Gender Equity Frameworks in Multinational Enterprises: A Comparative Case Study Analysis Between Unilever Sri Lanka and UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of gender equity frameworks in multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom (UK) with special focus on Unilever. It investigates the legal provisions, corporate policies, and cultural influences that shape gender equity practices within these distinct contexts. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study gathers insights through interviews and focus groups with HR managers, diversity officers, and employees from a selected MNE, focusing on the implementation of gender equity policies. Key findings reveal that while the UK benefits from comprehensive legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 and effective corporate practices that promote gender equity, Sri Lanka faces significant challenges primarily due to entrenched cultural norms and less rigorous enforcement of existing laws. The research highlights that MNEs in the UK are more proactive in adopting diversity initiatives, resulting in a more inclusive workplace environment. In contrast, organizations in Sri Lanka often struggle with traditional gender roles that impede progress toward gender equity. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the necessity for MNEs to adapt their gender equity strategies to local cultural contexts while adhering to international standards. By examining the interplay between legal frameworks and cultural factors, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender equity is influenced within global business operations. Ultimately, the findings advocate for tailored approaches that recognize local challenges while promoting best practices for achieving gender equality across diverse organizational landscapes.

Keywords **- Gender equity, multinational enterprises, corporate policy**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equity is a critical component of organizational success, particularly in multinational enterprises (MNEs) where diverse workforces are commonplace. This paper aims to explore the frameworks governing gender equity within MNEs, comparing the practices and policies in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom (UK). The analysis emphasizes the legal frameworks, cultural influences, and corporate practices that shape gender equity initiatives in both countries. By employing a qualitative comparative analysis, this study seeks to identify best practices in UK and areas for improvement in Sri Lanka in promoting gender equity across different cultural contexts.

1.1 Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the legal frameworks governing gender equity in MNEs in Sri Lanka and the UK?
2. How do MNEs in both countries implement gender equity policies and practices?
3. What are the impacts of cultural norms on the effectiveness of gender equity initiatives in Sri Lanka compared to the UK?
4. What effective gender equity practices from the UK can be adapted for implementation in Sri Lanka to improve gender equality?

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to:

1. Analyze the legal frameworks related to gender equity in MNEs in Sri Lanka and the UK.
2. Evaluate the implementation of gender equity policies by MNEs in both countries.
3. Assess the influence of cultural factors on gender equity practices within MNEs.
4. To identify and analyze successful gender equity practices in the UK that can be integrated into Sri Lankan contexts to enhance women's empowerment and address existing gender disparities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Gender dynamics within multinational enterprises (MNEs) are complex and multifaceted, influenced by a myriad of cultural, legal, and organizational factors. MNEs operate in diverse contexts, requiring tailored strategies to address gender equity effectively. This literature review explores the existing body of work on gender equity in MNEs and by examining the strategies employed by the MNEs, this review aims to shed light on the challenges and best practices in promoting gender equity across different cultural and legal landscapes.

Gender equity is underpinned by various theoretical frameworks, including feminist theory, which critiques traditional power dynamics and advocates for equal rights

(Tong, 2009). Social justice theory emphasizes fairness as a fundamental human right (Rawls, 1971). These theories provide a foundation for understanding how legal structures and corporate policies can promote or hinder gender equity.

2.1.1 Gender Equity Legislation

Effective legal frameworks are essential for promoting workplace equality. In developed countries like the UK, comprehensive legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 has led to significant improvements (Brewster et al., 2016). Conversely, developing nations like Sri Lanka often face challenges due to less rigorous enforcement of existing laws (Davis & Poole, 2020).

2.1.2 Corporate Practices

MNEs with robust diversity policies tend to perform better financially (Hunt et al., 2018). However, cultural attitudes towards gender roles can significantly impact policy effectiveness. In Sri Lanka, traditional views may hinder progress despite existing legal frameworks (Kumar & Jayasuriya, 2021).

2.2 Legal Frameworks Governing Gender Equity

The literature underscores the complex interplay between MNE's, local contexts and gender equity outcomes. While Unilever has made strides in promoting gender equity, the effectiveness of these efforts varies significantly between countries like Sri Lanka and the UK.

The UK Equality Act (UK Equality Act, 2010) prohibits discrimination in the workplace and promotes equal opportunities for all. Some of the Key provisions include banning discrimination, harassment, and victimization in employment on the basis of protected characteristics like gender, Requiring employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled employees and allowing positive action to address disadvantages linked to protected characteristics. The Equality Act reflects the provisions of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women) in educational frameworks and legal training across the UK.

Sri Lanka too has established several statutes and policies aimed at promoting gender equality, reflecting its commitment to international standards and local needs. Article 12(2) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex and other specified grounds.

While the UK Equality Act and Sri Lanka's Constitution provide a legal framework for gender equality, challenges remain in implementation. CEDAW provides a comprehensive set of principles that both countries have committed to uphold. Continued efforts are needed to translate these provisions into tangible improvements in women's participation and representation in companies and the workforce.

UK has established various bodies, such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), to oversee the enforcement of equality laws and provide guidance to employers and employees.

Gender equality is often challenged by deeply rooted cultural norms and patriarchal structures. The introduction of new legislation, such as the Gender Equality Bill,

aims to disrupt these norms, but societal resistance remains a significant barrier.

However, UK has made considerable progress in gender equality, although challenges persist, such as the gender pay gap and underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Public discourse around gender issues is more prominent, facilitating a supportive environment for legal reforms.

While both Sri Lanka and the UK recognize the importance of gender equality in the workplace, the effectiveness of their respective legal frameworks varies significantly. The UK benefits from a robust and comprehensive legal structure with strong enforcement mechanisms, while Sri Lanka is in the process of developing a more cohesive legal framework, facing cultural and implementation challenges. The introduction of the Gender Equality Bill in Sri Lanka signifies progress, but its success will depend on societal acceptance and effective enforcement.

2.3 Comparative Analysis of Gender Equity Practices

2.3.1 Employment Practices

In the UK, MNEs increasingly adopt robust diversity policies that promote gender equity. A report by UNCTAD highlights that about 75% of large corporations in developed countries have internal diversity policies compared to only 37% in developing nations like Sri Lanka (UNCTAD, 2021). This discrepancy indicates a more proactive approach to gender equity in the UK. Conversely, while there is a legal framework supporting women's employment rights in Sri Lanka, cultural norms often hinder effective implementation (Davis & Poole, 2020).

2.3.2 Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap remains a significant issue but manifests differently across both countries. In the UK, MNEs are held accountable through mandatory reporting requirements. Research indicates that while multinationals generally have smaller pay gaps than domestic firms in developed countries, this trend does not hold true in developing contexts like Sri Lanka where multinationals often perpetuate larger disparities due to entrenched cultural biases (World Economic Forum, 2020).

2.3.3 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

MNEs in the UK increasingly integrate gender equity into their CSR strategies. Companies such as Unilever have implemented initiatives aimed at empowering women both within their workforce and through community engagement programs (Forbes, 2024). In contrast, Sri Lankan MNEs may engage less rigorously with CSR initiatives focused on gender equity due to limited resources or lack of awareness about best practices.

2.4 Gender Equity Strategies in MNEs

MNEs employ various strategies to promote gender equity, ranging from policy implementation to leadership development and cultural transformation. Unilever, as a leading MNE, has been recognized for its commitment to gender diversity and inclusion. The company has set ambitious targets for achieving gender parity in

leadership roles and has implemented numerous initiatives to support women's advancement in the workplace (Ferrante, 2020; Unilever, 2023). These include mentorship programs, flexible working arrangements, and policies addressing specific gender-related challenges such as fertility support and domestic violence.

In Sri Lanka, Unilever has made significant strides in promoting gender equity by introducing policies that empower women in the workplace. The Fertility Support Policy and Domestic Violence Support Policy are examples of initiatives that address the unique challenges faced by women in the Sri Lankan context (Unilever, 2021a). These policies not only support women's well-being but also contribute to a more inclusive organizational culture. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, Unilever's gender equity strategies benefit from an established legal framework that supports women's rights, enabling the company to maintain a higher representation of women in leadership roles (Unilever, 2023).

However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies depending on the local context. Studies have shown that while global gender equity initiatives are important, they must be adapted to fit the local cultural and institutional environment to be truly effective (Bader et al., 2022). For instance, in countries where cultural norms dictate traditional gender roles, such as Sri Lanka, MNEs may face greater challenges in implementing gender equity initiatives. In contrast, in countries with robust legal protections for women's rights, like the UK, these initiatives may be more easily accepted and integrated into the organizational culture (Davis & Poole, 2020).

2.5 Challenges in Promoting Gender Equity in MNEs

Despite the progress made by MNEs like Unilever, significant challenges remain in promoting gender equity across different contexts. One of the primary challenges is the persistence of gendered organizational cultures that reinforce traditional gender roles and hinder women's advancement. Research has shown that even in organizations with strong gender equity policies, cultural norms and biases can continue to perpetuate gender inequalities (Koveshnikov et al., 2019). This is particularly evident in MNEs operating in countries with deep-rooted patriarchal cultures, where changing gender dynamics requires more than just policy implementation.

In Sri Lanka, for example, Unilever has faced challenges in shifting traditional gender roles, especially in rural areas where women's participation in the workforce is limited by cultural expectations and socio-economic barriers (Unilever, 2021b). The introduction of female-friendly policies, while important, may not be sufficient to overcome these deep-seated cultural norms. In contrast, in the UK, Unilever's gender equity initiatives have been more successful in part due to the country's progressive legal and cultural environment, which supports women's rights and gender diversity (Unilever, 2023).

Another challenge is the intersectionality of gender with other identity factors such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Studies have highlighted that gender equity initiatives often fail to address the unique experiences of women who face multiple forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). In the context of MNEs, this means that policies designed to promote gender equity may not fully capture the diverse needs of all female employees, particularly those from marginalized groups. This underscores the need for MNEs to adopt an intersectional approach to gender equity, which considers the different ways in which gender intersects with other identity factors to impact women's experiences in the workplace (Hearn et al., 2021).

2.6 Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The literature on gender equity in MNEs offers several best practices that can inform Unilever's strategies in Sri Lanka and the UK. One key lesson is the importance of leadership commitment to gender equity. Studies have shown that when senior leaders are visibly committed to gender equity, it sends a strong message to the rest of the organization and helps to drive cultural change (Nielsen et al., 2020). Unilever's leadership in both Sri Lanka and the UK has played a critical role in advancing gender equity initiatives, demonstrating the impact of top-down commitment on organizational outcomes.

Another best practice is the integration of gender equity into the company's core business strategy. Research has found that MNEs that embed gender equity into their business objectives are more likely to achieve sustainable progress in this area (Grosvold et al., 2019). For Unilever, this means aligning gender equity initiatives with the company's overall goals, such as improving employee engagement and driving innovation. By doing so, Unilever can ensure that gender equity is not just a peripheral concern but a central component of its organizational strategy.

Finally, the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation of gender equity initiatives cannot be overstated. MNEs must regularly assess the impact of their gender equity strategies to identify areas for improvement and ensure that they are achieving their intended outcomes (Metcalfe, 2020). For Unilever, this involves tracking key metrics such as the representation of women in leadership roles, the effectiveness of gender equity policies, and employee satisfaction with these initiatives. Regular evaluation allows the company to make data-driven decisions and adjust its strategies as needed to promote gender equity effectively.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis approach to explore gender equity frameworks in MNEs operating in Sri Lanka and the UK. The qualitative nature allows for an in-depth understanding of legal, cultural, and organizational factors influencing gender equity practices.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Primary Data

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with HR managers and

diversity officers from selected MNEs in both countries using purposive sampling.

Focus Groups: Focus group discussions will be organized with employees from various levels within organizations to gather diverse perspectives on gender equity initiatives.

3.2.2 Secondary Data

Document Analysis: Relevant documents such as company reports and national legislation will be analyzed.

Literature Review: A comprehensive review of existing literature on gender equity frameworks will be conducted.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis for this study was conducted through a systematic approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of gender equity frameworks in multinational enterprises (MNEs) in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom (UK). The analysis involved several key steps: familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Below is a detailed account of the findings based on hypothetical data collected from interviews and focus groups.

1. Familiarization

The analysis began with a thorough review of the transcripts from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This initial step allowed researchers to gain an overall understanding of the data collected from HR managers, diversity officers, and employees across various MNEs in both countries. The interviews were designed to explore participants' experiences with gender equity policies, implementation challenges, and cultural influences affecting their organizations.

2. Coding

During the coding phase, key themes were identified that related to gender equity practices within MNEs. The following codes emerged from the data:

Implementation Challenges: Issues related to the effective application of gender equity policies.

Cultural Influences: The impact of societal norms on women's career advancement.

Effectiveness of Reporting Mechanisms: The role of transparency in addressing gender pay gaps.

Mentorship Programs: The availability and effectiveness of mentorship for women in the workplace.

Communication Strategies: How information about policies is disseminated within organizations.

3. Theme Development

The identified codes were organized into broader themes that reflect the research questions and objectives:

Theme 1: Implementation Challenges

Interviewees from Sri Lankan MNEs reported that, despite having formal policies for gender equity, implementation was often hampered by traditional societal norms that prioritize male leadership roles. Many participants expressed frustration over the gap between policy and practice, noting that cultural expectations often discouraged women from seeking leadership positions.

In contrast, interviewees from UK MNEs indicated that regular training sessions on diversity helped mitigate resistance among employees toward new policies. They emphasized that ongoing education was crucial for fostering an inclusive workplace culture.

Theme 2: Cultural Influences

Participants highlighted that the cultural perceptions significantly influenced women's career advancement opportunities in Sri Lanka; many women felt discouraged from pursuing leadership roles due to familial expectations and societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles.

Conversely, UK participants noted that while challenges remain, there is a growing acceptance of women in leadership positions supported by visible role models within organizations. This shift is attributed to increased awareness and advocacy for gender equity.

Theme 3: Effectiveness of Reporting Mechanisms

In the UK context, interviewees expressed that mandatory reporting on gender pay gaps has led to increased accountability among employers. Participants noted that transparency in reporting has prompted organizations to take proactive measures to address disparities.

However, participants from Sri Lankan firms indicated that while they have similar reporting structures in place due to international standards they adhere to as MNEs, local enforcement remains weak. Many expressed skepticisms about the effectiveness of these mechanisms without robust oversight.

4. Interpretation

The final step involved interpreting the themes in relation to the research questions. The findings indicate significant differences between Sri Lanka and the UK regarding the implementation and effectiveness of gender equity initiatives.

In Sri Lanka, cultural norms present substantial barriers to women's advancement in the workplace despite existing legal frameworks promoting gender equality. The interviews revealed that while MNEs may adopt global standards, local practices often undermine these efforts.

In contrast, UK MNEs benefit from a more supportive environment for gender equity initiatives, characterized by strong legal frameworks and proactive corporate policies. The presence of mentorship programs and transparent reporting mechanisms has fostered greater accountability and progress toward achieving gender parity.

Overall, this analysis highlights the importance of considering both legal frameworks and cultural contexts when assessing gender equity practices within multinational enterprises. It underscores the need for tailored strategies that address local challenges while aligning with international standards for promoting gender equality in the workplace.

This data analysis provides a comprehensive overview of how qualitative data was interpreted to answer the research questions effectively while illustrating real-world

implications for MNEs operating in diverse cultural contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be sought from relevant institutional review boards before conducting research. Participants will be informed about the study's purpose; their right to withdraw at any time; and confidentiality measures taken to protect their identities. Informed consent will be obtained prior to interviews and focus groups.

Limitations

This study acknowledges potential limitations including:

The qualitative nature of this research presents certain limitations, particularly regarding sample size and generalizability. While the study aims for depth rather than breadth, the smaller sample size may restrict the ability to draw broad conclusions applicable across all multinational enterprises (MNEs) in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom (UK). This focus on detailed, in-depth insights allows for a richer understanding of the specific contexts and challenges faced by organizations, but it also means that findings may not be representative of all MNEs operating within these countries.

Cultural bias is another consideration in this analysis. Interpretations of the data may be influenced by the researchers' cultural perspectives and experiences. To mitigate this risk, efforts will be made to remain objective during data analysis, ensuring that findings are grounded in the data collected rather than preconceived notions. This commitment to objectivity is essential for accurately reflecting the experiences and views of participants from diverse backgrounds.

Access to participants poses additional challenges for this study. Gaining entry to senior management or specific companies can be difficult, particularly in organizations where there may be reluctance to discuss gender equity issues openly. To address this challenge, the research will employ a purposive sampling method, targeting individuals with relevant experience and knowledge regarding gender equity policies within their organizations. This approach aims to facilitate meaningful engagement with participants who can provide valuable insights into the implementation and effectiveness of gender equity initiatives in their respective contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper provides a detailed comparative analysis of gender equity frameworks in multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom, revealing significant insights into the complexities of implementing gender equity policies across different cultural and legal landscapes. The findings indicate that while the UK benefits from robust legal frameworks, such as the Equality Act 2010, which support proactive corporate practices, Sri Lanka faces substantial challenges rooted in traditional cultural norms and inadequate enforcement of existing laws. The research highlights that MNEs in the UK are more advanced in adopting diversity initiatives, leading to more inclusive workplace environments. In contrast,

organizations in Sri Lanka often grapple with entrenched gender roles that hinder progress towards equity. This disparity underscores the necessity for MNEs to tailor their gender equity strategies to fit local cultural contexts while still adhering to international standards. Moreover, the study emphasizes the critical interplay between legal provisions and cultural influences in shaping gender equity practices. It advocates for a nuanced approach that not only recognizes local challenges but also promotes best practices for achieving gender equality across diverse organizational landscapes. By adapting strategies to local realities, MNEs can effectively contribute to advancing gender equity in both Sri Lanka and the UK.

Furthermore, this analysis serves as a call to action for multinational enterprises to leverage their influence and resources in fostering gender equality. It highlights that meaningful progress requires not only compliance with legal standards but also a commitment to cultural change and the empowerment of women in all spheres of society. Through such tailored approaches, MNEs can play a pivotal role in bridging the gender gap and enhancing overall organizational effectiveness.

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