Unveiling the Inequity: Mapping the Determinants of Female Underrepresentation in Sri Lanka's Maritime Sector

Lai Kuen Law[1]*, Kaumini Kaushal Dharmappriya De Silva[2]

[1] University of South Wales, United Kingdom

[2] Independent Scholar

Abstract

This study interrogates the persistent underrepresentation of women in Sri Lanka's maritime sector – a critical node in the global blue economy – as a systemic outcome of cultural, organizational, and industry-level barriers rather than an incidental demographic pattern. Although maritime transport facilitates over 80% of global trade, women remain substantially marginalized, constituting only 19% of the global maritime workforce and just 1-2% of seagoing roles. In Sri Lanka, this imbalance is even more pronounced, sustained by entrenched occupational masculinization, expectations of 24/7 availability, gendered perceptions of physical suitability, and structural impediments that restrict women's career advancement. Drawing on twenty in-depth interviews with purposively sampled maritime professionals, the study reveals how mentorship gaps, male-dominant professional networks, weak female-led support structures, and cultural caregiving norms collectively reinforce a glass ceiling and contribute to the sector's persistent "leaky pipeline." These mechanisms not only suppress women's progression but also limit the industry's capacity to innovate as it moves toward digitalization, decarbonization, and climate adaptation. The study advances a pragmatic blueprint for gender-sensitive HR reform – centering inclusive leadership, formal mentoring, strengthened support networks, and culturally responsive workplace practices – to reconfigure opportunity structures and align Sri Lanka's maritime development with SDG 5. By situating Sri Lanka within global maritime dynamics, the research offers both conceptual clarity and actionable pathways to reshape institutional practices and unlock underutilized talent.

Keywords: career progression constraints; gender inequality; maritime labor dynamic; organizational barriers; structural cultural norms