

Qualitative Study on Perceptions of Female Graduates towards the Sector of Employment

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Abstract

Female graduates' perception on private sector employment in Sri Lanka is vital to understand what they may seek in pursuing a career in the private sector upon graduation. The mismatch between having more women in higher education compared to men versus higher unemployment of females compared to males, raises the question: how do females perceive being employed in the private sector? This interpretive study thus aims to identify the determinants of the female graduates' perception on sector of employment upon graduation. Five thematic areas were identified through the literature review to analyze the perceptions such as: salary expectation, career growth, work environment, reputation of the organization and family's perception of the organization. Qualitative evidence gathered from the 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted among female Management Faculty graduates from three state universities in Colombo, Sri Lanka suggests that potential for career growth, work environment and reputation of the company were important determinants in choosing a career in the private sector. Salary expectations and family's perception of the organization were not strong determinants according to the study despite literature stating otherwise. This study also reveals that lecturers' perceptions about the private sector vs. public sector employment, asymmetry of knowledge about private vs. public sectors, political influence in gaining a job in the public sector and peers' perception about the sector of employment are factors that shape the career perception about the sector of employment for female graduates.

Keywords: Perception, Employment, Private Sector, Female Graduates, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a South Asian middle-income country, with majority of its total population 51.59% comprising of females (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Despite females making majority of the population, it does not reflect in the country's economically active population. While the economically active population encompasses 35.4% females, the majority 64.6% comprises of males. On the contrary, 73.7% of the economically inactive population includes females and 26.3% males. The unemployment rate of females with the education level of G.C.E. A/L and above in 2019 was 11.9%, compared to 5% for males (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). Despite this high rate of unemployment among females, Sri Lankan state university enrollments in 2013/2014 recorded 62.27% females in its total population. Therefore, it is evident that although females in Sri Lanka extensively engage in education, they do not actively take part in the economy. Females show a greater tendency not to be employed at all or withdraw from employment despite pursuing university education (Secretariat for Senior Ministers, 2011). Research also shows many socio-cultural factors that women consider before seeking employment. For example, the need to balance work and life by refraining working for lengthy hours to take care of household chores, perception of being employed by husband or parents and gender stereotyping of jobs have played a crucial role in determining how females perceive their careers both in the past and the present (United Nations Development Program, 2014).

This study gives special reference to the private sector because, majority of Sri Lankans work in the private sector. Of the 8,180,693 employed population in Sri Lanka, the majority 4,738,244, that is 57.9% are employed as employees. 43% of the employees are employed in the private sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). Therefore, private sector entities in Sri Lanka find human resource management as an essential and integral part of their work to manage employees to maximize efficiency and productivity at the work place. As part of effective human resource management, private sector entities pay much attention to the employee recruitment processes. Therefore, this research analyzes factors that may influence female graduates' perception of entering the private sector employment in Sri Lanka.

Studying the job seeking behavior of female graduates is an area of study that has an elevating importance in Sri Lanka, due to the large female population and low female employment rates that has prevailed over decades. Therefore, gathering evidence to determine how and why female graduates may or may not seek employment in the private sector would support when formulating corporate strategic plans, government policies and multidisciplinary procedures to attract more educated women to enter the private sector job market in Sri Lanka.

Previous studies suggest that, the issue of unemployment among university graduates has been significantly evident among management graduates due to the large number of students graduating from faculties of management each year. Studies also state that job opportunities in the private sector have been expanding and increasing for students graduating from the field of management (Ariyawansa, 2008). Therefore, with the prevailing mismatch between demand and supply of management graduates, this study will provide a foundation to research further on how graduates; particularly female graduates, may perceive their career prospects in the private sector in Sri Lanka.

The dilemma of having more females educated in the national universities and yet producing less employed females, is an under-researched issue in Sri Lanka, particularly with reference to graduates pursuing a career in the private sector. Therefore, undertaking research to identify reasons for female graduates to prefer private sector employment is vital to understand in order to further analyze Sri Lanka's labour force dynamics of the present and forecast the future. Hence, this research focuses primarily on understanding how female graduates may perceive a career in the private sector and factors that may influence female graduates to seek jobs in Sri Lanka's private sector. It thus allows understanding and analyzing reasons why female graduates may prefer entering the private sector labour force in the country. The research aims at answering the following question: What determines female graduates' decision to work in the private sector?

This research aims at identifying reasons why university educated females may or may not enter the private sector job market upon completion of their degree.

Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to understand how university educated females may perceive the private sector when seeking for jobs as prospective employees. The primary objective will be fulfilled by collecting evidence under a defined scope of five thematic areas defined with reference to empirical evidence gathered from previous studies. The five areas are; salary expectation, career growth, work environment, reputation of the organization and family's perception of the organization.

Literature Review

This research was constructed as an interpretive study following the theory of emotionalism. Emotionalism refers to a study of the inner reality of humans (Bryman & Bell, 2011) allowing to capture the diverse opinions and perceptions of female graduates in this study. The interpretive study was chosen because it enables to capture subjective and qualitative evidence of the graduate's perceptions of their prospective employment. Since generalization is not the motive of this research, emotionalism allows an explanation of subjective factors that may influence the job seeking behavior of female graduates through their perceptions of the private sector.

Salary is a vital part of the employment decision because it fulfills the employees' basic needs and wants (Highhouse et al., 2003). It's been identified that the intention of some females to work in particular industries related to their salary expectations (Schweitzer et al., 2014). Studies also reveal that competitive pay structures attract young employees to a work place (Jain & Bhatt, 2015). However, other studies also reveal that first time job seekers would not consider salary expectations as a main factor when seeking for employment, but pay greater attention on the prospects of career growth instead (Gokuladas, 2010). Furthermore, it is important to note that females in some countries experience a large gender pay gap that may also impact salary expectations of the new job seeking female graduates. In 2019, the mean monthly earnings of a male in Sri Lanka was recorded at Rs. 44,471 per month while female monthly earnings were recorded at Rs. 34,124 per month (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019). Therefore, inequalities in earnings have been a major challenge for females employed (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Robson & Wallance, 2001). Furthermore, first time job seeking graduates are

often criticized to be overly ambitious with high job expectations, thus often find themselves frustrated and giving up seeking jobs when they find themselves getting turned down a few times (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011). Hence, salary expectation of the job seeker is the first factor scrutinized in this research.

Scope for career advancement, opportunities for training and development, good work colleagues, good superiors and a decent initial salary are some crucial factors considered by university educated youth when deciding on a job (Ng & Burke, 2006). However, risk adverse individuals considered working in a challenging environment to be stressful and tiresome. Therefore, preferred employment in the public sector over the private sector due to the ease of managing work and non-demanding nature of the public sector (Christofides & Pashardes, 2002). Furthermore, discrimination against women in giving promotions and opportunities for career growth (Ali, 2013) is a crucial factor that job seeking women pay attention to. A prospect for career growth is thus the second factor scrutinized in this research.

Research evidence reveal that work places with flexible work hours, learning opportunities, and empowering work conditions play an important role in determining a work place for a new job seeker (Jain & Bhatt, 2015). A study done on the job search behavior of Business students in Canada, found that the behavior of female students varied depending on their program of study and Grade Point Average, yet in general students stated, having good work colleagues, good superiors and challenging work are deciding work environment factors when choosing a job (Ng & Burke, 2006). It is further identified that individuals with risk adverse behavior; where they would consider challenging work environments to be stressful and tiresome, would prefer employment in the public sector, thus be less inclined to seek employment in the private sector (Christofides & Pashardes, 2002). Therefore, the third factor considered in this research is the work environment.

With the high value placed on social media by millennials, it is found that social media policies of companies make a significant impact on the job seeking behavior of millennials. They would perceive the person-organization fit to be weak if a company adopts a limiting social media policy which restricts employees from

engaging in social media, compared to a company which supports the use of social media. Therefore, career perception of millennials can be impacted by the practice and perception of social media by a company due to the extensive use of social media by present day job seekers (Cho et al., 2013). Another factor impacting job seeking behavior is the employer branding of the organization. Hence, there will be more individuals seeking jobs at companies with positive employer branding of the organization (Gomes & Neves, 2010). Reputation of a company increases with the corporate social responsibility initiatives it engages with. Hence, companies with high levels of corporate social performance are found to be more competitive in attracting prospective employees (Turban & Greening, 1997). Company's reputation is another factor that will be researched in this study.

Many studies reveal that males and females show differences in how they perceive their careers. Some studies found that female college students preferred interpersonal work goals over high paying status work goals which were preferred by men (Morgan et al., 2001). Other studies also suggest differences in terms of career goals, inter personal relationships, values such as women preferring quality over quantity and even decision of becoming a parent may vary among men and women who embarked on a professional career (Jagsi et al., 2011). Number of children, husband's income, husband's education level and education of father are some factors that determined a female's perception of having a career in Pakistan (Chaudhry & Jabeen, 2010). Therefore, women in many parts of the world have shown reluctance and hesitance to join the workforce, despite of their education attainment due to the family's perception of the job market. Adding on, men have been able to progressively enter the private sector work force where as women have been finding it difficult to adjust and adapt to the new private sector job market as they may exit the job market earlier than men, due to reasons such as starting a family (Ibrahim, 2013).

The generation gap in preferring employment in the public sector versus private sector is another crucial factor that influences family's perception of being employed. Sri Lanka's public sector was the largest employer till year 1989. However, with the pro-private sector liberalization policies, enacted by the new governing party, enabled the private sector to expand in its size and proportion of

employment. In 1977, 32 percent of the total employed population was employed in the government sector while only 21 percent were employed in the private sector. By 2007, Sri Lanka's private sector became the largest employer holding 42.7 percent of the total employed population in its work force, compared to 13.8 percent in the public sector (Little & Hettige, 2016). Hence, understanding the history of Sri Lanka's public and private sector employment allows to understand factors which may influence university educated female graduates to seek jobs in their preferred sector. It would also enable to understand the possibility of parents being biased towards public sector employment. Therefore, the final factor that will be researched in this study is the family's perception of having a career.

Methodology

This interpretive study is constructed to capture diverse opinions and perceptions of female graduates in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm used in this research will enable conducting focused and in-depth interviews as an effort to understand the perceptions of female graduates about a prospective career in the private sector.

This research used in-depth qualitative interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to ensure flexibility in the process of gathering evidence, so that follow up questions could be asked to ensure that interviewees were given enough opportunity to express their opinions in a free and fair manner, respecting the interpretive nature of the research. Semi structured qualitative interviews allow a flexibility for both interviewer and interviewee during the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative interviewing allowed explaining the reasoning behind each of the defined thematic areas. Thus, in-depth and descriptive analysis of multiple variables was possible through this methodology, capturing the subjectivity of opinions expressed by the interviewees.

The sample of 15 graduates was chosen across three national universities concentrated in the Western province of Sri Lanka. National universities were selected to maintain uniformity in the tertiary education system in which they obtain their undergraduate qualification. Western province was selected to minimize travel time to conduct the interviews. Faculty of Management was chosen because this

research gives special reference to the private sector. Hence, these job seeking graduates from the field of management were considered as likely candidates to seek employment in the private sector. Furthermore, the time factor was taken into consideration when determining the sample, to ensure the research is comprehensive and completed on time.

Findings and Conclusion

Findings of this research are presented through five defined thematic areas chosen through the literature review, together with other factors identified through the evidence gathered during the study.

Salary expectation - The study focused on two main aspects of salary expectation of female graduates in Sri Lanka: importance of the first salary meeting the expected rate and the importance of salary progression. Meeting the salary expectation of new graduates showed diverse levels of importance when seeking a job. Previous studies suggest that salary played a vital role in motivating new graduates to improve their work performance. In fact, previous research also suggests that salary was considered as a symbol of career status (McLean et al., 1996). However, such perception of career status through the salary was not evident in this study. Salary was not considered as a symbol of status but a necessity.

“Salary is important because it is a basic need. But it is just one part of the decision” – Participant 1.

The study also reveals that new graduates do not perceive themselves to be in a position to demand for a high salary. Their lack of work experience has a greater impact than the level of education when seeking employment for the first time. Hence, the ability of demanding a high salary is far less for a first-time job seeker.

“Private sector expects us to have prior work experience. They base their salaries on our previous experience. At this stage, I don’t consider salary as a priority, at this stage I consider experience and exposure more valuable than the salary”- Participant 12.

Another important finding in this research is, although the graduates understand they are not in a position to demand for a high salary, they still expect the private sector to offer them a good salary progression with periodic salary increments. They perceived salary progression to be something they deserve due to the academic and professional qualifications they possess.

“I would look at the salary progression. I will look at how they perceive my qualifications and what the recognition they give for my academic qualifications and other professional qualifications” - Participant 8

Although evidence does not suggest that graduates in Sri Lanka consider salary as symbol of prestige, evidence suggests that graduates believe salary should be a reward for their academic achievements. Graduates do expect employers to take their academic and professional qualifications into consideration when determining the salary of a new entrant. Furthermore, salary increments and career progression upon good work performance were expected by the graduates.

“The salary must be a reward to the time I spent in the university and the knowledge I gain” - Participant 9.

“I think the private sector is better able to satisfy my salary expectations. One main reason to choose a job in the private sector is the salary progression. It's my biggest motivational factor” - Participant 2

Another important finding is that graduates perceive a higher salary to be associated with high standard and expectation of work performance or the job role given. Hence, they do not solely base their career decisions on the salary they may initially earn.

“I definitely look at the salary. But it depends on the organization within the private sector. The salary will depend on the job role I am given to perform. International organizations will offer higher salaries but the job role I will have to perform will also be of higher standards” - Participant 4

We could deduce that salary is not the sole factor that independently determines the career decisions made by new graduates. They do perceive the private sector to have better ability in matching their salary expectations in the long run. In the short

run, they believe their lack of experience overrides their ability to demand for the salary they expect.

“I think the private sector can match my salary expectations. Salary is a critical factor but salary is not the only factor I will look into. I would mainly consider the job role, after that I will look into the salary and working hours and other facts” - Participant 5

The literature review reveals that previous studies have found job-seeking graduates to be overly ambitious about their salary expectation (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011). However, this study did not reveal such overly ambitious salary expectations by female graduates in Sri Lanka. In fact, they were fully aware of their lack of experience, thus lack of bargaining power for a higher salary. Finally, it is important to note that, graduates do acknowledge that their career perceptions may change over time. They believe their perception about the sector of employment may change with experience and maturity.

“At the moment I focus more and give priority to the salary which the private sector offers, more than the job security. If you ask the same question in a year or two my answer may be different” - Participant 2.

Career growth – This study revealed two main aspects of career growth; importance of training and development, and the importance of job security towards deciding which sector to work. Opportunities offered by the organization for career growth plays a vital role in the decision made by new graduates to prefer working in the private sector over the public sector. Private sector is perceived to provide better opportunities for career growth through training and development, whereas the public sector is perceived to provide better job security. Ng and Burke (2006) revealed that career advancement, training and development were deciding factors when making career decisions. Female graduates in Sri Lanka who participated in this study, did find career growth as a crucial and essential factor when making their career decisions.

“The private sector is better in training new graduates at their first job. So I prefer the private sector” - Participant 13

Training and development provided by the private sector were perceived as an opportunity for career progression, where young employees are able to learn on the job, get guidance from supervisors and learn about different functions of an organization through formal training programs. First time job seeking graduates found this to be crucial to advance their skills.

“Training and development for career growth is very important in my opinion, because there is no point in doing the same job for a long period of time” - Participant 8

“The support level and the supervisor’s guidance (are) so much important. Supervisor is the person you are going to learn the work (from)” - Participant 7

“Private sector provides a lot of opportunity for trainings. It also gives on the job training. Therefore, for me, the private sector becomes more attractive to join compared to the public sector. Because I don’t know enough about trainings provided by the public sector” – Participant 2

This statement also reveals the asymmetry of information about training and development opportunities in the private and public sectors. The gap in information will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter. Training and development opportunities were not only important to progress in the organization hierarchy but also to improve soft skills and social skills required in employment. Therefore, training opportunities are considered as opportunities for personal growth.

“Yes, career growth is very important. But when I say career growth, I don’t mean the growth in the hierarchy. I mean growth in the professional knowledge, or soft skills, or social skills” - Participant 10

Time spent on training and development is also considered as an investment for their personal career prospects beyond the organization they serve. Hence, they might not necessarily remain in the organization that provided them with the training, but move on to a different organization weighing their priorities at the time. This can be a potential deterring factor when recruiting young employees as they may be more prone to change their jobs after acquiring the training provided by the organization.

“Comparing private and public, private provides more training. In the beginning I can gain more experience in the private sector through the trainings they provide, and later on with the trainings I can join the public sector” - Participant 3

The young graduates understood that the public sector will offer greater job security compared to the private sector. Therefore, those who are risk averse and seek greater stability would be less likely to seek employment in the private sector.

“Job security is utmost important. But compared to the public sector I don't think the private sector offers job security. Because, if the employee doesn't perform well, there is a very high chance of the employee getting kicked out of the company if it is the private sector, but in the public sector the relevant authorities won't be able to do that very easily compared to the private sector, due to the laws and trade unions” - Participant 9

Studies also reveal that job security in the private sector is determined by a combination of factors. Therefore, it was understood the graduate's work performance in the organization is as important as the overall financial and market performance of the organization in order to ensure job security within the private sector.

“I think if you are working in an organization which is stable in terms of their financial performance, their sustainability in their particular sector, their organization survival and your skills, your commitment, both are important” - Participant 7

It was discussed in the literature how young graduates may compare the importance of salary over job security. It is crucial to understand that young graduates, just entering the job market perceive their first job as a stepping-stone to the world of work. Hence their first job is not necessarily their last job.

“Yes, job security is important, but for me, I will anyway work for a company for a period of 2-3 years, not more than that. I look for more opportunities and will move to another company for experience and knowledge” - Participant 4.

Young graduates may not be concerned about job security when entering the job market. This is because they are able to explore different work places over a period of time, until they find a suitable organization to remain for a longer period of time. Therefore, an important finding from this study is the importance of training and development, and job security changes over time as the career progress.

Work environment – The study reveals three main aspects of the work environment; availability of flexible work hours, supervisor-supervisee relationship and professionalism among colleagues at the work place. Availability of flexible work hours were perceived diversely, by the young female graduates. One much perception was, flexible work hours should be allowed as a reward for working long hours during times when employees are expected to work under tight deadlines

“It’s ok to work even late, when there is a deadline, but I expect them also to be flexible when I have done enough work during the deadline, during other times, to do my studies and also be flexible to be okay with working from home. If there are flexible terms, it would be great but I can’t expect all the organizations to be like that” - Participant 7

Another participant revealed that the work environment with flexible work hours would not matter if the employee enjoys the job role given to perform. It is important to note how graduates may not perceive conducive work environment and enjoying the job role to be interdependent, yet find conducive work environment and work efficiency to be positively related to each other. New entrants to the job market could have such perception due to the lack of experience and exposure to employment.

“I don’t really look into the work environment because if the job satisfies your other aspects, work environment won’t matter much. Other aspects mean job role or tasks you are going, if you enjoy the work, it won’t matter if you have flexible work environment, but if there is a flexible work environment efficiency of the worker might go up” - Participant 5

As Christofides and Pashardes (2002) found that risk averse individuals may dislike working in stressful work environments hence choose to work in the public sector for convenience. Public sector is perceived as a much easier sector to maintain a

good work-life balance. Evidence from this study also reveals that some may perceive the public sector as a comfortable and unchallenging environment to work.

“Right now, I have time to do a private sector job. But in the future, I won’t be able to play the same role. After getting married and having kids, I won’t be able to balance the time with work and family, so public sector will be a better option then”

- Participant 3

A flexible work environment can sometimes be perceived as not challenging enough. Therefore, a challenging and demanding work environment can be considered as essential in order to achieve higher career goals and aspirations.

“Flexibility of work and work hours, is something I don’t consider as much. If you really have a goal to achieve, I don’t think a person who works from 9-5 or 8-5 would achieve much, because the work you can do during those hours is very less. At this young age, we need to be flexible and work more hours, be serious and responsible when we work” – Participant 9

Relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is another important aspect of the work environment that was studied through this research. Graduates revealed, since they wouldn’t know who their supervisor would be until they join the organization, they must be flexible to adapt to the supervisor accordingly in order to sustain in the organization.

“You will not know your supervisor until you get to the job. You need to be flexible with how you communicate with supervisor and adjust yourself, if not you can’t survive” – Participant 4

Thus, the authority of a supervisor is fully understood by the young graduates and they were fully aware of how the supervisor could influence the supervisee’s rights and benefits within the organization.

“Even things like getting study leave and all, depends on your supervisor” – Participant 10

Work relationships such as the relationship with the supervisor, plays a vital role in ensuring the employees happiness at the work place. Good work relationships will

thus increase happiness of working in the organization, which will enable the employee to perform more efficiently at work (Oswald et al., 2015). Therefore, it is evident that young graduates are aware of how a positive relationship with the supervisor would impact their career progression in the chosen sector of employment.

“Relationship with the supervisor is very important because it totally decides the future of our career” - Participant 9

Professionalism among work colleagues was considered important when determining the career because associating the right colleagues will enhance the job performance while the opposite would cause detrimental impacts on work efficiency and performance.

“If we get to associate people with professionalism in the organization, there is a high chance that we succeed in the future also. It will stop us from associating people with negative ideas and people who gossip at work places” – Participant 9

Hence, if the organization has colleagues who are unfocused, inattentive at work, it would negatively impact others working around such colleagues.

“Professionalism is important to maintain a professional relationship with colleagues. If they are always chatting and everything during work hours, it becomes a disturbance to do our work. Therefore, professional work environment is very important” (Participant 6).

The study focused on three main aspects of the organization’s reputation: impact of brand reputation, impact of policy reputation such as human resource management policies and sexual harassment policies and finally, the impact of social media image of the organization on career perception of job seeking graduates. Importance of brand reputation on career decisions showed diverse opinions among the graduates. While some stated that brand reputation is a crucial factor they consider when applying for a job, some stated that a well-known brand would not necessarily be a good employer.

“No. I don’t look at brand reputation. For freshers the brand reputation is not important. I will give you an example, if you put yourself in a well-reputed company, you will be placed in a particular section of the company and you will get exposure within that section only. But you might place yourself in a small company and you will have to do the entire thing. There is a big difference between the exposure. As a fresh graduate, reputation is not what you should look at, it should be the experience we are getting from the company. I don’t look at the reputation at all” – Participant 6

The awareness about work environment in large versus small companies, well-known versus not so well-known companies is important for new graduates when seeking for employment because the lack of comprehensive awareness may cause misconception that in turn may refrain graduates from exploring their career opportunities in both well-known and reputed companies and other companies equally. On the other hand, some may not perceive company reputation as an important part of one’s career decisions.

“I won’t look into the brand reputation too much and I won’t base my decision on what I see on social media” – Participant 3

Participants revealed that working at a reputed organization is important for their self-image. Hence the job-seeking female graduates believed, a reputed company would add value to its employees’ image and self-worth in the labour market.

“When you go to a place and you’re asked where you work, it impacts a lot when it’s a reputed company. It will say a lot about yourself” – Participant 2

However, it is important to note that different people perceive and define ‘reputation’ in different ways. Participant 9 stated what she meant by a reputed company.

“It needn’t be world famous, but the reputation is important because, the company we work in will actually represent us. If we go to a crowd and say we work at place X, they look at in a different way if it is a reputed company” – Participant 9

Therefore, it is essential to note that, while some may perceive a reputed company to be world recognized, another may perceive a company's reputation to be determined upon how it treats the employees or the work environment they provide for its employees. Defining an organization's reputation is essential because, the importance of brand reputation, policy reputation and social media reputation may vary among individuals.

"I understand that some organizations are less involved with modern day marketing tools like Facebook or Instagram, but that doesn't mean that all the organizations who are active on social media are well-reputed and credible companies" – Participant 14

Literature review in the second chapter suggest that young job seekers' may change their career perceptions due to what they may experience on social media (Cho et al., 2013). However, this was not seen in this study because social media was not perceived as a credible source to rely on and gage the reputation of an organization.

"I do pay attention to social media but I won't believe in everything that the social media says about a company. I understand that some organizations are less involved with modern day marketing tools like Facebook or Instagram, but that doesn't mean that all the organizations who are active on social media are well-reputed and credible companies" – Participant 14

Family's perception - The study focused on two main aspects of family's perception of the sector of employment: influence by parents to change the sector and parents' sector of employment. Previous research suggests that parental influence played a significant role in a young woman's decision in choosing a career or organization to work in. Tahir et al (2013) found that female graduates may even refrain from working in the private sector, or not working at all because of how their parents perceive the private sector.

It was found that parents were supportive of the decision the graduates made despite the sector their parents chose to work.

"Both parents worked in the public sector and retired. Mother works in the private sector after she retired. My parents are okay with me working in the private or

public sector but there are times when they talk about the good and advantages of working in the public sector. But I have enough arguments about advantages when working in the private sector” – Participant 7

Hence, it is evident that parents might not necessarily agree with the decision taken by their daughters, yet they chose to support the personal choice made by the graduate. Participant 5 stated a justification why parents may support the daughter's decision irrespective of the parents' personal preference.

“My Mother worked in the private sector and father in the government sector. Now the job market is really competitive and it is really hard to find a job, so if you are already having a job in the private sector, they won't force me to go to a government job. I don't think my parents will do that” – Participant 5

Contradicting the popular South Asian belief that parents play a critical role in a girl's career decisions, this study found that parents respected the educated decisions made by their daughters.

“They would look into and inquire about what kind of organization I will do my job, but they won't interfere with my decision. They respect the education I have gained from university to make a good career choice” – Participant 13

Therefore, it is evident that university educated females in Sri Lanka are not pressurized to make career choices in favor of their parents' perceptions. As stated by a participant, this could be the confidence parents' have on the education their daughters' education attainment.

Furthermore, participants were given the option to reveal their parents' sector of employment to find if parents would prefer if their daughters worked in the same sector. The evidence reveals that irrespective of which sector the parents were employed, they were flexible in understanding and respecting their daughter's career choices. Parents who worked in the public sector would be aware of the benefits in working in the public sector, hence passively influencing their daughter to choose the public sector to pursue her career.

“My parents are okay with me working in the private or public sector but, there are times when they talk about the good and advantages of working in the public sector” – Participant 8

Evidence did not indicate parents forcing their daughters to join a sector they did not like or influence to discontinue their career and remain unemployed as found in the literature review.

Apart from the five thematic areas used in this study; following factors were highlighted by participants as factors that influence their career decision to prefer working in the private sector and not the public sector.

University lecturers often discuss about career choices students make and choices students should make. Lecturers give their opinions about working in different sectors and different industries. Therefore, students tend to consider lecturer's opinions as more learned and mature than their own perceptions. This was evident in the study as graduates did mention how they've been influenced by what lecturers have told them about career choices.

“I don't like to join the public sector because of all the rumors and what we've been told and taught by our parents, teachers and lecturers about the public sector. They say there's a good future in the private sector, but no career growth and promotions and increments in the public sector” - Participant 2

This statement suggests that university lecturers too encourage students to join the private sector. Hence, it is evident that students could be influenced by lecturers' perceptions of a career.

The influence lecturers have on students is often a factor that is neglected, conveniently ignored and poorly researched in Sri Lanka. The opinion expressed by Participant 2 through this research reveals that lecturers do cause a significant impact on students' career perceptions especially because students have close interactions with lecturers during a semester. Thus, repetitive statements made by lecturers advocating for private sector employment and against public sector employment would adversely impact students' career perception in the public sector.

Asymmetry of knowledge - “I don’t know enough about trainings provided by the public sector. I have no idea what kind of salary to expect from the public sector. I don’t even know what their hierarchy is. I don’t even know how to apply to the public sector. I actually don’t know. It is easy to apply to the private sector through different websites and all but I have no idea how to even apply to the public sector”

- Participant 2

“I’m not sure about how the salaries work in the government sector” - Participant 4

The evidence above shows there is an asymmetry of information available among university graduates about career prospects in the private sector and career prospects in the public sector. Hence, the reason why graduates choose to join the private sector could be due to the lack of knowledge they possess about the public sector employment. Therefore, it is important that graduates are able to make informed career choices with sufficient knowledge about both sectors. Graduates may not have enough knowledge about job vacancies due to the lack of sources advertising public sector job opportunities. Hence, graduates would be more inclined to apply for job advertisements that are easily accessible rather than ones that are remotely found. Furthermore, the perception that public sector recruitments procedure is biased and flawed where as private sector recruitment procedure is transparent and just would also have an impact on which sector they apply for employment. Therefore, asymmetry of information is a factor that influences the career perception of female graduates in Sri Lanka.

Political influence – Political influence and party politics within the public sector has made the sector unattractive for young graduates to pursue a career for decades. As participants stated during the interviews, they prefer to remain politically unbiased in a professional environment. Therefore, being forced to perform political favors while at work and confining themselves to a position where political requests cannot be ignored were disliked and intended to be avoided when graduates decided not to pursue a career in the public sector. Hence, found the private sector more attractive because the graduates perceived the private sector to be apolitical and unbiased in terms of performing organization functions.

“Main reasons not to join the public sector are the inefficiency and political involvement the employees gain due to the corruption in the system” - Participant 13

“I’m not fond with the political involvements in the public sector. That’s why I would join the private sector. Private sector is not politically involved like the public sector. When you go up the ladder there’ll be a lot of political pressure. The main reason why I wouldn’t choose the public sector is if I go up the ladder, at higher positions, you might not want to do certain things but you have to make the decisions because of the political pressure. That is the reason why I wouldn’t join the public sector” – Participant 1

Peer Perception – Peer perception is another factor that impacts the career perception of new graduates seeking for employment. Graduates may be concerned about how their peers may perceive if they work at a public institution versus a private institution. Hence, graduates may refrain from applying for public sector jobs due to the negative stigma associated with working at a public institution. Most often, the negative stigma relates to public sector workers being inefficient.

“The public sector’s use of technology is very less, they still use manual systems which are still used in the public sector, they are inefficient. Private sector is efficient and really target oriented” - Participant 6

“My friends might make fun of me if I say I work in the public sector, because public sector workers are considered lazy” (Participant 2).

Key findings can be presented in nine thematic areas. First, graduates did not expect high salaries at the beginning of their careers because they were fully aware of their lack of experience and lack of demanding power for a higher salary. Yet they expect to be rewarded with salary increments and progression if they perform efficiently at the work place. Second, graduates found prospects of career growth to be a major influence to choose a career in the private sector over the public sector. Graduates found the private sector more attractive because of the training and development opportunities provided by the organization for career advancement of its employees. Third, the work environment played an important role in graduates’ decision to

choose the private sector because of the efficiency, updated and advanced use of technology and professionalism in the work environment.

Fourth factor is reputation of the organization. It was found that graduates had a mix of opinions about the reputation of the organization. While social media was not considered the most credible source to gauge a company's reputation, graduates did claim to pay close attention on the company's brand reputation because they perceive the company's reputation would impact their personal reputation in the labour market as well. Fifth, graduates expressed that their families did not pressurize or influence them to seek jobs in a particular sector. Hence, the graduates were able to make their own independent decision on which sector to seek employment. Thus the evidence contradicted with the previous study done by Ibrahim (2013). This research revealed four other factors that will influence graduates' career choice of pursuing employment in the private sector. They are: interactions with lecturers at the university and their perception of the private sector, asymmetry of information about public sector employment, political influences when applying for a job in the public sector and the negative perception peers have about working as a public sector employee.

The main limitation of this research is the inability to generalize the evidence to all female graduates in Sri Lanka. This is a qualitative study that provides descriptive evidence through subjective accounts. Therefore, the evidence cannot be generalized to all university graduates. The lack of statistical evidence also contributes towards the inability to generalize the findings across the nation. Furthermore, the sample was selected from three national universities in the Western province. Thus, once again the evidence cannot be assumed to repeat if the study was replicated in other national and private universities across the island.

Following are the five recommendations derived from this qualitative research. First, this qualitative research can be expanded to a quantitative study to gather evidence on factors influencing female graduates to pursue a career in the private sector. Second, the research evidence can be utilized by private sector companies to strategize and reconstruct their recruitment strategies. For example, companies can capitalize on the fact that graduates seeking a job at the beginning of their career

would give higher priority to companies with better training and development opportunities. Third, universities can use this evidence to make their career guidance programs more holistic and inclusive of potential employers from both private and public sectors to bridge the gap in the asymmetry of information on public sector job opportunities and career prospects. For example, universities can initiate public sector entities like ministries and departments to conduct career awareness programs for students to familiarize prospective employees with the functions of each ministry or department in the public sector that relates to their field of study.

Fourth, this evidence on the lecturers' influence on students can be taken a step further by educating and training lecturers and academic staff on guiding students about career choices. This would enable lecturers to interact with students about career prospects with an unbiased expression of opinion, by stating facts and statistics on employment in the two sectors rather than enforcing emotional and personal judgments about the two sectors. Fifth and final recommendation is, this evidence can be used by policy makers to ensure perceptions of female graduates into consideration when strategizing higher education and labour policies for the future. It is vital to note that Sri Lanka has a higher female population in total, as well as higher enrolment of females in tertiary education. Hence, strategizing, developing and implementing evidence-based policies would enable more effective measures taken by policy makers to attract more women into employment, especially to the private sector.

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