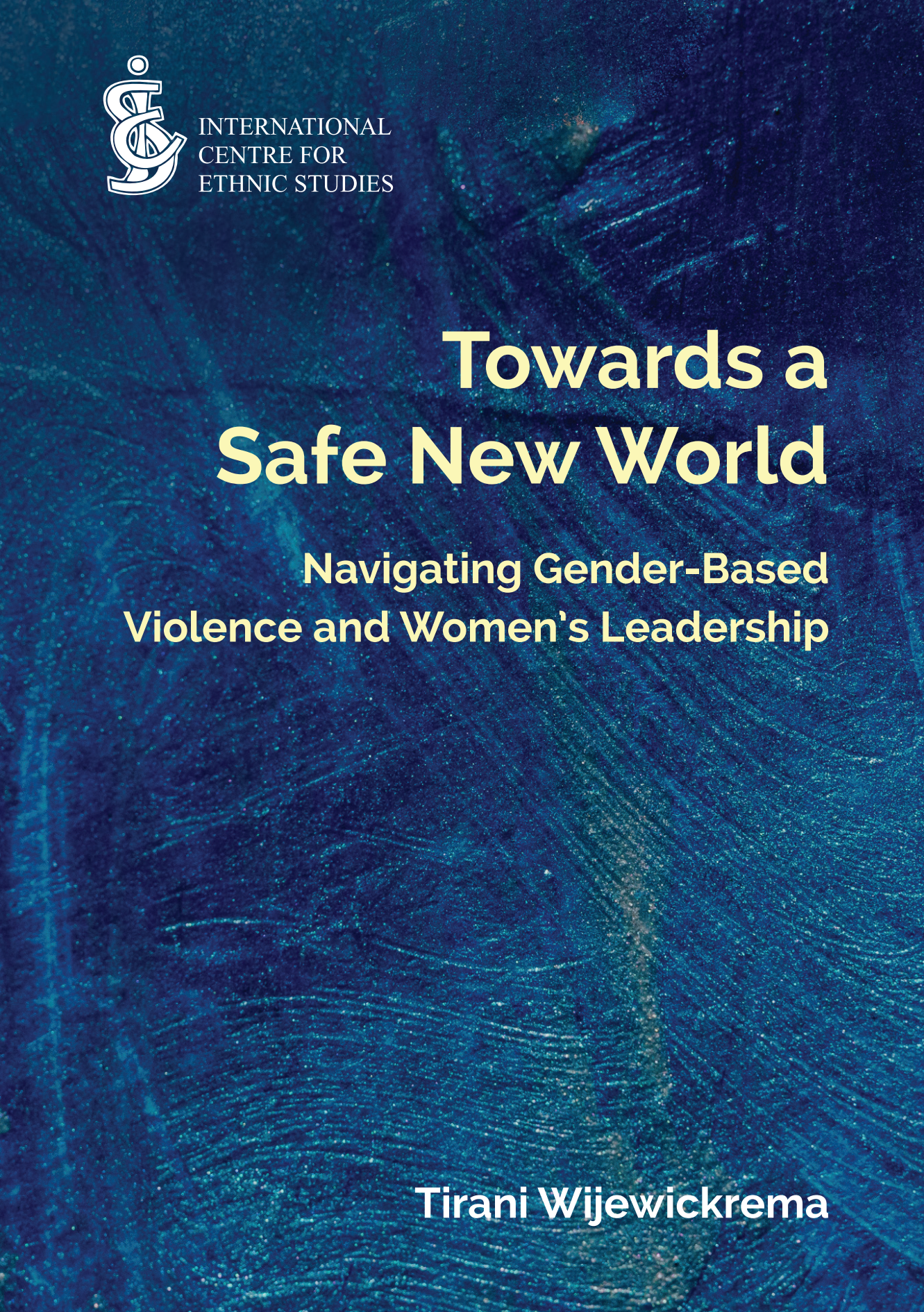

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Towards a
Safe New World
Navigating Gender-Based
Violence and Women's Leadership
Tirani Wijewickrema

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The International Centre for Ethnic Studies

2026

A Safe New World: Navigating Gender-Based Violence and Women's Leadership

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Towards a Safe New World

Navigating Gender-Based Violence and Women's Leadership

Tirani Wijewickrema*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the narrative of women's progress is often defined by high literacy and educational attainment. Yet, these achievements have not translated into equitable representation in leadership. Whether in politics, the corporate world, or public service, women entering leadership positions are moving into spaces that are culturally and structurally coded as masculine. This study examines the professional landscape where Gender-Based Violence (GBV) acts not just as an interpersonal issue, but as a systematic gatekeeper to power.

This report frames GBV as a structural constraint that impacts the entire leadership lifecycle, from the initial decision to enter a "masculine" field to the physical and mental burnout that leads to premature exit. The study proceeds from the premise that leadership cannot be understood in isolation from the conditions under which it is practised. Leadership is also not merely a position held but a space that must be continuously navigated under systemic constraints. The study examines how gendered forms of violence, ranging from subtle social regulation and institutional exclusion to harassment and threats, shape women's access to and continuity in power. It also explores the impact of GBV on women's leadership and the way in which institutional failures protect perpetrators and perpetuate violence.

To understand these complexities, this qualitative study draws on 35 in-depth interviews across 10 districts and utilizes feminist institutionalism in its theoretical framework. It aims to answer three central research questions:

1. How does GBV affect women's rise to leadership roles in particular sectors?
2. How does GBV impact women's ability to perform in and sustain leadership roles?
3. What strategies or mechanisms do women use to navigate or respond to GBV?

This report contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the intersection of GBV and women's leadership, particularly in Sri Lanka. While there is existing research on the prevalence of GBV, limited attention has been paid to how GBV affects women's leadership. Additionally, while there is quantitative data about GBV and women's leadership in Sri Lanka, in-depth qualitative studies are less

common. As quantitative data alone is insufficient to understand a social issue such as GBV, it is important that more in-depth studies are done to bring to light the experiences and narratives of survivors and victims. By filling these gaps, this study provides insights that can inform policy interventions and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting women's leadership.

Chapter 2

Context and Existing Evidence

2.1 Understanding GBV

Gender-Based Violence is a systematic violation of human rights that permeates both the private and public spheres. At its core, GBV is defined as violence directed at individuals based on their sex or gender identity, involving coercion, threats, and socio-economic pressures (UNHCR 2022). Recognized as a severe human rights violation and a critical health issue, GBV occurs in both private and public spheres, including the workplace (UNHCR 2026). While it disproportionately affects women, girls and LGBTIQ+ individuals, with global estimates indicating that one in three women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, it also impacts men and boys (UNHCR 2022).

The manifestation of GBV is multifaceted, occurring through several intersecting domains:

- Physical and Sexual Violence: Includes assault, non-consensual sexual acts, harassment, and exploitation (UNHCR 2022).
- Psychological and Emotional Abuse: Encompasses verbal abuse, humiliation, isolation, and the manipulation of individuals, often within intimate or professional environments (UNHCR 2026).
- Socio-economic Violence: Involves the denial of civil rights and exclusion from essential resources such as education, employment, and healthcare (UNHCR 2022).
- Domestic Abuse and Harmful Practices: Includes violence within the family unit and culturally specific practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and “honour crimes” (UNHCR 2026).

The consequences of GBV are profound, often resulting in long-term social and physical harm, and in the most extreme cases, can be fatal (UNHCR 2026).

In Sri Lanka, these global patterns of GBV are reflected in “a broader culture of sexual and gender-based violence,” the structural, cultural, and social roots of which have yet to be addressed (UN Sustainable Development Goals). Evidence of

this persistence is found across various sectors of society. In 2003, a study of the plantation sector in Hatton highlighted the staggering scale of the problem: 83% of the women surveyed had experienced GBV, primarily at home (67%), but also in the workplace (17%) (UNFPA 2020). Harassment also persists within training environments; a 2006 study of medical students found that 55.6% had experienced GBV while in university, with women bearing the brunt of these experiences at over 72.2% (UNFPA 2020). The economic dimensions of this violence are equally restrictive, with a 2013 UN multi-country study reporting that 18% of men admitted to using economic violence to control their partners' employment or finances.

Beyond the home and workplace, public spaces remain a site of significant risk; research shows that 90% of women in Sri Lanka have experienced sexual harassment while using public buses and trains (UNFPA 2017). Even as women enter the political sphere, they face distinct gendered barriers. A study of the 2018 local elections revealed that while both men and women faced political violence, women were targeted with sexual intimidation at higher rates (Bjarnegård, Håkansson, and Zetterberg 2020). These figures underscore a widespread landscape where GBV persists as a structural constraint across social, economic, and political domains.

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Sexual harassment is a significant barrier to women's participation in the workforce, restricting their career choices and discouraging them from pursuing leadership roles (UN Women 2021). Despite legal frameworks designed to prevent such misconduct, many workplaces still fail to provide safe environments, forcing women to navigate professional spaces with the added burden of potential harassment. This issue is particularly critical when examining GBV and its impact on women's leadership, as fear of harassment can deter women from entering certain industries, seeking promotions, or remaining in the workforce altogether.

A 2020–2022 study by (Stockman et al. 2022) provides critical insights into the prevalence and impact of workplace violence and harassment in Sri Lanka. Surveying 8% of the Sri Lankan workforce, the study found that harassment affected individuals across gender lines, often in ways that were underreported and poorly understood by management.

The findings were striking:

- 61% of employees (regardless of gender) reported experiencing some form of workplace violence or harassment, including bullying, sexual harassment, and online violence.
- Despite the high prevalence of sexual harassment and online violence, these issues were significantly underreported, with many employees acknowledging they knew others who had experienced harassment but had not spoken up. The study also revealed that managers were largely unaware of the extent of these problems, highlighting a major gap between employee experiences and organizational awareness.
- The economic impact of workplace violence and harassment was substantial. Across the nine participating companies, it was estimated to cost at least US$1.7 million annually due to productivity losses equivalent to nearly six working days per employee each year. This estimate excludes additional costs associated with overtime, staff turnover, and recruitment.

The connection between workplace harassment and women's employment choices is reinforced by a 2016 study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which examined factors affecting women's labor force participation in Sri Lanka. The study found that 60% of full-time women homemakers would seek employment if they were assured they would not face sexual harassment at work. Furthermore, within the workforce, the threat of harassment was a major reason for attrition, with 45% of public sector women employees and 68% of private sector women employees stating that they would leave their jobs if they were sexually harassed (International Labour Organization 2016). These findings suggest that workplace harassment is not only a gendered issue but also a significant economic concern, limiting women's ability to participate in and contribute to the workforce.

Although Sri Lanka is among the 140 countries with laws against workplace sexual harassment, legal frameworks alone are insufficient without proper enforcement and accountability mechanisms. International instruments such as the ILO Convention No. 190 (C190) on Violence and Harassment provide a strong foundation for legal protections, but many workplaces still lack effective systems for handling complaints. In the absence of confidential reporting mechanisms and clear consequences for perpetrators, survivors are often obliged to stay silent, leaving harassment unaddressed and workplaces unsafe. Strengthening

organizational policies, improving managerial awareness, and fostering cultures of accountability are essential to ensuring that women, and all employees, can work free from harassment (UN Women 2021).

2.2 Women's Leadership in Politics and Public Life Globally

Women's leadership in politics is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, yet gender parity in decision-making roles remains a distant goal. Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in leadership positions across all levels of governance. As of early 2024, only 25 countries had women serving as Heads of State or Government (World Economic Forum 2024). At the current pace, it will take an estimated 130 years to achieve gender equality in these highest positions of power (UN Women 2026, 2). Women hold just 22.9% of ministerial positions globally, with most of their portfolios focused on gender equality, family affairs, social development, and cultural sectors (UN Women 2026, 2). In legislative bodies, progress has been slow. Women occupy only 27.5% of parliamentary seats worldwide, and just seven countries have reached gender parity in their national legislatures (UN Women 2026, 2). While regions like Latin America and Europe have seen more progress, Northern Africa, Western Asia, and Central and Southern Asia still lag behind (UN Women 2026, 2).

Gender quotas have played a crucial role in improving women's representation in politics, especially where these policies are legally mandated (Shiran 2024). Research suggests that greater women's representation in political leadership can influence policy priorities, particularly in areas related to social welfare and public services. For example, studies from India indicate that women-led local councils prioritize essential services like drinking water projects (Cyrille 2025), while research from Norway links higher female representation to improved childcare services (Hessami and Fonseca 2020). Women in political leadership also tend to advocate for policies addressing gender-based violence, parental leave, and electoral reform. However, achieving balanced representation in politics still presents significant challenges, requiring sustained policy efforts and structural reforms (UN Women 2026). Recent Sri Lankan research suggests that while the introduction of the 25% local government quota substantially increased women's numerical representation, many women continued to encounter institutionalised

sexism, tokenism, exclusion from decision-making, and male-dominated party gatekeeping, illustrating that descriptive representation does not necessarily translate into substantive influence (Panditha 2026). Earlier research also identifies political parties as a key institutional barrier to women's political representation, noting that while nominations have increased over time, the major parties have shown only limited commitment to advancing women candidates (Kodikara 2009). According to findings by (Munasinghe and Ariyarathne 2019), political parties often responded to the quota requirement by recruiting women through existing local elite, kinship, caste, and class networks, demonstrating how established power structures continued to shape women's access to political office.

In public life, women's participation in leadership roles remains similarly limited. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) 2024, women make up 42% of the global workforce but only 31.7% of senior leadership positions (World Economic Forum 2024). While women hold nearly half of entry-level jobs, they occupy less than a quarter of the most senior executive (C-suite) positions (World Economic Forum 2024). Furthermore, the number of women hired into leadership roles has been declining, with women representing only 36.4% of senior leadership hires in early 2024, down from 37.5% in 2022 (World Economic Forum 2024).

Beyond political office, women's representation in leadership across public life also remains uneven. An article by (Duke 2023) highlights the decline in female leadership representation post-COVID. The pandemic disrupted workplaces worldwide, but gender disparities in leadership persisted. LinkedIn data used by the World Economic Forum shows that the proportion of women hired into senior leadership roles dropped globally, including in major economies such as the UK, US, Brazil, and India (Duke 2023). By early 2023, women held just 32% of leadership positions, the same level recorded during the peak of the pandemic in 2020 (World Economic Forum 2024). Prior to 2022, the hiring rate of women into leadership had been increasing by 1% annually since 2016, but the pandemic halted this progress (World Economic Forum 2024).

The technology, media, and professional services sectors experienced the most significant declines, with hiring rates falling by four percentage points compared to pre-pandemic projections (Duke 2023). This "drop to the top" trend is seen across all industries, where women make up a substantial share of entry-level positions

but struggle to advance into senior roles (Duke 2023). In female-dominated sectors like education and consumer services, women hold over half of entry-level jobs but significantly fewer leadership positions. For example, women occupy 60% of entry-level roles in education but only 39% of top leadership positions (Duke 2023).

In STEM fields, the gender gap is even more pronounced. Although more women are graduating with STEM degrees, their transition into the workforce is challenging. Data shows a seven-percentage-point drop between graduation and workforce entry, and women hold only 12% of C-suite (chief executive and other senior executive) positions in STEM industries. Given that STEM careers are among the fastest-growing and most resilient to economic downturns, increasing women's participation in these fields could help mitigate future economic challenges.

2.3 Women's Leadership in Politics and Public Life in Sri Lanka

Women's Leadership in Political Life

The reports from the Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) spanning from 2006 to 2025 offer important insights into the trajectory of women's leadership in Sri Lanka. Data relevant to women's political leadership has been summarized in the below table, and it reflects women's leadership in the political sphere, over the years (World Economic Forum 2026).

Table 1: Women's Participation in Leadership based on GGGR (2006-2024)

Year	Global Gender Gap Index (ranking)	Political empowerment (ranking)	Women in parliament %	Women in ministerial positions %
2025	130th (out of 148 countries)	137th	9.78	9.09
2024	122nd (out of 146 countries)	123rd	5.3	5
2023	115th (out of 146 countries)	106th	5.30	0
2022	110th (out of 146 countries)	93rd	5.30	3.70

2021	116th (out of 156 countries)	90th	5.4	3.7
2020	102nd (out of 153 countries)	73rd	5.3	6.7
2018	100th (out of 149 countries)	65th	5.80	4.30
2017	109th (out of 144 countries)	65th	5.80	4.30
2016	100th (out of 144 countries)	57th	6	7
2015	84th (out of 145 countries)	59th	5	7
2014	79th (out of 142 countries)	50th	6	3
2013	55th (out of 136 countries)	30th	6	-
2012	39th (out of 135 countries)	22nd	6	-
2011	31st (out of 135 countries)	7th	6	6
2010	16th (out of 134 countries)	6th	5	6
2009	16th (out of 134 countries)	6th	6	6
2008	12th (out of 130 countries)	5th	6	6
2007	15th (out of 128 countries)	7th	5	10
2006	13th (out of 115 countries)	7th	5	10

Source: Compiled by the author based on the Global Gender Gap Reports (World Economic Forum, 2006–2025).

Looking at the above table, it is evident that Sri Lanka's ranking on the Political Empowerment sub-index has declined substantially over the years. Women's representation in Parliament remained consistently low throughout most of the

period covered by the Global Gender Gap Reports, generally fluctuating between 5% and 6%. Women's representation in ministerial positions was also generally lower than women's representation in Parliament, particularly between 2021 and 2023. This suggests that women have remained underrepresented in executive political leadership despite their already limited parliamentary representation.

Despite the persistently low levels of women's political representation reflected in the table, the 2024 parliamentary election marked an important milestone in Sri Lankan politics, with 24 women being elected to Parliament (Manthri.lk 2025). In addition, Harini Amarasuriya became Sri Lanka's first female Prime Minister since 1994 after securing the second-highest number of preferential votes in the election. Nevertheless, women continue to be underrepresented in executive political leadership, with only two of the 21 cabinet ministers being women. Consequently, Sri Lanka ranked 161st globally for women's representation in parliament in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's April 2026 rankings (Office of the Cabinet of Ministers – Sri Lanka 2026; IPU Parline 2026). While these developments suggest renewed momentum for women's political participation, substantial challenges to achieving gender-balanced political leadership remain.

As shown in Table 1, Sri Lanka's ranking on the 'Political empowerment' sub-index declined sharply from 7th place in 2006 to 123rd place in 2024, despite relatively modest changes in the underlying indicators of women's political representation over parts of this period. To understand this sharp decline in the 'Political empowerment' sub-index, it is useful to consider a paper by (Verité Research 2021) on the same topic. According to this paper, the drastic drop in Sri Lanka's ranking (in both the GGGI and the 'Political empowerment' sub-index) is partly due to a technicality in the calculation method, which previously inflated its scores, and adjusting for this reveals that Sri Lanka's gender gap has remained consistently low over the years rather than worsening drastically. In the GGGI Sri Lanka ranked 13th out of 115 countries in 2006, ahead of nations like Australia and Singapore. However, by 2019/20, its ranking had fallen to 102nd among 153 countries - marking the steepest decline globally since the index's inception. The sharp decline in Sri Lanka's GGGI score is primarily due to the Political Empowerment Sub-index, which measures:

1. Female representation in parliament
2. Female representation in ministerial roles
3. Years with a female head of state

The last indicator, years with a female head of state, had previously boosted Sri Lanka's score due to former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's tenure. However, as her term aged out of the 50-year calculation window after 2010, Sri Lanka's score dropped significantly. Verité Research recalculated Sri Lanka's GGGI score by removing the head-of-state indicator's impact, and the results indicate that Sri Lanka's gender gap has remained relatively unchanged since 2006, rather than worsening. The country has therefore made little progress in reducing gender disparities across other indicators.

Women's Leadership in Public Life

The GGGR spanning from 2006 to 2024 also offers critical insights into women's leadership in public life in Sri Lanka. Data from the reports relevant to women's leadership in public life have been summarized in Table 2 and Table 3, and sheds light on the evolution of women's representation in leadership roles, particularly in the business spheres, and contributes to understanding the progress, and setbacks, over the years (World Economic Forum 2026).

Table 2: Advancement of Women to Leadership Roles and Women's Leadership in Business (2006-2024)

Year	Advancement of women to leadership roles	Ability of women to rise to positions of leadership	Ability of women to rise to positions of enterprise leadership	Firms with female majority ownership, % firms	Firms with female co-owners (value)	Firms whose ownership includes women (female-over-male ratio)	Firms with female top managers, % firms	Firms with female top managers (value)	Firms whose top management includes women (female-over-male ratio)
2024	4.68	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2023	4.71	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2022	4.62	-	-	-	-	-	8.80%	-	-
2021	4.69	-	-	26.1%	-	-	8.8%	-	-
2020	4.62	-	-	-	-	-	8.8%	-	-
2018	0.61*	-	-	-	0.35	-	-	0.10	-
2017	0.61*	-	-	-	0.35	-	-	0.10	-
2016	-	0.69*	-	-	-	26.1	-	-	8.8
2015	-	5.1	-	26%	-	-	9%	-	-
2014	-	-	5.7	26%	-	-	9%	-	-
2013	-	-	5	26%	-	-	9%	-	-
2012	-	-	5.38	-	-	-	-	-	-
2011	-	-	5.31	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	-	5.2	-	-	-	-	-	-
2009	-	-	3.78	-	-	-	-	-	-
2008	-	-	5.49	-	-	-	-	-	-
2007	-	-	5.33	-	-	-	-	-	-
2006	-	-	4.87	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: Compiled by the author based on the Global Gender Gap Reports (World Economic Forum, 2006–2024).

Table 3: Women's Leadership in the Public and the Business Sphere (2006-2024)

Year	Global Gender Gap Index (ranking)	Economic participation and opportunity (ranking)	Legislators, senior officials and managers, %	Professional and technical workers, %
2024	122nd (out of 146 countries)	127th	22.32	49.18
2023	115th (out of 146 countries)	124th	27.01	47.5
2022	110th (out of 146 countries)	122nd	27.19	47.7
2021	116th (out of 156 countries)	132th	26	47.9
2020	102nd (out of 153 countries)	126th	28.4	49
2018	100th (out of 149 countries)	125th	27.6	49
2017	109th (out of 144 countries)	123rd	24.8	49.3
2016	100th (out of 144 countries)	124th	25	49
2015	84th (out of 145 countries)	120th	24	51
2014	79th (out of 142 countries)	109th	28	47
2013	55th (out of 136 countries)	109th	24	48
2012	39th (out of 135 countries)	105th	24	47
2011	31st (out of 135 countries)	102nd	24	47
2010	16th (out of 134 countries)	89th	24	47
2009	16th (out of 134 countries)	99th	24	46
2008	12th (out of 130 countries)	99th	22	47
2007	15th (out of 128 countries)	94th	21	46
2006	13th (out of 115 countries)	84th	21	46

Source: Compiled by the author based on the Global Gender Gap Reports (World Economic Forum, 2006–2024).

The first section of Table 1 focuses on the advancement of women to leadership positions. This data has been derived from responses by survey participants to a question on, to what extent they think companies in Sri Lanka provide women with the same opportunities as men to rise to positions of leadership. The GGGRs present this indicator using different reporting scales across editions. That is, the responses for all years except for the period from 2016-2018 were recorded on a scale of 1-7, and in 2016, 2017 and 2018 answers were recorded on a scale of 0-1. Consequently, comparisons in this section can be made only across years that use the same measurement scale. Therefore, looking at the data which was recorded on a scale of 1-7, it is clear that in the decade between 2014 and 2024, the value has dropped quite significantly from 5.7 to 4.68, marking a concerning trend in gender equity in leadership roles.

Additionally, the 2nd and 3rd sections of Table 1, provide data on the presence of women in top leadership roles within businesses. These figures highlight the percentage of firms with female-majority ownership, the proportion of firms with female co-owners, and the percentage of firms with female top managers. However, data for these indicators have not been reported consistently enough, to make observations or derive trends.

Table 3 shows Sri Lanka's rankings over the years in the GGGR, and the percentage of women in two different areas. The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) given in the 2nd column, ranks countries based on their gender equality across various sectors, and provides context to the discussion of women's leadership in Sri Lanka. Reflecting ongoing challenges in gender equality, in 2024, Sri Lanka ranked 122nd globally in the GGGI, continuing a downward trend that had started a few years before that.

Similarly, in the 'Economic participation and opportunity' ranking which provides insights into women's participation in public life, Sri Lanka has ranked consistently low with the most recent downward trend being seen from 2022 to 2024. The data on women in the roles of legislators, senior officials and managers paints a similarly negative picture. Here it is seen that there's been a very slow growth in this number from 2006 to 2023 with some occasional dips, but that the largest drop (of almost 5 percentage points) is seen from 2023 to 2024. In comparison, the number of women in professional and technical roles presents a slightly more positive picture, with a slow but mostly steady growth seen in the numbers over the years.

Another useful indicator of women's leadership in the workplace is the proportion of women in managerial positions. The data presented in Table 4 are drawn from the United Nations Sri Lanka SDG Data Portal (2025).

Table 4: Percentage of Women in Managerial and Professional Roles in Sri Lanka (2016-2021)

Year	%
2016	25.6
2017	23.2
2018	22.5
2019	25.6
2020	26.1
2021	21.8

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the United Nations Sri Lanka SDG Data Portal (2025), Indicator 5.5.2: Proportion of women in managerial positions.

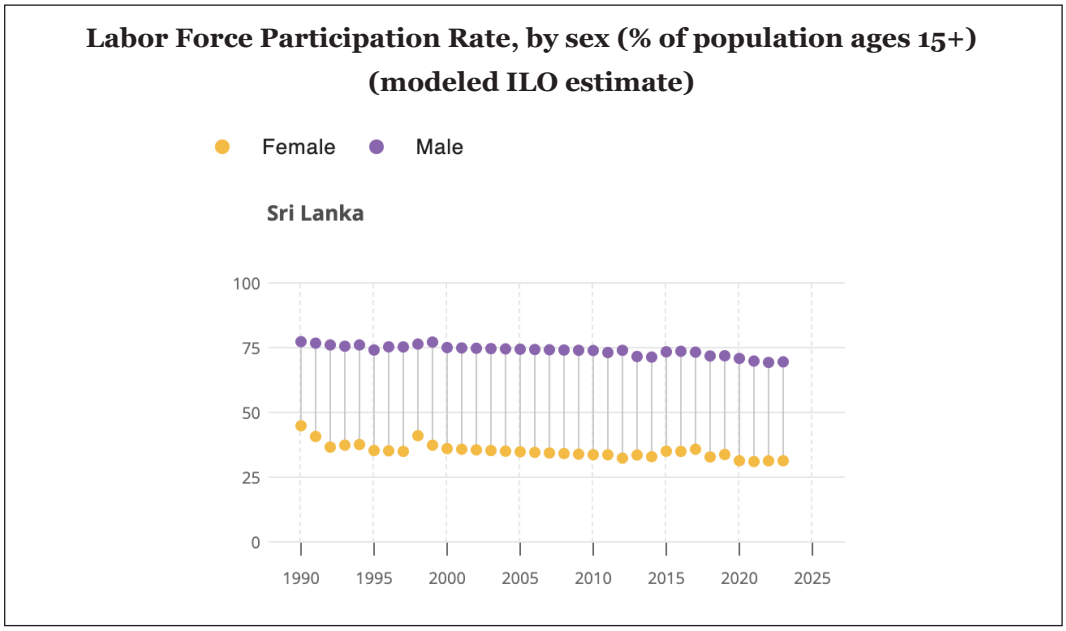
As seen above, from 2016 to 2020 there has been a slow but steady growth in the share of women in the upper echelons of business. However, this number has dropped by 4.3 percentage points from 2020 to 2021.

In summary, while minor and inconsistent strides have been made in women's leadership roles in both business and politics in Sri Lanka, many challenges remain. The existing literature and data underscore the persistent gender gaps in women's leadership and labor force participation.

Labor Force Participation (LFP)

Women's participation in the labour force is a critical metric for understanding their role in public life. In Sri Lanka, only around one in three women participates in the labour force, making Sri Lanka's female Labour Force Participation (LFP) one of the lowest in South Asia (ADB 2026). In 2023, the female LFP was only 31.6%, compared with 69.8% for men (World Bank 2025). This represents a significant gender gap and a historical trend, with female LFP trailing behind male participation by approximately 32 to 41 percentage points over the years.

Figure 1: Female Labor Force Participation Rate in Sri Lanka (1990-2023)



Source: World Bank

Figure 1 shows that both male and female LFP rates declined between 1990 and 2023. While the overall downward trend appears similar for both groups, the graph alone does not capture differences in the magnitude of these annual changes. Examining the year-on-year changes in labour force participation rates, as shown in Table 5, provides a more detailed understanding of how male and female labour force participation evolved over time.

As shown in Table 5, in years where both male and female LFP rates declined relative to the previous year, the decline in the female LFP rate was larger than that of the male rate in all but three years (2000, 2011 and 2021).

In other words a look at the year-on-year changes in LFP rates reveals a gender disparity. In years where both male and female rates have dropped, the decline in the female rate is more pronounced, signaling that gender-specific factors may be at play.

Table 5: Changes in Female and Male Labor Force Participation Rate in Sri Lanka (1990-2023)

Year	Female	Difference in % points compared to previous year	Male	Difference in % points compared to previous year
1990	45.1%	-	77.6%	-
1991	41.0%	4.1%	77.1%	0.5%
1992	36.9%	4.1%	76.4%	0.7%
1993	37.7%	-0.8%	75.9%	0.5%
1994	37.9%	-0.2%	76.4%	-0.5%
1995	35.6%	2.3%	74.4%	2.0%
1996	35.5%	0.1%	75.6%	-1.2%
1997	35.3%	0.2%	75.6%	0.0%
1998	41.3%	-6.0%	76.7%	-1.1%
1999	37.5%	3.8%	77.5%	-0.8%
2000	36.3%	1.2%	75.4%	2.1%
2001	36.1%	0.2%	75.2%	0.2%
2002	35.8%	0.3%	75.1%	0.1%
2003	35.6%	0.2%	75.0%	0.1%
2004	35.4%	0.2%	74.8%	0.2%
2005	35.1%	0.3%	74.7%	0.1%
2006	34.9%	0.2%	74.6%	0.1%
2007	34.6%	0.3%	74.5%	0.1%
2008	34.4%	0.2%	74.4%	0.1%
2009	34.2%	0.2%	74.3%	0.1%
2010	34.0%	0.2%	74.2%	0.1%
2011	33.9%	0.1%	73.4%	0.8%
2012	32.6%	1.3%	74.3%	-0.9%
2013	33.9%	-1.3%	71.9%	2.4%
2014	33.2%	0.7%	71.7%	0.2%
2015	35.3%	-2.1%	73.7%	-2.0%
2016	35.3%	0.0%	73.9%	-0.2%
2017	36.1%	-0.8%	73.6%	0.3%
2018	33.1%	3.0%	72.1%	1.5%
2019	34.1%	-1.0%	72.2%	-0.1%
2020	31.7%	2.4%	71.1%	1.1%
2021	31.3%	0.4%	70.1%	1.0%
2022	31.6%	-0.3%	69.6%	0.5%
2023	31.6%	0.0%	69.8%	-0.2%

Source: Compiled by author based on data from World Bank

2.4 GBV and Women's Leadership

GBV and Women's Leadership in Public Life:

In the broader world of work, the ILO Convention No. 190, adopted in 2019, established new international standards and a unified framework to prevent, address, and eliminate violence and harassment in the workplace, including gender-based violence. The Convention acknowledges that women are particularly vulnerable to violence and harassment in the world of work and urges Member States to implement measures that mitigate this vulnerability. This framework has particular relevance to Sri Lanka, which ratified ILO Convention No. 190 on 16 April 2026, signalling a commitment to strengthening legal and institutional protections against violence and harassment in the world of work. The Convention will enter into force for Sri Lanka on 16 April 2027. It also emphasizes the need to tackle "the related underlying causes, such as multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, unequal gender-based power relations, gender stereotypes, and gender, social and cultural norms that support violence and harassment." Therefore, it highlights the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities - such as ethnicity, religion, class, caste, sexuality and socio-economic background - and calls for addressing the root causes such as unequal power relations and harmful gender norms.

Further, a 2015 report on women's voice and leadership in decision making, states that the assumption that women being in a position of leadership or having a voice means that they have actual influence does not always hold (Domingo et al. 2015). The authors go on to explain that the "factors that influence this relationship [between women's leadership/voice and actual influence] in practice depend on the environment in which women's voice takes place." This particular report focuses on women's leadership in spheres such as political participation, social activism and economic empowerment, as opposed to the current study which looks at women's leadership in various professional sectors (with politics being one). However, the idea that a woman's actual influence depends on the environment in which her leadership takes place, can be applied to the current study as well. This perspective directly informs the second sub-research question of the current study - "How does GBV impact women's ability to perform in and sustain leadership roles in their respective sectors?".

GBV and Women's Leadership in Political Life:

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) calls sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament one of the most significant barriers to achieving gender equality in politics (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). While political violence affects both men and women, violence directed at women because of their gender constitutes GBV. It is used to discourage women's political participation, restrict their rights, and undermine their political agency. As (Krook 2020) (as cited by IPU in 2025) argues, violence against women serves to normalize and legitimize their exclusion from political life.

One of the most prominent and rapidly growing forms of this is online gender-based violence (OGBV). A 2025 study by the IPU based on interviews with 150 women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 33 countries, highlights an alarming rise in OGBV. It found that 60% of women parliamentarians have experienced hate speech, disinformation, image-based abuse, or doxing, and that the majority of online attacks (85%) and threats (59%) against women MPs come from the public - revealing the deeply embedded patriarchal norms in society and their manifestation through digital platforms.

Sri Lankan women politicians have also been targets of OGBV, with smear campaigns, character assassinations, and threats of sexual violence used to undermine their credibility (Daily FT 2025). This aligns closely with the study's first sub-research question on the forms of GBV faced by women in leadership.

2.5 Navigating and Resisting GBV

Despite these challenges, women are not passive recipients of violence. They deploy a range of strategies to navigate, resist, and survive GBV in leadership spaces. Research conducted in Western Uganda with 26 self-help groups (involving a joint microfinance and coffee co-operative) found that group membership played a pivotal role in enabling women to challenge GBV (Domingo et al. 2015). Women who belonged to collectives or leadership bodies felt a greater sense of empowerment and capacity to resist abuse.

Applying this lens to the current study, women in leadership positions, whether in politics, corporate sectors, or government institutions, can be understood

as embedded within distinct "membership structures", which may afford them different levels of exposure to GBV, as well as varying levels of ability to cope with or resist GBV. This is supported by findings from a World Bank background paper by (Evans and Nambiar 2013) on collective action and women's agency, which highlights that collective action has historically been a powerful force for women's empowerment, from suffrage movements to modern-day campaigns for legal reforms and against violence. (Evans and Nambiar 2013) identify that the links between agency and collective action exist at several levels. Two of the several levels the authors mention are: (1) collective efforts can expand opportunities and enhance women's decision-making power; (2) collective efforts can explicitly challenge the social norms and behaviours that constrain women's agency. As examples, (Evans and Nambiar 2013) cite how women workers mobilise against workplace violence, how migrant workers associate to improve working conditions, and how women's groups lobby for political representation and leverage their strength as a voting bloc. The authors go on to say that the conditions under which collective action succeeds are deeply contextual - they depend on the local institutional and incentive environments, the pre-existing levels of social inequality and cohesion, and prior experiences of organising. The gendered nature of local norms and rules can also shape whether and how women are able to participate in or benefit from collective efforts. It is important to note that social stratification can be reproduced within community groups themselves, favouring women who are already relatively privileged and marginalising others.

These ideas connect to the third sub-question of the study, which looks at the mechanisms and strategies women employ to respond to GBV. Are these responses individual or collective? How do they vary based on sector or socio-political context? Do they reproduce power hierarchies or challenge them?

Chapter 3

Methodology and Frameworks

3.1 Research Approach

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach to explore the nuanced and personal experiences of women across various sectors who have encountered GBV. Rather than focusing on statistical trends, the study seeks to understand how violence, and the threat of it, affects women's ability to assume, navigate, and sustain leadership roles. This approach prioritizes participants' lived experiences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the structural and personal barriers created by GBV within professional and public life.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Data were primarily collected through 35 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing participants to describe their experiences of leadership and gender-based violence in detail.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling approach suited to identifying individuals with experiences and knowledge relevant to the research questions. Selection therefore prioritised women who could speak to experiences of leadership and GBV, while also seeking diversity across professional sectors, geographic locations, and ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of Sri Lanka's population.

Participants represented six sectors: the corporate sector (finance, banking, hospitality, and manufacturing), education (public and private schools and universities), sports, government, politics (local and provincial government), and the informal private sector (small and medium enterprises and agriculture). The sample included both women currently active in their careers and those who had retired or opted to leave their professions.

Geographic diversity was also considered in participant recruitment, with interviews conducted with women from 10 districts across Sri Lanka. Interviews were conducted in each participant's preferred language - Sinhala, Tamil, or English

- to facilitate participation and allow participants to describe their experiences in the language in which they were most comfortable. The distribution of participants by district and interview language is presented in Table 6.

Ethnic diversity was sought within the sample to capture experiences across different social contexts, although participants were not recruited according to population-proportionate ethnic quotas and the study was not designed as a comparative analysis of ethnic groups. Of the 35 participants, 19 (54.3%) were Sinhala, 12 (34.3%) were Tamil, and four (11.4%) were Muslim. The distribution of participants by sector and ethnicity is presented in Table 7.

Finally, where ethnicity, religion, caste, or other intersecting identities emerged through participants' accounts as factors shaping their experiences of GBV and leadership, these were incorporated into the thematic analysis. These intersectional dimensions are examined in Chapter 7.

Table 6: Distribution of Participants by District and Interview Language

District	Sinhala	Tamil	English	Total
Anuradhapura	1	0	0	1
Batticaloa	0	3	0	3
Colombo	3	1	5	9
Galle	1	0	0	1
Gampaha	4	0	0	4
Jaffna	0	4	0	4
Kandy	5	0	0	5
Matara	1	0	0	1
Puttalam	5	0	0	5
Trincomalee	0	2	0	2
Total	**20**	**10**	**5**	**35**

Table 7: Distribution of Participants by Sector and Ethnicity

Sector	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim	Total
Corporate	3	1	0	4
Education	4	5	0	9
Government Sector	3	0	1	4
Sports	1	2	0	3
Politics	5	1	2	8
Informal Private Sector	3	3	1	7
Total	**19**	**12**	**4**	**35**

Complementing these narratives, four Key Informant Interviews were conducted with experts working across law, academia, research, arts, activism and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with some informants having experience in multiple fields. These interviews provided broader systemic context regarding the institutional drivers of GBV and the legal frameworks surrounding women's leadership in Sri Lanka.

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of discussing gender-based violence, the study adhered to strict ethical protocols to ensure the safety and dignity of all participants. The research followed the 'Code of Research Ethics' established by ICES, and formal ethical clearance was obtained from an Ethics Review Committee comprising three senior researchers appointed by ICES.

A core pillar of the ethical framework was informed consent. All participants were fully briefed on the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence; formal consent was documented through signed forms. To maintain confidentiality, all data was anonymized. Identifying information was removed and replaced with codes to protect the identities of the women and their associated institutions.

Furthermore, the potential for psychological distress during the interviewing process was recognized. To mitigate this, all respondents were provided with

information regarding professional support services should they require assistance during or after their participation and interviews were conducted in environments where participants felt secure.

3.4 Limitations of the Study

The final sample size was influenced by the availability and willingness of participants to discuss sensitive topics, as well as logistical and time constraints. Although the research aimed for diversity, it does not claim exact proportional representation across all ethnicities, sectors and geographic locations.

Notably, while efforts were made to be inclusive, no trans women were included in the final sample. Additionally, the scope of this study is focused exclusively on the experiences of women; it does not attempt a comparative analysis with the experiences of men, who also encounter forms of violence, especially when they do not conform to normative standards of masculinity.

3.5 Theoretical Framework

This section explains the various theories and theoretical constructs that have been used in this study to interpret how GBV shapes women's leadership. This study is grounded in:

1) Feminist Institutionalism Theory
2) 'Feminist knowledges' of GBV as outlined by (Campbell 2022).

According to the Feminism and Institutionalism International Network (FIIN), Feminist Institutionalism uses a new institutionalist lens within feminist research to examine how institutions are shaped by gender. It focuses on uncovering gender bias and highlights how both formal rules and informal practices, deeply rooted and sustained over time, are inherently gendered. It can be used to gain insights into how institutions are gendered, the significance of informal practices, and inequalities of power in institutions.

According to (Holmes 2020) Feminist Institutionalism is a body of theory that seeks to understand and explain how power is distributed within and across institutions, emphasising gender as a primary unit of analysis. It builds upon

New Institutionalism by incorporating gender into institutional-level analyses, examining how seemingly neutral structures, rules, norms, and practices are gendered and produce gendered effects. Scholars of Feminist Institutionalism argue that institutions are not static but 'dynamic entities that constrain or enable the behaviour of social actors'. Formal and informal rules within institutions prescribe acceptable gendered behaviours and contribute to the reproduction of broader social and political gender expectations. As a political project, Feminist Institutionalism aims to disrupt existing power settlements within institutions and facilitate change by identifying and challenging institutional barriers that maintain gender inequalities and other forms of discrimination. Feminist Institutionalists analyse women's inclusion and exclusion, their experiences within institutions, and the effectiveness of gender equality reforms in redistributing power. Feminist Institutionalism also considers how intersecting social divisions like race and class interact with gender within institutions.

Feminist Institutionalism has several key components that help us understand how gender and power operate within institutions. Firstly, it emphasises gender as a primary lens through which to analyse institutions. It argues that institutions, which include formal structures like laws and organisations as well as informal norms and practices, are not gender-neutral. Instead, they are shaped by and perpetuate gendered power dynamics. In the context of this study, this perspective enables an examination of how leadership structures, political institutions, and workplaces in Sri Lanka are often embedded within patriarchal norms that tolerate, normalise, or fail to adequately address GBV, thereby reproducing gendered exclusions rather than functioning as neutral spaces.

Secondly, it specifically focuses on how the processes by which institutions maintain continuity and experience change are gendered and produce different effects for men and women. It looks at how seemingly neutral rules can have gendered consequences. This study draws on this principle to investigate how such institutional arrangements sustain unequal access to leadership through both subtle and overt forms of GBV, reinforcing barriers to women's participation and advancement.

Thirdly, Feminist Institutionalism views institutions as dynamic and not static entities. They are not fixed 'things' but are constantly evolving and can be

influenced and altered by social actors working both within and outside them. This highlights the role of agency in shaping institutional change. In this study, women are not positioned solely as subjects constrained by institutional structures, but also as actors who navigate, resist, and challenge these structures. By documenting women's experiences of GBV and their responses to it, the research foregrounds the ways in which individuals and collective networks influence institutional practices and advocate for more equitable environments.

Fourthly, a central focus of Feminist Institutionalism is understanding how power is distributed within and across institutions. It seeks to identify the institutional barriers that maintain gender inequalities and other forms of discrimination. This includes examining women's inclusion and exclusion from institutions, their experiences within them, and the effectiveness of gender equality reforms in shifting power dynamics. This study looks at how power operates in leadership and public institutions to exclude or marginalise women, often through the weaponisation of GBV.

Finally, it recognises that gender intersects with other social divisions such as race, class, sexuality, age, and ability. It considers how these intersecting identities shape individuals' experiences within institutions and how institutions can constrain or enable different groups in complex ways. This study aimed to involve women from diverse demographic backgrounds, and the way in which their experiences of GBV and leadership are shaped by multiple and intersecting identities is explored in Chapter 7.

Broadly, Feminist Institutionalism is used as part of the theoretical framework for this study because, as (Mackay et al 2010) argue, Feminist Institutionalism holds significant potential to deepen our understanding of institutional dynamics, gendered power relations, and the reproduction of gender inequalities within political life. This aligns closely with the focus of this study, which brings together key concepts such as gender, power, inequality and institutions. Furthermore, as previously discussed, Feminist Institutionalism is particularly valuable for examining women's experiences within institutions.

While the above theory of Feminist Institutionalism gives this study a grounding in analysing the research problem with a focus on institutions, it does not give enough emphasis to the problem of violence itself which is a key focus of the

study. To fill this gap, this study is also grounded in a combination of feminist perspectives on violence. While it does not pose a single theory, a paper titled 'On Violence as a Feminist Problem' by (Campbell 2022) has been used for this purpose. It was used as it explores contemporary feminist understandings and approaches to GBV, examining their strengths and limitations in developing clear conceptual frameworks that can support meaningful and effective responses to GBV. Accordingly, the author summarises the work of other scholars and writes that according to them, framing women's experiences of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) through a feminist lens was a political act that reshaped how these forms of violence are understood, that a key success of feminist theory and activism has been redefining SGBV as a form of political violence, and that the definition of "violence" within feminist thought remains contested. They go on to write that feminist approaches to SGBV are built on four key elements.

Central to these four elements is the importance of women's lived experiences in understanding violence. This study places these experiences at the core of its analysis by directly engaging with women and documenting their accounts of GBV, ensuring that their voices shape the research. These experiences are examined across three interrelated dimensions. First, at the empirical level, the study captures the phenomenological experience of GBV, documenting violence from the standpoint of the women who have endured it. Second, at the analytical level, it situates these individual experiences within a broader social framework, identifying patterns across sectors, ethnicities, and geographic locations to understand GBV as a structural phenomenon rather than a series of isolated incidents. Third, at the political level, these experiences are interpreted in relation to unequal gender power relations, with the findings framed within the broader context of systemic gender hierarchies that position GBV as a barrier to women's leadership.

Feminist approaches also emphasise that GBV constitutes a distinct form of violence, even though its definition and scope remain fluid and contested. It encompasses a wide range of acts, practices, and power dynamics that inflict harm, including not only physical force but also symbolic violence and coercion. Similarly, recognizing GBV as a structural and systemic issue, rather than isolated incidents, helps this study examine the broader patterns of discrimination and oppression that limit women's leadership opportunities.

Another important element is the framing of GBV as a continuum of violence that spans across time and space, existing in both peace and conflict settings. While this study does not specifically focus on conflict-related violence, this conceptualisation remains relevant in understanding how everyday forms of GBV are embedded within social and institutional contexts, shaping ongoing gendered barriers to leadership.

Finally, feminist perspectives understand GBV as a manifestation of unequal gender hierarchies. These hierarchies are reinforced through heteronormative norms and binary gender structures that sustain power imbalances and perpetuate violence. This study draws on this perspective to examine how deeply embedded patriarchal power structures constrain women's leadership. By linking GBV to these structural inequalities, the research highlights how systemic power relations restrict women's ability to enter, sustain, and succeed in leadership positions.

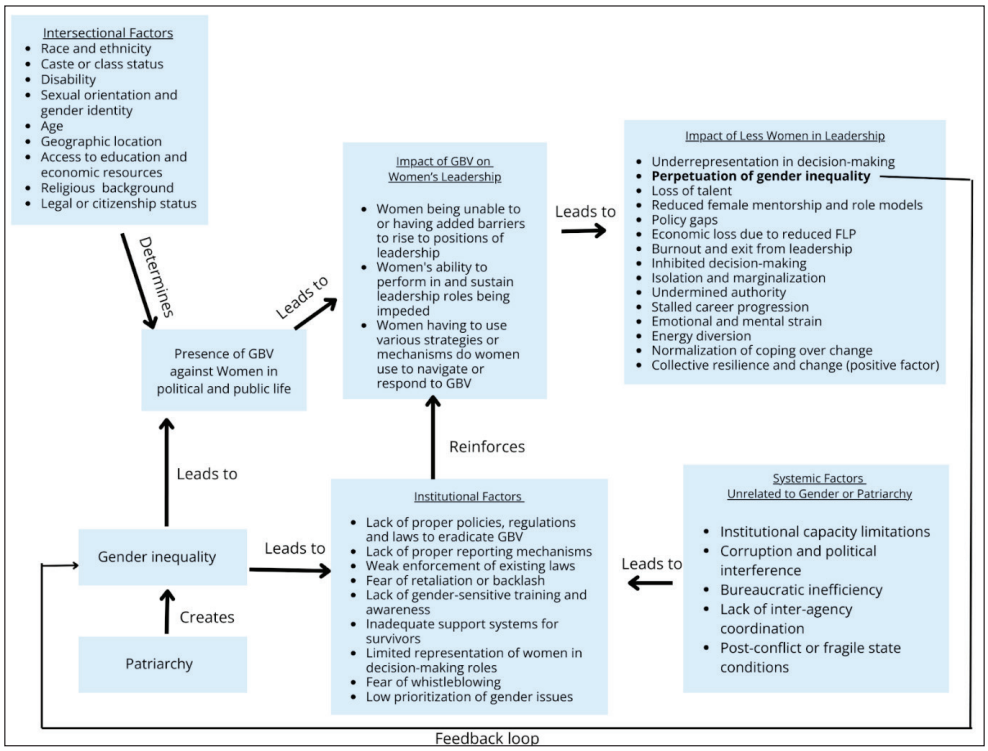
In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this study brings together Feminist Institutionalism and feminist perspectives on GBV to provide a lens through which to examine the relationship between GBV and women's leadership. Feminist Institutionalism offers insights into how gendered power dynamics are embedded within political and institutional structures, shaping women's access to and experiences of leadership. However, to more directly engage with the problem of violence, which is central to this study, feminist knowledges of GBV, particularly as outlined by (Campbell 2022), are also incorporated.

3.6 Conceptual Framework

Building on the theoretical foundations of Feminist Institutionalism and intersectional feminist analysis, this study develops a conceptual framework to understand how structural gendered power relations (including GBV) shape women's leadership. As illustrated in Figure 2, patriarchy and gender inequality are positioned as root causes that enable and normalize GBV against women. The impact and exposure to GBV are further shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, class, ability, and sexuality. GBV, in turn, acts as a significant barrier to women entering and sustaining leadership roles, ultimately perpetuating gender inequality, contributing to the continued underrepresentation of women in decision-making spaces. The framework also highlights how gender inequality,

along with non-gender-related institutional gaps, contributes to weak or absent policies, mechanisms, and protections against GBV. These institutional failures reinforce the effects of GBV and further entrench systemic gendered violence. In summary, the conceptual framework as seen in Figure 2 offers a way to understand the layered nature of the problem and guides the analytical approach of this study.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



Source: Created by the Researcher

Chapter 4

Gender Inequality and Structural Barriers to Leadership

Structural gender inequality in Sri Lanka operates through interconnected ideological, material, institutional, and social mechanisms that shape women's leadership trajectories even before explicit forms of GBV occur (Perera, Ganeshan, and Belitski 2021) (Herath 2015). These barriers are embedded not only in social expectations but also in institutional practices that condition women's participation on their ability to conform to gendered norms (Perera, Ganeshan, and Belitski 2021) (Herath 2015).

The fourth chapter of this report examines four distinct but reinforcing dimensions of this process. First, it explores the gendered ideologies of leadership, where social and cultural norms define leadership as a male domain and position women within domestic or "supportive" roles. Second, it analyses the material constraints created by the care economy, showing how unpaid domestic labour produces time poverty that limits women's professional mobility and decision-making capacity. Third, it examines how institutions reproduce gender inequality, through biased recruitment practices, exclusion from informal power networks, and structural barriers to promotion. Finally, it considers the social regulation of women's behaviour, where cultural policing and reputational control act as enforcement mechanisms that discipline women who deviate from expected gender roles. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that women's underrepresentation in leadership is structurally produced and maintained, and not incidental.

4.1 Gendered Ideologies of Leadership

Leadership in Sri Lanka is shaped by long-standing gendered ideologies that position men in the public sphere and women in the private sphere, particularly within caregiving and domestic roles. These divisions are rooted in historical processes that have structured gendered expectations over time.

As (De Alwis 1997) explains, colonial and missionary interventions in Sri Lanka helped institutionalise a framework of "separate spheres," where women were increasingly relegated to the home while men occupied the public world. She notes:

> *"Similarly, while the missionaries exerted themselves in educating and 'elevating' the position of the native woman in Sinhalese and Tamil society, they also succeeded in introducing another formulation of patriarchy that promoted a conception of 'separate spheres' which relegated the woman to the home and man to the world." (De Alwis, pp. 78–79)*

This separation was reinforced through missionary practices that positioned women as supportive figures rather than independent actors. De Alwis further describes how women were constructed as auxiliary contributors to male work, particularly within the household and moral sphere:

> *"It is this notion of 'separate spheres' of different but complementary gender roles, which underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions that ranged from a sexual division of labour to a sexual division of economic and political rights in nineteenth century Euro-America… The articulation of separate spheres in the colonies was epitomised by the missionary and his wife who replicated such a worldview…" (De Alwis, pp. 73–74)*

This ideology was later reinforced within nationalist movements, where women were positioned as symbolic carriers of culture, morality, and tradition, while men engaged in political and public struggle:

> *"…one of the predominant nationalist response and resistance to British colonialism in Ceylon took the form of a gendered separation of spheres; a feminized 'private' and a masculinized 'public'. The Ceylonese nationalists.. attempted to protect the distinctive spiritual and cultural essences of Ceylonese 'traditions', which they believed could be contained and nurtured within the 'home' by the women while they waged the battle for Independence on the treacherous terrain of the profane, materialist, 'world'." (De Alwis, pp. 38–39)*

Within this framing, women's identities became closely tied to motherhood, domesticity, and moral guardianship; while leadership was associated with authority, rationality, and public engagement - traits culturally constructed as

masculine. This ideological separation continues into contemporary society, where paternalistic norms still shape perceptions of women's autonomy.

(Satkunanathan 2020) notes that although women's equality is often acknowledged in principle, in practice women are still treated as needing protection and guidance:

> *"We pay lip service to women's equality but treat women in a paternalistic way, as if they don't know what is good for them."*

Such narratives reinforce the idea that leadership is inherently masculine, while women remain positioned as dependent or secondary actors within institutional and social hierarchies.

(Kray et al. 2025) provide a useful psychological explanation for how these gendered ideologies become embedded in leadership evaluation. They argue that leadership perceptions are shaped by the stereotype that men are more associated with agency, while women are more associated with communion. Because "stereotypes of agency and masculinity align more closely with prototypical leader stereotypes than stereotypes of communality and femininity," women are more likely to be overlooked for leadership, while men are advantaged by the perceived overlap between masculinity and leadership. The authors explain that "stereotypes function as cognitive heuristics in leadership fit judgments," meaning that even where there is no explicit intent to discriminate, women may still be judged as less naturally suited to leadership roles.

Empirical research in Sri Lanka consistently reflects how these gendered ideologies translate into workplace hierarchies and organisational practices. The (ILO 2016), in their study on women's labour force participation, found that despite high female participation in industries such as apparel and confectionery, women are largely concentrated in lower-level roles such as production line or machine operators, with very few in managerial positions. The study highlights perceptions that women are "too emotional" or "not decisive enough to make decisions quickly," leading to their exclusion from leadership pipelines. Additionally, there is a belief that women are unable to supervise male workers, even in contexts where men are a minority. This reinforces a broader ideology that women may function effectively in supportive or operational roles, but are not considered "suitable for management roles."

Similar patterns are observed across sectors where women are framed as supportive contributors rather than leaders. As (Satkunanathan 2020) notes in politics, women often play key roles in mobilisation and campaigning but are excluded from decision-making structures or not considered as potential candidates. This reflects a structural positioning of women as "helpers" rather than decision-makers, where their labour is essential but not legitimised as leaders.

(Wickramasinghe and Jayathilaka 2006) further highlight a double "jeopardy" faced by women workers. Women are excluded from promotion both because they are perceived to lack desirable leadership traits and because their effectiveness in existing roles makes them difficult to replace. Here, a woman's excellence in a supportive role is used as an ideological justification to keep her there, while effectively prioritizing the "support" function over her leadership potential.

The findings from the current study also reflect the broader ideological patterns identified in the literature, demonstrating that gendered constructions of leadership are not abstract norms but actively shape how institutions accommodate women's leadership, how society responds to the authority of women leaders, and how women understand their own leadership aspirations and trajectories. Across sectors, participants consistently described a persistent societal belief that leadership is inherently masculine. This belief operates both externally, through discrimination and exclusion, and internally, shaping women's own perceptions of what is appropriate or achievable. One respondent noted that:

> *"There is still a belief in society that some jobs can only be done effectively by men… Even when we graduate with First-Class results, those high positions are often given to men". - BCO*[1]

At the level of the workplace, these beliefs translate into resistance to women's authority, particularly in male-dominated sectors (Desai and D'souza 2023) (Dunavölgyi 2016). The same respondent as above[2] who runs a business in the construction field noted that "many [lower level workers] do not like being supervised by women", and attributed this to "social and cultural upbringing".

1 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
2 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

Similarly, in the corporate sector, leadership is often pre-emptively framed as incompatible with women's perceived domestic responsibilities, with one respondent observing that "higher positions are held by men because they feel that women have too many duties at home".[3] Here, assumptions about women's roles outside the workplace are used to justify their exclusion within it.

Institutional recognition of women as leaders is also undermined by deeply embedded gendered expectations. One business-owner[4] recounted how a government official repeatedly asked to speak to the "head" of the organisation, refusing to accept that she herself held that position. This illustrates how leadership is linguistically and cognitively coded as male, such that women's authority is not only challenged but rendered unintelligible within existing frameworks. This aligns with (Koenig et al. 2011) meta-analysis on masculine leader stereotypes, which draws on the "think manager-think male" paradigm. This body of research shows that when individuals are asked to describe the characteristics of a successful manager, the traits they identify tend to overlap more closely with those stereotypically associated with men than with women. In other words, the perceived attributes of leadership - such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness - are culturally aligned with masculinity, reinforcing the assumption that a leader is male.

In some cases, gendered ideologies are explicitly reinforced to deter women's participation. In the political sphere, one local government politician described how men actively portray politics as a hostile and morally compromised space - 'like a drain' - while relying on the gendered notion that such spaces should only be dealt with by men, in order to discourage women from entering politics. She described:

> *"Men tend to portray politics to us in a different way... They create an image that politics is like a 'drain' or something dirty, unsuitable for women." - BC02*[5]

This echoes of De Alwis's earlier quote about how the male Ceylonist nationalists viewed the "battle for Independence on the treacherous terrain of the profane,

3 Colombo district, 29 January 2026
4 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026
5 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

materialist, 'world'", as a battle to be waged by the men, while the women fulfilled a role within the 'home'.

Similarly, this gendering of activities is seen in the sports sector. A leader from the world of Cricket, described how certain sports are culturally designated as "appropriate" for women, with sports such as cricket being framed as inherently male:

> *"For girls, netball was considered the most suitable sport, and I also followed that path... many people believed that cricket was a sport only for men." - JN03*[6]

In highly institutionalised settings such as religious organisations, these patterns are further formalised. A respondent from the education sector, who is also a nun, described how leadership roles at the highest level remain exclusively male:

> *"In our Church assembly, there is a space at the highest level reserved for Bishops. Women are not given leadership roles there. Sisters are always present and are not necessarily 'under' the male clergy, but this is how it works in practice. No one really speaks up. All leadership roles are held by the Fathers, and every head position goes to them. Even though we have a network called 'CMARS' (Conference of Major Religious Superiors), where Sisters are able to communicate, the CMARS itself falls under the Bishops' Conference. That is how it is here, though it differs in other countries." - PT05*[7]

As seen above, while women may be present and active within these institutions, their exclusion from decision-making authority is normalised and rarely contested. Ruether's feminist theological critique helps explain this pattern as more than an informal cultural practice. In Sexism and God-Talk, she argues that Church authority is structured through male clerical office, where access to official teaching authority is restricted to men. As cited by (Ross 2019), Ruether observes that "only males can occupy the apostolic teaching office," which represents Christ within Church authority. This helps contextualise the above respondent's account that

6 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

7 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

women may be institutionally present and active, but the highest recognised forms of authority remain attached to male office.

Importantly, the findings point to the ways in which gendered ideologies are sustained through assumptions about investment and potential. In the sports sector, one respondent noted that training women is often viewed as a "waste," based on the belief that they are less likely to succeed or progress. She reflected:

> *"From the perspective of many men, providing training for women is considered a waste. If it is a boys' team, they can coach them and even send them to the national team. But they believe that women cannot be developed in the same way, so they see it as a waste of time." - JN03*[8]

This reflects a pattern in which women are systematically denied opportunities for development, not because of demonstrated incapacity, but because of preconceived notions about their future trajectories. In sport, this logic is especially persistent because women's athletic ability is still routinely undervalued within what (Fink 2014) calls the "sport-media-commercial complex." Fink argues that although girls and women are participating in sport in record numbers, female athletes and women's sport continue to receive "starkly disparate treatment" compared with male athletes and men's sport. This disparity is both quantitative and qualitative: women's sport receives far less coverage, and when sportswomen are covered, they are "rarely acclaimed solely for their athletic abilities." Such patterns shape perceptions of women's sport and female athletes, helping to sustain the belief that investing in women's training will produce lower returns than investing in men's training. Seen in this light, the above respondent's account is not simply an individual prejudice, but part of a wider sporting culture in which women's potential is structurally undervalued.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that gendered ideologies of leadership in Sri Lanka operate across multiple levels such as family, institutions, the individual, and society at large, to shape both the opportunities available to women and the ways in which they navigate them. Leadership is not simply denied to women through formal exclusion; it is continuously constructed as incompatible

8 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

with 'femininity', and therefore as something women must justify, negotiate, or resist in order to attain.

4.2 The Care Economy and the Double Burden

The gendered ideologies discussed in Section 4.1 do not remain at the level of belief or ideas; they materially shape how women's time, labour, and mobility are organised, with direct implications for their capacity to participate in and sustain leadership roles. In particular, the expectation that women remain primary caregivers and household managers produces what is called the "double burden": the workload experienced by individuals who engage in paid labour while also carrying a disproportionately large share of unpaid domestic and care work. (Verité Research 2022) shows that this burden is embedded within broader patriarchal structures that depend on women's unpaid labour for their normal functioning. As a result, women's participation in paid work is not simply an economic activity, but one that imposes additional physical and psychological costs due to the simultaneous expectation of fulfilling care responsibilities - costs that can directly limit the time and energy required for leadership trajectories.

Earlier work by the (International Labour Organization 2016) supports this framing. The report notes that women in Sri Lanka overwhelmingly shoulder responsibility for unpaid household maintenance and care work, spending nearly twice as much time as men on household-related tasks and up to four times as many hours on care work. This unequal distribution of labour is rooted in persistent gender norms that assign caregiving and domestic work primarily to women, thereby shaping the conditions under which women can enter, remain in, or advance within their careers and leadership pathways.

These patterns are closely linked to the concept of time poverty. The (International Labour Organization 2016) defines an individual as time poor when they have "very little necessary time and no discretionary time at all," and notes that women and girls are particularly vulnerable due to the gendered division of labour that concentrates unpaid work within the household onto them. The report further observes that the more time a woman spends on unpaid work, the less time she has available for paid employment or skills development. In the context of leadership, this translates into reduced capacity for professional advancement, networking, mobility, and sustained engagement in decision-making roles.

This dynamic is further reinforced by findings from the (World Bank 2017), which show that gendered household roles significantly constrain women's LFP in Sri Lanka through time poverty, care responsibilities, and mobility restrictions. Marriage reduced women's likelihood of LFP by 4.4 percentage points nationally in 2015, while increasing men's by 11 percentage points; in urban areas, marriage lowers women's LFP by 11 percentage points while raising men's by 10.3 points. The presence of young children further intensifies this gap, reducing women's likelihood of participation by 7.4 percentage points, with no significant effect on men. Marriage also reduces women's chances of becoming paid employees by 26 percentage points, compared to a slight increase (2.5 points) for men. Mobility constraints further reinforce this dynamic, as women, particularly married women, face greater restrictions on commuting and migration, often being expected to prioritise proximity to home to maintain household responsibilities. At the same time, declining access to extended family support increases the burden of care, while 40 percent of women with children report housework and childcare as the primary reason for not participating in the labour force. Together, these findings demonstrate that women's employment outcomes, and by extension their leadership trajectories, are shaped not only by labour market conditions, but by the interaction between care responsibilities, time poverty, and socially enforced limits on mobility.

The implications of this extend beyond economic participation into women's ability to engage in public and institutional life. Women's primary responsibility for childcare, domestic work, and reproduction, often alongside paid employment, leaves little time for activities outside the home, particularly those that require evening or sustained engagement, such as meetings and decision-making processes (Domingo et al. 2015).

The (World Bank 2017) moves beyond diagnosis to highlight structural solutions, emphasising the need to expand the care economy through interventions such as accessible childcare services, workplace daycare, and community-based care systems. (Verité Research 2022) builds on this by showing that the ability of women to participate in paid work is heavily dependent on access to informal support systems, particularly extended family members who can take on childcare responsibilities. In fact, the presence of such support is identified as the single most important enabling factor for women's employment. In the absence of affordable

and reliable childcare alternatives, many women are left with no viable option but to reduce their labour force participation or exit employment entirely, with long-term implications for leadership representation. This is further compounded by the economic cost of engaging in paid work: for urban women in the second-lowest income quintile, childcare costs ranging from LKR 22,400 to 27,000 per month nearly offset median earnings of LKR 25,500, making employment economically unviable without external support (Verité Research 2022).

This structural context is critical for understanding what appears, on the surface, as individual choice. As the study by (Verité Research 2022) notes women's decisions regarding employment, career progression, or withdrawal from the labour force may reflect not freely held preferences, but "adaptive preferences" formed in response to persistent gender inequality and constrained opportunity. In other words, choices such as declining promotions, avoiding leadership roles, or leaving employment after marriage or childbirth are often made within a context where time poverty, care responsibilities, and lack of institutional support have already narrowed the range of feasible leadership pathways.

These dynamics are clearly reflected in the lived experiences of women leaders interviewed across sectors for this study, particularly in how the double burden is experienced on a daily basis.

> *"Women have to cook, do all the household work, take care of the baby, and then come to work, go back home, cook, and do all the household work again. It's a pattern. But men, they will wake up, get dressed, come to work, do their work, go back home, scroll their phone, and sleep. This is a pattern that most men have. Comparatively, I would say women are multitasking." - CL03*[9]

> *"When my husband comes home from work, [his aunt] makes him tea and then everything is done. But when I go after work… I have to make my own tea and tea for everyone else as well." - CL08*[10]

9 Colombo district, 26 January 2026
10 Colombo district, 10 February 2026

> *"Women have responsibilities such as managing the family, taking care of children, fulfilling the needs of their husbands, and maintaining the household. Due to these additional responsibilities, some women may hesitate to take up higher leadership positions." - JN02*[11]

These accounts illustrate how unpaid care work is not simply an additional responsibility, but a structurally embedded expectation that shapes women's time use. Consistent with the findings by the (International Labour Organization 2016) on time poverty, these narratives show how the unequal distribution of domestic labour reduces women's discretionary time, limiting their ability to take on roles that require extended hours, flexibility, or sustained engagement - conditions that are often essential for leadership (Hoare et al. 2009) (Hyde, Greene, and Darmstadt 2020).

In many cases, this imbalance translates directly into constrained career decision-making, particularly in relation to advancement and mobility.

> *"I have missed many opportunities… because it would have been difficult to balance my family responsibilities." - TR01*[12]

> *"If I was a man, I would have had less child care responsibilities and would have been able to travel to different areas and take up new positions for work. But when I'm responsible for the children I can't just leave them. It's also our duty to the country to look after these kids and to raise them to be respectable citizens. So it's hard for women." - KD03*[13]

> *"I really do want to go and achieve my potential, but there have of course been times when I have stepped back from opportunities and leadership roles because of my role as a mother. My life can be viewed in a timeline as, before becoming a mother and after becoming a mother. Handling both the work at the faculty and my responsibilities as a mother is very difficult… Before childbirth, I was able to work 24/7, but after giving birth, everything turned upside down for me." - CL03*[14]

11 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026
12 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026
13 Kandy district, 24 October 2026
14 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

> *"When certain responsibilities were assigned, I have chosen not to accept them because it would have been difficult to balance my family responsibilities." - TR01*[15]

One respondent from the corporate sector similarly described being unable to take up a regional role due to family and childcare responsibilities, despite initially intending to pursue a global career trajectory (CL05).[16]

These experiences reflect what can be understood as a strategic self-exclusion, where women opt out of leadership opportunities not due to lack of ambition or capability, but because the structural conditions required to sustain such roles are incompatible with their care responsibilities. As highlighted by (Verité Research 2022) decisions are shaped by time poverty and mobility constraints rather than purely individual preference. They also show that the transition into motherhood often marks a critical turning point in women's leadership trajectories, reinforcing findings from the (World Bank 2017) that marriage and childcare significantly reduce women's labour force participation and mobility. Importantly, the need to adapt to these constraints often results in women recalibrating their aspirations, aligning closely with the concept of adaptive preferences, where perceived "choices" are shaped by structurally limited alternatives.

In some cases, the strain of managing these overlapping responsibilities has severe consequences. One respondent described experiencing a physical collapse and temporary paralysis due to the stress of balancing professional and domestic roles (GP04),[17] illustrating the extent to which the double burden can become unsustainable. These pressures are further intensified by institutional environments that fail to accommodate care responsibilities. A respondent in the higher education sector reported being "scolded for coming up with excuses" when seeking leave during pregnancy or after childbirth, noting that the institution was "unwilling to listen" to gender-specific biological needs (CL03).[18] Such responses reinforce the perception that leadership roles are incompatible with caregiving responsibilities.

15 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026
16 Colombo district, 29 January 2026
17 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026
18 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

At the same time, interview findings point to the importance of systemic childcare solutions. A leader from the banking sector described internal discussions to establish workplace daycare facilities that would allow employees to "drop their children there and then do their work," identifying this as a key retention strategy (CL01).[19] Similarly, a government sector leader highlighted the need for state-supported crèche systems staffed by trained personnel, both to support working women and to generate employment (KD03).[20] These perspectives align with broader policy recommendations, including the expansion of childcare infrastructure through public-private partnerships and the use of existing Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres as accessible care systems (World Bank 2017) (Wills, Kotzé, and Kika-Mistry 2020).

Under a Feminist Institutionalist lens, the "double burden" is not merely a personal challenge but a structural mechanism that ensures "institutional continuity" of male leadership. The care economy functions as a set of deeply entrenched informal rules that clash with the "seemingly neutral" formal rules of professional advancement.

Institutions often present leadership selection and promotion criteria as "merit-based" and "gender-blind." However, these rules are built upon the template of an "ideal worker" - an individual who is entirely unencumbered by domestic responsibilities. For instance, formal requirements for "flexibility," "late-night availability," or "unrestricted travel" are presented as neutral professional standards. However, they are inherently gendered because they ignore the informal rule that women for instance spend nine times as many hours cooking as men (3 hours vs. 20 minutes) (International Labour Organization 2016). Similarly, rules requiring late-night commuting or field visits for promotion are "seemingly neutral" but function as a barrier for women. Social norms dictate that a married woman's presence at home for dinner and schoolwork is a non-negotiable informal rule; breaching this often leads to "spousal veto" or social policing that labels her as not a "good mother" (World Bank 2017) (Verité Research 2022). The "merit" criteria used for leadership are built on the template of an "ideal worker" who is assumed to have "full-time domestic support" (Hinze 2023). By ignoring the lack of such support for women, institutions are not being "neutral"; they are formalizing a

19 Colombo district, 21 January 2026
20 Kandy district, 24 October 2026

system that requires an "unbroken work record" which is structurally incompatible with the realities of motherhood and caregiving (Hinze 2023).

Another insight from Feminist Institutionalism is that the institution of marriage interacts differently with the institution of work depending on gender. This is not a coincidence but a "gendered process" that maintains existing power settlements. In Sri Lanka, marriage acts as a formal career catalyst for men but a structural barrier for women. Statistics show that marriage decreases the odds of labor force participation for women by 4.4 percentage points, while providing an 11 percentage point "premium" for men (World Bank 2017). Additionally, the expectation that a wife should prioritize household management - held by at least 85% of respondents in a study by the (International Labour Organization 2016) - effectively turns the home into a "supportive" site for the husband's leadership while acting as a "restrictive" site for the woman's.

On the topic of the systematic disadvantage that occurs through "Merit" - when selection panels use "commitment" or "years of continuous service" as neutral metrics for leadership, they systematically punish women for what the (International Labour Organization 2016) calls "intermittent" career paths caused by child-rearing. Because the state and private institutions fail to provide subsidized childcare, the "neutral" lack of such facilities forces women to rely on informal family networks. When these networks fail, the woman's exit is seen as a personal choice rather than a predictable outcome of a "masculine-centered institutional design" that refuses to incorporate care into its formal structure.

By viewing the care economy through the lens of Feminist Institutionalism, it can be seen that gender inequality is not just "reproduced" by tradition, but actively sustained by formal institutional rules that refuse to acknowledge the gendered reality of the domestic-public divide.

4.3 Institutional Reproduction of Gender Inequality

The gendered constraints outlined in previous sections are not only socially reproduced but are embedded within institutional structures that shape recruitment, promotion, decision-making, and access to leadership. Applying the Feminist Institutionalist lens established in Chapter 3, this section examines

how recruitment and advancement operate through gendered institutional logics, where rules that appear objective systematically disadvantage women (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). Within these structures, exclusion from leadership is not incidental but is structurally produced through both formal rules and biased informal practices.

At the level of recruitment and advancement, institutions frequently operate on gendered assumptions about women's availability, mobility, and long-term commitment to work (Hinze 2023) (Utoft 2020). These assumptions translate into biased hiring and promotion decisions that systematically favour men. As one corporate sector leader explained:

> *"During recruitment, managers say, 'Madam, let's hire boys.' This is because of a perception that women are not willing to travel and work late." - CL05*[21]

This reflects how seemingly neutral organisational criteria, such as availability, flexibility, or willingness to travel, are in fact gendered in their application. From a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, such criteria are not neutral but are embedded within gendered institutional logics, where rules that appear objective, such as expectations of continuous availability or mobility, can systematically disadvantage women and reinforce existing power hierarchies (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). Evidence from parliamentary institutions further illustrates this, where women report being excluded from roles on the assumption that they may "have children at any moment" or cannot commit fully to demanding roles. These assumptions function as institutional filters, reinforcing glass ceiling dynamics by pre-emptively excluding women from leadership pathways.

This bias is further reinforced through differential evaluation standards, particularly in how women's career trajectories are assessed (Salin 2020) (Andersson, Hagberg, and Hägg 2021). One respondent described being rejected for a senior academic position despite strong qualifications, within a broader context of institutional inflexibility and limited support for women balancing professional and family responsibilities:

21 Colombo district, 29 January 2026

> *"I began my career as an Assistant Quality Controller and gradually progressed through several roles before being appointed as an Assistant Director at a state university, where I worked for seven years. However, I had to travel long distances for work, leaving home at 5.30 in the morning and returning only by 6.30 in the evening. Balancing this with my family life, especially my son's education and my husband's work commitments, became very difficult. When I requested a transfer, it was not granted. They clearly told me that I would have to remain there until retirement. It seemed that there was no real interest in retaining a woman in a leadership position.*
>
> *Later, I applied for a senior position at another state university. During the interview, they said that since I had left my previous institution midway, I would not continue in service consistently. Although I explained my situation, they did not accept it. Despite having a First Class and strong academic qualifications, I was not selected. Instead, the position was offered to someone with a Second Class Upper qualification. I believe this happened because I am a woman." - BC03*[22]

This account illustrates how institutional decision-making embeds gendered expectations into criteria such as "consistency" or "commitment," without recognising the structural conditions, such as mobility constraints and care responsibilities that shape women's career paths. What appears as an objective evaluation of reliability is, in practice, a gendered interpretation of career interruption. From a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, this reflects how institutional norms define the "ideal worker" through uninterrupted service and geographic flexibility, thereby structurally disadvantaging women even where formal equality in recruitment criteria exists.

Beyond formal structures, exclusion is also reproduced through informal male networks, which play a critical role in decision-making and access to power. These networks often operate outside official institutional spaces, effectively sidelining women from key discussions.

22 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

> *"Men often resolve work-related issues through late-night social gatherings, such as going out for drinks... As a result, women are excluded from these discussions and decision-making processes." - CL06*[23]

> *"They [men] have their own groups... they drink together and all that. So they are treated better than the women." - PT04*[24]

These patterns are not limited to individual workplaces, but reflect broader institutional cultures in which decision-making is informally relocated to male-dominated social spaces (Moodly 2021) (Adamu 2023). As one key informant with expertise explained:

> *"So those things are very subtle... in an institution where both men and women are in dominant positions, the men can go out for a drink in the evening and they make the decision. So that's a kind of subtle cultural demarcation... very difficult for a fairly traditional woman to cross. Even at a university, if a woman stays in a male dean or vice chancellor's room for a long time, then that's seen as inappropriate... whereas if two men are talking, it's somehow okay." — KII01*

This insight highlights how institutional exclusion operates not only through access to spaces, but through gendered norms governing who can legitimately occupy them. While men's informal interactions are normalised as part of professional life, similar behaviour by women is subject to moral scrutiny, effectively restricting their participation in these decision-making networks (Horak and Suseno 2022) (Fenech, Kanji, and Vargha 2021).

Beyond formal exclusion from decision-making spaces, institutional cultures are also reproduced through everyday informal practices that normalise women's marginality within professional environments(Mora and Blanco 2017) (Horak and Suseno 2022). One respondent from the sports media sector described how even routine workplace settings are shaped by gendered norms of speech and behaviour:

23 Colombo district, 03 February 2026
24 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

> *"I've had incidents in the press box where male journalists are making comments about women in the crowd… Once the media manager asked me, 'will you put in your earphones and wait?'… I've been in so many instances where they're talking about women and then they look at me and say, 'because [interviewee name] is here, I won't say anything'"*
> *- CL07*[25]

This account illustrates how institutional exclusion does not operate only through absence from formal spaces, but also through the conditions under which women are present within them. The expectation that she should "put [her] earphones and wait" reflects an implicit rule that women must accommodate and tolerate masculinised workplace cultures rather than challenge them(Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010) (Martin and Barnard 2013). At the same time, the practice of censoring speech only when a woman is present marks her as an exception within the space, reinforcing that the "normal" institutional environment is male-oriented (Male et al. 2017).

From a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, such informal norms are central to how institutions reproduce gender inequality. They establish behavioural expectations that signal who truly belongs within a space and who does not. In this case, sexualised commentary and its selective suppression function not only as exclusionary practices, but as mechanisms that define the institutional culture itself as implicitly male, positioning women as outsiders who must adapt rather than reshape the environment.

These accounts also mirror findings from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2025), where women described masculinised institutional environments in which exclusion is spatial, behavioural, and symbolic. For instance, respondents to this report reported that: "Male parliamentarians crowd into the corridors of Parliament, leaving no room to move, and making no effort to respect women or give them space." "Male parliamentarians push you without apology: it's their male privilege. It's a power play that consists of saying: 'This is a male space; this is our space. You women are just passing through.'"

25 Colombo district, 06 February 2026

Exclusion also occurs more directly through the denial of access to high-power institutional spaces.

> *"The common justification given is that women are not capable of managing such responsibilities... If we are included... we will question them... They are afraid of that. That is why they do not include women in the finance committee." - BC02*[26]

This reflects how institutional power is actively protected through gendered exclusion. The theory highlights that institutions are sites where power is distributed and maintained; in this case, exclusion is not simply about perceived incapacity, but about preventing disruption to existing male-dominated power structures. Women's potential to challenge decision-making processes becomes a basis for their exclusion.

These dynamics are not limited to formal institutions but extend to broader political and social spaces. (De Alwis 1998) demonstrates that even women-centred movements in Sri Lanka are structured through male-dominated institutional control. She notes that male political actors "set the agenda," organised events, and controlled decision-making processes, while women, despite being central to the movement, were spatially marginalised, often "seated at the foot of the stage," with limited speaking time compared to male politicians. This illustrates how such power operates not only through formal authority but also through control over visibility, voice, and agenda-setting.

In addition to exclusion and bias, institutions also reproduce inequality through predatory and coercive practices, particularly in contexts where accountability is weak.

> *"If we want to get a job done properly through the government, if a sexual bribe is given, any work can be done. That is the truth." - PT01*[27]

26 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
27 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

> *"Promotions happened according to the opinions of individuals... I have had ladies tell me that their superiors made certain 'proposals' to them." - PT05*[28]

> *"In the women's cricket team... there had been a system where they were asking for sexual favors to get players into the team." - CL07*[29]

One respondent (KD03)[30] described an incident in which she believed she had been deliberately failed in an examination required for promotion, in order to compel her into a vulnerable situation. She explained that the examiner then asked her to come alone to his office to rewrite the paper, where she was isolated with him. She described feeling very unsafe, remaining alert and fearful throughout the re-sitting of the exam, and completing the paper as quickly as possible in order to leave the room.

These accounts illustrate how access to opportunities can be contingent on compliance with exploitative demands, constituting a form of institutionalised gatekeeping. The (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) report similarly documents high levels of sexual harassment and coercion within institutional environments, noting that such practices are used to "control, restrict and prevent" women's participation in political life.

Finally, institutional inequality is reproduced through logistical and infrastructural barriers, particularly in relation to safety and accommodation. These barriers are often used to justify the exclusion of women from roles requiring travel, night work, or relocation.

> *"Sometimes, there's a situation where women cannot enter certain roles. For example, for roles related to examinations, they prefer to recruit men. This is mostly because women lack time or cannot commit to night work. Even in our own department, there's a slight reluctance to take women for certain posts. Generally, those working with examinations have no day or night; they have to stay at night, and stay at coordination centers. Safe accommodation must be provided for us (women). Because*

28 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025
29 Colombo district, 06 February 2026
30 Kandy district, 24 October 2026

> *of this, we don't get to gain certain experiences. In those instances, we step back a bit. When that happens, every opportunity is not received equally." - GP02*[31]

Another respondent described how institutional policies in a private bank around staff transfers are structured in ways that implicitly exclude women from mobility-based career progression. In this case, employees transferred away from their hometowns are provided with lodging by the bank; however, this facility is often only available to male staff:

> *"Some of the places you have... the lodging facility, but it's not for girls. It's all for boys only." - CL01*[32]

This illustrates how organisational infrastructure itself can be gendered, with support systems designed around male mobility while women are expected to rely on alternative arrangements or forgo such opportunities altogether. As a result, access to geographically mobile roles, which are often critical for career advancement and leadership, becomes structurally uneven.

These examples highlight how institutional design fails to accommodate women's needs, effectively limiting their access to critical career-building experiences. Rather than adapting structures to ensure inclusion, institutions often exclude women altogether, reinforcing gender inequality. As FI emphasises, such outcomes are not accidental but reflect how institutional arrangements privilege certain groups while constraining others.

Taken together, these findings suggest that gender inequality is systematically perpetuated within institutional systems (Tan and DeFrank-Cole 2023). Through gendered recruitment practices, informal exclusion, restricted access to decision-making spaces, coercive gatekeeping, and infrastructural neglect, institutions shape the conditions under which women can enter and advance within leadership. From a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, these patterns reflect the interaction between formal rules and informal norms that sustain gendered power relations over time (Utzeri 2019, 39). Consequently, leadership disparities are not simply the outcome of individual choices or capabilities; rather, they are structured by

31 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026
32 Colombo district, 21 January 2026

institutional systems that systematically advantage men while constraining women's participation.

4.4 Social and Cultural Policing

The structural and institutional barriers discussed in previous sections appear to be further reinforced through social and cultural mechanisms influencing gendered comportment and personal sphere expectations (Mavin and Grandy 2016, 388). These regulatory frameworks appear to function as informal yet potent systems of control, influencing both the perception and performance expectations of women in leadership roles. Women's leadership does not appear to be evaluated solely on competence or outcomes, but is often assessed against culturally defined expectations of modesty, morality, and respectability (McCluney 2017, 31).

One key dimension of this regulation is the policing of women's bodies and attire, through which female morality is made visible, measurable, and enforceable. In the Sri Lankan context, this process is historically rooted in nationalist constructions of femininity. As (De Alwis 1996) shows, the regulation of female morality was central to the Sinhala-Buddhist revivalist project, where figures such as Anagarika Dharmapala explicitly mapped chastity onto the female body. In his writings, Dharmapala advocated that women wear the saree as a sign of their "modesty, chastity, and unique 'Sinhalaness'," prescribing in detail how the body should be covered, including the requirement that a woman's "black legs" be fully concealed and that the blouse cover the breasts, midriff, navel, and back. In this formulation, the female body itself became a regulated surface through which moral discipline was expressed. More broadly, (De Alwis 1996) argues that the female body was fashioned as one of the "most visible markers of nationalist resistance," particularly through the wearing of the saree. This construction is reinforced by (Jayawardana 1986), who contrasts the figure of the "Western woman," represented as sexually free, with the Sri Lankan woman, who is expected to embody submission, chastity, and restraint. These historically embedded cultural codes continue to shape contemporary expectations, where women's appearance is not merely aesthetic but functions as a marker of moral legitimacy, against which their suitability for public authority and leadership is judged.

This form of bodily regulation is not only historical but continues to shape how women move through public and professional spaces. One respondent, a retired education sector leader and Catholic nun, described how her decision to ride a bicycle as a woman and while in religious dress became a site of scrutiny and collective regulation:

> *"I used to ride a bicycle to the school I used to teach at the time. I was in a leadership role. Actually, I must have been the first woman in that area to start riding a bike. It created a lot of issues. I wore the usual dress nuns wear, and it would sometimes blow up in the wind while cycling… Citing this, two or three petitions were sent by the villagers against me to the Father. I asked, 'What is wrong with these people, just because they see our legs?'… I said I couldn't wear a longer dress and ride, as my bike was a pedal cycle and that would've been too difficult. Ultimately, I managed to speak to the other Sisters and find myself a scooter. So there were such problems; they were challenges." - PT05*[33]

This account illustrates how women's bodies are regulated not only through abstract norms of modesty, but through direct surveillance and collective enforcement. The act of riding a bicycle, a practical necessity for mobility, became controversial because it disrupted expectations of how a woman's body should be seen and contained in public space. The submission of petitions reflects how such norms are not passively held but actively enforced by communities and institutions alike.

Importantly, this example also highlights how mobility itself becomes gendered. The respondent's ability to perform her leadership role was mediated through expectations about dress, bodily exposure, and respectability, demonstrating how physical movement in public space is conditioned by moral scrutiny. In this sense, the regulation of attire extends beyond appearance to shape the conditions under which women can access, occupy, and move within leadership spaces.

Another education sector leader interviewed for this study shared a similar experience:

33 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

> *"In my experience, I have been harassed for how I actually dress. So even wearing a sleeveless jacket with a saree was commented on by my senior colleagues. And of course they use words that are sexual. 'You are looking sexy' and similar remarks." – CL03*[34]

Such comments are not incidental but function as a way of undermining professional authority by shifting attention from competence to appearance. Similar patterns are documented in political institutions, where women report being subjected to remarks about their clothing and physical appearance during formal proceedings. As one parliamentarian noted, "Male parliamentarians called me a 'beauty queen' while I was discussing the annual budget" (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). These practices work to delegitimise women's presence in leadership by framing them through a sexualised or aesthetic lens rather than as decision-makers.

Beyond appearance, women's behaviour in leadership is closely monitored and constrained by expectations of respectability and restraint. Women who assert themselves or deviate from expected norms risk reputational consequences.

> *"There is an attitude or perception in society that women cannot do what men do… In some situations, women may need to hold back. If we push too far or go too far, it can create a negative mark on our character." – GP03*[35]

This reflects how leadership for women is conditioned by the need to navigate a narrow boundary between authority and acceptability. Assertiveness, often seen as a leadership strength in men, can be reinterpreted as moral transgression in women. As (Satkunanathan 2020) notes, women who challenge established norms are frequently labelled as "bad moral character" or being "too western," indicating how cultural narratives are mobilised to discipline dissent.

A particularly significant mechanism of control is character assassination, which operates as a tool to silence women in leadership or discourage their participation altogether. This can take highly personalised and public forms, especially for women in visible or political roles.

34 Colombo district, 26 January 2026
35 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026

> *"They had sent messages to everyone using my name, saying that I was going to build a mosque… and told them not to vote for a Muslim woman like me… They even published a cartoon of me… implying that I take a 10% commission." – KD05*[36]

Such attacks are not only gendered but can intersect with ethnicity and religion, amplifying their impact. By targeting a woman's morality, integrity, or identity, these narratives seek to delegitimise her authority and erode public trust. Similar dynamics are observed in media and professional spaces, where, as (Senanayake 2022) quoting journalist Aisha Naszim notes, women who are "too loud or too rebellious" risk being labelled negatively and excluded from career opportunities.

The regulation of women's personal lives further reinforces these constraints. Marital status, in particular, becomes a basis for scrutiny and judgement, affecting how women are perceived in leadership roles.

> *"If a woman is divorced, people often blame the woman herself… my husband also spread false allegations about me and even sent letters containing those accusations to my colleagues and to my head office." – JN01*[37]

This reflects a broader and more explicit pattern identified in the (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) study, where marital status is actively mobilised as a tool of control and discrediting within institutional environment. Women report that their personal lives are not treated as private, but are instead used to undermine their professional legitimacy and authority (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). As one parliamentarian noted, "Colleagues and strangers have called me a bitch and used my divorce as a weapon to attack me" (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). In such contexts, professional assertiveness is directly reframed through moral judgement: "I get negative comments when I am perceived as too determined and assertive in a meeting. If you're divorced, you get insults" (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). The report further highlights that being unmarried or single is itself constructed as a deviation from acceptable femininity, with one respondent stating, "Being a single woman is criticized, especially in politics. It made me vulnerable at the start of my career" (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). These narratives are

36 Kandy district, 24 October 2025
37 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

often accompanied by explicitly sexualised assumptions, where unmarried women are portrayed as "sexually available" or as refusing to fulfill expected social roles such as marriage and reproduction (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). In this way, marital status operates not simply as a personal characteristic, but as a moral and political category through which women's credibility, respectability, and legitimacy in leadership are evaluated and contested.

These dynamics are also embedded in everyday interactions that reinforce gendered expectations of identity and belonging:

> *"No one usually asks a man where his wife is... But when I go to places, people ask me where my husband is... By asking about your husband, they try to judge your character and whether you are a 'proper' woman."*
> *– JN01*[38]

Here, a woman's legitimacy is not understood as inherent to her role, but as contingent on her relationship to a man. Questions about marital status function as indirect mechanisms of social surveillance, reinforcing the expectation that women's identities, and by extension, their authority, are anchored in domestic roles.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that social and cultural policing operates as a critical enforcement mechanism within the broader system of gender inequality. While institutional barriers may restrict access to leadership, cultural norms regulate how women behave within those roles and punish those who deviate from expected standards. Through the policing of attire, behaviour, and personal life, women's leadership is continuously negotiated within a framework that prioritises respectability over authority.

In this sense, leadership for women is not simply about attaining positions of power, but about navigating the complex parameters of social expectations that shape how that power can be exercised. These informal mechanisms of control work alongside structural and institutional barriers to maintain gendered hierarchies, ensuring that even when women enter leadership, their authority remains conditional and contested.

38 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

Chapter 5

Forms and Experiences of GBV

5.1 Verbal Harassment and Sexist Language

In leadership spaces, gender-based violence often operates through language. Verbal harassment, sexist jokes, public mockery, and belittling remarks are not merely isolated interpersonal incidents; they function as mechanisms through which women's authority is questioned, interrupted, and disciplined (Hobgood et al. 2024; Just and Muhr 2021, 535). In professional and public settings, language becomes a tool for reminding women that their presence in leadership remains conditional, and that speaking with authority can invite ridicule, sexualisation, or character attack.

This is especially visible in the use of derogatory cultural idioms that frame women as intellectually inferior or unsuited for public responsibility (Benattabou 2020, 21; Bishwakarma 2020, 110).

> *"They say… 'Women's brains are only the length of a ladle's handle.' They say such foolish things in public; that women can't work." - PT04*[39]

Such language frames women's capacity to lead as a culturally embedded disparagement, framing women's exclusion as a societal norm rather than discrimination. Similar forms of belittling were reported in professional settings where women's expertise was dismissed through gendered stereotypes rather than evaluated on merit.

> *"Instead of encouraging me, some people made discouraging remarks, saying that since I was a Home Science teacher, I must have impressed everyone by cooking for them." - TR02*[40]

Here, the respondent's professional success is trivialised by linking it back to domestic femininity. Rather than recognising competence, the comment relocates her achievement within a gendered stereotype of women as cooks and

39 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025
40 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026

caregivers. This reflects how sexist language can convert women's professional accomplishments into evidence of "proper" feminine roles, thereby weakening their authority as leaders.

Verbal harassment also appears in more direct attempts to silence women during meetings and discussions. Several respondents described how men use mockery, double-meaning jokes, laughter, or raised voices to interrupt women's participation.

> *"If the men want to curtail a woman from speaking at a work discussion, they crack double-meaning jokes knowing that women cannot engage in hose." - CL05*[41]

This form of verbal harassment places women in a difficult position: responding risks further sexualisation or loss of 'respectability', while remaining silent allows the interruption to succeed. The effect is therefore disciplinary. It does not only insult women; it narrows the terms on which they can participate in professional conversation.

The experiences of women being shouted down by male colleagues are consistent with the findings by the (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) on sexism and harassment in Asia-Pacific parliaments, which highlight gendered intimidation. One woman parliamentarian described being shouted down by a male colleague in a way she explicitly understood as gendered intimidation:

> *"I was one of the new parliamentarians and the only woman in the ministerial group. A male colleague, younger than me, shouted at me and intimidated me to stop me from speaking. It was very violent and clearly motivated by gender. I was terrified, and no one in the room reacted. Later, he felt ashamed and apologised in front of everyone, but the experience was deeply shocking." - IPU, 2025, p. 7*

The importance of this account lies not only in the shouting itself, but in the institutional silence around it. No one in the room reacted, and this suggests that verbal intimidation can become normalised within leadership spaces, especially when directed at women. The same report also records how women's views are undermined in meetings through aggressive verbal dominance:

41 Colombo district, 29 January 2026

> *"When you arrive at a committee or plenary, you don't feel welcome. Male parliamentarians undermine women's opinions. You have to be loud and aggressive to make yourself heard. They always seem to view you as a threat, as if you're going to take away their power and decision-making authority… When I put forward solid arguments, my male colleagues often speak louder to assert themselves." - IPU, 2025, pp. 7, 11*

This closely reflects the experiences of women interviewed for this study, where speaking in formal settings often triggers collective resistance. One higher education sector leader described how women who speak firmly are then subjected to gendered character judgement.

> *"In a faculty board meeting, if I raise a point, someone will oppose it even when it has nothing to do with them, and others quickly join in. In a situation like this, a man can raise his voice freely, but as women we cannot. If we speak firmly, people start gossiping that this is how we behave at home. This becomes a form of character assassination." - JN02*

This account shows how sexist language and social judgement work together. The issue is not merely that women are interrupted or opposed; it is that women's professional speech is converted into a commentary on their private character. When a man raises his voice, it may be read as confidence or authority. When a woman does so, it can be reinterpreted as evidence of disorder within her personal or domestic life. This creates pressure for self-censorship, where women must calculate not only what they say, but how their speech will be morally interpreted.

Women in politics reported similar patterns of being laughed at or dismissed in formal spaces.

> *"Many male members do not respect what we say. Sometimes they laugh when we speak… When the group leader started reading [my proposal] in the meeting, the male members laughed." - JN04*

Such laughter is not neutral. In leadership settings, public ridicule functions as a way of reducing women's credibility before their ideas are even considered (Medina

2020). It marks women's contributions as lacking seriousness and signals to others that they need not be engaged with substantively.

Verbal harassment also takes sexualised forms, especially when women's bodies and dress are brought into professional commentary. One higher education sector leader described how even minor deviations from expected attire became the subject of sexualised gossip by colleagues.

> *"There is no strict order imposed on us as faculty members about how we can dress. Even the students can wear whatever they want. The faculty does not want to go into the details of people's attire because that is their freedom to wear whatever they want. We teach and preach about equality, so then we cannot go against it and control the details of what people are wearing. So at an official faculty forum you can't basically talk about dress. But at a private discussion, a senior colleague had been gossiping about me and speaking about the way I dress. They have said that the way I dress is 'very sexy' and 'not suitable for a lecturer'. I had just worn a sleeveless jacket with my saree." — CL03*[42]

This observation illustrates how sexist language frequently manifests in informal contexts, even when formal institutional values articulate principles of equality. The respondent's clothing was not officially regulated, yet it was subjected to sexualised commentary within private discourse. This disjunction between formal equality and informal mechanisms of social regulation highlights a critical issue: institutions may present as progressive in their foundational principles while concurrently enabling the perpetuation of informal cultures of surveillance and the sexualisation of individuals.

The deployment of sexualised or appearance-based remarks to undermine women leaders is also observable within international leadership contexts. Research on women in leadership documents instances of public sexism targeting Amanda Blanc, the chief executive officer of Aviva, during the organisation's annual general meeting. Shareholders reportedly made comments questioning whether she was "the man for the job," whether she "should be wearing trousers," and linking

42 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

women board members to "basic housekeeping activities"(Mavin et al. 2023, 162). This case study suggests that the incidence of sexist language may intensify within senior hierarchical structures. As Blanc herself observed, "the more senior the role I have taken, the more overt the unacceptable behaviour." This observation substantiates the pattern identified within this study: verbal harassment persists even following the attainment of leadership positions by women.

Within the domain of sports, verbal harassment is frequently perpetrated through challenges to women's legitimacy within environments traditionally delineated as male-dominated spheres (McCarthy 2021).

> *"I've had like, you know, 'What does she know?' 'Why are women in this?' Those kinds of comments do come." — CL07* [43]

From a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, such interactions can be understood as part of the informal practices through which institutions reproduce gendered power relations. FI emphasises that institutions are not only structured by formal rules, but also by informal norms and practices that are "deeply rooted and sustained over time" and which shape inclusion, exclusion, and access to power (Clavero and Galligan 2020, 655; Madsen 2021). These informal rules prescribe what forms of behaviour, participation, and authority are considered acceptable, and in doing so contribute to the reproduction of broader gender hierarchies. Within this framework, verbal questioning such as "why are women in this?" can be understood not as an isolated remark, but as an informal institutional practice that signals the boundaries of legitimate participation. It communicates that women's presence is conditional and subject to scrutiny, thereby reinforcing existing gendered expectations about who belongs within the field. In leadership contexts, such signals can affect entry, as well as recognition, authority, and the ability to perform as a leader.

In some cases, body-focused verbal harassment can directly push women out of professional or public roles. One sports sector leader described the experience of another senior sportswoman who stopped attending matches after being verbally harassed about her body.

43 Colombo district, 06 February 2026

> *"When she went to a boys' match as an umpire, some people commented on and described her body shape. After that incident, she stopped going to matches altogether." — JN03*[44]

This example shows how verbal harassment can produce material exclusion. The comments did not remain at the level of speech; they altered the woman's ability or willingness to continue participating in the field. In this sense, sexist language operates as a form of gatekeeping, particularly in male-dominated sectors where women's presence is already treated as exceptional.

Taken together, these findings show that verbal harassment and sexist language are central forms of GBV in women's public and professional lives. They operate through ridicule, sexualisation, cultural insult, aggressive interruption, and character assassination (Mugisho and Umumararungu 2024, 398; Rahmawati et al. 2025, 1101). Their effect is not only emotional harm, but the weakening of women's authority, the narrowing of their speech, and the restriction of their participation in leadership spaces (Lewis, Roberts, and Andrews 2015, 41; Rahmawati et al. 2025, 1101). Verbal harassment therefore functions as part of the broader continuum of GBV: it disciplines women who speak, punishes women who assert authority, and reinforces the idea that leadership remains a male domain.

5.2 Sexual Bribery and Gatekeeping

A recurring pattern across the interviews is the use of sexual bribery and coercion as a mechanism of gatekeeping, particularly in contexts where access to opportunities, advancement, or institutional services is controlled by individuals in positions of authority. These practices are not incidental, but operate as informal systems through which power is exercised and maintained.

Participants described instances where professional opportunities were implicitly or explicitly conditioned on private, one-on-one interactions with senior officials.

44 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

> *"I remember he told me on the phone, 'Why are you asking for a transfer to that district? I will give you the biggest school in this area… you come alone one day to meet me'." - PT04*[45]

> *"A senior officer used to speak with me somewhat more frequently and had asked me to call him… I did not do so and respectfully avoided such interactions." - TR01*[46]

Such interactions illustrate what is defined in the literature as sexual coercion or quid pro quo harassment, where sexual compliance is a condition for receiving professional benefits such as jobs, transfers, or promotions. Research on workplace sexual harassment in Sri Lanka identifies this as one of the most severe forms of harassment, precisely because it links access to opportunity with vulnerability to exploitation (Dewdunee and Alwis 2023).

In some sectors, these practices become more explicitly institutionalised.

> *"In the women's cricket team… there had been a system where they were asking for sexual favors to get players into the team." - CL07*[47]

Here, access to professional advancement is mediated through predatory systems rather than merit, effectively transforming institutions into sites of controlled access, where entry and progression depend on compliance with informal and exploitative demands.

The education sector provides further evidence of such gatekeeping.

> *"A 'Sir' proposed to me that he could give me the question papers… I said, 'Sir, I came here to win by learning, not by being a slave to anyone'." - PT05*[48]

> *"Once he failed me and told me to go to a room by myself and write it again… I was scared… I was very alert." - KD03*[49]

45 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025
46 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026
47 Colombo district, 06 February 2026
48 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025
49 Kandy district, 24 October 2026

These accounts demonstrate how authority over evaluation processes—such as examinations or grading—can be misused to create conditions for coercion. In such cases, formal systems of merit are undermined by informal practices that expose women to risk and pressure.

The findings also extend beyond individual institutions to broader administrative systems.

> *"If we want to get a job done properly through the government, if a sexual bribe is given, any work can be done. That is the truth." - PT01*[50]

This reflects a perception that sexual bribery operates as a parallel transactional system, particularly in bureaucratic settings where discretion and delay create opportunities for exploitation.

From a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, these practices can be understood as informal institutional rules that structure access to power. While formal systems may emphasise merit, transparency, and equality, informal practices such as coercion, threat, and exclusion function alongside them, often overriding formal procedures in practice. As the literature shows, such environments are frequently sustained within male-dominated organisational structures, where power is concentrated and accountability is weak, creating conditions in which harassment and exploitation can persist.

This dynamic is further reinforced by organisational complicity and informal protection networks. Evidence from Sri Lanka shows that even where formal complaint mechanisms exist, they often fail to produce accountability. In one documented case, a woman who reported sexual harassment through multiple institutional channels—including human resources, senior management, and the chairman—received no resolution. Instead, she was threatened by the perpetrator, who warned that he would "make her life harder" if she did not comply with his demands. Reflecting on the experience, she noted that there was a "boy-code operating at that level," suggesting the existence of informal networks that protected those in power. Ultimately, she left her job, stating that she was "curtailing [her] career for something [she] had not done or planned" (Wijesiriwardena 2020). This

50 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

illustrates how predatory gatekeeping is sustained not only through individual acts of coercion, but through institutional cultures that tolerate and shield such behaviour. In these contexts, access to opportunity is shaped as much by informal loyalty structures as by formal rules, and women who resist are effectively pushed out of leadership pathways.

Importantly, the impact of these practices is not limited to individual harm. Sexual bribery functions as a structural barrier to leadership, as women who refuse to comply are often denied opportunities, while those who attempt to resist face retaliation, isolation, or career stagnation. Evidence from Sri Lanka further shows that women subjected to such conditions may ultimately withdraw from roles or leave institutions altogether when faced with threats or lack of institutional support.

Sexual bribery, or "sextortion," should be analyzed not merely as individual misconduct but as a gendered form of corruption where "sexual favors are the means of exchange" for services to which women are already legally entitled (Paolis 2024; Mtotywa et al. 2023). This practice is an "opportunistic" abuse of power that leverages the structural vulnerabilities and resource imbalances inherent in patriarchal institutions (Bragagnolo and Lezama 2025; Mtotywa et al. 2023). By turning the female body into a "transactional currency," gatekeepers enforce an informal rule that women's professional advancement is contingent upon sexual submission (Bjarnegård et al. 2022). This effectively functions as a structural barrier to leadership, as it "unfairly criminalizes" or stigmatizes the victim while allowing the perpetrator to maintain institutional control through the threat of reputational harm (Bjarnegård et al. 2022; Paolis 2024).

5.3 Character Assassination and Digital Violence

With the expansion of digital communication, character assassination increasingly moves into online spaces, where reputational attacks can be rapidly amplified, archived, and circulated beyond the immediate institutional setting. (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025), argue that as women's visibility in Sri Lankan politics has increased, so has gender-based abuse online. They note that this abuse is not directed at women's policy positions or performance, but frequently targets their "appearance, clothing, personal lives or relationships" in order to "humiliate, silence, and de-legitimize women leaders."

Their article provides several recent Sri Lankan examples of how digital violence operates as political character assassination. (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025) note that Mithilaichelvi Sripathmanathan was publicly mocked when a rival politician filmed himself tearing her campaign flyer, mixing it with food, and pretending to eat it, then shared the video with over 90,000 followers. They also note that Umachandraa Pragash was falsely linked to a prostitution ring through TikTok and viral videos, while Kaushalya Ariyarathne was drawn into a fabricated romantic scandal through a blurred image in which only she was recognisable. In each case, the attack did not engage the woman's political programme; it attempted to damage her credibility through humiliation, sexual insinuation, or reputational scandal.

This is consistent with the experiences of women leaders interviewed for this study, who described online harassment, impersonation, and sexualised communication as recurring threats to their professional and public presence.

> *"Recently, someone sent me naked photos and videos and also made a video call... Harassment on social media is very high. People often take our photos and use them to create fake IDs." - BC01*[51]

> *"After the divorce, my former husband began spreading defamatory statements about me on social media... my character was assassinated. During that period, I was emotionally broken." - JN01*[52]

> *As soon as I answered the call, the man asked what my bra size was. I was in front of a customer at the time too. I immediately threw my phone down, but he kept calling me continuously. It wouldn't stop, and he started calling me from various numbers. Then I went to the police and complained. I went to the Women's Bureau, and do you know what they asked me? "Why do you answer every call that comes?" I said, I run a business, and I get a lot of calls due to it. Can I just sit and investigate the number on each unknown call I get before answering them? I have to just answer them. The police didn't even take the complaint. Then just said "Let's see if it happens again" and "just don't answer it." - KD01*[53]

51 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
52 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026
53 Kandy district, 23 October 2025

These accounts reflect what a review of sexual and gender-based violence in Sri Lanka by the (UNFPA 2020) identifies as forms of cyber sexual violence, including sexual harassment through naked images, nuisance calls, obscene messages, hate speech, blackmail, extortion, sextortion, and the circulation or threat of circulation of sexual images. The significance of these forms of violence is that they extend reputational harm beyond the physical workplace or political arena, making women vulnerable in both public and private spaces at once.

(Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025) also highlight the institutional weakness of platform and legal responses. They note that social media platforms such as Meta have often failed to remove attacks against women politicians, even where local moderators provide translations and context. They also argue that harmful content in Sinhala and Tamil can pass through moderation systems, allowing abuse and disinformation to spread while women are left to pursue slow legal remedies. This failure of moderation is not a technical issue alone; it directly affects leadership, because the cost of viral abuse is borne by the woman whose campaign, reputation, and public confidence are damaged.

The leadership impact is therefore substantial. (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025) note that many women who face sexual attacks online shut down their accounts or withdraw from digital spaces altogether. Such literature shows that targeted disinformation and sexualised online abuse can force women out of public life, weaken democratic representation, and create a "chilling effect" that interrupts women's continuity in political engagement (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025) (Koch, Riva, and Steinert 2025). This aligns closely with the findings of this study: digital violence does not simply harm women emotionally; it restricts visibility, mobility, networking, and public legitimacy, all of which are essential to leadership.

More broadly, character assassination operates not only through direct attacks, but through the constant possibility of being judged, labelled, and socially redefined. As one key informant explained:

> *"Many women in Sri Lankan culture have to fear character standards and character assassinations… If you're seen as "attractive", they say one kind of thing. If you're seen as "unattractive", they say another… I think women hesitate a lot because there is the stereotype of that kind of "aggressive woman" too. Once somebody names you as an*

> *aggressive woman, it's very difficult to switch off from that identity."*
> *— KII01*

This insight highlights how the fear of being marked as "aggressive," "improper," or morally suspect functions as a form of anticipatory regulation, shaping how women speak, behave, and participate in public and professional spaces.

This pattern is consistent with broader global evidence. Research summarised by the (International Women's Development Agency, n.d.) shows that female politicians are subjected to significantly higher levels of online abuse than their male counterparts; for example, Hillary Clinton received almost twice as many abusive tweets as Bernie Sanders, with three-quarters of this abuse coming from men. The report further notes that while violence against women in politics is not the only barrier to leadership, its consequences are "deep, long-lasting, and spread beyond the individual," with fear of violence discouraging women from entering political life or deterring them from continuing in it (International Women's Development Agency, n.d.).

Character assassination and digital violence function as "affective disciplining" mechanisms intended to punish women for "violating traditional gender roles and stereotypes" (Austin et al. 2023). These digital discursive practices are deeply embedded in social perceptions that women's political activity "breaches the rules of gender performativity" (Esposito and Breeze 2022). By using image manipulation and false identity attribution, perpetrators seek to disqualify women as legitimate political actors by refocusing public attention on their bodies and "sexual history" rather than their professional competence (Esposito and Breeze 2022; Esposito 2022). This visual and semiotic violence serves a clear institutional purpose: to impose a division between "correct" and "incorrect" ways for women to behave in public, thereby marginalizing them as "atypical" or unfit for leadership (Meriläinen 2024; Austin et al. 2023).

5.4 Physical Intimidation and Threats

While verbal harassment and reputational attacks undermine women's credibility (Papadakou and Sternberg 2025, 10), physical intimidation represents a more direct and coercive mechanism through which women's leadership is constrained

(Krook 2017). Unlike symbolic forms of violence, physical threats operate by creating immediate risks to bodily safety (Krook and Sanín 2019, 744), thereby limiting women's ability to participate fully in professional, political, and public life (Krook 2017).

Across the interviews conducted for this study, women leaders described experiences of explicit threats and acts of intimidation that extended beyond the workplace into their personal lives. These threats were often closely linked to their leadership roles, particularly where they challenged authority, exposed wrongdoing, or supported others in seeking justice.

One particularly illustrative account was provided by a local government leader (BC02) whose community-based leadership rendered her susceptible to sustained and escalating manifestations of intimidation.

> *"I receive threatening phone calls. Sometimes individuals pretend to be calling from the police and question why I interfere in 'unnecessary matters.' They attempt to intimidate me and discourage my involvement in social issues. On some occasions, they have even threatened my son, implying that harm could come to him… These threats deeply affect me as a mother." — BC02*[54]

In the reported case, the pattern of intimidation transcended the domain of verbal threats, manifesting as overt acts of aggression targeting her home and personal living space.

> *"Recently, a robbery took place at my home. At that time, only my children and I were at home… Valuable items… were stolen. I strongly believe this incident was intended to intimidate me and disrupt my leadership journey." — BC02*[55]

Moreover, her accounts indicated that such acts permeated her daily routines of mobility and public engagement:

54 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
55 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

> *"Even when stones are thrown at my vehicle, I remind myself why I started this journey." — BC02*[56]

The reported intimidation furthermore encompassed her children, thereby illustrating how such aggression leverages familial susceptibility (Andrić and Milašinović 2018, 875).

> *"My son was even slapped by someone… When I called the police, they said it was just an accidental incident… While my daughter was driving, some people recorded a video of her… Because of these kinds of actions, I am even afraid to take legal steps." — BC02*[57]

This highlights a critical dimension of physical intimidation: it is not only about direct harm, but about producing a wider climate of insecurity in which formal protection mechanisms fail. The dismissal of these incidents by authorities further reinforces the perception that women cannot rely on institutional systems for safety when exercising leadership.

Such patterns are consistent with global findings. The (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) reports that women in political leadership frequently face threats of death, rape, beatings, or abduction, with 44% of women parliamentarians worldwide reporting such experiences. These threats function as tools of exclusion, reinforcing the message that leadership is a space in which women are not safe.

Physical intimidation also manifests in everyday professional environments, particularly in male-dominated public spaces. In the sports sector, one respondent described how participation in sports events exposes women to routine physical violation.

> *"You can't go for a cricket match and move out in a crowd without getting groped… I would sit back and wait until everyone goes to leave because otherwise you're going to get groped." — CL07*[58]

56 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
57 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
58 Colombo district, 06 February 2026

Such experiences restrict women's movement within professional spaces, forcing them to alter behaviour, limit engagement, or withdraw altogether. In leadership terms, this can reduce access to visibility, networking, and participation in key public arenas.

In response to the threat of physical violence, some women adopt informal coping strategies that rely on invoking male authority for protection.

> *"I got a politically connected guy… to call and scare [them]… to protect myself." — CL02*[59]

While such strategies may provide temporary safety, they reinforce underlying power asymmetries, where protection is contingent on access to male networks rather than guaranteed through institutional systems.

Historical and contemporary evidence shows that such forms of violence are not new, but embedded within broader patterns of political control. (De Alwis and Jayawardana 2002) document that women participating in protests in Sri Lanka were subjected to direct and severe physical violence. Recalling one such incident, former LSSP Member of Parliament Vivienne Goonewardena described being "thrown… like a sack of potatoes across the room," kicked, and pinned down by a police officer standing with his foot on her stomach. They further note that in subsequent years, women protesting on International Women's Day (1984, 1985, 1986) were repeatedly tear-gassed, baton-charged, and arrested. Similarly, (De Alwis 1998) describes how Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu, who publicly challenged state actors over the murder of her son, was forced to flee the country due to threats to her life. These examples illustrate how physical violence has long been used to silence women who enter public and political spaces.

Contemporary global evidence further reinforces this pattern. (International Women's Development Agency, n.d.) notes that women are often specifically targeted with violence and intimidation when engaging in political activity, with such threats deterring women from entering or continuing in leadership roles. In some contexts, such as in Papua New Guinea, this has escalated to extreme acts such as the burning of homes belonging to women supporting female candidates,

59 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

demonstrating how physical violence can suppress participation at both individual and community levels.

Taken together, these findings show that physical intimidation operates both as an immediate threat and as a structural condition shaping women's leadership trajectories. It restricts mobility, discourages engagement in high-risk roles, and raises the personal cost of leadership to a level that many are unable or unwilling to bear. In doing so, it reinforces gender inequality by ensuring that leadership spaces remain safer and more accessible to men, while women must navigate environments marked by risk, fear, and vulnerability.

The various forms of GBV identified in this chapter, ranging from verbal harassment to physical intimidation, do not exist in isolation but form a "continuum of violence" rooted in "misrecognition" (Lewis, Roberts, and Andrews 2015). Symbolic violence, such as the belittling remarks and sexist jokes described in Section 5.1, is not merely offensive; it serves as a foundational layer that "affects performance and commitment" by signaling to women that they do not belong in leadership (Moodly 2021; Lewis, Roberts, and Andrews 2015). This normalized hostility creates a culture where more overt forms of exclusion and physical threats are seen as a natural extension of the "masculine" institutional environment, rather than as aberrations (Moodly 2021).

Chapter 6

Institutional and Systemic Drivers of GBV

6.1 Institutional Failures and the Production of Impunity

The persistence of GBV against women leaders in Sri Lanka cannot be understood solely as a product of individual behaviour. Rather, it is enabled and sustained by institutional systems that fail to prevent, respond to, or punish such violations. These failures operate across multiple levels, organisational, legal, and political, creating an environment in which perpetrators are protected, survivors are discouraged from reporting, and accountability remains weak. As a result, GBV is not an aberration within institutional life, but a structurally embedded outcome of how these systems function.

One key dimension of this failure lies in the operation of informal power networks that shield perpetrators from accountability. As highlighted in existing literature, institutional environments are often governed by a "boy code," where powerful men operate within tightly knit networks that protect one another, even in the face of serious allegations (Berdahl and Bhattacharyya 2021, 482; Moodly 2021, 10) (Wijesiriwardena 2020) Within such environments, perpetrators act with a high degree of confidence that their actions will not result in meaningful consequences, while those who attempt to challenge them face isolation or retaliation (Berdahl and Bhattacharyya 2021, 482; Täuber et al. 2022, 2339). This dynamic shifts institutions from being sites of governance to spaces of selective protection, where accountability is contingent on one's position within existing power structures.

These patterns are reflected clearly in the experiences of women interviewed for this study, who consistently described reporting mechanisms as ineffective, inaccessible, or actively unsafe. In many cases, formal systems either do not exist or are embedded within the same hierarchies that produce the violence, creating direct conflicts of interest. As one respondent explained:

> *"There is no institutional mechanism for us to speak... especially they are not gender sensitive." – CL03*[60]

60 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

Similarly, even where reporting pathways are formally available, they are undermined by fear of retaliation and professional consequences:

> *"They know where to report, but… they might not come up with them because they are scared they'll be taken revenge from, which might affect their career and their image." – CL01*[61]

This observation suggests a broader pattern in which reporting GBV is often perceived not as a pathway to justice, but as a risk to one's career and social standing. In hierarchical institutions such as universities, this risk appears to be intensified by the overlap between authority and accountability. Individuals responsible for promotions, confirmations, or transfers are often the same individuals implicated in, or connected to, the misconduct itself. Under such conditions, reporting may become professionally dangerous, thereby reinforcing silence as a rational strategy.

This reluctance is not simply individual hesitation, but structurally produced by the design and functioning of complaint mechanisms themselves. As one key informant explained:

> *"Most people actually do not want to complain. They will tell you in formally, but when you ask them to lodge a complaint, they do not want to because the mechanisms are very slow… and women fear reprisals—not just physical violence, but things such as denial of promotions, denial of increments and transfers. Therefore, the reluctance to complain is deeply ingrained because the structures are not set up to protect the person complaining." — KII04*

This highlights that institutional systems do not merely fail to respond to violence; they actively shape the conditions under which reporting becomes risky. When complaint mechanisms are slow, embedded within existing hierarchies, and unable to guarantee protection, they often produce a rational calculation in which silence becomes safer than formal reporting.

61 Colombo district, 21 January 2026

Even when complaints are formally lodged, institutional responses appear to be frequently characterized by inaction or deflection. One respondent described repeatedly seeking assistance from a state authority without any outcome:

> *"I have lodged complaints with the Cyber Crime Division nearly six times, yet no action has been taken to date." – BC01*[62]

Others described how institutions actively suppress complaints in order to preserve their own reputation:

> *Even during my probation period, when I was very junior, I felt that I could not speak to senior people, because they are also connected within the system. I actually had evidence to show that gender-based violations were happening in relation to my work, but the system did not support me. The other members protected the senior person to avoid creating a bad impression about the faculty." — CL03*[63]

In such cases, the priority of the institution shifts from addressing harm to managing its public image. This aligns with documented patterns in which survivors are asked to "keep it quiet" while organisations fail to pursue resolution, effectively transferring the burden of the situation onto the victim (Wijesiriwardena 2020). Rather than acting as sites of protection, institutions become mechanisms for containing and silencing complaints.

The failure of accountability is further reinforced by structural weaknesses within the broader legal system. Literature highlights that judicial processes are often characterised by extreme delays, high evidentiary burdens, and significant financial costs, all of which deter survivors from pursuing formal justice (Verité Research 2023). In some cases, legal proceedings extend over many years, while the requirement to prove cases "beyond reasonable doubt" creates a threshold that is difficult to meet in contexts where evidence is limited or poorly handled (Verité Research 2023).

Compounding this is the weakness of forensic and prosecutorial systems, which further undermine the likelihood of successful outcomes. Estimates (due to the

62 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
63 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

lack of official data) from earlier periods in Sri Lanka indicate that only a very small proportion of sexual violence cases, approximately 3% to 4%, resulted in successful prosecution (UNFPA 2020). This has been attributed to insufficient training among medico-legal officers, improper evidence handling, and failures within court processes (UNFPA 2020). Such low rates of accountability reinforce a perception that reporting violence is unlikely to produce justice, further discouraging survivors from engaging with formal systems.

Institutional failure is also evident in the absence or dysfunction of specialised mechanisms designed to address gender inequality. Respondents noted that units such as Gender Equality Centres, where they exist, are often inactive or limited in scope, focusing primarily on students rather than staff. In other sectors, such as sports, disciplinary bodies have collapsed entirely due to internal conflicts, leaving individuals without any formal avenue for redress. In these contexts, survivors are often forced to escalate complaints to external ministries or authorities, where they face further neglect or dismissal.

Faced with these systemic failures, many women adopt strategies of avoidance rather than engagement. As one respondent explained:

> *"That [complaining] wouldn't have solved the problem, because we also have to stay in this field and have to interact with them." – KD03*[64]

Another noted the futility of attempting to seek institutional support:

> *"No matter how much we speak or shout, the authorities don't pay attention." – CL09*

These responses highlight how institutional environments produce what may appear as individual silence but in reality reflects a rational response to structural conditions. When reporting mechanisms are ineffective, punitive, or unsafe, withdrawal becomes a form of self-protection (DuPont 2020, 20; Fischhoff et al. 2021, 1).

64 Kandy district, 24 October 2026

At the same time, institutional responses to misconduct often prioritise administrative convenience over accountability (Akrap et al. 2025, 19; Cowan et al. 2024, 479). Rather than removing perpetrators, organisations may resort to measures such as transfers, which effectively relocate the problem without addressing its root cause (Täuber et al. 2022) (Datta 2023). As one respondent observed:

> *"Transfer becomes the only punishment… this only protects him and sends the problem somewhere else." – BC01*[65]

Such practices not only fail to deliver justice but also allow patterns of abuse to continue across different locations and institutions (Täuber et al. 2022). In this way, institutional action does not resolve violence but redistributes it (Täuber et al. 2022).

Some institutions also reproduce inequality through the absence of enabling infrastructure (Khalil and Rubin 2020, 114). In several sectors, women are excluded from key roles due to the lack of safety measures such as secure accommodation or transport (Megheirkouni 2014, 72; Duguma et al. 2022, 11). As one government sector leader explained:

> *"Safe accommodation must be provided for us. Because of this, we don't get to gain certain experiences… most of the time, they give those positions to men." – GP02*[66]

Here, the absence of institutional support is used to justify exclusion, rather than prompting structural adaptation. This limits women's access to the kinds of roles, particularly those requiring travel, fieldwork, or irregular hours, that are critical for leadership progression (Liani et al. 2021, 10; Zeinali et al. 2021, 5).

From a Feminist Institutionalist perspective, what appears to be "institutional failure" is actually a "gendered process of institutional continuity". Impunity is not simply a side effect of incompetence, but a structural outcome of an institution designed around patriarchal norms. Inaction by the state is a political choice to preserve existing power settlements" By failing to prosecute perpetrators, the

65 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
66 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026

institution signals that the "power settlement", which favors male dominance and control, remains undisturbed. The police and judiciary too are shaped by patriarchal norms that tolerate or ignore GBV to maintain the status quo. This toleration is often masked by a logic of appropriateness, where officers prioritize "social harmony" or "family preservation" over the formal rights of the woman(Menjívar and Walsh 2017). Even when formal laws are progressive, they are subverted by "informal rules" and practices. For example, the habit of police officers pressuring women to "settle" domestic disputes is an informal rule that ensures the "institutionalization of gender-based violence" within the democratic framework(Quiroga, Cárdenas-Rodríguez, and Terrón-Caro 2023),(Kang and Kim 2024).

The "impunity" and institutional failures documented here are not merely systemic oversights; they function as "informal rules" designed to preserve the patriarchal status quo (Madsen 2021). From a Feminist Institutionalist perspective, when leadership "shuns" or "socially ostracizes" those who report harassment, they are utilizing informal practices to actively "undermine formal gender equality reforms" (Clavero and Galligan 2020). This ensures that despite the existence of formal policies, the "hidden life" of the institution remains unchanged, effectively maintaining existing male power structures by making the cost of reporting prohibitively high for women (Clavero and Galligan 2020; Madsen 2021).

6.2 State Institutions, Law Enforcement Bias and Political Interference

While organisational cultures shape women's experiences within workplaces, the broader state apparatus, including law enforcement, judicial systems, and political structures, plays a decisive role in sustaining gender-based violence (GBV) and constraining women's leadership. These institutions do not operate as neutral mechanisms of protection and accountability; rather, they often reproduce gender inequality through bias, inaction, and the protection of existing power hierarchies.

A central issue emerging from both the literature and interview data is the failure of law enforcement systems to act as effective avenues of redress. Instead, they frequently function as sites of dismissal, intimidation, or even further harm. Research highlights that the Sri Lanka Police themselves have been alleged perpetrators of harassment against women seeking assistance, making the institution a "possible

threat to their safety" and deterring reporting (Verité Research 2023). This erosion of trust is critical, as it prevents women from pursuing justice.

These patterns are reflected in the experiences of women leaders interviewed for this study. One political leader described repeated attempts to seek protection that were met with institutional indifference:

> *"Even when I inform the police, they tend to speak more favourably towards the men involved rather than supporting justice." – BC02*[67]

In another instance, when her son was assaulted, the incident was minimised:

> *"They said it was just an accidental incident." – BC02*[68]

Similarly, another respondent (KD01), reflecting on her experience of harassment through her phone and attempts to seek support, described being questioned in a way that shifted responsibility onto her rather than addressing the perpetrator:

> *"Why do you answer every call that comes?" – KD01*[69]

This illustrates how reporting processes can become sites of victim-blaming, where institutional responses implicitly hold women accountable for the harassment they experience. Such practices discourage reporting and signal that women's safety is not a priority within state systems.

In some cases, law enforcement interactions extend beyond dismissal into more troubling forms of conduct. One respondent described how officers misused professional contact channels to initiate inappropriate communication:

> *"They usually contact me only after 9 PM… to ask for information… to provide additional favours beyond." – BC01*[70]

67 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
68 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
69 Kandy district, 23 October 2025
70 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

This reflects how institutional authority can be informally leveraged to create gendered expectations and exploitative dynamics, further undermining trust in systems meant to provide protection.

Political structures further reinforce these patterns. Interview data indicates that political influence frequently shapes decisions regarding recruitment, promotions, and institutional accountability. One respondent described how leadership opportunities were allocated based on political considerations rather than merit:

> *"They had given that school to someone else based on a different kind of political influence." – TR02*[71]

This reflects a broader pattern in which gender equality initiatives are often subordinated within political systems. Literature suggests that gender reforms frequently face resistance because they require a redistribution of power and resources, and as a result, even when progressive policies exist, they are often weakly implemented or not enforced at all (Domingo et al. 2015).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that GBV and gender inequality are not simply the result of individual actions or organisational cultures but are deeply embedded within the functioning of state institutions. Law enforcement systems discourage reporting, judicial processes obstruct accountability, administrative structures prioritise silence, and political systems reinforce existing power hierarchies; for women leaders, this creates a landscape in which both violence and impunity are structurally normalised, significantly constraining their ability to enter, sustain, and advance within leadership roles.

71 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026

Chapter 7

Intersectional Dimensions of GBV and Leadership

Gender-based violence (GBV) and barriers to leadership do not affect all women uniformly. Existing literature reinforces that workplace harassment and violence are not experienced evenly across populations, but tend to disproportionately affect marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities, migrant workers, youth, and LGBTQI individuals (Verité Research 2023). Similarly, gender-based violence takes identity-specific forms: for instance, it may involve racist abuse for racialised individuals, threats of "outing" for LGBTQI persons, or the removal of assistive devices for persons with disabilities (Graaff 2021, 16; Miles, Johnson and Ball 2022, 4). (Hoare et al. 2009) notes, women's leadership is often evaluated through multiple axes of inequality, class, caste, ethnicity, and education, rendering certain groups of women structurally "unfit" for leadership in the eyes of dominant institutions. Against this backdrop, this chapter examines how intersectionality operates across domains.

Insights from key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with experts in gender, law, academia, and activism further reinforce this intersectional framing. These interviews highlight that intersectionality is not simply an added layer of disadvantage, but a structural condition that determines who can access leadership, who is protected within institutions, and who is exposed to violence without recourse.

7.1 Ethnicity, Religion and Caste

The findings from this study indicate that minority women, particularly Tamil and Muslim women, experience gender discrimination in ways that are intensified by ethnic and religious identity. These forms of marginalisation operate simultaneously through institutional exclusion, social stereotyping, and targeted harassment.

This aligns with broader evidence from Sri Lanka. (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025) show that digital violence against women political leaders in Sri Lanka is often intersectional and weaponises religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity. They describe how Hasanah Cegu Issadeen was targeted through WhatsApp

forwards and memes after being appointed private secretary to Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, with her advocacy for Muslim Marriage and Divorce (MMDA) Act reform distorted into accusations of undermining Islam. They also note that Saroja Paulraj was labelled Islamophobic after advocating for MMDA reform, and Ambika Samuel was sexualised in a poem that fetishised her body, identity, and community's suffering. These examples show that digital character assassination does not operate only through gender, but through multiple axes of social vulnerability.

Similarly, regional data from the (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) shows that women parliamentarians from minority backgrounds experience disproportionately higher rates of psychological and sexual violence compared to their peers: +18 percentage points for psychological violence and +6 percentage points for sexual violence respectively. Women parliamentarians report that their abilities are frequently questioned and that they are subjected to racist and exclusionary language, reinforcing their position as outsiders within political institutions. (IPU 2025) also finds that beyond these quantitative differences, minority women's legitimacy is systematically undermined through racialised and exclusionary narratives. Women interviewed described how their competence is questioned and their achievements dismissed on the basis of identity:

> *"People question my abilities and achievements as a young woman from an ethnic minority. I was told that I only achieved this appointment because of my various connections. I do not fit in with the norm."*

> *"I am subjected to racist attacks, with people calling me a mixed-blood."*

These accounts demonstrate that minority women are not only subjected to higher levels of violence, but are also positioned as outsiders within institutional spaces.

Similar experiences were shared by leaders interviewed for this study too. One respondent described how her identity as a Muslim woman was directly weaponised in political spaces:

> *"They had sent messages to everyone using my name… saying not to vote for Muslim women… [A newspaper] showed a cartoon… implying*

> *that a Muslim woman surrounded by a Sinhalese temple is asking for a 10% commission." – KD05*[72]

Political opposition in this context is not framed through policy disagreement, but rather through communal suspicion and stereotyping. Leadership itself consequently experiences delegitimization through identity-based factors.

Ethnic marginalisation is also evident within Tamil communities, particularly among Upcountry (Indian) Tamil women, who described experiencing exclusion both within majority-Sinhala institutions and within Tamil subgroups:

> *"I belong to an Indian Tamil community… I was not given the opportunity to take up some leadership because of my ethnicity group… I faced discrimination within the minority as well. They didn't want me to get recruited and they also commented on how I speak Tamil." – CL03*[73]

This account further illustrates how for some women, intersectionality manifests across majority–minority divides, as well as within minority groups themselves.

In the banking sector, ethnicity is identified as a factor in career advancement, with one participant (CL02)[74] noting that "promotions in banks are often given to Sinhalese". Furthermore, the participant reported that financial institutions initially "didn't trust" her and blocked her from receiving loans as a female Tamil business owner.

For some women, these structural inequalities are further shaped by historical violence. The legacy of the 1983 riots continues to influence leadership trajectories of some of the women interviewed. One respondent recalled being hidden in a toilet pit as a child to escape being burned alive, an experience that disrupted her education and sense of security (PT01).[75] Another described having to change schools due to the unrest (CL02).[76] These experiences demonstrate how ethnic conflict produces long-term structural disadvantages that shape women's access to education, mobility, and leadership opportunities.

72 Kandy district, 24 October 2025
73 Colombo district, 26 January 2026
74 Colombo district, 26 January 2026
75 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025
76 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

While less overtly discussed, caste continues to operate as a powerful but often unspoken determinant of leadership legitimacy (Esler 2024, 389). One respondent described how caste identification is embedded in everyday social interactions:

> *"In this area, the first two questions people usually ask are: where you are from and who your husband is... By asking where you are from, they can identify your caste." – JN02*

This demonstrates how caste is not simply a background identity, but an active classificatory system that shapes how individuals are evaluated.

The same respondent further explained how caste intersects with gender in leadership contexts:

> *"If a woman is in a leadership position, it is sometimes seen as a weakness. If she also comes from a lower caste background, she may become even more vulnerable to such treatment." – JN02*

Here, caste amplifies gendered perceptions of weakness, producing a compounded form of marginalisation.. Leadership is not only questioned because the individual is a woman, but because she does not represent a socially dominant caste.

In the Sri Lankan context, gender is an "unstable category" that cannot be analyzed in isolation from the co-constitutive factors such as ethnicity, religion, and caste (Hyndman 2008). Intersectionality here is not "additive" (e.g. gender plus ethnicity) but a framework that reveals how these axes of identity "entangle" to create unique everyday realities (Perera et al. 2018). For women from marginalized ethnic or caste groups, GBV is often shaped by "struggles over interethnic justice" and the legacy of conflict, which may render them more vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence or exclusion (Hyndman 2008). These intersecting identities do not just add "layers" of disadvantage; they fundamentally alter the nature of the violence experienced and the institutional responses available, as "caste bigotry" and "ethno-national differences" often override formal gender equality protections (Perera et al. 2018; Hyndman 2008).

7.2 Disability

Women with disabilities emerged as one of the most vulnerable groups within this study, facing intensified forms of discrimination, exploitation, and exclusion.

Literature supports this finding, noting that workplace harassment disproportionately affects individuals from marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities, who experience higher rates of victimisation (Verité Research 2023). Data from the (International Finance Corporation 2022) indicates that 68% of employees with disabilities reported experiencing at least one form of workplace violence or harassment, compared to 61% of all respondents. Similarly, 68% reported workplace bullying compared to 59% overall. These figures demonstrate a broader pattern of heightened vulnerability, even where specific forms of violence may vary.

Similar experiences were reflected in an interview with a leader from the informal private sector who also has a physical disability:

> *He (the taxi driver) was saying things like, "Where are you going dressed so nicely on a holiday?" I said, "Nowhere, just going to my shop" He said, "Let's go for a ride." I said, "No, I get to travel plenty for my work," trying to hide my fear. He said, "I'd like to marry you." I said, "Thank you for the proposal, but I have no intention of marrying." He said, "I'll do all your taxi hires for free, I don't want a cent." I kept talking just to deflect the situation and buy myself time. He then stopped near a garage. There was a piece of iron or something under my seat. As he went to take it, he stroked my leg. I was trying to call someone, a boy who works for me, but he didn't answer… He saw me calling and asked, "Why are you scared? Who are you calling?" I said, "Just a friend." Then he drove into a lane of guest houses. He stopped at one and said, "Let's get down and stay for a while." I said, "Should I call the police?" He said, "Why? Don't you like it? Let's stay." I said, "Drive the vehicle or I will scream." Then he drove off. That road is also deserted on holidays. He asked again, "Are you willing now?". I was absolutely terrified - there was no way I could run, and I had no idea what he was capable of. At the end of it too, while I was handing over the taxi fare, he stroked my hand. He had later told people that I had gone with various people in*

> *his vehicle, and that's why he approached me. He claimed I had gone to hotels twice with an old man. - KD01*[77]

In this case, disability is posited to be not merely incidental but actively exploited; the respondent's inability to physically escape contributes to heightened vulnerability, while the perpetrator uses isolation and coercion to escalate the situation.

This pattern is further reinforced by expert perspectives, which highlight how intersectionality operates as a structural barrier to leadership itself. One key informant, a senior university academic (KII01), underscored the significant absence of women with intersecting marginalised identities in leadership:

> *"Especially if you are a woman with a disability, and when I say women with disabilities, I don't only mean visible disabilities. Visible disability is almost nil. There is not a single visually impaired female professor in our system that I know of. I think there are a couple of male professors, but not a single visually impaired female professor that I have ever come across. Not as a head, not as a professor, and never as a dean or as a vice chancellor." - KII01*

This reflects not only discrimination but the structural narrowing of leadership pipelines. Leadership is not equally accessible across identities; rather, it is filtered through institutional norms that privilege dominant ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities.

Intersectionality in this context is not simply an "additional layer" of bias but a multifaceted confluence of risks. For women with disabilities, GBV often functions as a "punishment" for transgressing both gender and ability norms (Graaff 2021). Their "societal precarity", frequently characterized by dependence on potential abusers for mobility or care, creates "unique risk factors for extreme violence" that are qualitatively different from the experiences of non-disabled women (Graaff 2021). Institutional protections must therefore move beyond generalities to address how these intersecting vulnerabilities are specifically weaponized to enforce silence and exclusion (Graaff 2021).

77 Kandy district, 23 October 2025

7.3 Other Intersections

Socio-economic marginalization also intersects with gender, particularly in rural and estate sectors, where economic necessity can override social norms. Women from lower-income backgrounds often face additional barriers related to education, class identity, and access to networks which collectively shape perceptions of leadership suitability (International Women's Development Agency 2018) (Hahn 2023).

In her interview, CL06[78] explained that senior government officers are entitled to official vehicles, drivers, and fuel allowances. However, she noted that some women opt to take the vehicle allowance as additional income instead of using it for transport, which can lead to less secure travel arrangements. She also stated that modes of transport can affect perceptions of authority, noting that arriving in a three-wheeler, for example, may not project the same image as arriving in an official vehicle. This highlights how socio-economic conditions of leaders shape secure travel and authority.

Gender identity also emerges as a critical axis of vulnerability. (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025) document how Sri Lanka's first openly transgender election candidate, Chanu Nimesha, faced sustained transphobic and homophobic abuse. Her experience reflects what the authors describe as "triple marginalization"—being transgender, female-presenting, and politically active—a demonstration how multiple identities intensify exposure to violence.

Finally, cultural practices surrounding widowhood impose serious restrictions on women's autonomy (Maluleke 2017, 14; Baloyi 2017, 3). Respondents (CL02 and PT01)[79] [80] who had experienced widowhood described expectations that widows wear specific clothing and withdraw from public life ("must stay in a corner of the house for four months and ten days") which make it very difficult to sustain leadership roles and engage in economic activity.

78 Colombo district, 03 February 2026
79 Colombo district, 26 January 2026
80 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

The study also reveals that access to justice is not uniform, but shaped by language, class, and geography.

Language barriers function as a form of institutional exclusion, particularly for Tamil-speaking women:

> *"I filed a complaint in Batticaloa… they tell you to go to Colombo, and even if you go, you must explain everything in Sinhala. Because of such difficulties, many victims do not even file complaints." – BC01*[81]

This demonstrates how state systems can reproduce inequality through linguistic dominance, effectively discouraging reporting.

Economic status also plays a critical role. Women with greater financial resources are better able to navigate unsafe environments(Gilow 2016) (Useche et al. 2024):

> *"Women who are economically stable tend to experience fewer forms of discrimination… when I go on a motorbike, people speak more harshly… when I go in a car, they are more polite." – JN01*[82]

Here, class operates as a protective factor, shaping both exposure to violence and the ability to mitigate it(Jensen et al. 2021).

Access to justice is also deeply stratified along socio-economic and identity lines(Ouma and Chege 2016) (Jiménez and González 2024). As one key informant (KII04) explained, arginalized identities directly shape whether women are able to seek redress at all:

> *"If you are a poor woman, you wouldn't even think of going to the police. You think you have no right to access the system, and that when you go there, they are not going to treat you with respect. Poverty makes you almost invisible in the eyes of these state structures." – KII04*

81 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
82 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

Structural vulnerability is particularly acute for women in informal and arginalized sectors(Ogando, Roever, and Rogan 2017) (Rhodes, Parvez, and Harvey 2017); as the same key informant (KII04) noted:

> *"Women in the informal sector, agricultural sector, or low-income contexts have no protection. They don't have EPF, ETF, proper salaries, or institutional safeguards. They have no protection and are vulnerable. I would say that those are some of the sectors where violence is most pronounced." – KII04*

This reinforces that socio-economic arginalizedon is not only about limited opportunity, but about heightened exposure to violence and the absence of institutional protection—factors that significantly constrain leadership participation (International Women's Development Agency, n.d.) (Hoare et al. 2009).

The ability to respond to or withstand violence is also unevenly distributed (Zimmermann 2023). As another key informant (KII03) explained, women's responses to violence depend heavily on both internal and external forms of power:

> *"It depends on the amount of privilege the person has, the amount of protection they have, and whether they feel they have access to remedies. Some women may feel secure enough to push back, while others may not feel they have any options at all. So whether violence silences a woman or pushes her forward depends on these factors." – KII03*

This highlights that resilience is not simply an individual trait, but structurally conditioned (Nadat and Jacobs 2021) (Zimmermann 2023). Women with greater institutional backing, financial security, or social capital are better positioned to resist or absorb violence, while others may be forced to withdraw from leadership spaces (Shamieh and Bastian 2025).

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that gender inequality in leadership cannot be understood in isolation. Women's experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of power that produce differentiated risks, constraints, and opportunities. Intersectionality reveals that disadvantage is not simply additive but compounded. Ethnicity, caste, disability, class, and language interact to intensify exclusion, shaping both exposure to violence and access to leadership pathways.

These dynamics have direct implications for policy. Interventions that treat women as a homogeneous group risk benefiting only those who are already relatively privileged, while leaving the most arginalized behind. Understanding the intersectional nature of GBV is therefore essential to understanding the uneven landscape of women's leadership in Sri Lanka: where barriers are not only structural, but stratified.

Chapter 8

Impact of GBV on Women's Leadership

Across the interviews conducted for this study, GBV emerges as a force that shapes women's leadership pathways at every stage: whether they are able to enter leadership, how they perform once they are there, and whether they are able to remain without burning out, withdrawing, or being forced out. GBV narrows women's choices, changes their behaviour, restricts their mobility, limits their authority, and alters the costs of leadership itself.

8.1 Entry into Leadership

At the point of entry, GBV and gendered expectations operate as gatekeeping mechanisms. Women are discouraged from entering certain fields, filtered out through recruitment bias, controlled by family or intimate partners, and in some cases exposed to predatory demands in exchange for opportunity (McCarry et al. 2023, 226; Dutz et al. 2023). This shows that women do not enter leadership on the same terms as men; they are often required to first negotiate social permission, institutional suspicion, or sexualised gatekeeping (Sommerlad 2016; Moodly 2021).

This is consistent with wider literature on women's leadership, particularly in politics (Aiuchi 2003). The (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) notes that violence against women in politics and parliaments violates women's human and political rights and remains a major obstacle to parity in political life, with a deterrent effect on both individual and collective political participation. The report further notes that such violence can deter young women from entering politics and can lead women already in office to give up politics because they can no longer bear the danger, exhaustion, and pressure (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025).

Key informant interviews reinforced this point. One expert described violence in politics as a major reason women are reluctant to engage in party politics, especially because election campaigning has historically been associated with high levels of violence. She also noted that while physical violence may now be less dominant in some contexts, digital violence has become a more convenient way of targeting women.

> *"Violence in relation to politics is also one of the main reasons that women have been reluctant to engage in political activity… particularly party politics. The kind of violence has evolved and changed from physical violence… what we have now is perhaps less physical violence and more digital violence because they've also found easier ways of targeting women." — KII04*

The study's interviews show similar dynamics outside politics. Women entering fields perceived as "tough" or masculine are often made to feel out of place before their careers even begin (Andersen 2024; Hersh 2021). For example, one woman engineer was questioned on her first day at university about why, as a woman, she had chosen the field. Such remarks appear minor, but they function as early signals that women's presence in certain sectors is exceptional and must be justified.

In some cases, access to professional entitlements is sexualised (Guillén, Kakarika, and Heflick 2023; Sommerlad 2016). One senior teacher seeking a transfer described a predatory interaction with a politician who implied that the transfer could be "fixed" if she came alone to meet him.

> *"Then he speaks and says, 'I am the Councilor [name redacted] calling'… he asked details like, 'Where are you?' and I felt he was trying to be friendly, and this wasn't going to be good… he said, 'Come, let's talk'… 'Now you come to meet me to get it fixed.' I said, 'Fine, I will come with my father,' and he said, 'No, no, that's not what I mean, you come alone one day to meet me.' Then I realised he was hinting at something improper. 'You are very beautiful,' he told me things like that." — PT04*[83]

This example shows how entry into or movement within professional systems can be mediated through sexualised access to powerful men. The issue is not only harassment, but the conversion of administrative authority into a predatory gatekeeping mechanism.

The sports sector provides a similar pattern. (Vasudevan 2025) documents that in 2015, women cricketers were reportedly asked to perform sexual favours to gain places on the national team, with at least one player dropped after refusing sex with

83 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

cricket officials. A three-member committee headed by a retired Supreme Court judge found evidence of sexual harassment by two officials and improper conduct by another. Although Sri Lanka Cricket removed the officials, (Vasudevan 2025) notes that the scandal discouraged women from pursuing cricket at the highest level and stalled the momentum of the women's team for much of the following decade.

This is mirrored in the interview data, where women's participation in organised sport, which is often the pathway to leadership in team sports, was treated as not taken seriously or deemed useless.

> *"Even registering a girls' cricket team was a very big challenge for us… Some people even said that registering a girls' team in a club was useless… Even after we prepared and submitted all the required documents for registration, it took almost three years for the process to be completed. Only after that were we able to officially register and form a ladies' cricket team." — JN03*[84]

Here, institutional delay and belittling attitudes operate together. The barrier is not only bureaucratic; it reflects a judgement that women's sporting participation is not worth institutional investment.

Family and intimate relationships also shape entry into leadership. One respondent was selected for university, but her parents allowed only her brothers to study. Years later, on the day of her Law College exam, her husband prevented her from sitting for the exam because their daughter was sick (CL02).[85] Another respondent resigned from a prestigious post at an INGO early in her career because her boyfriend's suspicion, emotional pressure, and threats of self-harm forced her to relocate.

> *"During this period, my boyfriend became suspicious and doubted me, believing that I might be involved in another relationship in the district I was working in. This led to frequent conflicts, which I experienced as emotional distress and a form of violence… He repeatedly asked me to leave my job and move here. At one point, he threatened suicide, which*

84 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026
85 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

> *added further pressure and emotional strain. Ultimately, due to this situation, I resigned from my job and moved here." — JN01*[86]

This illustrates how intimate partner control can redirect a woman's entire leadership trajectory before it develops. The loss is not only personal; it is institutional and professional, because a woman with leadership potential is pushed out of a pathway through coercive emotional pressure.

Religious institutions also structure entry into leadership through formalised gender hierarchy (Yih 2023; Naidoo 2016). A respondent who is both a retired education sector leader and Catholic nun described how women may be present and active, but the highest forms of authority remain male.

> *"In our Church assembly, there is a space at the highest level reserved for Bishops. Women are not given leadership roles there. Sisters are always present and are not necessarily 'under' the male clergy, but this is how it works in practice. No one really speaks up. All leadership roles are held by the Fathers, and every head position goes to them. Even though we have a network called 'CMARS'... the CMARS itself falls under the Bishops' Conference." — PT05*[87]

This shows that the exclusion of women from leadership is not always informal or hidden. In some institutional settings, women's subordinate leadership position is built into the structure itself (Yih 2023; Naidoo 2016).

A key informant similarly noted that women's entry into politics in Sri Lanka has historically been shaped by widowhood or substitution for male relatives, rather than by women's independent political legitimacy.

> *"Most women who went to parliament, they went as widows, either as a widow or to replace the male family member... it took the husbands to unfortunately die for them to be able to come forward and take on that role." — KII02*

86 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026
87 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

This observation is important because it shows that even when women enter leadership, their entry is often mediated through male absence, family lineage, or exceptional circumstance. Women's leadership is therefore permitted more easily when it is framed as continuation of male authority, rather than independent political ambition.

From a Feminist Institutionalist perspective, entry into leadership is not a neutral process but a challenge to an existing power settlement. Institutions operate under a "gendered logic of appropriateness," which dictates that leadership is a masculine domain; consequently, women's entry is often perceived as a disruption to the institutional status quo (Mackay and Waylen 2009). In this context, GBV, particularly in the form of sexual bribery and character assassination, functions as a mechanism of "gatekeeping". Even when formal rules (such as quotas) allow women entry, the institution often adapts by "simultaneously disadvantaging the newcomers" through informal sites of power (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). GBV thus serves as a policing tool to ensure that those who threaten the masculine norm are either excluded or entered under terms that reinforce their subordination (Mackay and Waylen 2009; Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010).

8.2 GBV as a Barrier to Performing in Leadership

Once women enter leadership, GBV continues to shape how they perform authority. Women leaders are not only expected to do the work of leadership; they must also manage reputational risk, exclusion from informal power networks, and constant scrutiny of their conduct (Davidson 2018; Mukherjee and Krammer 2024).

Review by (Hoare et al. 2009) on women's leadership notes that women decision-makers often face a lack of respect for their decisions because of stereotypical assumptions that men should be the ones making decisions. In one survey cited by Oxfam, 70% of women respondents identified lack of respect for women's decisions as the principal difficulty facing women decision-makers; other difficulties included needing to prove themselves more than men, household obligations, and discrimination in political parties.

The interviews conducted for this study show how this lack of respect operates in practice. Much of the real decision-making in some sectors occurs in informal

male-dominated spaces, such as late-night drinking sessions, from which women are culturally or practically excluded (Davidson 2018). This means women may formally hold positions, but decisions are shaped elsewhere, leaving them to endorse or implement outcomes they did not meaningfully influence.

Women interviewed also described the need to adopt defensive leadership styles to survive. Some cultivate a reputation as an "Iron Lady" or "Touch Me Not" in order to signal unapproachability to harassers. Others avoid being alone with male colleagues, bring husbands to meetings, or carefully manage their speech and behaviour to prevent gossip. These are not simply individual personality choices, but can be viewed as adaptations to unsafe and gendered institutional environments (Grangeiro, Silva, and Esnard 2021; Patel et al. 2020).

A key informant captured this balancing act clearly:

> *"Generally, I think for women to be able to get to a leadership position, in some ways she has to be liked or favoured... it is very difficult for a woman to get to a leadership position based purely on talent... Do the men around you or the higher-ups like you? Do they feel threatened by you? Men feel very threatened by smart women... So it is only someone who plays that role very carefully... there is a certain balancing act that women have to do if they don't want to upset the men in the system." — KII01*

This shows that women's performance in leadership is shaped by the need to manage male discomfort. Competence alone is not sufficient; women must also navigate whether their competence is perceived as threatening.

GBV also affects performance by limiting access to high-value experience. In the public sector, one respondent (GP02)[88] explained that women are excluded from examination-related roles because such roles require overnight stays and irregular hours, while institutions fail to provide safe accommodation. This shows how GBV risk and institutional failure interact. Rather than providing safe facilities, institutions treat women's exclusion as the practical solution. As a result, men

88 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026

accumulate experience while women are left without the exposure needed for further advancement.

GBV also changes how women behave in leadership roles. The (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) found that among women parliamentarians who experienced violence, 63% said they had been deeply affected and suffered, while 50% felt isolated and abandoned. Some reported changing their behaviour: "I became a silent person because of this harassment," and "I limit my interactions with my male colleagues; I avoid being alone with them."

This directly connects to the findings of this study. Women leaders described avoiding certain interactions, moderating their speech, and becoming defensive because leadership itself exposes them to harassment. The result is not only emotional harm, but a narrowing of leadership practice. Women may remain in office, but their authority is exercised under constraint.

The literature on workplace sexual harassment further supports this. (Dewdunee and Alwis 2023) note that sexual harassment can lead to physical and mental health consequences, marital problems, career interruptions, reduced promotion opportunities, lower pay, forced job changes, unemployment, reduced willingness to collaborate, work avoidance, and resignation. These effects show that GBV alters both professional functioning and institutional participation.

The ability of women to perform in leadership roles is fundamentally constrained by the institution's refusal to recognize GBV as a structural rather than an individual issue. Following (Campbell, n.d.), the act of identifying and naming the violence women face in the workplace is a "political act" because it challenges the institutional "ontology" that ignores gender-specific harm. Institutions often resist this by "de-politicizing" violence, framing it as an isolated "domestic" or "personal" conflict to avoid the transformative change required to address it. This de-politicization forces women into a state of "defensive adaptation," where their leadership performance is undermined by the constant need to navigate a "socially sanctioned" environment of impunity. By treating GBV as a permissible byproduct of professional life, the institution effectively maintains its patriarchal power settlement.

8.3 Retention, Burnout, and Exit

The most severe impact of GBV is not only that it makes leadership difficult, but that it pushes women out. Exit can take several forms: formal resignation; withdrawal from leadership contests, refusal of promotions; self-censorship; avoidance of public visibility, or physical and psychological burnout.

The interviews show that the double burden and lack of institutional support are central to this process. Institutions often fail to accommodate women's domestic responsibilities, including childcare, transfers, and weekend work. One lecturer noted that her male colleague earned more because he could work weekends, while she could not; over time, this led her to consider settling for a lower or "inferior" job simply to find happiness. This is not a lack of ambition, but a response to conditions that make advancement exhausting and unsustainable.

The physical toll can be severe. One school leader described experiencing a stress-induced temporary paralysis after decades of balancing professional labour, three children, and an unsupportive domestic environment (GP04).[89] This demonstrates that the cumulative burden of leadership under gendered conditions can become bodily harm.

Women also exit or avoid leadership to protect their families from reputational violence. One university Head of Department declined to contest for Dean because she anticipated that opponents would attack her character and reputation. Another leader resigned to focus on her children after her husband used social media to assassinate her character during divorce. In both cases, withdrawal was not simply personal preference; it was a protective response to gendered harm.

The literature supports this pattern. (Verité Research 2023) defines harassment as part of a continuum of sex discrimination that diminishes life chances and opportunities, noting that some women leave jobs or careers because of harassment, which can place them in socially and economically disadvantaged positions and increase vulnerability to further violence.

89 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026

Similarly, Fonseka (2020), writing on #MeToo in Sri Lankan workplaces, describes how fear of job insecurity, victim-shaming, discrimination, and loss of confidence in legal redress force people facing sexual harassment to continue working under the same roof as harassers, "suffering in silence every single day." The workplace then becomes discouraging rather than enabling, producing losses such as reduced productivity, lost time, turnover, and legal costs.

Key informants made the same point more directly. One expert noted that women's coping strategies often involve tolerating harm or removing themselves from the institution, precisely because formal structures are patriarchal and sexist and may revictimise them.

> *"Some women might even use strategies which adversely impact them, like leaving a job because they're facing sexual harassment… some end up really adversely affecting other aspects of their life, like livelihood, like career, because the way that women try to cope is just to tolerate it or to remove themselves. Very few would actually push back or complain because the structures are patriarchal and sexist, and the victim will most often get re-victimized." — KII04*

The "boy code" described in Sri Lankan #MeToo literature further demonstrates how institutional protection of perpetrators produces forced exit. In the case discussed by (Wijesiriwardena 2020), Mihiri de Silva described a "boy code" operating at senior levels. She ultimately quit her job, saying she was leaving a job she loved and "curtailing" her career for something she had not done. The source interprets this not as an isolated incident, but as part of a culture where powerful men have impunity and confidence that they will be protected by their own.

Exit can also occur through public humiliation. In the sports sector, one umpire stopped attending matches after spectators commented on her body shape and described it (JN03).[90] This is a clear example of how harassment can remove women from professional spaces without any formal dismissal.

90 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

Digital violence also produces withdrawal through self-censorship (Guntrum, Nuñez, and Reuter 2025). One key informant explained that social media harassment affects not only political expression but also women's willingness to narrate their own lives and experiences..

> *"What we were talking about when it comes to social media is self-censorship. And self-censorship applies at another level in art and culture… women do not talk about their own lives. Their life experiences, autobiographies are not coming out… they do not want to be associated with these issues… So that is also GBV." - KII02*

This expands the understanding of exit beyond resignation. Women may remain physically present in institutions, but withdraw their voice, reduce their visibility, and limit risk, and self-censorship is therefore a leadership impact because it restricts public presence and knowledge production.

Burnout and exit among women leaders are not merely personal failures of resilience but are outcomes of "institutional resistance" to reform (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). Feminist Institutionalism suggests that institutions have "deeply rooted" mechanisms of reproduction that act to preserve their original masculine design (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). When women exit due to a hostile environment, it is often a result of "institutional continuity" - the system's way of ensuring that its gendered power settlements remain undisturbed. The violence that leads to their exit is a functional tool used by "institutional enforcers" (male elites) to prove the patriarchal claim that women are "unfit" for power, thereby reinforcing the status quo (Mackay and Waylen 2009). Thus, the "revolving door" for women in leadership is a deliberate, though often informal, institutional strategy to limit the possibilities of actual gendered change (Mackay and Waylen 2009; Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010).

8.4 GBV as a Structural Constraint on Leadership Pathways

Taken together, the findings show that GBV affects leadership not only through individual trauma, but through the restructuring of women's pathways. It shapes entry by deterring women from certain sectors and exposing them to gatekeeping; it shapes performance by forcing defensive adaptations and limiting access to

informal power; and it shapes retention by producing burnout, self-censorship, and exit.

(International Women's Development Agency, n.d.) argues that violence against women in leadership is designed to control, limit, or prevent women's full and equal participation. In politics, this violence can be motivated by the desire to intimidate politically active women, deter women who may consider entering politics, and communicate to society that women should not participate in public life (International Women's Development Agency, n.d.). This is highly relevant to the present study, where the effects of GBV extend beyond the individual woman to others watching her experience. Young women's aspirations can be dampened by seeing how women already in leadership are treated.

(Hoare et al. 2009) similarly notes that restrictions on women's mobility, whether cultural, legal, or arising from fear of violence and harassment, make it difficult for women to travel to meetings, forums, or campaign spaces. For women living in poverty, risks connected to disability, HIV, and GBV further compound their inability to participate equally. This aligns with the findings of this study, where women's mobility, public presence, and professional advancement are repeatedly shaped by fear, reputation, care responsibilities, and institutional neglect.

The impact of GBV on leadership is therefore cumulative. A single incident may cause immediate harm, but repeated exposure creates anticipatory behaviour: women avoid meetings, decline promotions, refuse travel, withdraw from public platforms, soften their speech, or leave institutions altogether. These are not isolated coping strategies; they are the mechanisms through which GBV reshapes the leadership landscape.

In this sense, GBV functions as a system of regulation. It determines who enters leadership, how women perform once inside, and who is able to remain. Its impact is visible not only in those who leave, but also in those who stay while narrowing themselves to survive. Therefore, addressing women's leadership in Sri Lanka requires treating GBV not as a separate "safety" issue, but as a core structural barrier to equal leadership.

Through the lens of Feminist Institutionalism, GBV can be defined as a structural constraint that "re/produces broader social and political gender expectations" (Mackay and Waylen 2009). By functioning as a mechanism that punishes women for their public visibility, GBV reinforces the informal rule that a woman's "proper place" is the private, domestic sphere. This creates a binary where the public sphere remains a supportive site for masculine leadership while acting as a restrictive site for women's agency. Ultimately, the systematic use or tolerance of GBV in leadership pathways is not an "impact" of a failing system but a core component of the "systematic construction of gender disparity" within state and professional institutions (Kang and Kim 2024). It ensures that even if women gain formal rights, the "logic of appropriateness" continues to prioritize patriarchal control over gender equality (Mackay and Waylen 2009).

Chapter 9

Coping Strategies and Responses

Women leaders in this study do not exhibit uniform response patterns to gender-based violence (GBV). Their responses range from silence, avoidance, and tactical compliance to direct confrontation, reporting, collective organising, spiritual grounding, and public resistance. A common denominator among these strategies is their infrequent selection under conditions of full safety or institutional trust. They are usually developed because women are required to survive within systems that do not reliably protect them. Consequently, coping mechanisms should not be conflated with definitive resolution. It often reflects women's intelligence, courage, and adaptability, but it also exposes the degree to which institutions transfer the burden of safety onto women themselves.

9.1 The Individual

9.1.1 Strategic Silence and Avoidance

Analysis of the interview data reveals a consistent pattern wherein women frequently employ avoidance, not as an indication of passivity, but rather as a product of calculated decision-making within environments characterised by insecurity. This includes avoiding closed-door meetings, blocking suspicious calls, dropping courses, refusing leadership positions, or choosing not to report harassment because the consequences may be worse than the original harm.

In professional settings, avoidance can be highly spatial and deliberate. CL05[91] described arranging her office so that she does not meet men she distrusts in an isolated corner. Instead, she moves the meeting closer to the entrance, keeps the door open, and calls another woman into the room if necessary. This illustrates how women strategically reconfigure conventional workspaces into protective environments, owing to the institutional inability to guarantee safety.

91 Colombo district, 29 January 2026

CL08 described a similar practice:

> *"Say there's someone coming into your room to talk to you about work, but he's someone you feel a little unsafe around, then I will ask someone else first to come into the room. Or we leave the room and just go to an open area and talk… It is not always because I feel that he might do something to me. It is also sometimes because I don't want to hear any stories about me and him going around." — CL08*

This observation is significant, as the respondent navigates a dual-risk dynamic: the possibility of harm and the possibility of reputational damage. Her concern is not only what the man may do, but what others may say as well. Avoidance therefore becomes a strategy for managing both violence and surveillance.

In academic settings, women also avoided certain educational pathways when male authority figures posed discomfort or risk. TR02 described dropping a subject during her Master's degree because a lecturer asked her to meet him alone in his room.

> *"While I was pursuing my Master's degree, a lecturer asked me to select his subject. Later, one day he asked me to come and meet him alone in his room. I felt very uncomfortable… So I dropped that subject… Later, I resumed my studies by selecting a subject that did not require research, because if I had chosen a research subject, I would have had to meet him again." — TR02*[92]

This is not a minor academic adjustment. It shows how harassment or the anticipation of harassment can redirect women's intellectual and professional development (Trawalter et al. 2021; Lindquist and McKay 2018). The respondent avoided a research pathway not because she lacked ability, but because that pathway required continued contact with a man she did not feel safe around.

KD03[93] similarly described navigating an examiner who controlled her academic progression. She felt he was deliberately trying to fail her and create situations

92 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026
93 Kandy district, 24 October 2026

in which she would be alone with him, but she also felt unable to confront him because she needed him to pass.

> *"I couldn't get away from it because I needed him to pass me… I used to go with a friend when I had to talk to him, and I always pretended as if I didn't understand what he was trying to do." — KD03*[94]

Her response was not formal complaint but strategic survival: going with a friend, pretending not to understand, staying alert, and completing the task quickly. She later explained that when a similar male supervisor offered to drop her home after a late meeting, she arranged for other people, including another man, to accompany her.

> *"One day a similar male supervisor wanted to drop me home after a late meeting. I had to be smart and quickly asked another couple of people including a male colleague to come with me… I didn't directly tell them why I was asking them to join me. Acknowledging it openly to them would have also caused problems, because if they don't have good intentions they could have spread rumours about me and the supervisor." — KD03*[95]

This shows the double-bind women face: silence protects them from gossip, but silence also protects the system. Speaking is risky because the woman may be disbelieved, blamed, or sexualised. Not speaking allows her to survive, but at a cost . The literature reinforces this interpretation. Satkunanathan (2021) argues that women's silence must be understood in relation to fear, class position, victim-blaming, and the failure of those with a duty of care. Similarly, Amarasuriya's comments on the limits of #MeToo in Sri Lanka caution against assuming that women who do not publicly speak are protecting perpetrators; women make complex choices about how, where, and why they speak, shaped by the risks around them.

Blocking communication was another practical strategy. BC01[96] blocked an unknown number after receiving sexualised digital harassment, including nude

94 Kandy district, 24 October 2026
95 Kandy district, 24 October 2026
96 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

photos, videos, and video calls. However, when she reported it, police told her to unblock the number so they could track the caller. Another respondent (CL02)[97] blocked a number after receiving a call proposing that a tax-related issue at the business she oversees could be solved if she were to spend a weekend with the caller at a popular holiday destination in Sri Lanka. While ostensibly a straightforward action, blocking communication assumes the function of a protective measure in contexts characterized by inadequate or delayed institutional support.

Avoidance also appears in decisions to decline leadership itself. PT05, a retired education sector leader and Catholic nun, described refusing a leadership role because she knew the community was not ready to accept a nun's leadership and would create rumours linking her to the senior male priest.

> *"I was asked to take leadership in this centre. I told the Father, 'Oh no, I won't take it; even if I can, I won't.' I told him directly that the people in our Church are still not ready for a Sister's leadership. It would be a big problem for him too if he gave me that position, because they could create stories about us without understanding that he had no bad intentions."*
> *— PT05*[98]

This is a particularly important form of coping because it shows withdrawal as reputational protection. This perspective suggests an absence of self-perceived incapacity, positing instead that the prevailing social environment would transform her appointment into a source of public criticism.

JN01 also described a withdrawal after her former husband spread defamatory statements about her to colleagues, her head office, media institutions, and social media platforms.

> *"After the divorce, my former husband began spreading defamatory statements about me on social media… At that time, I used to appear as a guest speaker on talk shows. He sent letters to those media institutions about me. After that, for some time, they stopped inviting me to their programs. In many places, my character was assassinated. During that period, I was emotionally broken. Because of this, I decided to step away*

97 Colombo district, 26 January 2026
98 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025

> *from leadership roles for a while and focus only on my personal life and on raising my children." — JN01*[99]

In this instance, coping manifests as a strategic disengagement. This decision, while inherently protective, simultaneously elucidates the efficacy of character assassination as a mechanism for leadership suppression.

9.1.2 Safety Practices

Many women's coping strategies involve creating witnesses. They keep doors open, call another woman into the room, or move conversations into public areas. These strategies are practical, but they also show how women are required to create their own protection systems inside institutions.

One respondent stated:

> *"I am cautious. If I need to meet a male colleague, I prefer to have another female staff member present or speak in an open setting." — TR01*[100]

CL08 shared a similar strategy, saying if she has to have a discussion with a man she feels unsafe around, that she will first ask someone to come into the room.

CL05[101] similarly created a personal rule of never travelling alone with men for work and not sharing personal matters with male colleagues. Over time, she became known in her company as "touch me not," a label that functioned as a protective boundary. This kind of reputation-building is strategic. It prevents some forms of harassment, but it also requires women to become permanently guarded.

CL02[102] described using indirect communication in threatening situations. Rather than speak directly, she sometimes asks someone else to speak for her, including politically or militarily connected men. This is a form of borrowed authority. It

99 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026
100 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026
101 Colombo district, 29 January 2026
102 Colombo district, 26 January 2026

protects her in the immediate situation, but it also reveals that women's own authority is often insufficient to secure safety.

KII04 described similar everyday vigilance as something women carry constantly:

> *"Fear of GBV is something that women all over the world face, of all ages, and that is something that remains in the back of their minds and perhaps unconsciously colours and controls many of the decisions they make. Even what time you go out on the street, whether you take a taxi or not, whether you take a taxi late and then what you do for protection, like messaging someone your location—these are things that men would never think to do that women do." — KII04*

This insight is important because it locates coping not only in crisis moments but in everyday decision-making. Women's movement, timing, transport, routes, and communication are shaped by anticipated violence.

The (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, n.d.) guidance on workplace GBV similarly recognises the need for practical safety supports, including changing work phone numbers or email addresses, buddy systems for walking to vehicles or transit stops, accommodations, and workplace safety plans. However, in the interviews, many of these supports are not institutionally provided; women improvise them privately.

9.1.3 Personal Resilience

Respondents also described internal coping strategies: meditation, yoga, prayer, self-reflection, motivational media, and self-discipline. These strategies helped women preserve mental health and continue functioning under stress.

CL03 described using yoga, meditation, walking, and reflection:

> *"Whenever I'm down, I go for a walk, engage in some physical activity, or go for some meditation… I'm most into meditation to balance my mental health. I do yoga too. It's a good way to maintain my mental peace." — CL03*[103]

PT05 described religious discernment as the basis of her leadership autonomy:

> *"I believe that I am only truly obedient when my decisions are guided by God's discernment. If I feel something is right and just, I try to discuss it. But often, there is no space for dialogue—they simply impose their views. When I try to engage, it is seen as disobedience. In such situations, I believe the fault is not mine. If there is no room for discussion, I make my decision and move forward with it, even if it is interpreted as disobedience." — PT05*[104]

This is a particularly nuanced strategy. She does not reject obedience altogether; she redefines it through conscience and discernment. In a religious institution where women's assertion may be labelled disobedience, spiritual reasoning becomes a way to legitimise autonomous leadership (Manyonganise 2023). TR02[105] similarly described her position as a responsibility entrusted by God and expressed determination to continue serving society.

Other women leaders used motivation and self-talk. JN01 watched success stories and motivational videos. JN03[106] listened to motivational speeches, went out to eat, and called a friend, while still acknowledging that stress remained difficult to overcome.

Work by the (International Women's Development Agency 2018) similarly found that women leaders looked inward for support, using self-talk, positive thinking, learning from mistakes, hobbies, physical exercise, and mental detachment as harm-minimisation strategies.

103 Colombo district, 26 January 2026
104 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025
105 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026
106 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

However, resilience should not be romanticised. Women's strength is real, but constantly requiring women to be strong can become another burden (Woods-Giscombé 2010; Jones et al. 2025). Personal resilience helps women survive, but it does not replace institutional responsibility. To elaborate, while the "grit" and "coping" described by participants are remarkable, it is critical to redefine resilience through a structural lens to avoid the trap of "victim-blaming." Resilience should not be viewed as an inherent personal trait, but rather as the "sum of material, human, social, and environmental resources" available to an individual (Zimmermann 2023). When women leaders are forced to exit their roles or struggle to cope, it must be analyzed as a failure of the institutional safety net and a lack of distributed resources, rather than a lack of individual courage (Zimmermann 2023). Framing resilience as a resource-dependent state shifts the focus back to the institution's responsibility to provide the necessary support structures for survival (Zimmermann 2023).

9.1.4 The Performance of Invulnerability and Vulnerability

Some women coped by deliberately creating a strong, even intimidating, public persona. BC03[107] stated that people call her an "Iron Lady" because she refuses to tolerate GBV and consciously projects strength.

> *"People often describe me as an 'Iron Lady.' I do not tolerate disrespectful or harassing behavior... When I speak to others, I maintain a firm tone and confident body language. I consciously create the impression that I am a strong woman. This is something I learned from some difficult experiences in my past." — BC03*[108]

CL05[109] similarly created a "touch me not" reputation at work, describing that male colleagues know not to try to touch her. She elaborated that she sets clear boundaries, avoids personal confidences with men, and never travels alone with men for work.

107 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
108 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
109 Colombo district, 29 January 2026

KII03 described a similar strategy as "walking like I own the place":

> *"When I walk, I walk like I own the place... even if men want to say something unnecessary, they won't approach me in that same sense because I am giving out the feeling that this is my personal space, and not to get too close." — KII03*

While this strategy may reclaim space and signal boundaries, it also shows how women must perform invulnerability in order to be safe. The burden is again placed on the woman: she must be confident enough, firm enough, guarded enough, and visibly untouchable enough to prevent harm (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020) (Renehan, Barlow, and Walklate 2023).

Hard work also functions as a form of protection. JN03[110] described entering a male-dominated field and overtaking more experienced men through dedication. BC03[111] said she entered her position with 10 years of experience and additional qualifications, which gave her respect from the beginning. GP04[112] described acting as a principal without prior experience and eventually outperforming larger schools through hard work. These strategies help women gain legitimacy, but they also reveal unequal standards. Women often have to overperform before they are respected.

However, not all coping strategies take the form of strength. Some involve tactical softness, politeness, or submissiveness. KII01 described this as the "nice girl" role:

> *"Another strategy that I have seen... is to kind of play the nice girl role, because it's easier to get out of a situation if you play the nice girl role. If you are the nasty type, then it gets really ugly... You perform a certain submissiveness that will make your life a little easier... In many of the cases I've seen, even at relatively senior levels, if a woman fights, then she's in for so much. The system is stacked against such women." — KII01*

110 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026
111 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
112 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026

Women may perform submissiveness because open confrontation is punished. This strategy is costly as it requires women to suppress anger, moderate truth, and appear agreeable even when facing injustice (Saße et al. 2021) (Jeffrey and Stephens 2021).

KII01 also described how women calculate whether to speak up when another woman is silenced:

> *"At meetings, when a woman is shut down, another woman will not speak up. And if you speak up, then you also become the 'bad woman'... Nobody wants that because then it's going to be a problem when you apply for something later. So people make very calculated decisions on when to act and when not to act." — KII01*

This complicates the idea of women's solidarity. Failure to speak up may not reflect lack of care; it may reflect awareness of institutional punishment. The literature on code-switching helps explain this. (Smith and Sinkford 2022) define code-switching as adjusting speech, appearance, behaviour, and expression to increase the comfort of dominant groups in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, or employment opportunity. They note that women may even be told to code-switch to survive police encounters, such as acting polite and respectful or avoiding running even when afraid. In this study, such code-switching appears in multiple forms: acting agreeably, staying silent, pretending not to understand harassment, using open spaces, bringing witnesses, or filtering speech to avoid being labelled difficult.

9.2 The Network

9.2.1 Family as Protection

A recurring coping mechanism was the reliance on husbands or family members for mobility, reputation, childcare, and emotional support. This support can be enabling, but it also reveals the absence of institutional protection.

The account of GP02 illustrates reliance upon her spouse for professional engagement during evening hours, as follows:

> *"If I'm asked to go to a school, I usually drive myself in my own vehicle. But after 6:00 PM, I don't go alone. In such instances, if there is a school ceremony or a night function, I go with my husband. At such times, it might be a nuisance for him. If he cannot come, I might not attend that event or meeting." - GP02*[113]

This quote shows the cost of mobility restrictions. Her professional participation after dark depends on whether her husband can accompany her. If he cannot, she may not attend.

GP03[114] similarly relied on her husband for safety and reputational protection when travelling late or returning home alone. TR01[115] said her husband ensured her safety in all places, reducing her exposure to problems faced by a woman in leadership. CL06[116] described her husband as her primary support system and noted that his military position gave her a sense of protection when facing threats related to her role.

These examples should not be read merely as positive family support. Instead, they illustrate that women's engagement in public leadership roles frequently remains contingent upon the provision of private male protection. Having such spousal presence helps individual women continue, but it also reinforces the structural problem: institutions and public spaces remain unsafe unless mediated by male presence.

Family support also enabled women to pursue education and work while managing care responsibilities. CL08 described undertaking a demanding research degree while raising two young children because her husband, siblings, and parents helped with childcare.

> *"I suddenly realised that I had to complete a research degree soon, if I wanted to keep my job at the university… Then Peradeniya started a new degree in what I wanted to study… Both my children were very young at the time, my husband was supportive, and on weekends I travelled from*

113 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026
114 Gampaha district, 09 February 2026
115 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026
116 Colombo district, 03 February 2026

> *Colombo to Peradeniya… Luckily I have four elder siblings, and they are all very helpful. My parents are also very helpful, so I could keep my young daughter and newborn son with them and go towards my dream." - CL08*

CL01[117] similarly described being able to return to a demanding banking role shortly after childbirth because her husband and parents helped care for their child. CL09's sports career was made possible by her mother and brothers, who financed and supported her for nearly a decade.

> *"My brothers spent a lot on me. That freedom and their dedication is what made me able to become national champion for 10 years… One brother looked after all my expenses. Everything my mother earned was also spent on me." - CL09*

Family can therefore be a foundation for leadership. However, because family support is unevenly distributed, relying on it as the main coping mechanism reproduces inequality (Ule and Živoder 2023). Women without supportive families, safe marriages, money, or extended kin networks are far more exposed (Crankshaw, Freedman, and Mutambara 2023).

Furthermore, while the reliance on husbands for physical safety and professional legitimacy that respondents have described above is a vital tactical response, a critical analysis suggests these strategies often reinforce the patriarchal hierarchies they aim to navigate. Respondents describe having to rely on "male guardianship" to bypass institutional failures; for instance, having to use a husband's name or professional status to gain respect from state officials, or relying on a husband's physical presence to deter harassment in public spaces or when travelling for work after nightfall. However, this dynamic confirms the "gendered nature" of these institutions, where a woman's safety is treated as a derivative of her association with a male protector rather than an inherent right (Benali and Villesèche 2023, 963). Consequently, while these coping mechanisms enable individual survival and career persistence, they do not "challenge the issue" of systemic GBV. Instead, they allow the institution to remain fundamentally unsafe for women who lack such

117 Colombo district, 21 January 2026

patriarchal "shields," thereby preserving the existing gender hierarchy (Benali and Villesèche 2023, 963; Manyonganise 2023, 186).

9.2.2 Social and Collective Support Systems

Unlike family support, which depends on private circumstances, NGO and peer networks can create collective forms of protection and empowerment. Several respondents described women's organisations and community-based organisations as crucial in helping them understand rights, access institutions, and develop confidence.

PT01 described a transformation from domestic confinement to public leadership through a community-based organisation:

> *"It is through the [community-based organisation] that I was given the opportunity to take up leadership. Previously, I was truly a woman confined to the corner of the kitchen. But I felt that I had the ability to come forward and speak, that I could get work done. Now, I have the courage not just to go to the police, but even to argue with a lawyer. I have the strength to go to the police, stand strong and say, 'Something like this has happened to one of our women and this is wrong.'" — PT01*[118]

BC02 similarly explained that NGO-led capacity-building strengthened her ability to engage in institutional oversight, particularly where women were excluded from Finance Committees.

> *"Women are excluded from the Finance Committee, limiting our oversight and understanding of financial decision-making processes. Although we initially lacked experience in these areas, NGO-led capacity-building programmes have strengthened our knowledge and enabled us to participate more effectively… Because of this, we are now able to speak more openly and confidently." — BC02*[119]

118 Puttalam district, 25 October 2025
119 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

BC01 also noted that women's organisations such as 'Women in Need' and 'Sooriya Development' have supported women by accompanying them to police stations. These examples show that coping can become collective capacity. Women's organisations provide not only emotional support, but procedural knowledge, accompaniment, and institutional confidence.

Professional peer networks also matter. BC02 described a district-level network of women leaders:

> *"There are groups in the community that I have helped before. Sometimes they stand strongly with me… I also seek advice from women representatives in other areas. We work like a network… In this district, there are 54 women leaders. I am in contact with all of them. We organize meetings and discussions together." — BC02*[120]

TR01[121] similarly described sharing issues with senior lecturers and building an internal departmental culture where staff, most of whom are women, could speak freely.

The literature supports this. The (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025) notes that dedicated forums for women parliamentarians can draw attention to GBV and push institutions to stop tolerating abuse; in Sri Lanka, the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus and the Secretary General of Parliament took steps to combat sexual harassment of female staff and reduce impunity. (Hoare et al. 2009) also highlights Female Councillor Forums in Cambodia, where women gained confidence speaking publicly, challenging discrimination, and assuming greater responsibilities.

KII02 also described "sisterhood" and information-sharing as a practical form of power:

> *"There is a kind of sisterhood in women coming together… women who are more aware are encouraging other women to make use of the tools available. Tools such as the Domestic Violence Act… We see such information being shared." — KII02*

120 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
121 Trincomalee district, 01 February 2026

This kind of collective knowledge is especially important because written law does not help women unless they know how to use it and have support in doing so.

Where formal mechanisms fail, women also use informal networks and digital strategies. These include whisper networks, anonymous sharing, "shaming without naming," and public calling out (Stein, Janzen, and Haida 2023; Marganski and Melander 2021, 629).

KII04 described whisper networks as survival systems:

> *"If you know a particular person is a predator, the whisper network of women warning each other about it, changing their schedules to avoid running into certain people… Some women might even use strategies which adversely impact them, like leaving a job because they're facing sexual harassment… The way women try to cope is just to tolerate it or remove themselves. Very few would actually push back or complain because the structures are patriarchal and sexist." — KII04*

Whisper networks are protective, but limited. They warn women, but they do not discipline perpetrators (Cunningham, Drumwright, and Foster 2019; Johnson 2023, 10).

Sri Lankan #MeToo-related literature explains why anonymous sharing became important. (Satkunanathan 2021) notes that women use social media and anonymised experiences to share, be heard, warn others, or seek justice later, when they are ready to bear the emotional and financial cost. (Wijesiriwardena 2020) similarly describes Sri Lanka's #MeToo moment as one where women created spaces to share, reflect, and transform collectively without necessarily naming perpetrators, prioritising the creation of spaces where women were not alone in speaking about experiences that cost them.

Public resistance is another strategy. KII02 cited a member of parliament as an example of a female political leader who refuses silence in the face of character attacks:

> *"She's always been targeted... but she never keeps silent. She always responds back... she shares it on social media too. She has taken control of her public life. She has become a role model for some other women not to be silent." — KII02*

This kind of public response reclaims the narrative. It refuses the expectation that women absorb humiliation quietly.

KII04 described a similar personal response to gendered verbal abuse and digital violence:

> *"I have been subject to a lot of gendered verbal abuse, digital violence. It is unpleasant, but it has never deterred me from doing anything or saying anything. If at all, it has only spurred me more... But not everyone is like that. It depends on how secure they feel, how privileged they are, what remedies or resources they have." — KII04*

This caveat is crucial. Public resistance should not be romanticised. Some women can confront because they have status, resources, confidence, or institutional protection. Others cannot, and their silence should not be judged as failure.

The literature on women in leadership similarly shows how high-status leaders may use their position to break taboos and protect others with less social capital. Decker and Grandey note that some leaders speak openly because their status protects them, and this can create purpose in helping others without the same resources. (Mavin et al. 2023) also discuss public feminist resistance by women leaders who use their platforms to call out backlash and demand collective action.

9.3 The System

9.3.1 Reporting and Redress

Reporting is another form of response, though its application is highly uneven. While some women use formal mechanisms, others avoid them due to a lack of trust in institutions.

In the corporate and banking sectors, respondents noted that whistleblowing policies exist; however, reporting is undermined by fear of career sabotage and reputational damage.

> *"If it is your manager, you can't go and tell him, so it has to go to another person, it has to go to head office. The policies are there, and then we have the whistleblowing policy as well… They know where to report, but sometimes women might not speak up because they are scared of being subject to revenge, which might affect their career and their reputation." — CL01*[122]

CL04 reported observations indicating that women within the tourism sector frequently experience circumstances necessitating their silence until resignation.

> *"They just keep quiet… they stomach it. They're scared to report. And when their tolerance is finally gone, they resign and go." — CL04*

This shows the limits of policy without trust. A mechanism exists, yet women may still decide that using it is too dangerous.

Some women bypass police and go directly to court. JN01 stated:

> *"When domestic violence occurred, I did not go to the police station because I knew they would not take proper action. I went directly to court and filed a divorce case. Later, I also filed a maintenance case and obtained full custody."" — JN01*[123]

BC02 similarly described mistrust of police:

> *"Even after struggling hard to reach a leadership position, there are moments when I have to fight alone without any support. In such situations, even when I inform the police, they tend to speak more favourably toward the men involved rather than supporting justice… I*

122 Colombo district, 21 January 2026
123 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

> *am even afraid to take legal steps, as they seem to act in favour of the other side." — BC02*[124]

BC01's experience shows how language, geography, and weak cyber systems prevent effective reporting:

> *"Harassment on social media is very high. People often take our photos and use them to create fake IDs or profiles… I filed a complaint in Batticaloa, but there is no proper system here to investigate such cases. They tell you to go to Colombo, and even if you go, you must explain everything in Sinhala. Because of such difficulties, many victims do not even file complaints… I have personally filed six or seven complaints so far, yet the responsible parties have not been identified." — BC01*[125]

She also noted that there is no proper mechanism to complain about sexual extortion from government officers, and that if a male officer conducts the inquiry, victims may not fully disclose what happened.

CL08 described a similar institutional gap in the university system:

> *"In the university system, there is no proper way of handling this type of inquiry. An inquiry committee is appointed and then the inquiry is conducted, but no action will be taken… We are not empowered to complain to a different level outside the university. We are not educated or empowered, and we also fear that our identities will be revealed." — CL08*

These accounts show why formal reporting is often avoided. The reporting system can itself become a site of harassment, linguistic exclusion, or reputational risk.

However, reporting can work under certain conditions. JN03 stated that she began receiving opportunities only after she complained directly to the cricket board.

124 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026
125 Batticaloa district, 31 January 2026

> *"It was only after I made a complaint to the cricket board that I started receiving opportunities… I went alone and spoke to them. Usually, others do not come forward because they are afraid that making a complaint might cause problems for them… Since I know Sinhala, I did not face any language-related issues." — JN03*[126]

This is important because it shows that complaint mechanisms are partially effective, but access is unequal. Her Sinhala fluency, confidence, and willingness to approach higher officials shaped the outcome. Others may not have those advantages.

The IPU (2025) also records examples of direct confrontation, where women parliamentarians clearly named sexual harassment and threatened complaints. One filed a complaint to defend her rights and set an example for younger women entering public office. These examples matter, but they depend on status, institutional backing, and the likelihood that action will follow.

9.3.2 Institutional and Movement-Level Responses

While much of this chapter has focused on women's strategies, the literature is clear that responsibility cannot remain with individual women; institutional and collective responses are necessary (Norander and Zenk 2023).

(International Women's Development Agency, n.d.) emphasises that safe spaces must be created for women to report violence, access long-term psychological support, and pursue justice. It further stresses that local women's organisations understand the challenges that shape women's leadership opportunities and should be supported and resourced. Mentoring, coaching, women's parliamentary caucuses, and specialist services are identified as effective support models.

(Patel et al. 2020) similarly emphasise the importance of strong sector-specific and global platforms, particularly for women in humanitarian and conflict settings, because networks allow women to learn from one another, support one another, and advocate for change.

126 Jaffna district, 02 February 2026

(Domingo et al. 2015) argue that effective voice and leadership require the ability to navigate formal and informal institutions and network. Successful women's coalitions often use "soft advocacy," harnessing informal relationships, ties between elite women, and strategic framing to circumvent conservative opposition (Domingo et al. 2015). This is relevant to the women in this study who relied on peer networks, NGO training, intermediaries, and strategic framing to survive and influence institutions.

(Batiwala 2010) adds an important caution: even feminist movements require internal accountability. The African Feminist Charter emerged from the recognition that movements need basic rules of engagement governing how members treat each other and handle destructive tendencies (Madunagu 2008). This matters because women's spaces are not automatically safe; they must be intentionally structured to prevent hierarchy, exclusion, and harm.

(International Labour Organization 2016) also points to assertiveness and leadership training as a useful intervention. One key interviewee in that study noted that assertiveness and leadership programmes for women with board or senior management potential had positive effects, with several women going on to take promotions and appointments as directors. Training alone cannot dismantle structural violence, but it can help women navigate institutions when combined with accountability and support (Smith 2023, 9).

The coping strategies documented in this chapter demonstrate women's agency, intelligence, and resilience. Women leaders protect themselves by arranging rooms, keeping doors open, bringing witnesses, blocking numbers, avoiding predatory men, relying on husbands, building peer networks, turning to NGOs, performing invulnerability, using spirituality, filing complaints, or speaking publicly. However, the central finding is that coping does not equate to justice. Avoidance may prevent immediate harm, but it can also narrow education and career pathways. Silence may protect women from retaliation, but it leaves perpetrators untouched. Support from family may enable women, but it confirms that women's freedom to attain and engage in leadership is not institutionally guaranteed. Informal communication channels warn women, but they do not remove abusers. Resilience helps women continue, but it can become another burden imposed on them. Therefore, the

existence of coping strategies should not be read as evidence that women leaders have overcome GBV. Rather, these strategies reveal the extent of institutional failure.

A meaningful response to GBV and women's leadership must therefore move beyond celebrating resilience. It must shift the burden away from individual women and toward institutions: safe reporting mechanisms, credible accountability, language-accessible services, workplace safety planning, psychological support, transport and accommodation arrangements, properly resourced women's organisations, strong peer networks, and cultures where women do not have to choose between leadership and safety.

Chapter 10

Discussion and Recommendations

10.1 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that GBV functions as a foundational mechanism that structures the leadership trajectory for women in Sri Lanka. Regarding the first research question on how GBV affects women's entry into leadership, the study reveals that violence operates as a formidable gatekeeping force. Entry is not solely determined by merit but is frequently contingent upon navigating sexualized gatekeeping and predatory demands, where access to professional opportunities such as transfers or recruitment is weaponized by male authority figures to demand sexual favors (Bragagnolo and Lezama 2025; Paolis 2024). This is compounded by deeply embedded gendered ideologies that frame leadership as an inherently masculine domain, positioning women in "supportive" roles that pre-emptively filter them out of leadership pipelines (Vijeyarasa 2020, 102397; Utoft 2020).

In response to the second research question on performance and retention, the findings indicate that GBV significantly undermines a woman's ability to exercise authority. Performance is hindered by the structural "double burden" of the care economy, which produces chronic time poverty and restricts professional mobility (Lyon, Mutersbaugh, and Worthen 2016; International Labour Organization 2016). Within institutional spaces, women's authority is constantly challenged through verbal harassment, sexist language, and public mockery, which serve to delegitimize their expertise and shift focus toward their bodies or moral character (Just and Muhr 2021; Hobgood et al. 2024). Retention is further threatened by the escalating cost of public visibility, particularly through character assassination and digital violence (Koch, Riva, and Steinert 2025; Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025). The cumulative psychological and reputational toll often leads to a strategic withdrawal or "forced exit," as women prioritize personal and familial safety over professional advancement in the face of institutional impunity (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025; Täuber et al. 2022).

Addressing the third research question on women's responses to GBV, the study highlights a sophisticated range of strategies developed to survive within hostile

environments. These include "safety work," where women reconfigure their physical movements and speech to mitigate risk, and "strategic silence," employed when the consequences of reporting are perceived as greater than the original harm (DuPont 2020; Renehan, Barlow, and Walklate 2023). While formal reporting is rare due to a distrust in biased state and institutional systems, women increasingly rely on collective support, whisper networks, and NGO-led capacity building to reclaim their agency and advocate for rights (Domingo et al. 2015; Johnson 2023). These responses demonstrate that while individual resilience is high, it is often a tactical adaptation to a lack of institutional protection (Zimmermann 2023).

From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, these dynamics illustrate that institutions in Sri Lanka are active sites of gendered reproduction where GBV functions as a set of informal rules that maintain masculine power settlements (Mackay and Waylen 2009; Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). The documented "institutional failure" and "inaction" are structural choices that protect existing hierarchies and ensure institutional continuity by signaling that leadership remains a male prerogative (Clavero and Galligan 2020; Madsen 2021). By ignoring the material realities of care labor and normalizing everyday harassment, institutions enforce a "logic of appropriateness" that prioritizes patriarchal control over formal gender equality reforms (Kang and Kim 2024; Mackay and Waylen 2009).

10.2 Key Insights

1. Gender-based violence operates as a structural gatekeeping mechanism that conditions women's entry into leadership on their ability to withstand or comply with exploitative demands, effectively filtering the leadership pipeline based on vulnerability rather than merit (Dutz et al. 2023; Paolis 2024).
2. Leadership for women in Sri Lanka remains fundamentally conditional, as authority is only socially permitted as long as the woman conforms to rigid codes of "respectability" and does not disrupt traditional gender hierarchies (Mavin and Grandy 2016; McCluney 2017).
3. Violence is systematically normalized through institutional inaction and informal "boy codes" that protect perpetrators, ensuring that the cost of seeking justice remains higher for the survivor than for the offender (Wijesiriwardena 2020; Berdahl and Bhattacharyya 2021).

4. The care economy and its resulting time poverty function as a non-physical form of structural violence that restricts women's mobility and professional advancement by enforcing an "ideal worker" template that ignores domestic realities (Hinze 2023; Verité Research 2022).
5. Digital spaces have become a primary site for the affective disciplining of women leaders, where viral character assassination is used to humiliate and delegitimize women, ultimately forcing their withdrawal from public and digital life (Esposito 2022; Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025).

10.3 Recommendations

Regarding policy and legal frameworks, the state can prioritize the effective enforcement of ILO Convention 190 to provide a comprehensive legal basis for addressing violence and harassment in the world of work (UN Women 2021; International Labour Organization 2016). Moreover, it is important that all court procedures, police reporting mechanisms, and legal aid services are made accessible in both Sinhala and Tamil, thereby removing the linguistic barriers that currently prevent many women from seeking support or pursuing formal justice. Furthermore, the legislative framework should be updated to specifically address technology-facilitated GBV, ensuring that law enforcement agencies are equipped and mandated to handle digital harassment with gender sensitivity rather than dismissing it as a private matter (Verité Research 2023; Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025).

At the institutional level, public and private organizations should establish independent, third-party grievance bodies that operate outside of internal management hierarchies to reduce the risk of retaliation against survivors and bypass the informal protection of perpetrators (Stockman et al. 2022; Täuber et al. 2022). Social media platforms can also function as responsible institutions by employing local language moderators who are specifically trained in gender issues to respond immediately to online GBV and coordinated disinformation campaigns that target women leaders (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025). Within workplaces and political parties, the adoption of mandatory promotion audits and gender-sensitive reporting protocols can help dismantle the informal norms and "gatekeeping" practices that currently maintain masculine power settlements (Kang and Kim 2024; Fenech, Kanji, and Vargha 2021).

On a collective and social level, civil society and professional associations can facilitate the creation of sector-specific leadership pipelines and mentorship networks that provide women with the peer support necessary to navigate hostile institutional environments (Patel et al. 2020; International Women's Development Agency 2018). Media organizations should also shift their editorial focus away from gendered stereotypes or the private lives of women leaders, focusing instead on their policy contributions and professional achievements to foster a more respectful public discourse (Abdul Saroor and Iqbal 2025). Additionally, community-level programs can engage men and boys in challenging the social norms that justify violence, promoting a shared responsibility for building an environment characterized by safety and professional equality for all.

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Towards a Safe New World

Navigating Gender-Based Violence and Women's Leadership

Tirani Wijewickrema

This study examines how gender-based violence (GBV) shapes women's leadership across politics, public service, the corporate sector, education, sports, and the informal private sector in Sri Lanka. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted across ten districts, it explores the experiences of women leaders navigating institutions and spaces where power continues to be shaped by deeply gendered norms, practices, and inequalities.

Moving beyond individual incidents of violence, the findings demonstrate that GBV operates as a structural barrier throughout women's leadership journeys. Participants describe experiences ranging from sexual harassment, intimidation, and digital abuse to institutional discrimination, political gatekeeping, and social policing. These forms of violence not only affect women's entry into leadership but also their ability to exercise authority, remain in leadership positions, and influence decision-making. At the same time, the report documents the resilience, strategies, and collective networks women draw upon to resist and navigate these challenges.

Building on Feminist Institutionalism and an intersectional perspective, this report highlights the urgent need to address the institutional cultures, policies, and power structures that continue to reproduce gender inequality. It argues that creating safer and more inclusive pathways to leadership requires moving beyond representation alone, towards systemic reforms that enable women to participate, lead, and shape public life on equal terms.

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