

Unemployment among Women, Challenges, and Coping Strategies: Evidence from the Vavuniya District

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges unemployed women face in the Vavuniya District, Sri Lanka, focusing on systemic and personal barriers to employment. It aims to provide actionable insights for policymakers to address gendered unemployment disparities and foster inclusive growth. Using a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with fifty purposively selected unemployed women aged 18–30. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns and insights reflecting participants' socio-economic and cultural contexts. Key barriers faced by unemployed women in the Vavuniya district include several interrelated challenges such as economic challenges, socio-cultural challenges, government and policy challenges, mental health challenges, skill gaps and education, gender discrimination, mobility challenges, and technology challenges. The coping strategies to address the economic challenges are establishing women's business incubators, microfinance initiatives, and financial literacy programmes; for socio-cultural challenges, flexible childcare solutions and community-based support systems; for government and policy challenges: gender-responsive labour market policies and improved maternity benefits; for mental health challenges, counselling programmes and resilience-building workshops; for skill gap and education, tailored skill development programmes, vocational training, and e-commerce workshops; for gender discrimination, affirmative action policies and leadership development programmes; for mobility, promoting remote work and improving rural transportation infrastructure and for technology challenges, subsidised digital literacy training and technology access programmes. Addressing these barriers requires targeted policies to improve access to education and vocational training, promote entrepreneurship through financial support, and implement gender-sensitive strategies. Enhancing mental health services and providing flexible work opportunities, rural transportation, and access to technology are also crucial. This research deepens our understanding of gendered unemployment in post-conflict rural areas. Integrating economic, cultural, and psychological perspectives offers a framework for addressing disparities and promoting sustainable development in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Economic Challenges, Government and Policy Challenges, Mental Health Challenges, Socio-Cultural Challenges, Women Unemployment