater financial independence, and increased participation in community decision-making.

Similarly, the World Bank's Climate Smart Irrigated Agriculture Project promoted women's participation in climate-resilient agriculture and agricultural processing, enabling women to diversify income sources beyond subsistence farming.

ADB projects demonstrated notable progress in integrating gender considerations into infrastructure investments. Traditionally, infrastructure projects have generated employment primarily for men. However, recent ADB initiatives increasingly incorporate employment opportunities for women through community-based maintenance, environmental management, and support services.

JICA's technical cooperation programmes focused primarily on enhancing women's employability through vocational education and technical skills development rather than direct employment generation. These programmes strengthened women's capacity to compete in local labour markets and participate in community development activities.

Overall, the findings suggest that donor-funded projects have increasingly shifted from welfare-oriented approaches toward economic empowerment strategies that promote women's productive participation.

6.4 Sectoral Distribution of Women's Employment

The analysis also reveals substantial sectoral differences in women's employment opportunities.

Table 3. Women's Participation across Major Project Sectors

Sector	Women's Participation	Major Constraints
Agriculture	High	Limited land ownership; market access
Livestock	Moderate–High	Limited technical training
Rural Enterprise	High	Financial constraints
Water Supply & Sanitation	Moderate	Limited technical positions
Infrastructure & Construction	Low	Gender stereotypes;

		contractor preferences
Irrigation	Low	Heavy manual work; technical skill gaps
Transport	Very Low	Occupational segregation
Renewable Energy	Emerging	Limited technical expertise
Digital Economy	Emerging	Skills shortages

Agriculture remains the largest sector employing women within donor-funded projects. However, women are primarily engaged in lower-value activities such as cultivation, processing, and marketing rather than higher-income technical or managerial positions.

Infrastructure projects continue to exhibit the lowest levels of female employment. Construction contractors frequently recruit male workers due to prevailing stereotypes regarding physical labour, despite growing opportunities for women in surveying, environmental monitoring, project administration, procurement, community engagement, and occupational health and safety.

The emerging sectors of renewable energy, climate resilience, and digital technology present new opportunities for expanding women's employment. Nevertheless, participation remains constrained by limited access to technical education and vocational training.

6.5 Structural Barriers Affecting Women's Employment

The thematic analysis identified six major barriers consistently reported across project evaluations and policy documents.

Socio-cultural norms

Traditional gender roles continue to assign women primary responsibility for childcare, household management, and unpaid domestic work. These expectations restrict women's mobility, reduce their availability for full-time employment, and discourage participation in occupations perceived as masculine.

Many women decline employment opportunities that require travel, relocation, or irregular working hours due to family responsibilities and societal expectations.

Occupational segregation

Women remain concentrated in traditionally female occupations such as education, healthcare, and garment manufacturing. Their participation in engineering, construction, irrigation management, transport, and heavy infrastructure remains extremely limited.

This occupational segregation significantly reduces women's access to higher-paying technical occupations supported by development projects.

Skills gaps

Project documentation consistently identifies inadequate technical and vocational skills as one of the principal barriers to women's employment.

Although women possess relatively high levels of general education, many lack specialized competencies required for employment in engineering, digital technology, renewable energy, construction, and modern agricultural systems.

These findings support the Capability Approach, which argues that expanding people's opportunities requires enhancing their capabilities rather than merely providing formal access to employment.

Workplace safety concerns

Safety remains an important determinant of women's employment decisions.

Several project evaluations highlighted concerns relating to:

- inadequate transport;
- absence of separate sanitation facilities;
- limited childcare services;
- insecure accommodation for field staff; and
- weak mechanisms for addressing workplace harassment.

Improving workplace safety therefore represents an essential component of gender-responsive project implementation.

Procurement and recruitment practices

Many donor-funded infrastructure projects outsource employment through contractors.

Although donor agencies increasingly include gender requirements within bidding documents, contractors frequently prioritize rapid recruitment of experienced male workers rather than investing in training women.

Weak enforcement of contractual gender obligations limits the effectiveness of Gender Action Plans.

Unpaid care responsibilities

Women continue to undertake substantially more unpaid domestic work than men.

Time devoted to childcare, elder care, food preparation, and household management reduces women's availability for wage employment and vocational training.

Without supportive measures such as childcare facilities and flexible work arrangements, labour force participation is unlikely to increase significantly.

6.6 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that donor-funded development projects possess considerable untapped potential for promoting women's employment in Sri Lanka. Although gender mainstreaming has become standard practice across multilateral agencies, many projects continue to emphasize women's participation in consultations, awareness programmes, and community organizations rather than generating substantial employment opportunities.

This observation supports the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, which argues that gender inequality is embedded within institutional structures rather than resulting solely from individual disadvantages. Consequently, increasing women's employment requires structural reforms in project design, recruitment, procurement, monitoring, and institutional accountability.

The comparative project review further indicates that projects producing the strongest employment outcomes combine several complementary interventions rather than relying on isolated training activities. These include vocational education, financial inclusion, market access, leadership development, producer organizations, and supportive workplace policies.

The findings also demonstrate that employment quality is as important as employment quantity. Sustainable economic empowerment requires women to access decent work characterized by equal pay, career progression, leadership opportunities, social protection, and safe working conditions. Short-term casual employment alone is unlikely to generate lasting improvements in women's economic status.

Another important finding concerns the growing importance of climate resilience and green economy initiatives. As donor investments increasingly focus on renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, climate-smart infrastructure, and digital transformation, new opportunities are emerging for women to enter traditionally male-dominated occupations. However, realizing these opportunities will require substantial investment in technical and vocational education.

The evidence further suggests that Gender Action Plans are most effective when supported by measurable employment targets, dedicated budgets, contractor compliance mechanisms, and regular monitoring. Projects lacking these elements often achieve high levels of female participation in meetings and consultations but comparatively low levels of employment generation.

Finally, the findings reinforce the importance of institutional coordination among government agencies, donor organizations, contractors, civil society organizations, and local communities. Women's employment cannot be addressed solely through isolated project interventions; rather, it requires an integrated policy environment that simultaneously addresses education, labour market regulation, social protection, childcare, transportation, workplace safety, and private sector engagement.

Overall, the results demonstrate that multilateral donor-funded development projects can significantly contribute to women's economic empowerment when gender equality is integrated throughout the project cycle from project identification and design to procurement, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Moving from gender-sensitive to gender-transformative approaches will be essential for increasing women's employment, reducing labour market inequalities, and advancing inclusive economic growth and sustainable development in Sri Lanka.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the role of multilateral donor-funded development projects in enhancing employment opportunities for women in Sri Lanka within the broader context of inclusive economic growth and sustainable development. Although Sri Lanka has achieved remarkable progress in female education, literacy, and health outcomes, these achievements have not translated into equitable labour market participation. Women continue to experience significantly lower labour force participation rates than men, reflecting persistent structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers.

The findings demonstrate that multilateral development partners, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and other international organizations, have made notable progress in integrating gender equality into development programming. Through Gender Action Plans, vocational skills development, livelihood enhancement programmes, rural entrepreneurship initiatives, financial inclusion, and value chain development, these projects have created important opportunities for improving women's economic participation. Nevertheless, the overall impact on employment remains uneven across sectors and projects.

The study identified several interrelated barriers that continue to constrain women's participation in project-related employment, including entrenched socio-cultural norms, occupational segregation, limited access to technical and vocational skills, inadequate workplace safety measures, gender-insensitive procurement practices, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities. These barriers highlight that improving women's employment requires more than increasing educational attainment or creating temporary job opportunities; it requires addressing the structural factors that influence women's access to decent work and economic opportunities.

The findings further suggest that donor-funded development projects are most effective when gender equality is integrated throughout the entire project cycle from project identification and design to procurement, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Gender-responsive employment targets, inclusive procurement

systems, technical capacity development, safe working environments, institutional accountability, and comprehensive monitoring mechanisms are critical components of successful interventions. Moving beyond gender-sensitive approaches toward gender-transformative strategies will enable development projects to challenge existing inequalities and create sustainable pathways for women's economic empowerment.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the relevance of Human Capital Theory, the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, and the Capability Approach in explaining women's employment outcomes within development projects. While investments in education and skills remain essential, they must be complemented by institutional reforms that expand women's capabilities, remove structural barriers, and create enabling environments for equitable labour market participation.

Ultimately, enhancing women's employment in multilateral donor-funded development projects should be viewed not only as a social or gender equality objective but also as an economic and developmental imperative. Increasing women's participation in productive employment contributes to higher household incomes, poverty reduction, improved productivity, stronger community resilience, and more inclusive national economic growth. As Sri Lanka continues to pursue the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its broader development agenda, strengthening gender-responsive employment policies and practices within donor-funded projects will be essential for achieving sustainable, inclusive, and resilient development.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen women's employment opportunities in multilateral donor-funded development projects in Sri Lanka. These recommendations are intended to support policymakers, development partners, implementing agencies, contractors, and other stakeholders in promoting gender-responsive employment practices while contributing to inclusive economic growth and sustainable development.

Institutionalise Gender-Responsive Employment Targets

The Government of Sri Lanka, in collaboration with multilateral development partners including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and other development agencies, should establish mandatory employment targets for women in donor-funded projects. These targets should specify minimum levels of female participation across skilled, semi-skilled, technical, supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions. Gender-responsive employment indicators should be incorporated into project design documents, financing agreements, procurement plans, implementation schedules, and monitoring frameworks to ensure measurable outcomes and institutional accountability.

Strengthen Gender-Responsive Procurement Systems

Procurement policies should be redesigned to promote women's employment throughout project supply chains. Contractors and consultants should be required to prepare Gender Employment Plans as part of the bidding process, outlining strategies for recruiting, retaining, and promoting women. Bid evaluation criteria should reward firms that demonstrate commitments to equal employment opportunities, equal remuneration for work of equal value, safe working conditions, gender-sensitive workplace facilities, and support for women-owned enterprises. Regular compliance monitoring and contractual enforcement mechanisms should be integrated into project supervision.

Expand Technical and Vocational Skills Development

Limited technical competencies remain a major barrier to women's participation in infrastructure and other non-traditional sectors. Development partners should invest in market-driven Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes that equip women with skills relevant to construction, engineering, renewable energy, digital technologies, climate-smart agriculture, irrigation management, water supply, transport, and agribusiness. Partnerships among government institutions, vocational training centres, universities, and private sector employers should ensure that training

programmes respond to current labour market demands and facilitate employment placement upon completion.

Promote Women's Leadership and Career Advancement

Women's participation should extend beyond entry-level employment to decision-making and leadership positions. Development projects should establish structured mentoring programmes, leadership training, career development initiatives, and succession planning mechanisms to prepare women for managerial, technical, and supervisory roles. Increasing women's representation in project management units, procurement committees, engineering teams, safeguard functions, and steering committees will contribute to more inclusive governance and improved project effectiveness.

Ensure Safe, Inclusive, and Gender-Responsive Workplaces

Safe working environments are fundamental to women's participation in development projects. All donor-funded interventions should implement comprehensive workplace policies addressing gender-based violence (GBV), sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), occupational health and safety, and workplace discrimination. Project sites should provide separate sanitation facilities, secure transportation, adequate lighting, childcare support where appropriate, breastfeeding facilities, safe accommodation, and confidential grievance redress mechanisms. Contractors and project personnel should receive regular training on gender equality, workplace ethics, and codes of conduct.

Reduce Constraints Associated with Unpaid Care Responsibilities

The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work continues to restrict women's labour market participation. Development projects should incorporate family-friendly employment policies, including flexible working arrangements, maternity protection measures, childcare services, and community-based childcare facilities in project areas. Such interventions would enable women to balance household responsibilities while participating more actively in productive employment and skills development activities.

Strengthen Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment

Beyond wage employment, donor-funded projects should promote women's entrepreneurship by improving access to finance, business advisory services, digital technologies, producer organizations, market information systems, and value chain integration. Special attention should be given to supporting women-owned micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) through preferential procurement opportunities, business incubation programmes, financial literacy training, and access to domestic and international markets. Strengthening women's enterprises will contribute to local economic development and long-term livelihood resilience.

Strengthen Monitoring, Evaluation, and Gender Accountability

Monitoring and evaluation systems should assess not only women's participation but also the quality and sustainability of employment outcomes. Projects should collect comprehensive gender-disaggregated data on employment duration, wage equality, occupational categories, leadership positions, skills acquired, enterprise ownership, income growth, promotion rates, and long-term livelihood improvements. Independent gender audits, social safeguard monitoring, and periodic evaluations should be undertaken to assess compliance with Gender Action Plans and inform adaptive project management.

Enhance Institutional Coordination and Policy Coherence

Achieving sustainable improvements in women's employment requires stronger coordination among government ministries, donor agencies, private sector organizations, vocational education institutions, civil society organizations, and local authorities. A national coordination platform should be established to harmonize gender-responsive employment policies, facilitate knowledge sharing, promote best practices, and strengthen collaboration across sectors and donor-funded programmes. Such coordination would improve policy coherence and maximize development impacts.

Develop a National Gender-Responsive Employment Framework

This study recommends the formulation of a comprehensive National Gender-Responsive Employment Framework specifically for multilateral donor-funded development projects in Sri Lanka. The framework should align with the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDGs 5 and 8), International Labour Organization conventions, national labour legislation, and donor safeguard policies. It should establish standardized procedures for gender analysis, employment planning, procurement requirements, monitoring indicators, reporting mechanisms, institutional responsibilities, and performance evaluation. Such a framework would provide a consistent policy foundation for mainstreaming women's employment across all externally financed development interventions.

9. Directions for Future Research

Future studies should move beyond secondary data analysis by undertaking longitudinal and project-level impact assessments that examine the long-term effects of donor-funded development projects on women's employment, income, leadership, and household welfare. Comparative research across South Asian countries would provide valuable insights into regional best practices and innovative policy approaches. Further research should also evaluate the effectiveness of Gender Action Plans, gender-responsive procurement policies, social and environmental safeguard mechanisms, and inclusive labour market interventions in generating sustainable employment outcomes. Additionally, future studies should adopt an intersectional perspective by examining how factors such as disability, age, ethnicity, geographic location, and digital inclusion influence women's access to employment opportunities in development projects.

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