



To cite this article: Meditha D. Karunatillaka (2026). CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LGBTQ+ WORKPLACE INCLUSION IN SRI LANKA: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE, International Journal of Research in Commerce and Management Studies (IJRCMS) 8 (4): 34-53 Article No. 801 Sub Id 1338

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LGBTQ+ WORKPLACE INCLUSION IN SRI LANKA: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38193/IJRCMS.2026.8404>

ABSTRACT

Diversity and inclusion initiatives actively promote employee satisfaction and drive innovation, resulting in improved organizational performance. Although authors have researched LGBTQ+ workplace issues in Western countries, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in developing countries like Sri Lanka (where this study is focused) has not received the same degree of scholarly attention. This study attempts to address the gap in scholarly literature by analyzing the barriers and obstacles to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in Sri Lankan workplaces. Through conceptual research design, this study attempts to construct a conceptual framework for workplace inclusion grounded in the context of Sri Lanka and comparable developing nations. The framework employs Social Identity Theory and Psychological Safety Theory in the context of the Workplace Inclusion Framework. The framework explains how employees' perceptions of inclusion and psychological safety, as well as workplace belonging, are impacted by socio-cultural and legal institutional settings, organizational policies, and workplace culture and leadership behaviors. The framework also attempts to contribute to the diversity and inclusion body of knowledge by addressing some contextual gaps that previous studies have not researched. The framework also attempts to offer a foundation for other practicing professionals with its contextual recommendations.

KEYWORDS: Diversity and Inclusion; Human Resource Management; LGBTQ+ Employees; Psychological Safety; Sri Lanka; Workplace Belonging; Workplace Inclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Enhancement of employee wellbeing and other related positive changes have positioned workplace diversity and inclusion at the forefront of contemporary workplace concerns. Demographic representation of diversity in the workplace is no longer sufficient. Contemporary organizations acknowledge the workplace value of fairness, respect, and psychological safety (Mor Barak, 2017)

There has been a noted change from compliance to a strategic business advantage of employee engagement and retention driven by workplace diversity and inclusion (Bell et al., 2011). Bourke and Dillon (2018) posit that a competitive advantage and a positive shift in an organization's culture can be achieved by creating an authentic and inclusive workplace for all employees, irrespective of their personal characteristics.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are some of the most under-researched aspects of workplace inclusion and are often the most contentious, especially within the Global South. Over the past 20 years, general studies regarding LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion have seen significant growth. However, much of the work has taken place within the Global North and the Western world, where there are comparative legal protections, state-sponsored institutional aid, and workplace diversity frameworks (Köllen, 2016; Ragins, 2004; Shore et al., 2018). Research has shown that workplace inclusivity aids the wellbeing of individuals and of the workplace overall, and enhances workplace commitment and satisfaction as well as professional development, and that the workplace and professional environment aids the development of psychological safety. Conversely, the concealment of one's identity as protective against workplace discrimination leads to stress and a decline in workplace commitment and overall productivity (Meyer, 2003; McFadden, 2015; Ragins, 2008). Although these studies have added a considerable amount of knowledge to the field of LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion, the degree to which the studies can be generalized to the Global South remains unknown, as the workplace experience is largely dependent on the prevailing local sociocultural environment, legal, and institutional frameworks.

Globally, the most limited research on workplace inclusion is found in South Asia. When one compares North America, Europe, and Australia, there is a relative lack of empirical and conceptual work on LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in South Asia, where cultural customs, religious beliefs, and social and legal norms, as well as the changing legal landscape, affect what happens in the workplace and what employees experience. Therefore, the ways and the extent to which inclusion is experienced and constructed in the workplace remain largely unknown, offering a wide gap in the literature that calls for regionally situated studies, instead of relying solely on Western scholarship.

Sri Lanka has events that are particularly notable and important to the understanding and advancement of this discussion. From a regional perspective, Sri Lanka demonstrates a rich variety of traditional socio-cultural phenomena juxtaposed with modern influences as a result of globalization and socio-economic advancements, as well as external pressures to meet the standards of equity, diversity, and inclusion. There is recent evidence that LGBTQ+ people in Sri Lanka continue to face societal stigma and discrimination in the world of work and in the active participation that is offered to them in the workplace (Equal Ground, 2021). The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2023) has highlighted

that the recent economic crises in Sri Lanka have compounded the insecurity and inequitable situations of the LGBTQ+ population in the workplace. Although some industries, such as the IT and financial sectors, as well as tourism and other multinational enterprises, are expected to adhere to global standards of equity, diversity, and inclusion, the existing frameworks create opportunities and challenges for the organizations that are attempting to implement the principles of inclusion in the workplace.

The presence of policies and practices related to equity, diversity, and inclusion is a necessary but not sufficient condition for workplace inclusion. From a policy perspective, the presence of equity, diversity, and inclusion may be demonstrated. However, the perceptions of workplace inclusion are the result of the interplay between the policies and practices of the organizations and the socio-cultural, legal, and institutional environments in which they operate. As a result, diversity policies and models that have been successful in the West cannot be implemented in Sri Lanka due to varying cultural and legal standards in the workplaces and organizational norms. The need for relevant models is particularly necessary in developing countries in order to understand the inclusion of workplaces in these countries.

Although there is greater international insight into the inclusion of LGBTQ+ employees, a detailed conceptual framework has not yet been developed to illustrate the ways in which socio-cultural norms, the legal and institutional framework, organizational policies, leadership, and workplace culture together with psychological safety and belonging impact the experiences of LGBTQ+ employees in Sri Lanka. While the models of workplace inclusion that have emerged have contributed to the scholarship of diversity and inclusion, they have not accounted for these contextual realities in a framework for developing nations. This is a gap in scholarship and a challenge in practice for HR professionals, organizational leaders, and policy-makers interested in creating workplace inclusion in a manner that is attuned to the realities of a particular locality.

This paper, therefore, seeks to analyze the possibilities and challenges of LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in Sri Lanka. It seeks to establish a grounded conceptual framework that illustrates the relationship between contextual factors, organizational practices, psychological safety, workplace belonging, and the outcomes of employees. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, Psychological Safety Theory, and Workplace Inclusion Theory, the framework that is proposed is a departure in diversity and inclusion scholarship because it accounts for the organizational and contextual realities of a developing country. As a result, this paper seeks to enhance the scholarship of LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in South Asia, and offer a basis for future research, along with practical insights in the form of policy and organizational proposals for the inclusion, equity, and psychological safety of all employees.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The following section describes the conceptual research methodology used in this study. The section after that brings in the proposed conceptual framework and describes the key components of that framework. The paper then discusses the implications of the framework from a theory and practice point of view and ends with the limitations of the framework and suggestions for future research.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a conceptual research design to explore the barriers and facilitators to LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in Sri Lanka. This research design also identifies the components for the development of a country specific, conceptual framework. Through the lens of conceptual research, knowledge is advanced by integrating the existing theoretical and empirical body of literature, identifying the gaps in the current body of scholarship, and formulating novel theories or frameworks (Jaakkola, 2020). Unlike empirical research, which is concerned with the collection and analysis of primary data, conceptual research deals with theoretical insights (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020) and is more appropriate in research where there is a paucity of literature.

Currently, research on LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in Sri Lanka is sparse, making a conceptual approach more appropriate for this research. Furthermore, workplace inclusion models have primarily been developed in the context of Western organizational settings. Therefore, the research in the rest of the world has to consider the interplay of social and cultural arrangements, the legal frameworks, and the practices of organizations. This study aims to consolidate and extend the existing body of knowledge in order to construct a framework that is both contextually and theoretically relevant.

2.2 LITERATURE IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION

The conceptual framework was informed and constructed by a comprehensive and systematic analysis and evaluation of the relevant literature on workplace diversity, inclusion, belonging, and organizational behavior, as well as literature on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace. This literature was identified by searching various academic databases. These included Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, as well as publisher databases such as Emerald Insight, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, and Wiley Online Library.

The literature review centers on peer-reviewed articles, seminal publications, academic books, and credible reports related to Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior, and published in the field of Diversity and Inclusion and Management Studies. The focus was on those articles which are cited the most, and have made seminal contributions to the theory of workplace inclusion and

research on LGBTQ+ in the workplace.

The selection was based upon the following combinations of keywords:

- Workplace diversity
- Workplace inclusion
- LGBTQ+ employees
- Workplace belonging
- Psychological Safety
- Social Identity Theory
- Human Resource Management
- Organizational Culture
- Inclusive Leadership
- Sri Lanka
- South Asia

Based on the quality of research and theory, the inclusion of diversity at the workplace was considered based on the organizational and socio-cultural perspectives.

2.3 RAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The conceptual framework was created using an iterative approach to theory building (Jaakkola, 2020) and involved four steps.

First, the literature was reviewed, and key concepts related to workplace diversity, inclusion, belonging, employee experiences and organizational support, and LGBTQ+ were identified.

Second, workplace inclusion theories were compared and contrasted, and support was given to the identification of recurring antecedents, mediating variables, and organizational outcomes.

Third, the concepts noted were placed into the socio-cultural, legal, and organizational context of Sri Lanka. Inclusion models from the West were not directly placed, and the Sri Lankan context was added to improve the relevance of the Framework.

Lastly, contextual factors, organizational structures, psychologies, and employee outcomes were combined, resulting in a singular conceptual model. In the framework, socio-cultural and legal/institutional context, along with organizational policies, leadership, and workplace culture shape psychologically perceived inclusion and psychological safety, in turn producing workplace belonging and desirable employee outcomes.

2.4 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The most relevant of the theories to the framework are the following three.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) accounts for the ways in which individuals come to know themselves (in part) through the social group to which they belong and the belonging and exclusion that they perceive to occur in the workplace. This theory is helpful in coming to understand the workplace inclusion and belonging of LGBTQ+ people.

Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999) accounts for the ways in which fear of ridicule and/or discrimination can cause employees to withhold their true selves from organizational environments. Psychological safety is important for LGBTQ+ employees, as the safety to express one's true self and one's identity is dependent on the perception of support and trust.

Workplace Inclusion Framework (Shore et al., 2011) presents a model of inclusion that both belonging and uniqueness are present. This theory offers a starting place to describe how organizations are able to both invite and embrace the participation of their employees.

Combining these theories, the framework advances contemporary workplace inclusion by situating socio-cultural and institutional contexts in a way that other models have not.

2.5 SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS

Conceptually, this study does not attempt to test any hypothesis or show causation. This study seeks to bring a contextually informed model to the Sri Lankan context framed by the existing literature. As such, this study shapes a model that situates Sri Lanka, and should henceforth be viewed as contextually bound.

Subsequent studies, especially those that engage qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methodologies from various organizational and industrial contexts, should strive to empirically test the connections and concepts outlined in the current study. The outcomes of these studies will likely represent significant additions to the scholarly discourse on workplace diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Moreover, West and colleagues (2020) suggest that empirical workplace diversity and inclusion research would provide a stronger basis for workplace interventions.

3. RESULTS

3.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The main outcome of this conceptual research is the creation of a contextually specific framework for Sri Lankan LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion. The framework was constructed from the material available regarding workplace diversity and inclusion, belonging, workplace behavior, and the

experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. Existing inclusion models are of little use because of the lack of inclusion of the contextual features of Sri Lanka. Rather than replicate these models, the framework combines the psychological, socio-cultural, and institutional dimensions alongside the Sri Lankan context.

The literature suggests that workplace inclusion is a complicated, multidimensional phenomenon. Studies have noted the essential nature and role of workplace policies, workplace leadership, workplace culture, psychological safety, and workplace member perceptions of inclusion. There is a notable gap, however, in the role of the socio-cultural and legal contexts that influence workplace behaviors in developing nations. The framework fills this gap by consolidating both external contextual and internal organizational phenomena within a single model.

To this end, the framework asserts that the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace is the result of socio-cultural and legal/institutional contexts, workplace policies and human resource practices, leadership, workplace culture, and the perceptions and psychological safety of workplace members, which leads to workplace belonging and ultimately diverse outcomes for individuals and the organization.

3.2 PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed conceptual framework for Sri Lankan LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion is illustrated below in Figure 1.

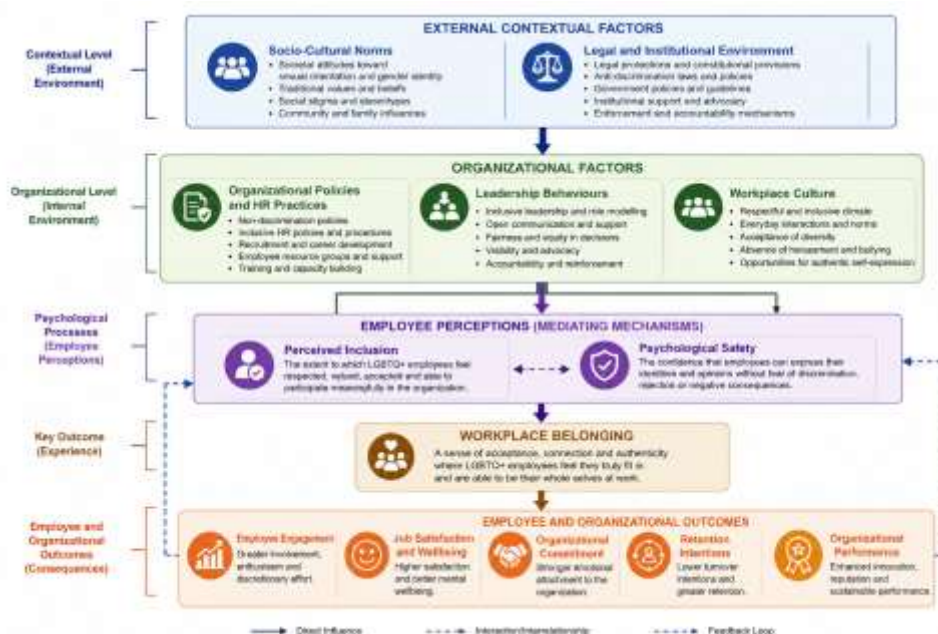


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework for LGBTQ+ Workplace Inclusion in Sri Lanka

This framework asserts that organizational policies are not the sole determinant of workplace inclusion. Rather, employee experiences are shaped by the interactions of the broad socio-cultural and legal context, combined with the policies and practices of the organization, the behaviors of leaders, and workplace culture. These elements affect the perceptions of employees regarding inclusion and their sense of psychological safety, which together constitute a sense of belonging to the workplace and favorable outcomes for the organization.

3.3 EXTERNAL CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

In this framework, workplace inclusion is most affected by socio-cultural and legal and institutional external contextual factors. In this case, socio-cultural factors are the attitudes, beliefs, and norms of the society in relation to sexual orientation and gender. These factors, in turn, affect workplace behavior, leadership, employee interaction, and the organization's readiness to adopt inclusive practices.

In the same vein, the legal and institutional external contextual factors define the broader regulatory framework within which organizations exist. The presence (or absence) of laws, protective legislation, organizational employment policies, and institutional frameworks affect the formal organizational practices regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion. In the Sri Lankan context, with the legal and institutional frameworks in flux, these factors will greatly affect the organizational systems of Diversity and Inclusion.

3.4 ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

This framework suggests that organizational policies and practices of human resources are the mechanisms through which external factors are brought into the workplace. Inclusion-oriented recruitment practices, anti-discrimination policies, employee assistance programs, diversity training, and fair performance management systems are some of the practices that reflect an organization's commitment to inclusion.

Recent findings in Sri Lanka show that organizations with strong leadership commitment, and that establish supportive workplace policies, are able to create supportive inclusive cultures that promote LGBTQ+ inclusion. Chathuranga (2024) explains how inclusive organizational values and leadership behaviors mitigate the negative impact that socially hostile environments have on employee experiences. In relation to the proposed framework, the practice of organizations reinforces the socially driven cultural barriers and the practices that are structured to respond to them.

How leaders behave impacts the extent to which people feel included in an organization. Through their choices and examples, leaders construct the workplace's operational standards. Leadership that displays inclusiveness promotes trust, equity, and safety, while leading in an uninclusive manner promotes exclusion and concealment of diversity.

The culture of an organization describes the conditions of day to day interactions among its workforce. Their inclusion is strengthened by civil and respectful interactions, teamwork, and valuing diversity. Inclusion is weakened by discrimination, stereotyping, and micro aggressive behavior.

3.5 EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS

Identifying perceived inclusion and psychological safety reveals the core mechanisms through which organizational elements are perceived to impact belonging within a workplace.

Perceived inclusion is the extent to which employees believe they are appreciated, valued, and given the opportunity to engage within the organization. Psychological safety is the belief that employees are free to show their true self and to voice their thoughts and feelings without fear of being judged, ridiculed, or punished. Perceived inclusion and psychological safety are critical for employees to engage fully within the workplace.

3.6 WORKPLACE BELONGING AND ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES

The framework places workplace belonging as the ultimate goal of the actions taken toward organizational inclusion initiatives. It expresses the extent to which employees feel accepted, integrated, and truly themselves within the organization. In the presence of inclusion and psychological safety, employees are likely to feel even more emotionally connected to the organization.

It is further hypothesized that workplace belonging will yield favorable outcomes for both employees and the organization, including increased engagement, satisfaction, and commitment, as well as improved organizational effectiveness and reduced turnover. Therefore, aiming to cultivate workplace belonging is both a people-focused and a strategic priority for the organization.

4. DISCUSSION

4.3 INTERPRETING THE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework provided here offers an empirically based way of examining the phenomena of LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in Sri Lanka. Many existing models of workplace inclusion analyze solely the organizational side of workplace inclusion. The model developed here

examines how employees' experiences are shaped by the interplay of external contextual factors and internal organizational factors. By combining the variable of socio-cultural norms, the legal and institutional context, organizational policies, leadership styles, workplace culture, perceived inclusion, psychological safety, and workplace belonging, the model provides a complex picture of the dynamics of inclusion in the workplace.

According to this model, workplace inclusion cannot be the sole responsibility of an organization. The organization functions within a complex societal system, which is reflected in the attitudes of its leaders, the behavior of its employees, and the organizational decisions and policies. Consequently, efforts to embrace LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace are likely to be ineffective unless organizational inclusion initiatives are accompanied by a workplace culture of dignity, respect, equity, and psychological safety.

Workplace belonging is also the primary goal of inclusion efforts described in the model. This makes a contribution to workplace diversity initiatives by placing workplace belonging beyond simply being an emotional response by an employee, but rather the lived experience of an inclusive workplace culture in which employees are free to express themselves in an authentic manner without fear of being excluded or discriminated against.

4.4 CHALLENGES TO LGBTQ+ WORKPLACE INCLUSION IN SRI LANKA

The proposed inclusive framework presents some interconnected obstacles that are present within the Sri Lankan context. These obstacles emerge from socio-cultural factors and holistic legal, institutional, and organizational factors as they impact employees' experiences in the workplace.

Dominant socio-cultural factors and emergent, restrictive, and traditional views of heteronormativity and socially dominant gender and sexuality frameworks are responsible for shaping the views of LGBTQ+ persons. These factors can stifle the open discourse on sexual orientation and gender identity within organizations. As a result, LGBTQ+ employees will feel pressured to be closeted and/or not to be themselves in the workplace. Being closeted is often the only way to shield oneself from the negativity, but in the process, employees are denied the full benefits of engaging with the organization and the process negatively impacts employees' mental health, morale, and overall sense of belonging.

Recent studies in Sri Lanka substantiate these findings. Equal Ground (2021) asserted that many LGBTQ+ persons in the workplace feel discriminated against and are reluctant to reveal their identities due to fears of being negatively treated. Similarly, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2023) stated that, especially in periods of economic instability, LGBTQ+ persons suffer from employment insecurity, mistreatment in the workplace, and a lack of job opportunities. These studies point to the

need for an inclusive understanding of the socio-cultural and economic context of Sri Lanka in order to address LGBTQ+ workplace exclusion.

Another challenge is framed with the changing legal and institutional dynamics. Although the discussions about equality, and more recently, diversity and human rights have been strengthening, organizations function where legal protections for LGBTQ+ staff members are virtually non-existent. This creates ambiguity around the adoption of inclusive practices. As a result, responses to LGBTQ+ inclusion are expected to be very different, with some organizations taking the lead on diversity and inclusion practices, while others remain hesitant, citing legal and social ambiguity as the cause, and therefore, maintaining the status quo.

Additionally, the framework argues that while formal organizational policies are critical to establishing supportive workplaces, they are not sufficient on their own. Policies aimed at promoting diversity that exist only to meet a compliance obligation or as a statement of corporate social responsibility will have little to no effect unless they are complemented by inclusive leadership, fair and just human resources practices, and a supportive organizational culture. Employees are more likely to view a workplace as being supportive and inclusive when policies and practices aimed at promoting inclusive workplaces are reflected in the everyday interactions that take place at a workplace. In the absence of this alignment, initiatives aimed at promoting workplace diversity will be perceived to be for show rather than real, and as a result will be limited in their ability to promote a culture of inclusion.

Another significant challenge outlined in the framework is leadership capability. Leaders play a pivotal role in developing an organization's culture and shaping employee behaviors regarding respectful conduct within the workplace. However, managers may have differing levels of knowledge, confidence, and preparedness to support LGBTQ+ inclusion. In the absence of adequate diversity education and organizational support for the leaders, managers may paradoxically sustain an exclusionary culture by evading discussions on diversity, making arbitrary decisions, and remaining passive in the face of discrimination. Thus, developing leadership capability for inclusiveness is crucial in realizing the organization's diversity aspirations and the employees' lived experiences.

When grouped collectively, these challenges indicate the situation of LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in Sri Lanka is beyond the accomplishment of standalone organizational policy. It requires a multisectoral approach, dealing with socio-cultural, legal and institutional, leadership, organizational, and human resource frameworks simultaneously. This strengthens the core element of the framework: meaningful inclusion within the workplace is a result of contextual and organizational interrelated factors that affect employees' perceptions regarding inclusion, psychological safety, and belonging

within the workplace.

4.5 OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

The proposed framework notes significant challenges for LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion, and more significant opportunities for nurturing LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion and support in Sri Lankan workplaces. Despite the socio-cultural and structural challenges, these opportunities imply that Sri Lankan organizations may opt for the more active and pragmatic pathways to staff wellbeing, workplace effectiveness, and sustainable diversity management.

The first of these opportunities involves the socio-economic changes resulting from active globalization and the opening of Sri Lanka's International business channels. With the Sri Lankan workplace being increasingly connected to global business through multinationals, International business ventures and cross-border business activities, a significant number of Sri Lankan workplaces are being exposed to global business models, trends and frameworks of workplace diversity, equity and inclusion. Highly connected global workplaces such as Information Technology, Financial Services and Business Process Outsourcing are under increasing pressure to accommodate diverse employment practices which are in line with the expectations of their global clientele and international corporate governance frameworks. Sri Lankan workplaces can easily adapt international Diversity and Inclusion frameworks while remaining contextually appropriate in a socio-culturally sensitive manner.

Human Resource Management is another important area that can offer opportunities for the promotion of Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace. The proposed framework has distinguished various inclusive human resource practices that provide the means through which organizations can translate workplace diversity from theory to lived experiences. Creating an open and transparent recruitment and selection process, a career development system that is free of barriers, a system for the confidential reporting and resolution of grievances, diversity and inclusion training, and equitable workplace appraisal and reward systems can empower the organizational members with a sense of belonging and foster a sense of engagement and commitment toward the organization.

New findings from Sri Lanka emphasize the need for commitment toward inclusion by organizations. According to Chathuranga (2024), organizations with progressive leaders, inclusive work cultures, and supportive organizational values were situated better to embrace LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplaces, even with the existing societal challenges. This finding is valid for the existing framework and shows how positive organizational constructs can be created to enhance positive and constructive employee experiences, irrespective of the existing dynamic sociocultural challenges.

The framework further captures the concept of inclusive leadership as a vital element of constructive

organizational change. Inclusion in the workplace as a leadership construct is the result of the decisions leaders make, the communication, and the interactions that are performed on a day-to-day basis. Being fair, empathetic, and respectful, as well as demonstrating transparency and accountability, are leadership constructs that enhance the psychological safety for employees in the workplace. Such employees feel appreciated and supported. The potential of organizations to address the issues and challenges related to workplace diversity can improve greatly by the inclusion of leadership, trust, and collaboration, which can be fostered by the establishment of inclusive leadership through targeted training and sustained professional development.

Workplace culture can enable sustainable inclusion within the workplace. While formal policies set the expectations within an organization, it is the daily interactions within the workplace that employees experience inclusion. Organizational climates where individuals are appreciated and represented, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, are the result of communication, teamwork, and recognition of difference. Consequently, it is vital that workplace culture be viewed as a resource and a strategic element from an organizational standpoint to strengthen and reinforce inclusion and diversity constructs through consistent behavioral patterns and shared organizational values.

There is more international evidence supporting the organizational advantages of inclusive workplaces. The International Labour Organization (2019) asks us to think about equality, non-discrimination, decent work, and sustainable employment; while the United Nations Development Programme (2022) connects inclusive workplaces to positive productivity, innovation, and talent, as well as positive socio-economic development. All of these viewpoints argue LGBTQ+ inclusion in workplaces is a human rights issue and an important part of organizational competitiveness and sustainability.

The proposed framework identifies workplace belonging as the main outcome of successful inclusion efforts. Employees who perceive workplace inclusion and workplace psychological safety will more likely have a strong sense of workplace belonging. This will allow them to express their true selves at work and fully commit to the workplace. High levels of workplace belonging have positive impacts on workplace engagement, satisfaction, commitment, retention, psychological wellbeing, and workplace innovation. Thus, workplace belonging will have the most positive impact when your organization views it as a strategic priority and not as an individual employee experience.

In total, these opportunities show that substantial LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion will not occur with single workplace initiatives. Inclusive leadership along with inclusive Human Resource practices, and offering positive workplace psychological culture will all be needed to improve workplace inclusion. When viewed with this perspective, the proposed framework will allow organizations to have practical

guidance on how to improve workplace inclusion and positive organizational outcomes along with employee wellbeing.

4.6 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The proposed framework adds to the scholarship on workplace diversity and inclusion by incorporating the flexible building blocks of existing workplace theories, and applying them to a developing country. Most of the existing studies on LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion have dealt with Western workplace settings, where legal protections and workplace diversity initiatives exist to a greater extent. By including socio-cultural norms and the legal context, as well as workplace practices, the framework brings greater flexibility to the theories on workplace inclusion.

The combination of Social Identity Theory, Psychological Safety Theory, and the Workplace Inclusion Framework describes how the structures and context of a workplace encompass the experience of an employee. The framework focuses workplace belonging as the primary mechanism that links organizational inclusion initiatives with positive outcomes for employees and the organization. This framework opens up the possibilities for a number of empirical studies concerning the LGBTQ+ workplace within culturally diverse environments.

4.7 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This framework outlines the practical steps that organizational leaders and HR practitioners can utilize to enable inclusion within the workplace, as well as policy-makers.

Organizations should not stop at diversity initiatives that fulfill legal requirements, but rather develop inclusion strategies that simultaneously address culture, leadership, and the wellbeing of employees. HR practitioners need to embed inclusion into recruitment, performance management, the provision of learning and development opportunities, and employee support structures.

Programs for the development of leadership should provide managers with the skills to understand and create psychologically safe and relationally inclusive environments. Similarly, organizations should commit time and resources to understand employee perceptions of inclusion and belonging to assess whether their diversity efforts create positive change to experiences at work.

For policymakers and professional organizations, the framework underscores the necessity of promoting the creation of organization specific guidance on the equitable treatment of employees that reflects the unique socially and culturally specific situation of Sri Lanka. Joint work of teaching and research, business and industry, and policy and legislatively based work should have a positive impact on the inclusivity of work environments and serve as the basis for the targeted development of future

diversity work.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper examines the LGBTQ+ workplace situation in Sri Lanka and builds a contextually sensitive conceptual framework for workplace inclusion in the context of developing countries. Although workplace inclusion and the related diversity and inclusion initiatives have increasingly become a priority for workplaces around the world, existing literature primarily focuses on the Western contexts. In the Western countries, legal frameworks, supporting institutions, and workplace diversity efforts are well-established. As such, there is still limited understanding of LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion in the context of Sri Lanka, where diversity initiatives exist, and the related socio-cultural, legal, and organizational frameworks, as well as the psychological aspects, are considered.

Applying Social Identity Theory, Psychological Safety Theory, and the Workplace Inclusion Framework, this paper builds a conceptual framework to explain how context-sensitive socio-cultural and legal/institutional factors interact with organizational policies and leadership/management behavior, and workplace culture, to shape employees' beliefs regarding their inclusion and psychological safety.

The proposed framework advances the existing workplace inclusion and diversity literature by adding a developing country context and a Sri Lankan context. Furthermore, by adding a contextual element to the existing frameworks, the proposed framework enhances cross-organizational LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion initiatives and offers a research agenda for the region and within comparable socio-cultural contexts.

Practically, the framework has organizations understand workplace inclusion as a strategic organizational capability rather than a compliance task or diversity initiative. It calls on HR, organizational leaders, and decision-makers to adopt inclusive policy frameworks, enhance leadership, and develop workplace cultures that are more psychologically safe and built on a sense of belonging for all. The initiatives most likely to increase employee wellbeing, engagement, commitment to the organization, the organization's innovative capacity, and the organization's long-term sustainability are the ones outlined in this framework.

Real inclusion in the workplace is more than policies and diversity initiatives that are driven by a compliance mentality. There has to be a commitment to LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion that encompasses the leadership approach, Human Resource policies, the workplace culture, and the socio-cultural and institutional frameworks in which the organization finds itself. The framework is designed

to spur empirical studies and provides a valuable and practical tool for organizations operating in the Sri Lankan context to design more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable workplaces.

5.4 LIMITATIONS

This being a conceptual paper, a few limitations are expected. First, the proposed framework has no empirical basis, and therefore, should be viewed as a theoretical model that requires validation. Accordingly, the proposed constructs are described in the context of existing literature and theories rather than direct empirical studies.

Secondly, the proposed framework focuses on Sri Lankan organizations. The majority of the proposed relationships may be relevant to other developing countries, however, the impact of socio-cultural norms, legal frameworks, and organizational settings may vary across different countries. Hence, the proposed framework should not be generalized beyond the Sri Lankan context.

Thirdly, the proposed framework draws from the literature on workplace diversity and inclusion, organizational behavior, and human resource management. Other related fields, such as sociology, and psychology, public policy, labor law, and gender studies may bring other insightful ideas. Therefore, the proposed framework should be refined and strengthened by future interdisciplinary research.

First of all, workplace inclusion is an iterative process. With management, law practices and recognition of the place of LGBTQ+ community participants in society all in flux, the model suggested here must be viewed as a work in progress, subject to adjustments to fit new contexts or to respond to new evidence and remain relevant.

5.5 FUTURE RESEARCH

This proposed model has a number of possibilities for research to be built on. First, research of any sort (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed) is needed to confirm the relationships demonstrated in the model. Without this research, there is no relationship, let alone understanding of the factors that improve the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in workplaces.

Second, inclusion of LGBTQ+ community members in workplaces in varying sectors in Sri Lanka is also a needed area of research. Comparative studies in the IT, Financial Services, Hospitality, Manufacturing, Healthcare, and public sectors could highlight variances in employee experiences, as well as variances in organizational and leadership readiness to engage with the community.

Third, research exploring the viewpoints of LGBTQ+ employees, managers, HR professionals, senior

organizational leadership, policymakers, and diversity consultants is needed to gain a fuller understanding of inclusion in the workplace.

Fourth, sufficient research is needed to explore how sexual orientation and gender identity interact with the other social identities. Including those of gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, and socioeconomic status is vital for understanding the belonging and inclusion needs of all members of varying workplace communities.

Critically, comparative studies involving Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries will help develop regionally useful diversity and inclusion theories. These studies may identify shared organizational issues, culturally relevant inclusion frameworks, and pathways for developing LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion across the Global South.

In summary, authentically inclusive, safe, and supportive workplaces for LGBTQ+ employees cannot be achieved with policies alone. A combination of committed leaders, inclusive human resource practices, and culturally supportive workplaces are essential. The proposed framework presents a starting point for research and practice in Sri Lanka and internationally. The framework also complements the existing scholarship on workplace inclusion, equality, and sustainability.

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