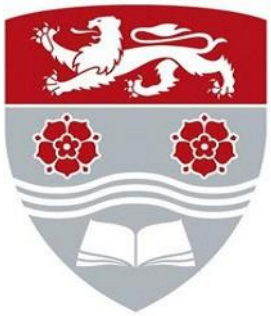

Lancaster University

Viewing Supply Chains through a Gender Lens: An Intra- and Inter-Firm Analysis of the Challenges to Achieving Gender Equality in Garment Supply Chains

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Declaration

This thesis is my own work, and it has not been submitted in support of an application for another higher degree or qualification elsewhere. Any parts of the research that have been published or submitted for publication to peer-reviewed journals are clearly identified.

Ophelia Laine Chidgey

February 2025

Dedication

I dedicate this work, everything that came before and everything that will come after to my Mum, who I owe everything.

'You can never be overdressed or overeducated' Oscar Wilde

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the critical role of gender equality in achieving economic and social development. Despite this, gender inequality remains pervasive within global supply chains, particularly in the garment industry where women make up 80% of the workforce and face, for example, persistent exploitation, precarious employment, and gender-based violence & harassment (GBVH). While social issues like child labour and modern slavery have gained attention, gender remains an underexplored topic within the socially sustainable supply chain management (SSSCM) literature.

By applying a gender lens to the field of SSSCM, this research presents four papers that provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to achieving gender equality in supply chains. Paper 1 reviews the academic literature before papers 2 to 4 draw on insights from an action research project with a UK garment brand focused on co-developing a gender due diligence programme for its supply chain. Collectively, the papers highlight the challenges faced by women workers, the role of key stakeholders, and the structural barriers preventing progress in achieving gender equality.

Paper 1 presents a systematic literature review of 38 academic sources to identify gendered human rights abuses in garment supply chains. This identifies 11 gendered issues across three themes: (i) existing SSSCM issues compounded by gender disparities, (ii) SSSCM issues that manifest in a gendered manner, and (iii) explicitly gender-specific SSSCM issues. The study underscores capitalism, the feminisation of labour, patriarchal structures, and limited female agency as key drivers of gender inequality in supply chains. It calls for further research on gendered issues and highlights the importance of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in addressing these issues.

Paper 2 synthesises 34 NGO reports to map the challenges women workers face and identifies 628 individual recommendations or policies for gender equality within the garment industry. This initial desk-based analysis provided context to the action research and informed the direction of the project. A total of 24 issues facing women workers are identified, thereby expanding on the set of 11 issues extracted from the academic literature in Paper 1. The myriad of recommendations fall under four broad themes: (i) embedding gender equality in business practices, (ii) fostering sustainability-oriented collaboration, (iii) integrating gender considerations into supplier assessments, and (iv) enhancing communication and disclosure strategies. Despite the wealth of guidance, the study finds a significant disconnect between recommendations and current supply chain practice. It asserts the need for more holistic efforts to achieve gender equality within supply chains.

Paper 3 utilises exploratory interviews with six buyers and six NGOs to better understand the disconnect between recommendations and current supply chain practice on gender equality within the garment industry. It uses Supply Network Analysis (SNA) to study inter-firm relationships within the garment industry, identifying three systemic barriers to gender equality. Importantly, it explores the potential of worker-centric supplier development (WCSD) as an alternative to traditional buyer-led strategies. The WCSD model aims to amplify women's voices and promotes collaboration with grassroots NGOs and women-led trade unions. It highlights that simply transferring responsibility to female workers is insufficient; instead, systemic change must be embedded in supply chain governance and supplier development.

Finally, Paper 4 explores the intra-firm barriers to implementing gender equality encountered in the action research. The research once again uses SNA but this time to explore

intra-firm relationships and structures. It identifies six barriers, including (1) a lack of cross departmental collaboration; (2) internal goal misalignment between departments; (3) a lack of power, influence, and agency within the firm; (4) a lack of dedicated resources, capacity, and capabilities; (5) inability to diffuse initiatives and information throughout the company; and, (6) a lack of boundary spanners for intra- and inter-firm relationships. The study leads to three propositions for effective gender due diligence of the supply chains.

Overall, the thesis highlights the importance of applying a gendered lens in the field of operations and supply chain management, moving away from the traditional, gender-blind approach to social sustainability that treats workers as one homogenous group. For practitioners, the findings highlight the need for garment brands to adopt a holistic and collaborative approach to gender equality by embedding gender policies across all levels of the organisation and by fostering intra- and inter-firm collaboration, including with traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors. These findings also offer a roadmap for addressing disparities in other global supply chains that lack transparency, have a high proportion of vulnerable workers, and a history of gender-based abuses, such as in the agriculture and mining industries.

Key words: Gender Equality, Socially Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSSCM), Worker-Centric Supplier Development (WCSD), Supply Network Analysis (SNA), Garment Industry, Action Research.

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List of Abbreviations

BSR	Business for Social Responsibility
CoC	Code of Conduct
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ETI	Ethical Trading Initiative
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GBVH	Gender Based Violence and Harassment
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MNC	Multi-National Corporation
MSI	Multi-Stakeholder Initiative
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SCM	Supply Chain Management
SD	Supplier Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
SNA	Supply Network Analysis
SSCM	Sustainable Supply Chain Management
SSSCM	Socially Sustainable Supply Chain Management
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
WCSP	Worker Centric Supplier Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Motivation

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, have set a global agenda for progress on sustainability, aiming “to transform our world. They are a call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice and prosperity” (WHO, 2025). The UN’s SDGs, which include 17 goals and 149 individual targets, specifically address the issue of gender. More specifically, Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) explicitly call for structural reforms to improve women's labour conditions. This forms part of an increasing recognition within the global policy discourse about the importance of addressing gender inequalities, emphasising the key role gender equality plays in economic and social progress.

Although achieving gender equality is an important priority, it remains a distant goal. For example, despite the potential economic benefits and a rise in attention on other social sustainability issues such as child labour, gender inequality persists in supply chains, exacerbated by weak regulatory oversight and exploitative labour practices (FTA, 2025; Akbari et al., 2024). In fact, the UN outlined that "at the current rate, achieving gender parity in managerial positions will take 176 years" (UN, 2025).

The garment industry emerges as a critical sector where gendered human rights abuses continue to persist, despite increasing pressure on firms to adopt socially sustainable supply chain practices. ActionAid (2019) found that 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh have experienced or witnessed some form of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) at work. Similar reports of GBVH and exploitation have emerged from

Cambodia, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Jordan (Solidarity Centre, 2019; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2022; Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2023). Despite the rise in global frameworks addressing gender equality, it continues to be overshadowed by other priorities or only superficially addressed in supply chain management, leading to claims of "purplewashing" within the industry (Republik, 2024). Additionally, Inditex, Bestseller, Primark, and H&M are just a few of the brands who have been reported for persistent gendered human rights violations (HRW, 2023).

Meanwhile, the recent COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated gender inequalities in global supply chains. Research by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that women were disproportionately affected by job losses caused by the pandemic-induced economic downturn, particularly in labour-intensive industries like garment manufacturing (ILO, 2020). This crisis exposed vulnerabilities in corporate sustainability policies, highlighting the need for stronger gendered policy and research within supply chains (Anner, 2021; Chua, 2022; Brown, 2021).

Despite the issues identified with gender inequalities in global supply chains, the operations and supply chain management (OSCM) literature has given only very limited attention to gender (Tang, 2022; Vijeyarasa, 2020). Tang (2022) identified this gap, calling for further research into gender-related issues that impact OSCM. Similarly, Vijeyarasa (2020) underscored the importance of examining global supply chains through a gendered lens, highlighting the persistence of gender-neutral policies and legal frameworks that fail to address structural inequalities. This research aims to address this critical gap by applying a gender lens to socially sustainable supply chain management (SSSCM). It seeks to contribute to the urgent need for stronger gender-focused

interventions in supply chain governance, particularly in the context of the garment industry.

1.2 Existing Literature

1.2.1 Key Terms

Certain terms relevant to this research have been defined and interpreted in different ways; therefore, it is important to confirm how they are used within this thesis. This section outlines the working definitions used within this research. Each will be discussed further within subsequent sections and chapters of this thesis.

- *Socially sustainable supply chain management* (SSSCM): "social sustainability is related to the management of practices, capabilities, stakeholders and resources to address human potential and welfare both within and outside the communities of the supply chain" (Nakamba et al, 2017, p6).

- *Gender equality:* "Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born female or male" (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025).
    - *(Versus) Gender parity: "*Gender parity concerns relative equality in terms of numbers and proportions of women and men, girls and boys, and is often calculated as the ratio of female-to-male values for a given indicator" *(*European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025).

- *Patriarchy*: “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women; the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (Walaby, 1989, pg4).

- *Patriarchal culture (or society): with strict cultural constraints on women's participation in the public sphere and their confinement to reproductive work and the domestic domain. Socialized into this role from an early age, denied independent access to economic resources and defined as life-long dependents of male breadwinners and guardians, women occupy a subordinate position within the family as well as the wider society (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003, pg 5).*

- *Feminization of labour: “The term “feminization of labour” is mainly used to denote two different features. First, it is used to refer to the sharp increase in women’s labour force participation…[Secondly] both “economic choices of cheap labour” and “gendered discourses of work” jointly enforce the feminized pattern of the labour force and lead to the violation of labour rights that serve the economic motive of cheap labour.…The gendered discourses of labour refer to the gender-biased beliefs that provide distinct forms of labour for men and women. These beliefs justify labour exploitation and gender discrimination at the workplace.…Both of these features are strongly conjoined and directly influenced by globalization and economic liberalization.* (Hossain *et al.*, 2013, pgs 1-2).

- *Purple washing:* is when a company claims to be in support and pursuit of gender equality or women's rights "without actually taking concrete or significant action… often used to gain popularity or improve brand image" (Republik, 2024).

1.2.2 The Importance of Focal Firms In Achieving Gender Equality Within SSCM

Focal firms play a critical role in shaping sustainable supply chain practices; for example, through supplier selection and management, the establishment of grievance mechanisms, and collaborative stakeholder partnerships (Teixeira, 2022). Given their extensive influence, analysing how focal firms address gender inequalities in the supply chain is essential to advancing social sustainability (Morais and Barbieri, 2022). Power dynamics within global supply chains position large brands and retailers as primary drivers of change. For example, their purchasing practices directly impact supplier behaviour and labour conditions (Gereffi et al., 2005). By incorporating gender-sensitive policies into supply chain governance, these firms have the potential to influence working conditions for women across the supply network (Barrientos et al., 2019). One of the key ways in which focal firms can influence social issues in the supply chain and bring about genuine change is through sustainability-oriented supplier development (Jia et al., 2021).

Yet, despite growing attention and emphasis on gender equality within corporate social responsibility (CSR), gendered initiatives remain secondary to other social sustainability concerns, including modern slavery and child labour, emphasising the need for further research into gender within SSSCM. Research suggests that social sustainability initiatives may fail within firms due to fragmented organisational structures

(Missimer and Mesquita, 2022). This calls for further investigation into how certain organisational barriers can be overcome, fostering cross-cutting collaboration and restructuring to better integrate gender equality initiatives (Teixeira, 2022). Additionally, there is growing demand for research on the practical implementation of social sustainability within supply chains, as current approaches are mostly conceptual and perspective-based (Teixeira, 2022). To address these challenges, enhancing gender due diligence should be a cornerstone of (SSSCM).

1.2.3 Social Sustainability and The Garment Industry

Since the inception of the triple bottom line, i.e., people, planet, profit (Elkington, 1994), there has been increased emphasis on the responsibility that brands and buyers have over not only their own operations but also those of their suppliers. Within this, gender has developed as a subject within several fields of management research. However, the field of (OSCM) has remained largely gender blind. The significance of gender considerations in OSCM is particularly evident in industries such as garment manufacturing, where women are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, precarious roles – a phenomenon widely recognised as the feminization of labour (Soundararajan et al., 2021). This exemplifies why gender analysis must be embedded within SSSCM. Yet, despite increasing attention on social sustainability, gender remains an underexplored dimension within the literature (Vijeyarasa, 2020; Tang, 2022; Akbari, 2024).

Since the 1950s, the garment industry has become increasingly globalised, with production being exported from the global north to the global south to take advantage of lower production costs and wages. In the 1990s, there was a further shift in production

patterns towards a fast fashion model (Turker and Altuntas, 2014). The volume of garments being produced has increased exponentially, coupled with a reduction in lead time expectations. This has put excessive pressure on the supply chains of the garment industry (Köksal *et al.*, 2017). This rapid growth and globalisation of the industry has created an environment of precarious working conditions and limited labour rights for workers. As outlined above there have been a range of issues reported, including low wages, a lack of access to collective action, poor working conditions, child labour, and modern slavery (Hossain, 2013; Nakamba *et al.*, 2017; Kuruvilla and Li, 2021; Akbari et al., 2024; Benstead *et al.,* 2021).

Reports of abuses in the industry continue to emerge as organisations pursue profit maximisation and reduced production costs. Notably, the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in 2013 killed over 1,100 workers, after garment workers were forced to continue working despite cracks in the foundations and walls of the building (Siddiqui and Uddin, 2016). This pattern of putting profit over people has seemingly continued within the industry.

Approximately 80% of workers within the garment industry are women, due to the feminization of labour in many global south countries, and the increased inclusion of women into the workforce as a cheaper, more disposable and less valued form of labour (Hossain et al, 2013; Standing, 1999; Carpenter, 2019; Barnes and Kozar, 2008). These abuses, therefore, often manifest in a gendered way and reports of verbal and physical abuse, sexual abuse, harassment, stalking, and even the murder of women workers continue to emerge from the industry (Hossain et al, 2013; Kabir et al, 2018; Pearson et al., 2013; Sanborne, 2005; Ali and Medhekar, 2016; ActionAid, 2019).

In more recent years, there have been increased calls and attention on brands and buyers to be responsible for the actions within their supply chains, mirrored by a rise in CSR and ethical initiatives from these brands and buyers (Busse, 2016). Multiple factors have contributed to this phenomenon, including increased awareness of disasters and issues such as Rana Plaza, increased awareness and demands from consumers alongside increased multi-stakeholder initiatives and work by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on these areas, such as by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (ILO, 2012; ILO 2019), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2017) and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) (ETI, 2018).Despite growing attention, there still appears to be a lack of significant meaningful progress in this area.

1.2.4 Gender within Supply Chains

Outside the field of SCM, a growing body of literature examines the intersection of gender and CSR within global value chains (Barrientos et al., 2019; Grosser and Tyler, 2022). This research has addressed critical issues, such as workplace sexual harassment, highlighting that occurrences are more prevalent in precarious working environments (Barrientos et al., 2019). Additionally, these studies have employed a variety of theoretical frameworks brought in from other fields and not usual within supply chain management (SCM), such as Marxism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism (Barrientos et al., 2019; Grosser and Tyler, 2022; Grosser and Moon, 2019), which could provide valuable insights for developing a gendered understanding of SSSCM.

Discussions outside of OSCM speak to the root causes of gender inequality within the garment industry, including the consequences of the feminization of labour. Research within other fields discuss how globalization and economic liberalisation come together

to drive the pursuit of the cheapest labour globally by Multi-National Companies (MNCs) (Hossain et al, 2013; Standing, 1999; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2001). Causing the inclusion of women into manufacturing supply chains as a cheaper, secondary, more flexible or disposable form of labour (Hossain et al, 2013; Standing, 1999; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2001). Women workers are deeply affected by capitalist patriarchal exploitation (Lim, 1997), as neoliberal globalization has caused substandard employment, labour flexibility and feminization (Wilson, 2012). Hossain et al. (2013) contributes to this by explaining that " 'economic choices of cheap labour' and 'gendered discourses of work' jointly enforce the feminized pattern of the labour force and lead to the violation of labour rights that serve the economic motive of cheap labour.... The gendered discourses of labour refer to the gender-biased beliefs that provide distinct forms of labour for men and women. These beliefs justify labour exploitation and gender discrimination at the workplace" (pg2).

Within neoliberal capitalism and globalization male workers and replaced with lower-cost female labour to minimise production costs (Standing, 1989). 'Feminization' and increased labour flexibility increases participation of women in the labour market, alongside flexible labour, such as part-time, temporary, low-wage, and precarious jobs, traditionally associated with female workers (Standing, 1989). Women are often regarded as a "reserve labour force," subject to cyclical hiring and firing based on production demands (Elson and Pearson, 1997). The feminization of the labour facilitates labour rights violations and prioritises economics goals by maintaining a supply of inexpensive and disposable labour (Hossain et al, 2013; Standing, 1999; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2001; Elson and Pearson, 1997).

Gender dynamics within supply chains impact beyond individual firms, shaping operations and impacting women within entire industries, particularly in complex, globalised sectors such as the garment industry. Understanding these dynamics requires examining the socio-cultural context, the specific roles women and men occupy within supply chains and wider society, and the broader gendered implications that arise across different geographies. Gender dynamics impact all areas of society, including the operations within supply chains. The garment industry is heavily feminized, with women concentrated in low-paid and precarious positions. These roles are shaped by societal perceptions of textile work as "women's work," leading to women being held in low paid roles with limited upward mobility. The patriarchal systems that impact women in the world also impact women in the world of work. The Global Gender Gap Report (2024) highlighted that no country in the world has achieved gender equality, further exemplifying the impact of patriarchy on women around the world in all areas of society, including at work and including within garment supply chains.

Within SCM, research has examined issues such as gender-based wage disparities, biases, workplace harassment, and stereotypes, yet much of this literature remains descriptive rather than solution-oriented (Akbari et al., 2024). There have been increasing calls for research that explores not only the barriers to gender equality but also mechanisms for women's empowerment in supply chains (Yang et al., 2024), as well as the links between gender and supply chain performance (Ma et al., 2021; Chin and Tat, 2015), logistics (Zinn et al., 2018), supplier and distributor development (Sodhi and Tang, 2014), sustainability (Ruel et al., 2020), and business model innovation (Plambeck and Ramdas, 2020; Yang et al., 2024).

Literature on gender in supply chains has focused on downstream operations, particularly gender representation on corporate boards (Park and Krishnan, 2005) and diversity and performance (Ta et al., 2024). Frohlich (2022) discusses the structural challenges faced by women in the workplace, noting that patriarchal norms continue to shape both professional and domestic spheres, perpetuating workplace harassment and an unequal distribution of unpaid domestic labour (Frohlich, 2022; Gore and LeBaron, 2019; LeBaron and Gore, 2020). While some recent research has explored gender within (SCM) (Kroes et al., 2024), much of this work has focused on company executives rather than addressing systemic inequalities at the upstream factory or supplier level. Scholars have also documented how gender discrimination is embedded within both global supply chain structures and broader systems, reinforcing the disadvantages for women workers (Kroes et al., 2024; Otis and Petrucci, 2023). This underscores the need to use a gender lens to address inequalities across supply chains.

1.2.5 Supplier Development

Supplier development refers to activities undertaken by buying firms to enhance supplier performance and capabilities to meet both short- and long-term supply chain issues (Krause et al., 2000). It has been recognised as an effective strategy for improving social sustainability within supply chains (Yawar and Seuring, 2018) and helping firms achieve a competitive advantage (Jia et al., 2021). By fostering closer collaboration between buyers and suppliers, supplier development can reduce supply chain risks, improve product quality, increase productivity, and enhance worker wellbeing (Li, 2012; Wagner et al., 2019). Investments in supplier capacity not only strengthen economic

performance but also drive social improvements, making supplier development a key tool for advancing sustainability objectives (Yawar and Seuring, 2018).

Recent research has expanded the scope of supplier development to focus on sustainability-oriented supplier development (SSD), aiming to develop supplier sustainability performance across social and environmental dimensions (Jia et al., 2023). SSD encompasses both compliance monitoring and capability-building initiatives, such as supplier training, technical support, site visits, and knowledge sharing (Blonska, 2013). This approach enables buyers to support suppliers in addressing social sustainability challenges, potentially including gender equality, by fostering stronger governance and operational practices. However, despite growing interest in SSD, the literature on SSD does not extend to gender. Moreover Bai (2022) highlights a continued lack of literature in this area, highlighting the need for further research on SSD and social sustainability.

1.3 Research Gaps and Questions

1.3.1 Research Gaps

Despite the growing body of research on SSSCM, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly concerning gender and the garment industry. Gender is a critical yet underexplored dimension of social sustainability, requiring further scholarly attention to fully understand its implications within supply chain dynamics.

Extant OSCM research often treats workers as a homogenous group, overlooking how gender shapes the manifestation of labour rights violations and social inequalities. This lack of differentiation has contributed to limited progress in addressing gender-specific issues within the garment sector. Additionally, there is a need to bridge the gap between

academia and practice by incorporating action research and through an in-depth analysis of NGO reports and industry guidance. Such an approach would facilitate a better understanding of why gender inequality persists in supply chains and provide actionable insights to drive meaningful change.

1.3.2 Theoretical Lens

1.3.2.1 Gendered Lens

This thesis utilises a broad gendered lens through each stage of the research. This has taken two forms. Firstly, a gendered approach to enquiry, built upon a background of feminist thought within adjacent fields. Gender has been increasingly used in business ethics (Derry, 2002), business and human rights, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) research (Götzmann et al., 2022; Grosser, 2016). However, the integration of feminist theories, such as Marxism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism, remains limited within the field of SCM (Barrientos et al., 2019; Grosser & Tyler, 2022; Grosser & Moon, 2019). Yet, feminist theories offer a crucial lens for understanding gender disparities within supply chains. For example, Karam & Jamali (2014), Götzmann et al. (2022), and Kroes et al. (2024) explore how power structures sustain gender inequality and highlight the global nature of gender disparities and the structural barriers that maintain them.

Moreover, feminist theories demonstrate how patriarchal oppression shapes supply chains, and how the feminization of labour, driven by globalisation and neoliberalism, has pulled women into low-wage, disposable jobs, exacerbating inequality (Götzmann et al., 2022; Prieto-Carrón, 2008). Global supply chains reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms, creating and perpetuating gendered organisational structures, leading to

workplace inequalities, gender-based violence, and the exploitation of women workers (Paiva et al, 2020; Gore & LeBaron, 2019; LeBaron & Gore, 2020; Frohlich, 2022). Women in the garment industry often occupy low-paid, precarious roles while men are mostly within managerial positions (Carpenter, 2019; Barnes & Kozar, 2008). Garment supply chains are often long, complex and opaque, exacerbating these inequalities, trapping women in insecure jobs and increasing their vulnerability to human rights abuses (Frohlich, 2022).

It is argued here that integrating feminist perspectives into supply chain research can help businesses move beyond compliance-driven approaches to gender equality and towards transformative change. A feminist approach to business ethics has even been linked to competitive advantage (Sila, 2022), reinforcing that gender justice and sustainability are inherently interconnected (Götzmann et al., 2022).

Specifically, the use of a gendered lens within this research refers to the researcher working in a way that is gender aware and informed, acknowledging that the field of OSCM has previously been gender blind or inherently masculine. This includes the researcher being informed by gender and feminist theories from other fields, including Marxism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism (Barrientos et al., 2019; Grosser and Tyler, 2022; Grosser and Moon, 2019), as well as other fields of research that have a long history of research on women in work (Götzmann et al., 2022; Prieto-Carrón, 2008, Paiva, et al 2020). Although a specific feminist theory is not applied, the research involved continuously considering the gendered dimensions of everything that was spoken, read, or observed. This includes a deeper level of interrogation into issues that may not appear

gendered on the surface, such as low wages, whilst recognising that issues impact men and women differently, such as the gendered impact of unpaid domestic labour.

Secondly, the researcher has maintained a reflexive approach to the research, i.e., recognising how her position in the world and as a researcher, and how the experiences she has and has not had, impact data collection and analysis.

1.3.2.2 Supply Network Analysis (SNA)

In addition to a broad gender lens, Supply Network Analysis (SNA) provides a framework for studying supply chain relationships, as networks do not function in isolation but rather are heavily influenced by the broader social and cultural contexts in which they operate (Gamper, 2022). Institutional structures and societal norms, including patriarchal influences and culture, shape operations within supply chains, impacting communication, decision-making, and overall sustainability. Understanding these dynamics is particularly relevant when seeking to understand gender inequalities within global supply networks.

SNA offers three key insights: (i) how supply networks function at both individual and network levels, (ii) the role and significance of each actor within the network, and (iii) the impact of overall network structures on individual and collective performance (Fouad and Rego, 2024). By applying SNA concepts, researchers can uncover hidden patterns of influence, power imbalances, and structural barriers that affect gender equality in supply chains. This perspective enhances understanding of networks, providing a systematic approach to understanding and addressing gender disparities within supply

chain relationships. SNA also acts as an effective modelling process and methodology to better understand the functioning of supply networks.

Additionally, network perspectives such as SNA offer valuable insights for work specifically on supplier development. Both SNA and the supplier development literature focus on the importance of collaboration for driving supply chain progress. Supplier development focuses on informal, trust-based interactions and soft ties, while SNA provides a useful lens for understanding relationships and identifying barriers to effective implementation (Han et al., 2020). Applying this perspective can deepen understanding of how supplier development contributes to gender equality by uncovering challenges within supply networks.

This research considered alternative theories such as stakeholder and institutional theory, as well as other methodological approaches such as feminist discourse analysis, to interrogate the data. However, they did not reveal a deeper level of insight and analysis in the same way that SNA did. SNA allowed for the examination of both intra firm and inter firm perspectives. Its ability to decipher and add commentary to relationships, power dynamics, how these may manifest and barriers to overcoming these, added valuable insight to understanding operations within the focal garment brand and within the garment industry more widely.

1.3.3 Research Questions

The above literature highlights the importance of gender equality as a key dimension of social sustainability and as a key dimension of the global sustainability agenda, as reflected in the SDGs. Despite gender equality being prioritised on the global sustainability agenda, the garment industry has continuously been criticised for its lack of progress in this area, with continuous reports of abuses faced by its women workers.

There have thus been calls for more research into how gender equality can be achieved within supply chains, and specifically the supply chains of the garment industry.

This thesis aims to explore and identify how garment brands can improve their approaches to achieving gender equality through supply chain activities and initiatives and to investigate what might be causing a disconnect between the global agenda and progress specifically in the garment industry supply chains. Therefore, this research poses the following overarching research question for the thesis:

- What are the challenges that prevent the alignment of garment industry supply chains with the global gender equality narrative, and how can they be overcome?

To address the above question, this thesis presents four papers that build upon each other, providing a path through the research to the overall conclusions.

Paper 1 presents a systematic literature review (SLR) of extant literature on gender within the garment industry. A total of 38 articles that discuss gender within SSCM and fields adjacent to SSCM are synthesised to answer the following research questions that are specific to Paper 1:

- What gender-related human and labour rights issues can be identified in the garment industry for socially sustainable supply chain management to address?
- What factors and stakeholders contribute to these gender-related issues in the garment industry?

The findings highlight a lack of research on gender within SSCM and, that gender equality issues are pervasive throughout the garment industry. The research draws out 11 issues facing women garment workers, the underlying contributing factors and identifies the relevant stakeholders, pointing to the need to understand gender equality from an

SSSCM perspective. As part of this work, the research highlights that NGOs may play an important role in providing guidance and tackling gender-related issues.

In response, the research began engaging in an action research project with a UK-based garment brand with international supply chains, with the overall goal being to co-develop a gender due-diligence program for their supply chain. Paper 2 builds on the important role that NGOs may play in better achieving gender equality within supply chains, while the paper also acts as the context development stage of the action research. The paper maps out the current state of best practice as outlined by a range of NGOs by utilising a scoping study adapted for collecting grey literature. The research captures NGO reports and materials discussing the issues faced by women working in garment supply chains and how they can be addressed, responding to the following research questions:

- What issues facing women working within the garment industry are identified by NGOs?
- What are the current policies and initiatives being recommended by NGOs to promote gender equality through supplier development in order to protect the rights of women working within the garment industry?

Paper 2 pooled 34 relevant sources, outlining 24 challenges facing women workers. Using supplier development frameworks, it identifies 366 recommendations for enhancing gender equality, organised into four themes: (i) embedding gender equality into business practices, (ii) sustainability-orientated collaboration, (iii) sustainability-orientated suppler assessments, and (iv) communication and disclosure to achieve gender equality. Paper 2 then provides a matrix, where these policies are mapped out against an X axis, representing short-, medium-, and long-term policies, as well as a Y

axis, divided into: (1) focal firm, referring to policies relating to the firm/ brand level; (2) immediate suppliers, referring to policies that directly impact or are applied to direct first tier suppliers; (3) further upstream, referring to second tier suppliers or further above; and, (4) beyond supply chain boundaries.

Having mapped out a wealth of guidance for garment brands to achieve gender equality in Paper 2, Paper 3 utilises interviews with six garment brands with international supply chains and with six NGOs who work with women garment workers. Using semi-structured open-ended interviews, these further explore the disconnect between the mass of guidance and lack of progress on gender equality within the industry and to address the following research questions:

- How do gender inequalities manifest upstream in garment supply chains and what are the barriers to tackling this problem?
- How can supplier development initiatives contribute to achieving greater gender equality in the garment industry?

Informed by SNA, this paper identifies a range of barriers to achieving gender equality in supply chains and emphasises the need to move towards a worker-centric approach to supplier development to better achieve gender equality within the supply chains of the garment industry.

Finally, Paper 4 presents an overview of the action research project as a whole and looks within the focal firm to understand why gender equality remains such a prevailing problem in supply chains. It explores the following question:

- What are the barriers within focal firms to tackling gender equality within the supply chain?

The research identifies six key intra-firm barriers to achieving gender equality in supply chains, while demonstrating the utility of action research for studying complex supply chain phenomena and providing a novel application of SNA to examine structures and relationships within an organisation. More specifically, the six barriers are: (1) a lack of cross departmental collaboration; (2) internal goal misalignment between departments; (3) a lack of power, influence, and agency within the firm; (4) a lack of dedicated resources, capacity, and capabilities; (5) inability to diffuse initiatives and information throughout the company; and, (6) a lack of boundary spanners for intra- and inter-firm relationships.

These papers come together to address the overarching research question in the concluding chapter, Chapter 6. Furthermore, Chapter 6 presents an overall discussion and conclusion, highlighting the contribution of the four papers and how they have addressed the overarching research question.

1.3.4 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is essential for developing a researcher's world view and guiding knowledge development, particularly in the context of gendered research within SCM (Saunders et al., 2009; Creswell, 2014; Akbari et al, 2024). It impacts methodological choices and the approach to data analysis, which impacts the approach to social sustainability issues such as gender equality in OSCM. Key philosophical components include ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (valid knowledge), and methodology (knowledge acquisition) (Khatri, 2020).

Ontological positions determine how the world is viewed and what is said to exist (Dudovskiy, 2018). In SCM research, ontological positions range from objectivism and universal truths to subjectivism, multiple, context-dependent truths (Oral and Kettani, 2015). This is particularly relevant when studying gender issues in OSCM as perceptions and understanding of gender, gender roles, patriarchy and equality can vary across different socio-economic, cultural and organisational contexts (Farzana, 2019; Saunders, 2009).

As this research focuses on gender and gender equality, alongside using action research, a social constructivist approach is appropriate. This approach asserts the importance of participants' experiences and interpretations and of understanding that perceptions of gender can vary (Farzana, 2019; Saunders, 2009). Qualitative methods, such as open-ended interviews, and collaborative methods which are collaborative can provide nuanced insights into the intersection of gender and SCM. As an inductive approach, social constructivism relies on smaller samples and data sets for in-depth investigations (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the social constructivist approach is ontologically subjective (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Subjectivism allows for multiple interpretations of truth and is built from the experiences of the individual (Creswell, 2003; Saunders et al., 2013). It is particularly useful for the study of gendered experiences within action research.

As this research utilises action research, the philosophical approach to research is particularly important. In discussing social sustainability and the lived experiences of women workers, which are different to my own experience, and using a gendered lens, it is vital to use a reflexive approach (Marshall and Reason, 2007). Moreover, maintaining

sight of my position within the research as a white western woman, it's important to remain reflexive and mindful of the cultural differences with women in other contexts and identities and how my experiences and biases may impact the interpretation of the data and findings (Motsa, 2023). This is particularly relevant when considering that most international brands are located within the global north, whilst much production has shifted to the global south. This includes the concept of positionality, which "is understood as a scholarly exercise that discloses the scholar's (or the scholarly field's) social/political position as (potentially) relevant for research, or as an exploration of the implications of the inseparability of subject and object" (Dottolo and Tillery, 2015, pg4).

1.4 Methods and Procedures

This PhD first utilised a systematic literature review to map out the current state of literature and to identify gaps within the current academic research. This then provided the direction for the action research project that followed. This section overviews the methods and procedures primarily used in the empirical part of the research, including data collection and analysis. To summarise, the theoretical lenses, methodologies, and aims of each of the papers is outlined in Figure 1.1.

Throughout the research, brands are central to the study and the core unit of analysis. The research is undertaken from the perspective of improving brands, their relationships, supply chains and operations in order to enhance social sustainability within their operations and supply chains. This includes analysing their relationships with other key stakeholders within their supply chains. As a result, other stakeholders are included in the discussion and research to build a holistic picture. For example, women

workers are a core aspect of this research as the stakeholder identified to experience harm and abuse within garment brands supply chains and are directly and indirectly impacted by garment brands' actions. Paper 2 incorporates guidance from NGOs as key stakeholders who work within and to improve the operations within the garment industry and brands' supply chains. Despite the inclusion of NGO literature in Paper 2, the focus is still on guidance and impact on garment brands and their supply chains. Paper 3 focuses on interviews with brands as the unit of analysis of the research and NGOs. As previously outlined, NGOs play a large role within the supply chains of the garment industry and with the women working within them; however, the focus remains on the impact to and the operations of garment brands and their supply chains. The unit of analysis of Paper 4 is the garment brand in which the action research is undertaken, its supply chains and the associated stakeholders. The research explored the impact of garment brands, their supply chains and operations on women workers and social sustainability. Although the unit of analysis remains garment brands and their supply chains, the inclusion of other stakeholders, including NGOs and women workers, is key to their understanding.

1.4.1 Action Research

This research undertook an action research project with a UK-based garment brand with international supply chains. The brand has tens of thousands of employees, sourcing from 17 countries and selling within 190 countries, amounting to several billion GBP of sales each year. I was embedded within the company on a part-time basis over a period of 18 months, working within the CSR team. This timeframe allowed me to develop trust with the team. The purpose of this research was to co-design a gender due diligence

program, to better achieve social sustainability and gender equality within their international supply chains.

Here I worked with the Head of CSR and CSR Team Lead, who led a team of two further individuals. The project involved attending in meetings, workshops, webinars, roundtables, multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs), internal meetings, internal documents and everyday conversations which allowed me to gain data through various channels. This process is outlined in more detail within Paper 4.

Action research is an effective method of enquiry for management, supply chain and sustainability research (Eden and Huxham, 1996; Romsdal, 2009; Shani and Coughlan, 2019), as well as for PhD research (Benstead et al, 2018; Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 2002). It addresses real-world problems through collaboration and co-inquiry and has the ability to co-develop sustainable solutions (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002; Touboulic and Walker, 2015; Galdwin et al, 1995). Action research can effectively interrogate issues of sustainability as it "relies on research processes that tend to be collaborative and inclusive, strategies that have the potential to shift power relationships and facilitate joint efforts that cross lines of organisational hierarchy" (Osterman, Furman, and Sernak, 2014, p. 101). This enables research into improving social and ethical issues within supply chains.

Action research has been identified as preferable to other forms of research such as case studies and surveys, as these alternatives do not capture the complexities of SSCM in the same way (Gold et al., 2010). Its ability to allow for continuous systematic change makes it particularly suitable for sustainability research (Touboulic and Walker, 2015). As is outlined in greater detail in Paper 4 within Chapter 5, the action research utilises cycles of action and reflection that allow for adjustments through the research. It has also been

suggested as a beneficial method of enquiry for PhD students, benefiting their learning and development as it "provided them valuable opportunities to reflect on their practice and improve their research skills" (Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2012, p. 107) and properly preparing researchers for future work in their desired fields (Vaughan et al., 2019), allowing researchers to develop skills first-hand, such as the ability to effectively design, reflect on and implement research. This first-hand experience develops these skills within researchers in a way that is less achievable through other methods (Vaughan et al., 2019).

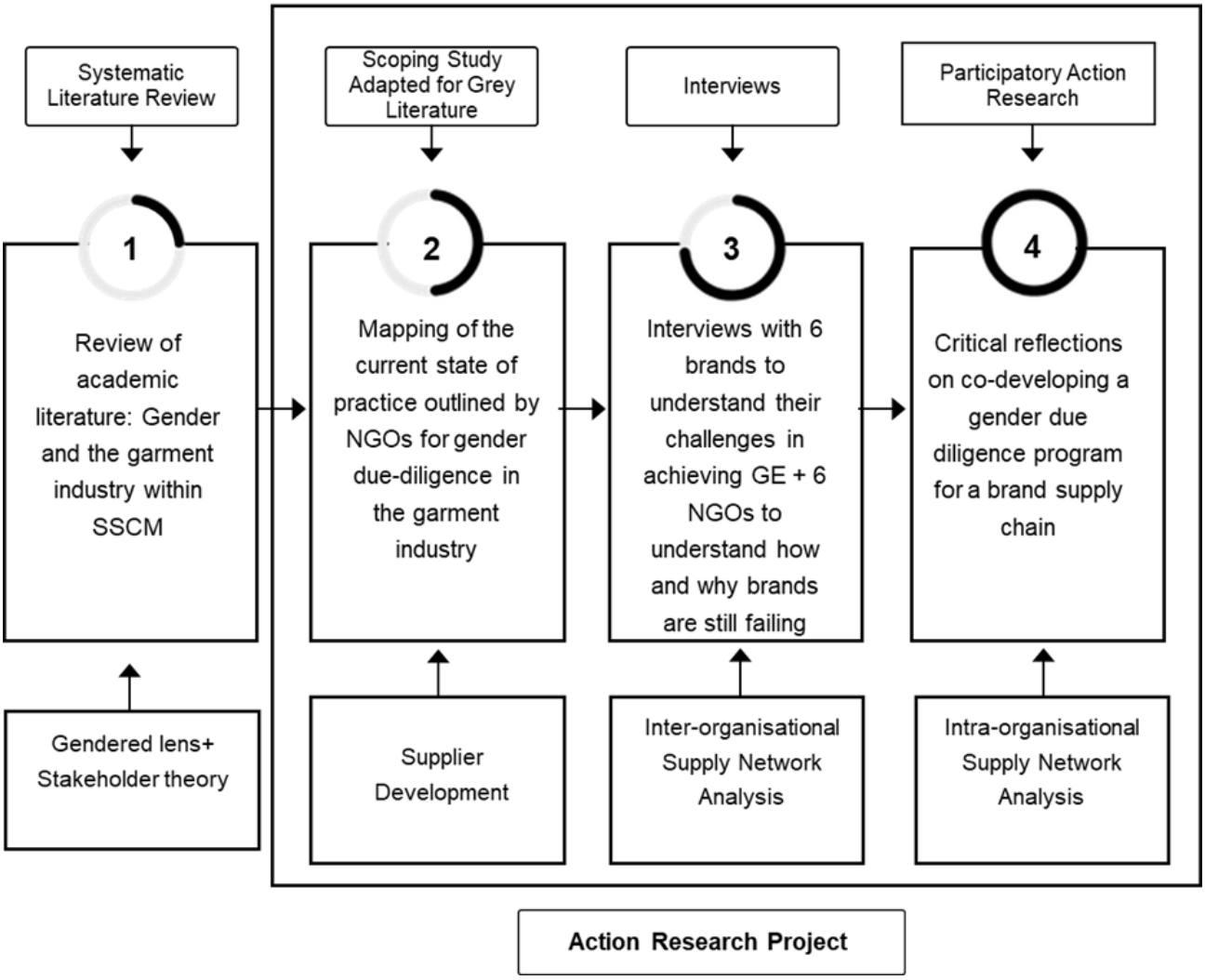


Figure 1.1 The Theoretical Lenses, Methodologies, And Aims of Papers 1 To 4

1.4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection for this research included multiple sources and types of data, such as secondary data and reports, grey literature, academic literature, internal documents, interviews as well as observations through participatory action research. The academic and grey literature sources were publicly available or available through academic channels, which were the primary sources of data in papers 1 and 2. Paper 1 utilised a traditional SLR for academic literature, whereas paper 2 used a scoping study adapted for grey literature in order to effectively capture reports and sources from NGOs.

Paper 3 included semi-structured open-ended interviews, which were conducted remotely online to facilitate access to various interviewees. Here, six interviews were conducted with garment brands with international supply chains but headquartered in the global north. Six interviews were also conducted with NGOs who work directly with women garment workers and could speak to the progress and actions by brands and if these were having positive, negative or any impact. Interviewees were selected based on their relevance, i.e., working within CSR and ethical compliance roles within garment brands, or directly with garment workers within NGOs. A snowball sampling method was used to locate recruits, as well as cold emails to individuals found through searches on platforms such as Google and LinkedIn. A separate set of questions was designed for NGOs and brands.

Interviews conducted over Teams utilised transcription software to help capture the data, which was simultaneously audio recorded for verification. These were then double-checked and transcribed in detail, refining the transcripts. Paper 4 brought all of these together alongside other interviews with suppliers and NGOs working on other projects.

Some interviews were conducted online and some in person, Observations were also made through the course of the participatory action research, where an action research diary was maintained.

Data analysis for papers 1 and 2 used thematic and descriptive analysis to unearth the key themes and discussions within the literature. The main characteristics of the data were also extracted, such as geographical spread and journals, to better understand the current literature within the field. Paper 2 also included a large review and mapping of individual policy recommendations for better gender equality and due diligence within the field, which were then grouped and mapped onto a matrix.

For Paper 3, the interviews were coded using a thematic analysis, then by using SNA to organise the data into a framework. Both sets of interviews were coded together to compare the brand and NGO interviews and to obtain a holistic picture of the current gender equality initiatives within the industry. This was helpful to see if the accounts from brands and NGOs matched up and were telling similar stories. Paper 4 triangulated several sources outlined above. It focused on the experiences of working with the focal firm and cross-referenced these with the experiences of other brands and NGOs to determine whether the intra-firm barriers to gender equality were specific to the focal firm or relevant elsewhere. Each data collection and analysis method is discussed in greater detail within their respective chapters.

1.4.2.1 Validity and Reliability

Various measures were taken to ensure rigour and reliability within the PhD research. For example, in Paper 1, exclusion and inclusion criteria were developed and applied throughout the study the for selection of all the papers. Additionally, the scoping study

followed guidance from Gold et al. (2005) on how to adapt this method for capturing grey literature. Paper 3 included an iterative process of coding that was discussed within the wider research team throughout its process. Paper 4 triangulated multiple data sources, and the primary researcher discussed and demonstrated data with the wider research team and with the CSR team within the brand, adjusting and reflecting through multiple cycles and mini-cycles of enquiry. Table 1.1 outlines steps to ensure validity and reliability within each chapter of the research. Validity and reliability were approached using Yin's (2018) four measures of quality for case studies. It is argued here that an action research project can be considered a special type of case study and therefore the same validity and reliability criteria can apply. Each of these measures is discussed further within their respective chapter.

Reliability/ Validity Criterion (Yin, 2018).	Research Phase			
	Design	Case Selection	Data Collection	Data Analysis
Reliability (demonstrating the replicability of the research design and results)	**Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and Scoping Study (SS):** Clear Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria, specify databases, keywords, search strings, and filters applied. **SLR/ SS:** Documented Search Strategy**,** maintaining records of search process, date of search, and rationale for inclusion/exclusion. **SLR/ SS:** Comprehensive Search Approach, defining sources (Academic literature or NGO publications). **Interviews (I):** Open-ended semi-structured interview design to ensure consistent questioning across all participants while allowing flexibility. **Action Research (AR):** Keep a detailed action research journal with all steps, cycles, decisions and observations.	**SLR:** Transparency in selection process to clearly document and justify selection decisions to ensure replicability. **SS:** Prioritise sources from reputable organisations (e.g., World Bank, UN, government bodies). **I:** Selected participants based on their relevance to the research topic **AR:** Defined action research host criteria for the brand in which the project was to be undertaken.	**SLR:** Utilised OneSearch for its inclusion of dozens of other search databases. **SS:** Multiple Databases and Search Engine sources like Web of Science, Scopus, and OneSearch to enhance reproducibility. **I:** Developed a semi structured interview guideline and recorded all interviews. **I:** Standardised Data Collection by ensuring all interviews follow the same general structure with the same core questions while allowing flexibility. **AR**: Provide detailed descriptions of interventions to allow replication in other settings.	**SLR:** Consistent analysis identifying common themes and using structured thematic coding throughout. **SS:** Consistent analysis identifying common themes and using structured thematic coding throughout. **I:** Compare responses across different participant groups. **AR:** Multiple data collection methods enabled the research to triangulate observations, interviews, and secondary data to improve validity. **ALL**: Rigorous coding process discussed and agreed upon with the wider research team.

				ALL: Regular review and debriefing among researchers
Internal Validity (establishing cause and effect relationships between variables and results)	**SLR:** Develop precise questions that guide the review. **SS:** Develop precise questions that guide the review. **I:** Exhaustive interview protocol based on the extant literature. **AR:** Multiple data collection methods to triangulate observations, interviews, and secondary data to improve validity. **Overall Research (ALL):** Research design based on extant literature.	**SLR**: Ensure a broad but relevant scope and choose studies from diverse contexts to enhance findings' robustness. **SS:** Source credibility and determining the reliability of grey literature sources. **I:** Purposeful sampling by choosing participants who have relevant experience with the research topic. **AR:** Relevance to practical problem-solving by selecting cases where action research can drive meaningful change.	**SLR:** Utilised OneSearch for its inclusion of dozens of other search databases. **SS:** Multiple Databases and Search Engine sources like Web of Science, Scopus, and OneSearch to enhance reproducibility. **I:** Standardised Data Collection by ensuring all interviews follow the same general structure with the same core questions while allowing flexibility. **AR:** Maintained reflexivity and transparency by recording researcher's role, decisions, position, and adaptations over time.	**SLR:** Systematically coded extracted findings to categorize causal relationships and contextual factors. **SS:** Systematically coded extracted findings to categorize causal relationships and contextual factors. **I:** Discussed among authors to identify alternative codes and explanations. **AR:** Moved back and forth between empirical data, observations and literature to avoid bias. **ALL:** Discussed among authors to identify alternative codes and explanations.

				ALL: Thematic synthesis of findings, looking for convergence and divergence in findings across data collection sources.
Construct Validity (establishing the suitability and consistency between the construct and its measurement)	**SLR:** Internal and external inclusion criteria. **SS**: Internal and external inclusion criteria. **I:** Developed Interviewee selection criteria based on job roles and industry. **AR:** Brand selection criteria to select a suitable and accessible brand.	**SLR:** Internal and external inclusion criteria. **SS:** Prioritise sources from reputable organisations (e.g., World Bank, UN, government bodies). **I:** Pilot testing of interview questions with industry experts to ensure they accurately capture the intended constructs. **I:** Consistency in questioning using the same core set of questions across all participants to maintain uniformity and consistency. **AR:** Triangulation with other data to cross-check interview insights with	**SLR:** Utilised OneSearch for its inclusion of dozens of other search databases. **SS:** Diverse data sources by incorporating reports from multiple sectors to ensure findings apply across contexts. **AR:** Gathered feedback through interviews and feedback sessions with the brand. **I/ AR**: Assured participants of their anonymity. **ALL**: Used multiple sources of data that were triangulated.	**SLR:** Thematic and content analysis to identify common themes across studies to synthesise findings meaningfully. **SS:** Iterative refinement of themes and adjusting themes as new insights emerge during analysis. **I:** Triangulation with other data sources to validate interview findings against academic and grey literature and observations. **AR:** Reflexivity in analysis and acknowledging researcher biases and their impact on interpretation. **ALL:** Multiple data collection methods to

		other sources (e.g., literature review and action research).		triangulate observations, interviews, and secondary data to improve validity.
External Validity (establishing the extent to which the findings can be generalised)	**SLR:** Utilised OneSearch for its inclusion of dozens of other search databases. **SS:** Multiple Databases and Search Engine sources like Web of Science, Scopus, and OneSearch to enhance reproducibility. **I:** Open-ended semi-structured interview design to ensure consistent questioning across all participants while allowing flexibility. **AR:** Involving practitioners, community members, and decision-makers ensures that research outcomes are applicable in real-world settings. **ALL:** Selected a highly relevant industry. **ALL:** Consulted with industry experts and relevant literature.	**SLR:** Diverse and representative sample of studies including studies from different contexts, fields, and methodologies to enhance generalisability. **SS:** Diverse and representative sample of studies including studies from different contexts, fields, and methodologies to enhance generalisability. **I:** Cross-Checking Narratives and findings looking for consistency in responses across participants and different data sources. **AR:** Selected a highly relevant industry	**SLR:** Utilised OneSearch for its inclusion of dozens of other search databases **SS:** Multiple Databases and Search Engine sources like Web of Science, Scopus, and OneSearch to enhance reproducibility. **I/ AR:** Interviewed industry experts. **AR**: Utilised multiple cycles of action, observations and reflections within the research.	**SLR:** Abductive and iterative data coding process to allow for emerging themes. **SS:** Abductive and iterative data coding process to allow for emerging themes **I:** Triangulation with other data to cross-check interview insights with other sources (e.g., literature review and action research). **AR:** Triangulation with other data to cross-check interview insights with other sources (e.g., literature review and action research).

Table 1.1 Validity and Reliability for Research

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

Overall, this thesis consists of six chapters as outlined below:

- Chapter 1 has outlined the background and motivation for the research (Section 1.1), the key literature (Section 1.2), research gaps and overarching research questions addressed by the four papers that follow (Section 1.3), the research philosophy (Section 1.4), and, finally, the research methods and procedures (Section 1.5).
- Chapters 2, 3 ,4, and 5 present the full versions of Papers 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Each chapter also presents the motivation, methodology, and findings of each of the papers, alongside the publication status of each of the papers.
- Chapter 6 provides a conclusion, discussing the research contribution, practical implications, and limitations of the overall PhD whilst also outlining promising future research directions.

Chapter 2: Paper 1

Paper 1: Fashion, gender, and sustainability: Addressing the gender gap in socially sustainable supply chain management

2.1 Background to Paper 1

Paper 1 is a systematic literature review synthesising the literature on gendered issues in the garment industry within and outside of operations and supply chain management (OSCM) literature. This research addresses an important gender gap in socially sustainable supply chain management (SSSCM). The paper was submitted to a special issue of Production and Operations Management on Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI). Although the paper was not accepted by this leading international, peer-reviewed journal (AJG 4; FT-50), a comprehensive set of recommendations were provided. These recommendations have been used to enhance the paper, as presented in this thesis, and prepare it for submission to an alternative journal in the near future.

This paper was written in collaboration with Professor Mark Stevenson and Dr Lingxuan Liu. As the first author, I was responsible for the majority of the work, accounting for 80% of the work.

My co-authors contributed throughout the process, making up the remaining 20%. Specifically, I initiated the research idea, identifying the need to explore gender-related human rights abuses in the garment industry. My supervisors guided me in refining the research scope to ensure a more focused and impactful objective. I collaborated with them to define search terms and selection criteria, ensuring that all relevant literature

was included. My co-authors provided valuable insights and helped enhance the writing style.

My co-authors have certified below that they agree with the above claim with regards to everyone's contribution to this paper.

Professor Mark Stevenson

Date: 28th February 2025

Dr Lingxuan Liu

Date: 28th February 2025

2.2 Abstract

Recent research has identified an important gender gap in the field of operations and supply chain management. Adopting both a gender and stakeholder perspective, this research contributes to addressing this gap through a systematic literature review that synthesizes the fragmented literature on gender-based human rights abuses in the garment industry. The paper identifies eleven gender-related issues of relevance to socially sustainable supply chain management (SSSCM) that are organized into three categories: (i) already known SSSCM issues that are compounded by gender, where a previously hidden gender dimension is revealed; (ii) SSSCM issues that manifest in a gendered way, meaning they are experienced differently by men and women; and, (iii) more obvious gender-specific SSSCM issues. Factors contributing to gender inequality in global supply chains are also identified, including capitalism, the feminization of labour, patriarchal culture, and a lack of agency for female workers; while key stakeholders involved include governments, buyers, suppliers, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This furthers our understanding of SSSCM and demonstrates the utility of taking a gendered perspective in the field of OSCM. A future research agenda is outlined, including the need for empirical research that incorporates the female worker-victim voice, that sharpens the gender focus of current social sustainability auditing, reporting and disclosure, that considers the role of non-traditional supply chain actors like NGOs in addressing gender inequality, that takes a global (non-Western) perspective to the issues identified, and that looks at how issues of gender intersect with other factors like race, religion, and immigration status.

Keywords: *Socially sustainable supply chain management; Gender inequality; Labour rights; Systematic literature review; Garment industry*

2.3 Introduction

Gender has matured as a subject of study within several fields of management research, including organisation studies, business ethics, and entrepreneurship; but the operations and supply chain management (OSCM) field has so far remained relatively gender blind. This has prompted Tang (2022) to identify a 'gender gap' and to call for further research into gender-based issues that affect OSCM. Similarly, Vijeyarasa (2020) called for further research into global supply chains from a gender perspective and pointed to the need to address gender-blind policies and laws. Importantly, Soundararajan et al. (2021) underlined the relevance of gender issues to OSCM by pointing to the exploitation of women within the garment industry, where they are often employed as a cheaper, less valued alternative to men – known as the feminization of labour (Hossain, et al, 2013; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2001; Standing, 1989). This example alone demonstrates why gender considerations should be an integral part of socially sustainable supply chain management (SSSCM), yet a gender lens has rarely been applied within the SSSCM literature (Vijeyarasa, 2020; Tang, 2022; Akbari, 2024).

Akbari et al. (2024) presented a vital literature review of gender equality within OSCM, highlighting the need for further literature reviews in this space. The authors' paper discussed eight key areas impacting gender equality within SCM: gender issues, mindset, transportation disparities, human resources, gender roles in OSCM, sustainability, mobility, and government policy intersection. Akbari et al. (2024) highlighted persistent underrepresentation, pay disparities, lack of women in leadership, and barriers such as workplace culture, stereotypes, and biases. There are however several key areas that the authors did not cover, prompting the need for a

further, more comprehensive review. This paper builds upon this work by exploring additional features of the currently available literature, such as contributing factors to gender equality and the key stakeholders. This research also focuses on women upstream within supply chains, rather than within leadership downstream, adding to the OSCM literature on gender and supply chains.

Although Govindan et al.'s (2021) recent review of SSSCM challenges in multi-tier supply chains referenced the human rights abuses experienced by some female workers, including sexual harassment, this was only covered in brief and studied alongside many other SSSCM concerns. The present paper is an attempt to focus specifically on developing a novel gender-based view of SSSCM, with a particular focus on the garment industry. It uses a systematic literature review (SLR) to draw together fragmented literature from various fields to identify and categorize gendered human rights issues relevant to OSCM, and to identify both the stakeholders involved and the factors that contribute to upholding this system of oppression and exploitation. This leads to a future research agenda.

The garment industry is an important starting point for developing a gendered perspective on SSSCM. It is an industry where there is often high pressure to reduce lead times and costs, and where supply chains are often long and complex, creating a lack of transparency and consequently considerable social sustainability risk (Köksal et al., 2017). It is estimated that 80-90% of the industry's workers are women, often undertaking low-skilled, underpaid and precarious roles (Carpenter, 2019; Barnes and Kozar, 2008; Akhter et al., 2019; Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012). In contrast, the majority of supervisors and managers are male, creating a challenging dynamic. The global

COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the issues faced by female garment workers, who have been more severely affected by the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic than men (Islam et al., 2022; Chua, 2022b). For example, Islam et al. (2022) pointed to the effect of patriarchal culture, or the way in which society and relationships are organised in such a way that men have power over women, on the inequitable effects of the pandemic. It has also been argued that the pandemic has revealed how neoliberal capitalism, which underpins our economic systems and global supply chains, is built and relies upon gender inequality (Chua, 2022b); and that any post-pandemic recovery must consider gender or else inequalities will persist (Peredo et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, this research asks:

RQ1. What gender-related human and labour rights issues can be identified in the garment industry for socially sustainable supply chain management to address? And,

RQ2. What factors and stakeholders contribute to these gender-related issues in the garment industry.

The paper identifies eleven gendered human rights issues relevant to SSSCM, which are organised into three categories: (i) issues already known to SSSCM but that are compounded by gender, meaning a gendered view of these issues creates a new perspective on existing knowledge; (ii) SSSCM issues that manifest in a gendered way, meaning they are not inherently gender-specific issues but are experienced differently by men and women; and, (iii) gender-specific issues. Breaking the issues down into these three categories is important for developing a more granular and nuanced understanding of the issues faced by women in global supply chains. Altogether, this sheds new light on existing understanding of SSSCM and introduces issues that, to the best of our

knowledge, have not previously been considered in the OSCM literature. The factors or systems of inequality, including patriarchy and the feminization of labour, are also identified along with the stakeholders that contribute to upholding these issues.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2.4 provides background literature on: gender within adjacent fields, on SSSCM, and on human rights in the garment industry. Section 2.5 then outlines the systematic literature review approach adopted in the paper and provides an initial descriptive analysis of the database of papers, before Section 2.6 uses the literature to present a taxonomy of issues for SSSCM in the garment industry from a gendered perspective. Section 2.7 then identifies the relevant stakeholders and contributing factors. A discussion follows in Section 2.8, including a future research agenda, before the paper briefly concludes in Section 2.9.

2.4 Background Literature

2.4.1 Gender within Adjacent Fields of Study

There is a small body of literature that examines the cross-section between gender and corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles within global value chains (GVCs) (e.g. Barrientos et al., 2019; Grosser and Tyler, 2022). This includes topics such as sexual harassment in the workplace (Grosser and Tyler, 2022), with incidents of sexual harassment towards women found to be more frequent in precarious working environments (Barrientos et al., 2019). Although the garment industry is a prime example where women carry out precarious work, these papers do not typically focus specifically on the garment industry or adopt an OSCM perspective. Rather, they look more widely at the link between gender and CSR (Grosser and Moon, 2019). Meanwhile, these papers have used theories atypical of OSCM studies, such as Marxism, radical feminism, and

socialist feminism (Barrientos et al., 2019; Grosser and Tyler, 2022; Grosser and Moon, 2019), which could prove useful for developing a gendered understanding of SSSCM.

Much of the available literature focuses on gender downstream in supply chains, for example, in terms of gender parity on executive boards (Park and Krishnan, 2005) as well as gender as a core component of diversity (Ta et al., 2024). Frohlich (2022) discussed the unequal treatment women face in the workplace, regardless of geographical location, and how patriarchal gendered norms impact social norms. This has an effect on women both in the workplace and at home, including violence and harassment at work and an unequal share of unpaid domestic labour at home (Frohlich, 2022; Gore and LeBaron, 2019; LeBaron and Gore, 2020).

2.4.2 Socially Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSSCM)

The literature on sustainable SCM has historically paid more attention to environmental concerns than social concerns (Zorzini et al., 2015), with social sustainability being considered more challenging to formally integrate into control and monitoring systems (Kuruvilla and Li, 2021; Soundararajan et al., 2021a). This literature has however rebalanced over time, with a growing body of work focused on SSSCM. There are many definitions in the literature of social sustainability; for example, Nakamba et al. (2017) asserted that "social sustainability is related to the management of practices, capabilities, stakeholders and resources to address human potential and welfare both within and outside the communities of the supply chain" (p.6). The literature specifically on SSSCM covers areas such as dangerous working conditions (Nakamba et al., 2017), freedom of association (FOA) (Kuruvilla and Li, 2021), and the specific challenges posed by modern slavery (Benstead et al., 2021).

Unsafe and ‘sweatshop’ working conditions, caused by a failure to maintain health and safety, are a growing concern in global garment supply chains (Nakamba et al., 2017; Emmelhainz and Adams, 1999). The literature includes discussion of how to address these concerns, including by: incorporating them into formal risk management, through audits, and via supplier development or training (Giannakis and Papadopoulos, 2016; Nakamba et al., 2017). Poor working conditions are also linked to decent work, which is represented in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 8 ‘Decent work and economic growth’ and therefore considered a global priority. Soundararajan et al. (2021) called for further research that looks at how decent work can be achieved, humanizes research agendas, supports the agency of workers, and incorporates a wider range of actors into OSCM research, including workers.

Meanwhile, Reinecke and Donaghey (2020) outlined that workers in many countries do not have FOA or a guaranteed right to collective action, arguing that further research is needed into how buyers can facilitate democratic workplace participation. The literature advocates how supporting FOA can in fact provide a firm with competitive advantage – by reducing worker turnover, increasing worker satisfaction and consequently enhancing efficiency and productivity (Kuruvilla and Li, 2021). A particular stream of SSSCM work is concerned with modern slavery (Gold et al., 2015; Vijeyarasa, 2020), which is considered one of the grandest challenges in contemporary society. It is estimated that there are approximately 35.8 million slaves around the world, including many in textiles, leather and cloth manufacturing (Gold et al., 2015). Modern slavery mitigation has focused on, for example, the governance of supplier-buyer relationships, developing more robust legislation, and embedding responsible practices into policies and compliance mechanisms (New, 2015; Carpenter, 2019).

Several reviews of the literature on SSSCM have been published in recent years, including on the themes covered in this growing body of work and on both the methods and theories used in the SSSCM literature, leading to future research agendas (e.g. Zorzini et al., 2015; Nakamba et al., 2017; Sodhi and Tang, 2018). But while SSSCM continues to grow as a field, gender issues remain under-researched (Tang, 2022); and, unlike in the work on CSR and GVCs, the field is yet to adopt a gender lens or perspective when studying SSSCM. Indeed, Akbari et al. (2024) recently demonstrated that few literature review papers discuss gender related issues within OSCM and called for further work in this area.

2.4.3 The Garment Industry

The garment industry has evolved over recent decades, with many retailers significantly increasing the number of lines they produce to provide choice and to continuously keep up with changing trends (Köksal et al., 2017). This has created a fast fashion business model where consumers expect a large variety of clothes that reflect the latest fashion to be readily available at low prices. This is often achieved by powerful, high-volume buyers dictating contractual terms (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2018; Chua, 2021) and putting downward pressure on global suppliers to reduce their lead times and costs (Köksal et al., 2017). The labour-intensive nature of many stages of garment production (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2018; Chua, 2021) means that cost reduction is often achieved at the expense of the pay and conditions experienced by garment workers, and the opaque and global nature of these supply chains makes this difficult to detect. The high proportion of female workers and their lack of agency means it is often women that suffer. For example, it has been argued

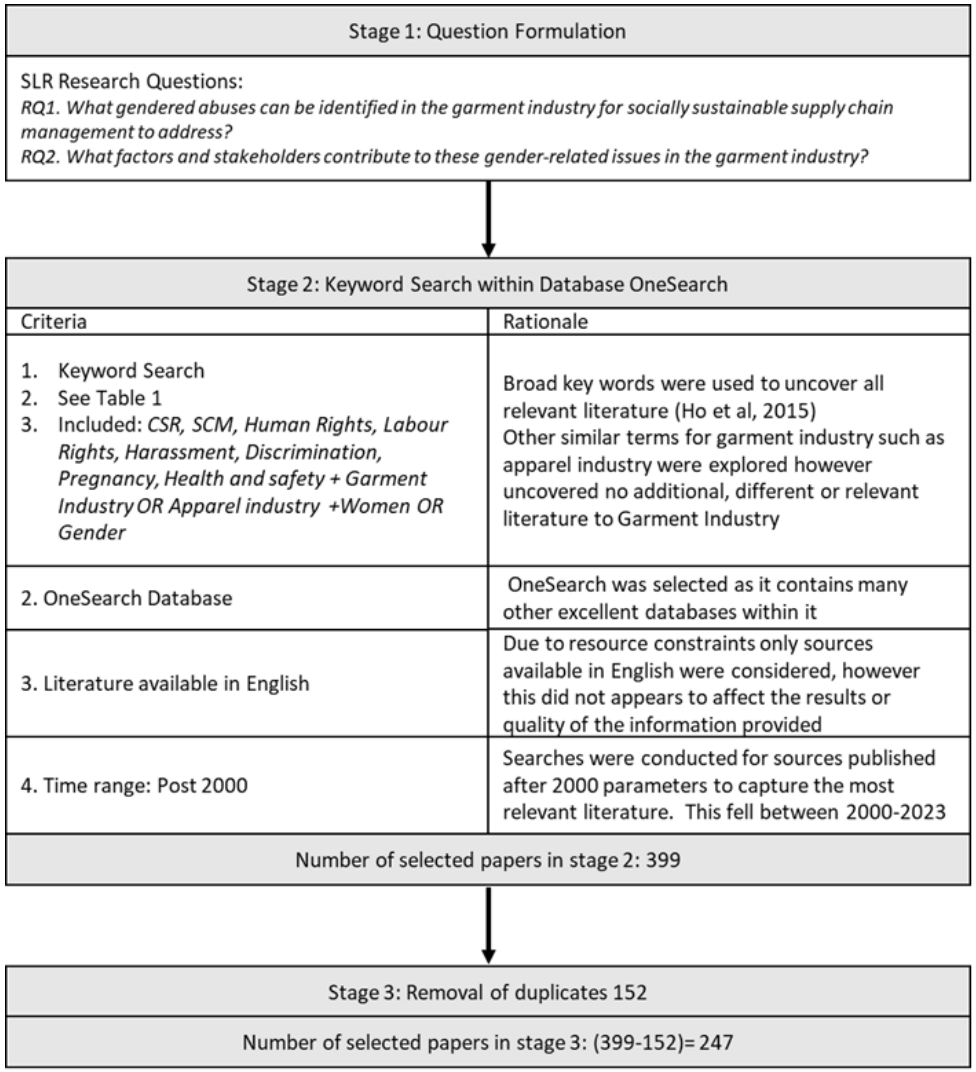
that women are overworked, underpaid, abused, ignored, shamed, controlled, and overlooked within the garment industry (Akhter et al., 2019; Barnes and Kozar, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic – with its impact on where people work and how they socialize being reflected in clothing buying trends – has only made matters worse, especially for women workers. Many buyers cancelled redundant orders or refused to pay for orders that had already entered production, while some buyers also demanded lower prices for any new orders they placed because of the economic conditions created by the pandemic (Islam et al., 2022; Chua, 2022b). This forced many factories to close; for example, approximately 2.8 million people in Bangladesh lost their jobs in the garment industry, with the majority being women (Islam et al., 2022). In some instances, those workers who were retained faced forced overtime, withheld pay and increased levels of sexual violence (Islam et al., 2022; Chua, 2022b; Chua, 2022a). Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably heightened the need for this research (Islam et al., 2022; Chua, 2022b).

2.5 Research Method

This research follows a systematic literature review (SLR) – an evidence-based approach to secondary data analysis, aimed at reducing bias and error by creating an objective overview of the most relevant literature (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). SLRs are considered a highly scientific strategy for gathering, appraising and synthesizing all relevant studies; and they are being increasingly used in the field of OSCM (Durach and Wieland, 2017; Seuring et al., 2021; Akbari et al., 2024). Due to the calls for further research on gender within OSCM, an SLR has been used to gather, analyse, and synthesize the available literature on this topic. The seven-step SLR approach adopted

in this work, drawing on Denyer and Tranfield (2009), Durach and Wieland (2017) and Petticrew and Roberts (2006), is summarized in Figure 2.1 and described in further detail below.



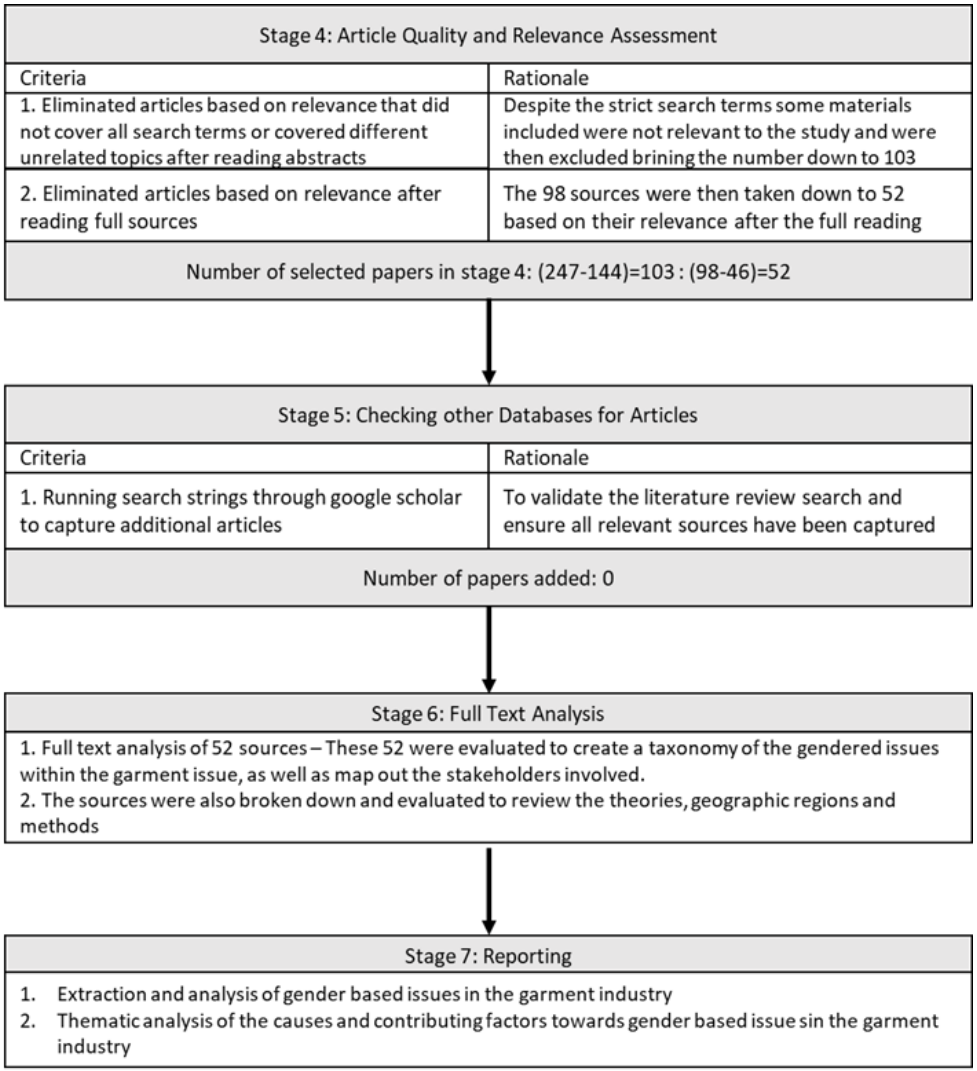


Figure 2.1 The Overall Systematic Literature Review Process (Stages 1 To 7)

2.5.1 The Seven-Stage SLR Process

In Stage 1, the research questions presented in the Introduction to this paper were used to guide the SLR process and its development of search strings or keywords. In Stage 2, the keywords shown in Table 2.1 were used to probe the descriptions, abstracts, and titles of all source types written in English contained in OneSearch without any date restriction. OneSearch was chosen as the overarching database because of the vast number of databases it contains, thereby enabling a comprehensive search. Sets of searches were conducted using Boolean connectors 'OR' to group together similar terms, such as 'women' OR 'gender' as well as 'AND' connectors to link them to other terms such as 'garment industry'. Other search terms not contained in the table were also explored, such as 'fashion industry', 'garment manufacturing', 'garment sector' 'textile industry' and 'female', but they did not return any additional relevant sources when compared, for example, to 'garment industry' or 'women'. This process resulted in 399 sources being retrieved.

Search Strings					Initial results	Carried forward after reading abstract	Duplicates	Included in review
Supply chain management	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	12	0	0	0
Corporate social responsibility	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	24	6	12	1
Human Rights	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	60	26	12	13
Labour Rights	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	127	33	51	18
Harassment	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	38	12	19	8
Discrimination	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	71	13	39	6
Pregnancy	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	23	4	9	2
Health and safety	+	Garment Industry OR Apparel Industry	+	Women OR Gender	44	9	18	4

Table 2.1 Search Term Results for The SLR

In Stage 3, 152 duplicates were removed thereby reducing the sample to 247 sources. In Stage 4, the relevance of the sources was evaluated. Examining the abstracts of the articles identified some sources that were not central to the focus of this paper, such as articles narrowly relating to public relations or marketing, which reduced the sample to 98 sources. A full reading of the papers reduced the sample down further to 52 highly relevant sources, including 19 journal articles and 8 books, plus other useful sources (5 online journals, 2 dissertations, 2 reports, and 2 news articles). In Stage 5, further searches were undertaken using Google Scholar to evaluate the completeness of the sample. This produced no new or additional sources considered sufficiently relevant, thereby demonstrating the robustness of the core approach.

In Stage 6, the full text of the 52 sources was analysed. A descriptive analysis of the articles was first undertaken, based on information such as journal, theory, method, and geographical context. This was followed by a more detailed analysis guided broadly by a gendered and stakeholder perspective, exploring SSSCM issues and contributing factors through a gendered lens, and stakeholder mapping to consider the role of traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors. The paper is informed by feminist theory rooted in socialist feminism as it focuses on how the dual systems of capitalism and patriarchy work together, as well as independent of each other, to oppress women (Grosser and Tyler, 2022; Grosser and Moon, 2019). Much of the oppression of women, and the systems that uphold this oppression, are socially constructed; therefore, social change is the vehicle to combat this oppression. Thus, this strand of feminist thinking prescribes combating this oppression through social and cultural changes. Feminist theories will assist in further understanding how these systems contribute to the gendered issues within the garment industry.

Meanwhile, stakeholder mapping can be used better understand the key stakeholders, understand how they are interconnected and how they can be agents of change (Parmar *et al.*, 2010). That is, how they can be mobilized to reconfigure the distribution of wealth or value within a supply chain to ensure that all stakeholders, at a minimum, have their human rights respected. It can be argued that female workers in the garment industry are receiving less value than is proportionate to the value they are creating for other stakeholders (Freeman *et al.,* 2010); and that the lack of rights and protections often afforded to female workers in the garment industry is indicative of this lack of value (Parmar *et al.*, 2010). Overall, this combination of theories enables the development of a greater understanding of how the phenomenon of gendered human rights abuses manifests in the garment industry. Finally, in Stage 7, a taxonomy of gendered SSSCM issues has been produced as well as a discussion of their contributing factors and stakeholders, as presented in Section 2.6 and Section 2.7 of this paper.

2.5.2 Descriptive Analysis

As recommended by Nguyen et al (2017), this research engages in a two-step analysis, i.e., a descriptive analysis followed by a thematic analysis. Tables 2.2, 2.3 and 2.5 as well as Figures 2.2 and 2.3 summarizes the descriptive analysis of the sources included in the literature review. This includes Table 2.2 that lists the 52 sources and Table 2.3 on the journals where the 19 journal papers were published. This underlines the OSCM gender gap as all of the papers were published in other fields – including gender, human geography, sociology, labour, and development studies journals – with the Journal of Business Ethics being the journal closest to OSCM. This further highlights the gap within OSCM on gender in the garment industry, however, demonstrates that research is being

undertaken within other fields. The research methods used in the sources are summarized in Figure 2.2, with the most common method being qualitative open-ended and/or semi-structured interviews, including for case study work, followed by secondary data analysis (e.g. the evaluation and comparison of current laws and policies, and of materials collected by NGOs and other organisations regarding women's rights and human rights abuses), literature reviews, and surveys. Meanwhile, the theories utilized in the research are summarized in Figure 2.3, including feminist, Marxist, and human capital theories, which have received extremely limited attention within the OSCM field. The total number of theories and methods does not correspond with the total number of sources as not all sources used a theory or method whereas other sources used more than one theory or method. Across the full set of papers, only 14 sources utilised or referred to a theory while 26 utilised a formal research method, including some work that used mixed methods (e.g. combining interviews with surveys). Discussion of Amartya Sen's concepts of agency and capability is also prominent in these sources (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Dey and Basak, 2017). Women are said to lack agency while men are not constrained in the same ways (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Hossain et al., 2013; Dey and Basak, 2017; Siddiqi, 2009), with patriarchal effects on culture and society contributing to these gender differences (Dey and Basak, 2017).

Title	Author	Year	Source
Sufferings in silence: Violence against female workers in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh: A qualitative exploration	Akhter, Sadika; Rutherford, Shannon; Chu, Cordia	2019	Women's health
What makes pregnant workers sick: why, when, where and how? An exploratory study in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh	Akhter, Sadika; Rutherford, Shannon; Chu, Cordia	2017	Reproductive health
Endless Misery of Nimble Fingers: The Rana Plaza Disaster	Akhter, Shamima	2016	Asian Journal of Women's Studies
Compliance Codes and Women Workers' (Mis)representation and (Non)recognition in the Apparel Industry of Bangladesh	Alamgir, Fahreen; Alakavuklar, Ozan N	2018	Journal of Business Ethics
Social Sustainability Challenges and the Role of Middle Managers: Case of the Ready-Made Garment Industry in Bangladesh	Aleksandra Dragania; Nazmul Arefin	2021	IDEAS Working Paper Series from RePEc
A poor country clothing the rich countries: case of garment trade in Bangladesh	Ali, Muhammad Mahboob; Medhekar, Anita	2016	Ekonomika Regiona: Economy of Regions
Vietnam: Poor Vietnamese women lining the pockets of world's richest men - Oxfam	Asian News Monitor	2017	Asian News Monitor
The exploitation of pregnant workers in apparel production	Barnes, Wendy D.; Kozar, Joy M.	2008	Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management
Nature of Human Rights Violation on Female Garments Workers in Bangladesh	Basirulla, MD; Farhat Tasnim	2023	Khazanah Hukum
Harassment of women garment workers in Bangladesh	Begum, F; Ali, R.N; Hossain, M.A; Shahid, Sonia B	2010	Journal of the Bangladesh Agricultural University
Rationality and Identity in the Participation Choices of Female Maquila Workers	Bellman, Mary J.	2004	Comparative political studies
Gender, Labour and Precarity in the Southeast European Periphery: The Case of Textile Workers in Štip	Bonfiglioli, Chiara	2014	Contemporary Southeastern Europe
Garment Production: The Female Face of Modern Slavery	Carpenter, M	2016	Sourcing Journal (Online)
Labouring for global markets: Conceptualising labour agency in global production networks	Carswell, Grace; Geert De Neve	2013	Geoforum
Chinese Women Workers Organize in the Export Zone	Chan, Jenny Wai-Ling	2006	New labour forum

The Evolution of Alohawear: Colonialism, Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Hawaii's Garment Industry	Chinen, Joyce	1997	Book: Women and Work: Exploring Race, Ethnicity and Class
How Brands Fuel 'Culture of Abuse' at India's Factories	Chua, Jasmin Malik	2022	Sourcing Journal (Online)
Indian Mega Manufacturer Speaks Out on 'Production Torture' Claims	Chua, Jasmin Malik	2022	Sourcing journal (Online)
Bangladesh's Women Garment Workers Bearing 'Devastating' Covid Impacts	Chua, Jasmin Malik	2022	Sourcing Journal (Online)
Two Garment Workers Dead as Wage Protests Intensify	Chua, Jasmin Malik	2021	Sourcing journal (Online)
Violence Against Women in Garment Factories is Rising. Brands Might be to Blame	Chua, Jasmin Malik	2021	Sourcing Journal (Online)
Expansion of Markets and Women Workers: Case Study of Garment Manufacturing in India	Chakravarty, Deepita	2004	Economic and political weekly
Forced Labour and Ethical Trade in the Indian Garment Industry	Delaney, Annie; Tate, Jane	2015	Vulnerability, Exploitation and Migrants. London: Palgrave
Forced Labour and Ethical Trade in the Indian Garment Industry	Delaney, Annie; Tate, Jane	2015	Book: Vulnerability, Exploitation and Migrants: Insecure Work in a Globalised Economy, by Gary Craig,, Louise Waite,, Hannah Lewis,, and Klara Skrivankova
Out of the shadows: Women and wage struggle in the RMG industry of Bangladesh	Dey, Soma; Basak, Palash	2017	Asian Journal of Women's Studies
Women's rights and voice in the ready-made garments sector of Bangladesh: evidence from theory and practice	Dilruba Shoma, Chowdhury	2017	Journal of international women's studies
Gender-Based Violence and Global Capitalism: Everyday experiences of female labourers in the fast fashion garment industry	Febrilly, Vanesha; Mia Siscawati	2023	Indonesian Journal of Gender and Womens Studies
Women and Work in Globalizing Asia	Gills, Dong-Sook S; Piper, Nicola	2002	Book: Women and Work in Globalizing Asia
Toward meaningful Health and Safety Measures: Stigma and the Devaluation of Garment Work in Sri Lanka's Global Factories	Hewammane, Sandya	2017	Book: Toward Meaningful Health and Safety Measures', in Unmaking the Global Sweatshop
Feminization and Labour Vulnerability in Global Manufacturing Industries: Does Gendered Discourse Matter?	Hossain, Md. Ismail; Mathbor, Golam M.; Semenza, Renata	2013	Asian Social Work and Policy Review

Women's Empowerment Revisited: From Individual to Collective Power among the Export Sector Workers of Bangladesh	Hossain, Naomi	2012	IDS working papers
Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Global Labour Governance: Organizing, Legal Mobilization and Decolonization	Huq, Chaumtoli	2022	Michigan journal of international law
Vulnerabilities of Women Workers in the Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh: A Case Study of Rana Plaza	Kabir, Humayun; Maple, Myfanwy; Fatema, Syadani Riyad	2018	Journal of international women's studies
The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh: a means to reducing gender-based social exclusion of women?	Khosla, Nidhi	2009	Journal of International Women Studies
Compliance Versus Accountability: Struggles for Dignity and Daily Bread in the Bangladesh Garment Industry	Mahmud, Simeen; Kabeer, Naila	2003	Bangladesh development studies
Sweatshop watchdog slams Liz Claiborne: 5 Edition	McCool, Grant	1998	Journal of Commerce
Post-Fordist Technology and the Changing Patterns of Women's Employment in the Third World	Nanda, Meera	2000	Gender, Technology and Development
Sexual Harassment Prevention: Better Work's training sparks changes in attitudes and behaviour	Oddone, Elisa	2018	World of Work Magazine: International Labour Organisation
Thailand's hidden workforce: Burmese migrant women factory workers	Pearson, Ruth; Kusakabe, Kyoko	2012	Book: Thailand's hidden workforce: Burmese migrant women factory workers
Corporate Responsibility and Labour Rights: Codes of Conduct in the Global Economy	Pearson, Ruth; Seyfang, Gill; Jenkins, Rhys; Howitt, Richard	2013	Book: Pearson, Ruth, et al. Corporate Responsibility and Labour Rights: Codes of Conduct in the Global Economy, Taylor and Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central,
Dynamics of Wage Employment: A Case of Employment in the Garment Industry	Pratima, Paul-Majumder; Zohir, Salma Chaudhuri	1994	Bangladesh development studies
Broken promises of globalization: the case of the Bangladesh garment industry	Rahman, Shahidur	2014	Book: Broken promises of globalization: the case of the Bangladesh garment industry
Ending violence at the workplace	Rossi, Arianna	2017	World of Work magazine: International Labour Organisation

Wage Productivity and Wage Income Differential in Labour Market: Evidence from RMG Sector in Bangladesh	Uddin, Salah, Md. Gazi	2008	Asian Social Science
The genetics of capital: An examination of Marx's labour theory of value and women's labour in the global garment industry	Sanborn, Julian M	2005	ProQuest Publishing
Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era	Siddiqi, Dina M	2009	Feminist Review
Gender and Work in Turkey: Case Study on Women Workers in the Textile Industry in Bursa	Sugur, N.; Sugur, S	2005	Middle Eastern Studies
Organizing Immigrant Women in America's Sweatshops: Lessons from the Los Angeles Garment Worker Centre	Sullivan, Richard; Lee, Kimi	2008	Journal of Women in Culture and Society
Are factories in Delhi-NCR saying NO to women workers?	Tagra, Dheeraj	2022	Apparel Resources
Fast Fashion for 2030: Using the Pattern of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to Cut a More Gender-Just Fashion Sector	Vijeyarasa, Ramona; Mark Liu	2022	Business and human rights journal
From Manufactura to Mentefactura? Gender and Industrial Restructuring in the Dominican Republic	Werner, Marion	2015	Book: Global Displacements: The Making of Uneven Development in the Caribbean
Social Impact of the Growth of Garment Industry in Bangladesh	Zohir, Salma Chaudhui	2001	Bangladesh development studies

Table 2.2 List of The Final 52 Sources Used in The Systematic Literature Review

Journal	Frequency
Journal of International Women's Studies	4
Bangladesh Development Studies	3
Asian Journal of Women's Studies	2
Asian Social Science	1
Asian Social Work and Policy Review	1
Business And Human Rights Journal	1
Comparative Political Studies	1
Contemporary Southeastern Europe	1
Economic and Political Weekly	1
Ekonomika Regiona: Economy of Regions	1
Feminist Review	1
Gender, Technology and Development	1
Geoforum	1
Indonesian Journal Of Gender And Womens Studies	1
Journal of Business Ethics	1
Journal of Commerce	1
Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management	1
Journal of the Bangladesh Agricultural University	1
Journal of Women in Culture and Society	1
Michigan Journal Of International Law	1
Middle Eastern Studies	1
New Labour Forum	1
Reproductive Health	1

Table 2.3 Papers Included in The Review by Journal

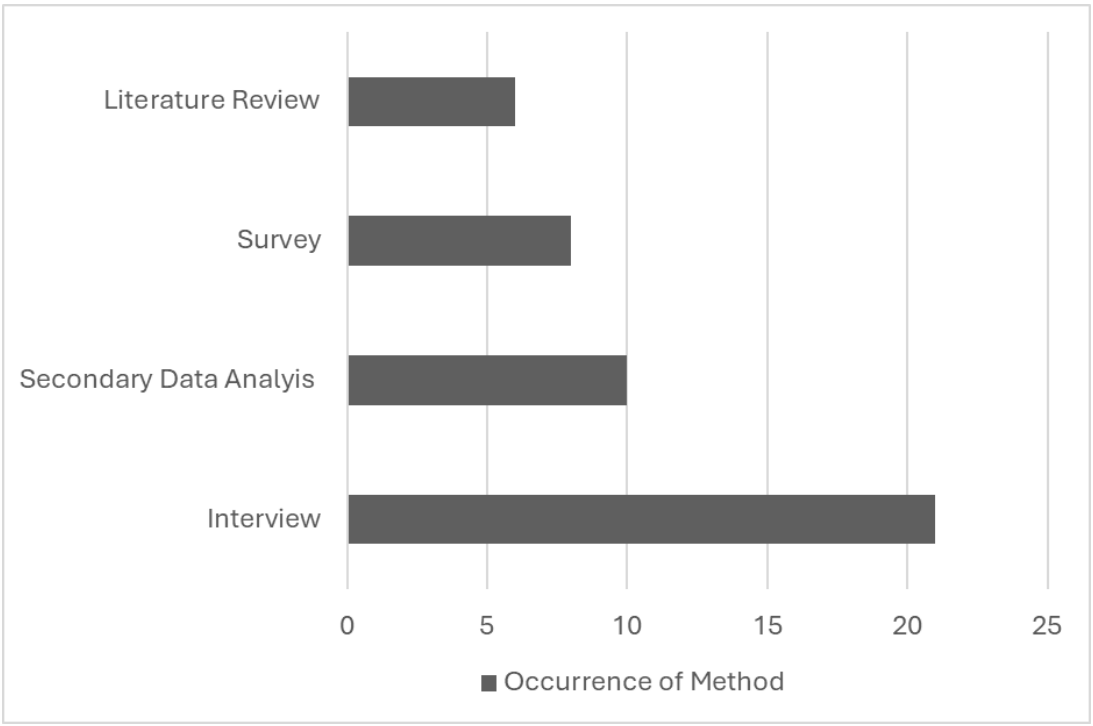


Figure 2. 2 Sources Included in The Review by Research Method

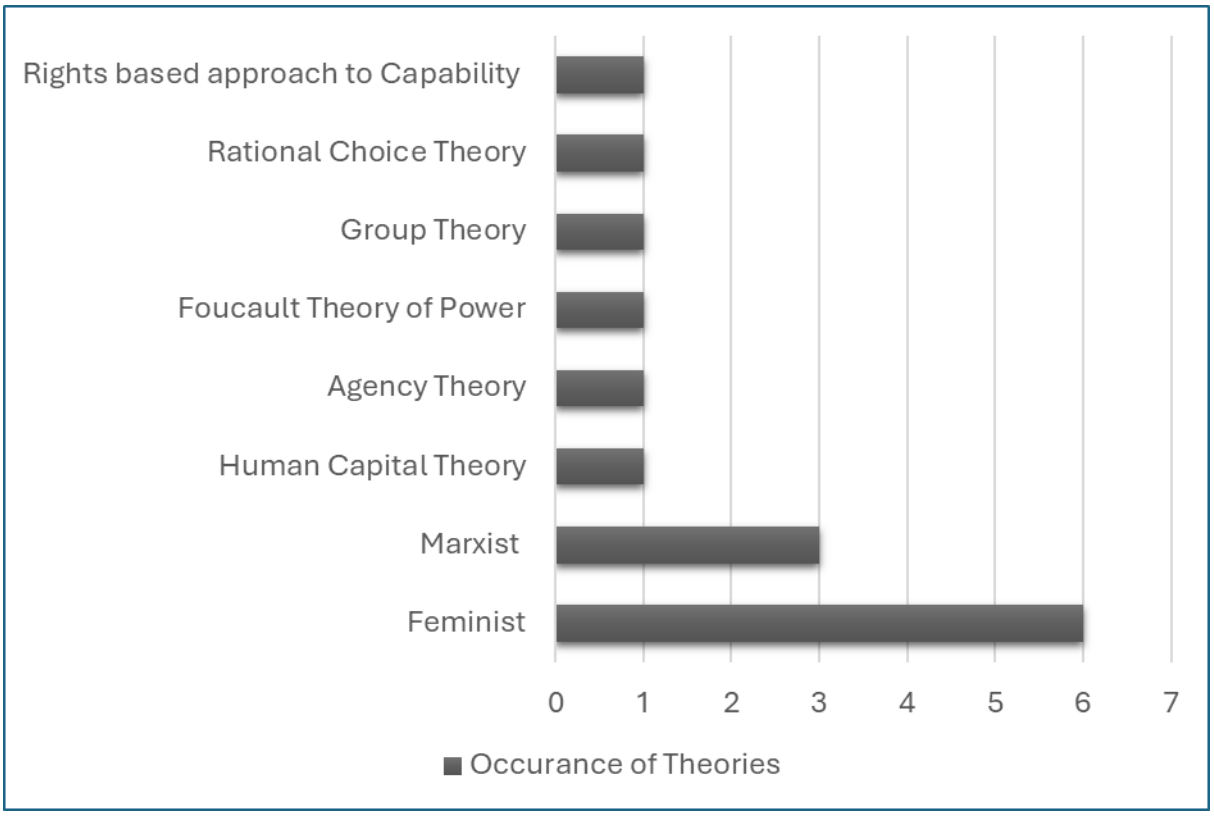


Figure 2.3 Sources Included in The Review by Theory Applied

Finally, Table 2.4 demonstrates the geographical contexts studied in the sources, with the majority of attention being on developing countries and the global south, reflecting the upstream characteristics of many contemporary garment supply chains (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019). The most studied context is overwhelmingly Bangladesh, followed by India and Nicaragua. This is unsurprising given that the garment industry contributes 11% to the gross domestic product (GDP) of Bangladesh and employs approximately 4.4 million workers (Ratcliffe, 2019). Also note that Bangladesh, together with Cambodia and Turkey, is designated by the Women and Girl's Rights Index as being an 'extreme risk' country for women's rights violations (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020).

Region	Country	Frequency
Asia	Bangladesh	28
	India	8
	China	3
	Vietnam	2
	Myanmar	2
	Sri Lanka	2
	Philippines	1
	Cambodia	1
	Indonesia	1
	Malaysia	1
	Thailand	1
Americas	Nicaragua	4
	Honduras	2
	El Salvador	2
	United States	2
	Mexico	1
	Dominican Republic	1
	Haiti	1
Africa	Lesotho	1
	Ghana	1
	Jordan	1
Europe	Turkey	2
	Macedonia	1

Table 2.4 Sources Included in The Review by Geographical Context Studied

2.5.3 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis is guided in part by developing a coding scheme that is both deductively informed by theoretical frameworks and inductively developed (Nguyen et al., 2022; Durach et al., 2017). This approach is justified as "In the process of coding and classifying papers by themes and sub-themes, the use of previously classified taxonomies (a priori codes) and the observation of common patterns among the papers (emerging codes) in data extraction form-based codification are seen as good methods of research analysis and synthesis" (Nguyen et al., 2022, pg18). The a priori codes were informed by a stakeholder perspective, to develop effective stakeholder mapping, and feminist theories previously used to discuss women working within global supply chains. This novel combination responds to Durach et al.'s (2017) call for SLRs within OSCM that pursue findings and theoretical frameworks which challenge and stimulate the development of new and alternative explanations within the field.

The use of a priori codes allowed for an initial structured and efficient evaluation of the data. Two main frameworks could be pulled from the papers, stakeholders and their relationships, as well as power relations, underlying contributing factors, and the gender related issues they created. Following the deductive evaluation, an inductive approach allowed for the evolution of emergent codes and themes to capture novel concepts. The data was organised into themes and sub-themes and organised into a coding framework informed by the previously mentioned theoretical frameworks (Given, 2008). The results of the thematic analysis are unpacked from Section 4 onwards.

2.6 SSSCM Issues from A Gender Perspective

The following section builds a taxonomy of issues faced by women in the garment industry that can be identified from the SLR, thereby responding to RQ1. More specifically, eleven issues are identified that are split into three categories, as outlined in Figure 2.4: (i) issues compounded by gender (Section 2.6.1); (ii) issues that manifest in a gendered way (Section 2.6.2); and, (iii) issues that are inherently and obviously gendered (Section 2.6.3).

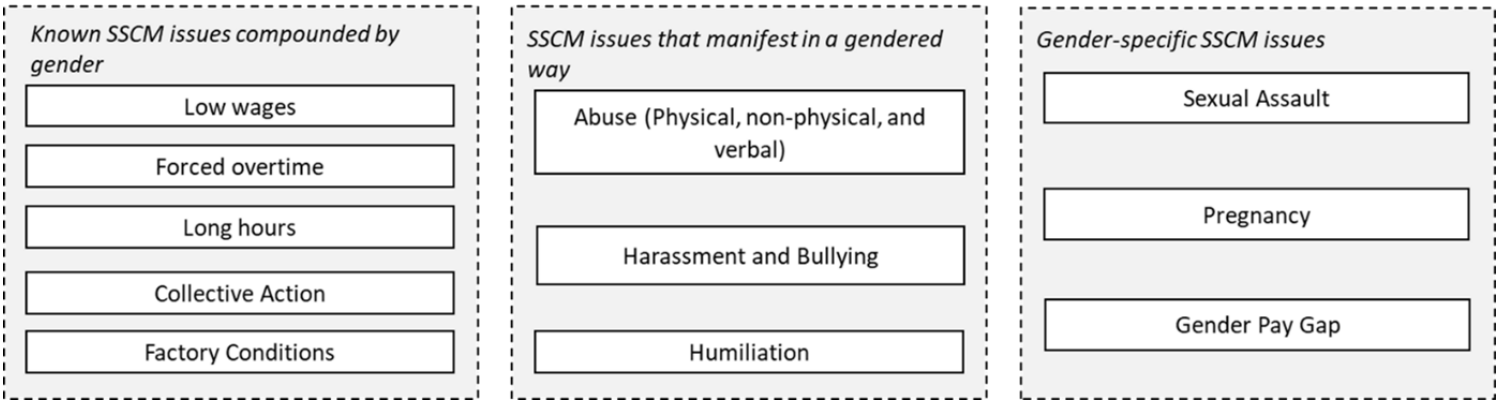


Figure 2.4 Taxonomy of Gender-Related SSSCM Issues in the Garment Industry

2.6.1 SSSCM Issues Compounded By Gender

SSSCM issues that are compounded by gender are discussed in this section. That is, the issues may be experienced by men and women, but their effects are particularly pronounced in women for the reasons explained below.

2.6.1.1 Low Wages

In general, women in the garment industry report that their primary concern is low wages (Ali and Medhekar, 2016; Hossain et al., 2013; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Pratima and Zohir, 1994), which suspend them in poverty while their male counterparts are paid more and promoted into higher roles with even better pay and greater power (Dey and

Basak, 2017, Pearson et al., 2013). Much of this issue is attributed to the piece-rate pay system adopted in many contexts. For example, to achieve a decent wage in El Salvador workers must typically sew thousands of items a day, hundreds per hour, and roughly one time every 4 seconds (Sanborn, 2005). This exceptional volume of work is often unachievable and usually requires working unpaid overtime to achieve the output target, which drives the real hourly rate down even further. Workers are often not provided with wage documents, which makes it easier for suppliers to underpay workers, and despite working the same hours each week, men and women can receive varying levels of pay (Dey and Basak, 2017).

Meanwhile, pay is often delayed by at least a month, which bonds workers to their job as they cannot afford to leave without their unpaid wages (Dey and Basak, 2017; Ali and Medhekar, 2016; Pratima and Zohir, 1994). Moreover, many workers are migrant women with a limited platform to speak up, which makes them susceptible to exploitation, and some use commission-based recruitment agents to obtain jobs, thereby plunging them into debt bondage (Pearson et al., 2013; Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012). Women in Bangladesh are often the sole breadwinners in their family, supporting themselves as well as children and elderly parents; they are therefore more vulnerable to exploitation as they desperately rely on their garment factory wages (Dey and Basak, 2017). These familial responsibilities and a reliance on (low) wages have led to anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide amongst female workers (Akhter et al., 2017; Chua, 2021c). Wage disparities between men and women, like many of the issues identified in this review, can however be difficult to detect as it is known that factories often have two sets of books or timecards to deceive auditors or they subcontract work without the buyer's consent to sub-suppliers that are not audited (Pearson et al., 2013).

2.6.1.2 Long Hours and Overtime

Issues with low wages are often related to and compounded by long hours, and both forced and unpaid overtime (Ali and Medhekar, 2016; Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012). According to Oxfam, women working in garment factories in Myanmar and Vietnam often work 12-18 hours a day, 6 days a week, and yet still do not earn enough to support their families (Asian News Monitor, 2017). Domestic responsibilities also often fall upon these working women. For example, women in countries such as Bangladesh carryout the majority of the domestic work despite working long hours (Pratima and Zohir, 1994; Ahkter et al, 2019).

Overtime hours can vary depending on the volume of orders and can therefore be very irregular at the upstream end of global supply chains. This introduces a great detail of uncertainty and precarity, especially for working mothers who struggle to make childcare arrangements. Workers often will not know how long they will be working or how much they will be paid. Women have also reported that if they refuse overtime, they are fined up to a day's wages (Pearson et al., 2013). Workers can be sent home at short notice when orders are cancelled and asked to 'make up the hours' at other times when the orders are high (Pearson et al., 2013; Dey and Basak, 2017). Childcare responsibility therefore often gets passed on to other women within the community who undertake domestic labour, often for free (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020).

Long hours also contribute to exhaustion, make it difficult to access healthcare appointments or find time to join workers' unions, while late-night hours also increase the risk of sexual violence or abduction (Hewamanne, 2017). These issues are reportedly prevalent in Bangladesh, Mexico, and Thailand, where women report physical

intimidation, sexual violence, rape, and murder on their journeys to and from their dormitories (Pearson et al., 2013).

2.6.1.3 Lack of Collective Action

Few female workers in the garment industry are able to exercise their rights to participate in collective action. For example, female workers in Bangladesh have highlighted that if a female worker joins a union or is seen to be associated with a union, they will lose their job and possibly be 'blacklisted' from employment in other factories (Pearson et al., 2013; Sanborn, 2005; Dey and Basak, 2017; Hossain et al., 2013). Approximately 2% of garment workers in Bangladesh are members of a union, and female participation in unions is much lower than that of men (Hossain et al., 2013). Women face particular barriers to accessing the benefits of unions as they are often led by men and focus on male workers' issues (Dey and Basak, 2017; Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003). Many women in particular are unable to risk getting involved in collective action due to their family's reliance on their wages (Sanborn, 2005; Pearson et al., 2013; Dey and Basak, 2017; Hossain et al., 2013). There are various accounts from Bangladesh of women being fired after protesting to defend their basic rights, such as access to backpay, a living wage, or a maximum 50-hour week (Sanborn, 2005; Pearson et al., 2013). There are also accounts of Bangladeshi female garment workers facing legal action and imprisonment for taking part in collective action, and in Lesotho workers have been killed when trying to exercise their right to freedom of association (Pearson et al., 2013; Chua, 2021a).

This blocking of collective action, effectively thwarting women from organizing, maintains and perpetuates the inequality been men and women in the industry. But when female workers are able to organize and participate in collective action, they can bring

about positive change. There are rare examples of codes of conduct being developed in consultation with female workers that incorporate, for example, reproductive protection, including issues following pregnancy, prohibiting forced contraceptive consumption, and pregnancy testing. This includes the Labour Behind the Label code of conduct and the Nicaraguan code of conduct (Pearson et al., 2013).

2.6.1.4 Poor Workplace Conditions

Some garment factories use toxic and harmful materials (Dilruba Shoma, 2017). For example, workers in China have reported toxic fumes and a build-up of dust in the air due to poor ventilation, causing sickness (Pearson et al., 2013; Hewamanne, 2017). Although these issues impact all workers, there can be specific gendered consequences. For example, there is evidence that some garment factories in Mexico use certain harmful chemicals that are banned in the US as they can damage a woman's reproductive health – damage that has extended beyond the direct employees of the factories by causing birth defects in local communities (Pearson et al., 2013). Meanwhile, there is evidence that in some factories, such as in the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, female access to bathroom breaks is restricted, sometimes limited to two breaks per 10-hour shift. This has caused serious urinary track and kidney infections in female workers (Sanborn, 2005; McCool, 1998; Kabir et al., 2018).

2.6.2 SSSCM Issues that Manifest in a Gendered Way

In this section, SSSCM issues that manifest in a gendered way are explored. That is, unlike those in the previous section that were general issues that had different consequences for men and women (typically more acute consequences for women),

these issues are also general but are directly experienced differently by men and women. Three such issues are identified but considered together due to their interconnected nature.

2.6.2.1 Physical Abuse, verbal Abuse and Humiliation

Abuse in factories can manifest in various ways and can be difficult to record or check for in compliance audits; yet abuse of any kind in the workplace is a violation of human rights (Akhter et al., 2019). Despite this there are growing reports of physical abuse, verbal abuse and humiliation of women in particular in the garment industry, especially in developing countries and in smaller upstream factories (Akhter et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2013; Chua, 2021c). This abuse affects millions of workers every year and causes stress, anxiety and has even led to murder and suicide (International Labour Organisation, 2021; Chua, 2021c).

Some of the abuses most frequently reported by female garment workers include verbal abuse, such as derogatory name calling, psychological bullying, or coercion, physical abuse, such as physical intimidation, being slapped, thrown against a wall, having their hair pulled or clothes thrown in their face (Akhter et al., 2019), and humiliation, such as being locked in an isolation room, being forced to clean the toilets, or constantly being fired (Akhter et al., 2019; Chua, 2021c). Women report being afraid and powerless to defend themselves, make a stand or even cry as they may face further abuse from their (typically male) supervisors who are larger and stronger men or may be fired for lodging a complaint (Akhter et al., 2019). In fact, it has been claimed that bullying, including verbal and physical abuse, often occurs within the industry's high-pressure environment, and it is claimed that it is being used as a method of management

and of disciplining workers in order to reach production targets (Akhter et al., 2019; Siddiqi, 2009; International Labour Organisation, 2021; Chua, 2021c). Female garment workers in Honduras have said that male managers often use demeaning misogynist language towards them within factories (Sanborn, 2005; Hossain et al., 2013; Chua, 2021c). Although, for example, verbal abuse may not inherently be gendered, the manifestation of this abuse through gendered language highlights how abuses can appear in gendered ways.

2.6.3 Specifically Gendered SSSCM Issues

In this section, SSSCM issues that are specifically gendered, that is they are especially directly towards women.

2.6.3.1 Sexual Violence

It is claimed that many women in the garment industry have experienced sexual violence in the workplace. This is a global issue not specific to any one country or culture (International Labour Organisation, 2021). Women however often fail to report this abuse due to fear of losing their job or other negative consequences (Hossain et al., 2013). Additionally, sexual violence is rarely effectively detected in compliance assessments (International Labour Organisation, 2021). Part of the problem is that it can often be the male manager who is the perpetrator, leaving no effective reporting mechanism (Hossain et al., 2013; Kabir et al., 2018). There is an asymmetry of power between the male supervisors and women workers in factories, exacerbating the threat of sexual violence (Oddone, 2018; Kabir et al., 2018). Like bullying, sexual harassment has been weaponised in some factories as another management strategy (Siddiqi, 2009) –

rewarding ‘good workers’ that do not speak up or protest with immunity from sexual violence and protection from managers for a period of time; or rewarding those that tolerate sexual violence with enhanced career prospects (Sanborn, 2005). Some garment workers in Lesotho have been instructed to undress in front of management at the end of their shifts, under the guise that management believes they are stealing from the company (Chua, 2021b). This sexual exploitation begins at the recruitment stage. For example, within Bangladeshi garment factories it is often challenging to find women above the age of 40, with most being recruited between 15 and 35 years old (Hossain et al., 2013). These young workers are vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation.

There can also be contextual and cultural reasons for not reporting sexual violence in the workplace, with levels of sexual violence and its reporting varying across countries. In India 14% of women report being raped or sexually assaulted, 67.1% in Korea and in Haiti 17% of female workers reported being forced to have sex with their bosses or they would be fired (Carpenter, 2019; Pearson et al., 2013; Chua, 2022a). In some contexts, reporting may damage marriage prospects, and these beliefs are exploited to ensure victims do not whistle-blow (Begum et al., 2010). In some cases, it has also been claimed that law enforcement is involved or complicit in the abuse and harassment of garment workers (Begum et al., 2010). As a result, it has been suggested that alternative, independent reporting mechanisms need to be developed (Oddone, 2018). There has however been some success in reducing incidences of sexual violence within factories by rolling out training programs aimed at male managerial staff (International Labour Organisation, 2021; Oddone, 2018). This includes by speaking a language that management understands, i.e. by highlighting the negative impact of sexual violence and harassment on productivity (Oddone, 2018).

2.6.3.2 Pregnancy (and Maternity)

Barnes and Kozar (2008) asserted that there is a lack of discussion in the academic literature regarding the mistreatment of and discrimination against pregnant women in the garment industry, despite evidence that this is a prominent issue. There is a perception that employing pregnant women will reduce productivity and increase a firm's costs; therefore, many factories will attempt to avoid hiring pregnant women or seek to dismiss them (or forced them to quit) if they become pregnant whilst employed. Sexual violence in the workplace has also contributed to pregnancies (Hewamanne, 2017). Managerial perpetrators have pressured female workers into unsafe lethal abortions and contributed to workers committing suicide (Hewamanne, 2017). Meanwhile, women have been forced to take pregnancy tests, been asked to provide medical certificates or to undergo humiliating physical exams both before being hired and routinely thereafter (Barnes and Kozar, 2008; McCool, 1998). Further, women who are found to be pregnant are either not considered for the job or are fired, even when this is illegal (Sanborn, 2005).

Many countries have labour laws that only protect women after they have been hired, which creates a loophole that allows some of this behaviour to persist (Sanborn, 2005). Similarly, maternity benefits in many countries are limited and mandatory maternity leave or pay is often avoided by dismissing pregnant workers (Gills and Piper, 2002; Barnes and Kozar, 2008; Hewamanne, 2017). For some garment workers, getting married or pregnant is a breach of contract and can mean they lose their work deposits or are punished, either financially or physically (Pearson et al., 2013). For example, pregnant women in some factories in Mexico and China have been kept in or moved to physically

demanding jobs as punishment (Barnes and Kozar, 2008). This practice, aimed at forcing pregnant workers to quit, can be detrimental to workers and their unborn babies causing undue stress that leads to miscarriage (Barnes and Kozar, 2008). Furthermore, garment workers have reportedly been injected with a contraceptive or been forcibly provided with contraceptive pills (Pearson et al., 2013; Barnes and Kozar, 2008). In some cases, women have been coerced into having abortions to keep their jobs, while others who have remained in employment have reported being prevented from receiving medical care (Pearson et al., 2013). Meanwhile, nearly 50% of women working in garment factories in Nicaragua who left work to have their baby were not able to return to their jobs, and those who were able to, were then paid less (Pearson et al., 2013)

2.6.3.3 Gender Pay Gap

Like elsewhere, a gender pay gap exists within the garment industry; for example, it has been reported that women working in export processing zones in Mexico are paid 20-50% less than men for undertaking the same or a comparable role (Sanborn, 2005; Pratima and Zohir, 1994; Chakravarty, 2004; Uddin 2008; Dey & Basak, 2017). Different gender roles are carved out by patriarchal culture, outlining men as breadwinners and women as homemakers and caregivers, and these beliefs are reinforced through lower pay levels for women, maintaining the perception that a woman's income is secondary to their role as a mother (Hossain et al., 2013; Dilruba Shoma, 2017). However, this caregiving role, as outlined by patriarchal cultures, is often not the reality. Despite the notion in some cultures that women should stay at home and be caregivers, many women are single mothers or responsible for financially supporting themselves and their families' men (Hossain et al., 2013; Dilruba Shoma, 2017). While there are even suggestions in the

literature that, in some cultures, women might ask for lower wages than men (Hossain et al., 2013), this is not the most commonly held belief. Rather, women should be paid the same as men for doing the same job.

2.7 Contributing Factors and Stakeholders

This section responds to RQ2 by identifying factors that contribute to gender-related issues in the garment industry (Section 2.7.1) and the stakeholders involved (Section 2.7.2). These stakeholders perpetuate the problem in some cases but could also be part of the solution.

2.7.1 Contributing Factors

2.7.1.1 Patriarchy

Patriarchy is an institutionalized social system in which men dominate over others, but refers to dominance over women specifically; it can also extend to a variety of manifestations in which men have social privileges over others to cause exploitation or oppression (Walaby, 1989). Patriarchy and patriarchal cultures, as seen in many countries, maintain constraints on women that dictate their roles within society, and women and girls are socialised in accordance with these structures (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Akhter & Chu, 2019; Chowdhury, 2017). Under patriarchy, women occupy a subordinate and secondary position to men that continues from the family unit into wider society (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Akhter & Chu, 2019; Chowdhury, 2017) – including into factories. When women within patriarchal cultures undertake work, they often retain household and reproductive responsibilities, including caring for children, husbands, and family, as well as childrearing and caring for those who are sick or

disabled (Zohir, 2001; Pratima and Zohir, 1994; Akhter & Chu, 2019), as briefly referred to above.

Patriarchal cultures are important to understand within the context of the garment industry, which exploits and perpetuates these patriarchal beliefs and structures by employing women for lower skilled jobs and men for managerial roles (Akhter et al., 2019). Alongside this, the industry reproduces patriarchally-repressive policies and legal structures of the state (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). These factors construct garment work as 'women's work' without acknowledging or supporting the needs of women workers (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). In some contexts, garment factory managers have claimed that female workers are timid, docile, and patient; however, they simply have less power than men who are more able to aggressively discipline women (Hossain et al., 2013; Bonfiglioli, 2014; Gills and Piper, 2003; Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012; Chakravarty, 2004). The influence of patriarchy is evident throughout much of the above discussion of SSSCM issues. For example, the sexual assault of female garment workers is an extension of patriarchal power, as are the social and cultural barriers that prevent women from speaking up (Hossain et al., 2013; Bonfiglioli, 2014). Senior male staff abuse women at work however; there do not appear to be any reports of the same happening to male workers within the industry. Men do not appear constrained by societal expectations; instead, they are said to fight back and have the agency to unionize in the garment industry when being mistreated (Hossain et al., 2013).

2.7.1.2 Capitalism and the Feminization of Labour

Capitalism encourages the 'race to the bottom' as an economic system and demands that firms constantly search for lower costs and higher profits (Beasley, 1999; Barnes and

Kozar, 2008). Labour is a significant cost in the garment industry that many firms are looking to minimize. In the pursuit of profit maximization, the capitalist pursuit of cheaper labour compounds with patriarchy and the gendered discourse of work to manifest as the devaluation of women's work, bringing women into the labour force as a cheaper, less valued source of labour compared to men (Hossain, et al, 2013; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2001; Standing, 1989) – also known as the feminization of labour. The gendered discourse of work refers to "the gender-biased beliefs that provide distinct forms of labour for men and women" (Hossain et al., 2013).

The feminization of labour as a term also includes the increased flexibility and precarity of labour and is achieved in part by suppliers providing inadequate working contracts. Flexibility of labour includes working patterns such as part-time, temporary and casual contracts, which allow employers to deny female workers of benefits and creates insecurity (Hossain, et al, 2013). Employing both full-time and part-time staff creates a mixed labour force, and this mixture, allowing for flexibility, is built upon a woman's secondary status in the labour market (Hossain, et al, 2013). This segmentation has allowed women to be used as a pool of surplus labour and explains why women are often paid less than men for the same position and struggle with low wages (Hossain et al, 2013; Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003).

More specifically, socialist feminist theory helps to identify and understand that the subjugation of women workers is heavily tied to the development of industrialization, where women can be viewed as a repressed political class (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). The use of women as a 'reserve labour force' in the garment industry develops directly from their position as poor working-class women, predominantly being forced to occupy the role of 'caregiver' before being rewarded as a worker (Hossain et al., 2013).

2.7.1.3 (Lack of) Agency

A direct consequence of the feminization of labour and the oppression of women in patriarchal cultures is a lack of agency (Dey and Basak, 2017; Kabir et al., 2018). Issues and constraints on women's agency affect their ability to protect themselves against and prevent all other issues within the garment industry, including those concerned with sexual violence, pregnancy, low wages, abuse, harassment, and humiliation (Kabir et al., 2018). Further, being a part of supply chains that condemn women to a secondary status allows them to be discriminated against in a unique way, be compensated less, and have their concerns overlooked due to gender (Dey and Basak, 2017).

Women's agency and identity are portrayed as intertwined. A contributing factor to a constraint on women's agency is a lack of recognition of their identity as a woman (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Kabir et al., 2018). Being classified generically as a worker, as opposed to as a female worker, inherently ignores the gender-based issues women face (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). This lack of agency has been attributed to weakening the capability of women to act collectively and claim their rights (Dey and Basak, 2017; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). Therefore, it can be concluded that protecting women's agency and identity are essential to protecting them from the oppression of capitalist patriarchy (Hossain et al., 2013), and that looking at workers' rights in general within supply chains greatly overlooks the unique issues faced by female workers.

2.7.2 Stakeholders

2.7.2.1 Governments

Governments have an important role to play in addressing the issues raised in this paper. Governments are supposed to enforce labour laws and standards on organisations to protect the rights of all workers, but it is claimed that some governments have not acted within their power to protect female garment workers. Addressing this is critical as attempts to improve human rights will not be effective if governments do not hold buyers and suppliers to account (Sanborn, 2005; Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Rahman, 2014; Chua, 2022; Chua, 2021). For example, much of Bangladesh's economy is derived from the garment industry, yet it is claimed that much of the workforce, especially women, remain unprotected by legislation (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Kabir et al., 2018). Meanwhile, it has been claimed that some governments have not only turned a blind eye to the abuse of workers but have been responsible for the deaths of garment workers via state-sponsored violence during pay related protests (Chua, 2021a). Of course, there are also some countries where men and women still do not human rights.

2.7.2.2 Buyers

The role of buyers in exacerbating upstream SSSCM challenges has been widely acknowledged. There are relatively few key buyers in the garment industry, and these firms order in high volumes from a large and often interchangeable supply base providing buyers with almost complete power to drive down prices and lead times (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Rahman, 2014; Chua, 2022; Chua, 2021) Many buyers are engaged in a race to the bottom, pursuing maximum profits for minimal costs. Lead time pressures directly impact issues like verbal and sexual abuse (Siddiqi, 2009) while

cost-cutting has a direct impact on issues like pay and conditions. This downward pressure can therefore be traced from buyers onto suppliers and eventually female workers as arguably the least powerful actors within the supply chain. These abuses could be reduced by imposing and enforcing codes of conduct and implementing effective grievance mechanisms that explicitly protect women (Dey and Basak, 2017; Carpenter, 2019) – in addition to buyers examining the effects of their own purchasing practices.

2.7.2.3 Suppliers

Suppliers often pass the pressure placed upon them by buyers to their workers, who are predominantly women, including migrant workers with limited agency or no platform to speak up. Here, capitalism is compounded by patriarchy, which has forced women to maintain a secondary position within society. Factories, as the employers of female garment workers, have direct control over many issues faced by women in the garment industry. For example, they have direct control over employment contracts, pay rates and schedules, job security, benefits, factory conditions, protection against forms of violence, career progression, and access to collective action (Chua, 2021a; Pearson et al., 2013; Dey and Basak, 2017). Practices like temporary contracts (or no contract) for women maintain a system of precarity and insecurity. This allows suppliers to keep wages low and maintain a narrative that women are disposable (Hossain et al., 2013; Pearson et al., 2013). Suppliers have a legal responsibility to provide safe and adequate working conditions, but these needs are often ignored.

2.7.2.4 NGOs

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can be important advocates and change agents for workers in the garment industry. That is, some NGOs, falling outside the traditional supply chain, are well positioned to advocate for women workers' rights (Rahman, 2014) and act as watchdogs to help enforce existing laws meant to protect women (Akhter et al., 2017; Dey and Basak, 2017). In fact, some large and prominent International NGOs (INGOs) have undertaken instrumental work on developing policies to support women in the industry, such as the ILO's decent work agenda aspiring towards human dignity for all workers (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). But the many smaller, grass-roots NGOs also have an important role to play locally, yet they are often resource-constrained – overstretched to support the many vulnerable garment workers spread across disparate supply chains.

Trade unions, which can be seen as a particular type of NGO, present some unique challenges. In some countries, trade unions are run by, and predominately for, male workers, often overlooking the rights and issues of their female colleagues (Pearson et al., 2013; Bellman, 2004). For example, some male union leaders in Bangladesh have outlined how they believe female workers are "illiterate, backward and rural, and unable to grasp concepts of unions and solidarity; therefore, don't make an effort to work with them" (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003). Subsequently, women's participation in trade unions is much lower than that of men. The representativeness of these numbers becomes extremely distorted when you consider that in Bangladesh, for example, only 2% of the sector's workers are members, and only a fraction of these are women (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Sullivan & Lee, 2008; Hossain, 2012). There are however some unions that work specifically for women or are female-led, providing schools for

children and suitable accommodation, and these organisations can be instrumental in supporting women workers (Hossain et al., 2013; Rahman, 2014) and may be well positioned to further develop and protect the rights of female workers in the garment industry (Sullivan and Lee, 2008).

2.8 Discussion

This research has re-emphasised and begun to address the gender gap in the OSCM literature, as identified by Tang (2022). In particular, it has brought a new gendered perspective to the study of SSSCM, thereby responding to recent calls (e.g. Vijeyarasa, 2020). Although the issues faced by female workers were identified as a key issue within SSSCM by Govindan et al. (2021), this was one of many challenges briefly touched upon in the authors' study. In our paper, the central focus is on SSSCM from a gender perspective. This has helped to further our understanding of existing SSSCM challenges and to identify new ones, thereby demonstrating the utility of a gender lens within the OSCM literature. The next two subsections provide a brief discussion structured around RQ1 (Section 2.8.1) and RQ2 (Section 2.8.2) before managerial implications (Section 2.8.3) a research agenda is provided (Section 2.8.4).

2.8.1 RQ1: Gender-related Human Rights and Labour Issues for SSSCM in the Garment Industry

Overall, this research has found that although many human rights issues in global supply chains may not initially appear to be gendered, viewing them through a gendered lens reveals their gendered dimension. More specifically, and by drawing on a fragmented body of literature spread across a variety of other fields, this SLR is, to the best of our

knowledge, the first paper to synthesize the key issues faced by female workers in the garment industry in order to build a taxonomy of the gendered human rights abuses relevant to SSSCM (see Figure III).

In total, eleven key gender-related issues relevant to SSSCM were identified, broken down into three groups: (i) already known SSSCM issues that do not initially appear gendered but where applying a gendered lens reveals how they are compounded by gender, i.e. have gendered consequences; for example, how the use of toxic chemicals in factories can harm all workers but especially cause infertility for female workers and birth defects (Pearson et al., 2013); (ii) SSSCM issues that manifest in a gendered way, such as the generic issue of verbal abuse that becomes misogynistic and sexist when directed towards female workers (Sanborn, 2005); and, (iii) gender-specific SSSCM issues, i.e. those that are inherently gendered, such as attitudes towards pregnancy (Barnes and Kozar, 2008). This level of granularity is important for beginning to understand the nuances behind how gendered human rights issues manifest in global supply chains. Overall, this contributes towards a movement from being gender blind towards being gender aware within the field of OSCM.

2.8.2 RQ2: Contributing Factors and Stakeholders

As a secondary contribution, this paper has unveiled a set of contributing factors that work together to create and maintain gender inequality in global supply chains. More specifically, there are large systems in which global garment supply chains operate that create and perpetuate gender-based human rights issues, including a capitalist economic system (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Beasley, 1999; Barnes and Kozar, 2008), the feminization of labour (Hossain et al., 2013; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020), and

patriarchy (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Akhter et al., 2019; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Hossain et al., 2013) – all of which contribute to a lack of agency for female workers (Dey and Basak, 2017; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Hossain et al., 2013). This has again further developed our understanding in the field of OSCM of gendered abuses within the garment industry.

Additionally, this paper has pointed to several well-known stakeholders that contribute to or uphold gendered issues in supply chains and that can be part of the solution (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Sanborn, 2005; Chua, 2021a; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). In addition to governments, buyers and suppliers, the role of NGOs is considered particularly critical in supporting women, especially grassroots NGOs and female-led trade unions.

2.8.3 Implications for Managers

If focal firms are to help develop greater gender sensitive practices within the garment industry, they need to adopt a more nuanced and focused approach. This includes using a gendered lens to approach all supply chain issues, as issues that do not appear gendered will likely have a gender dimension and a gendered impact. Additionally, there must be a shift from targeting symptoms and individual issues of gender equality to targeting the contributing factors which cause gender inequality and abuses. This holistic approach also requires collaboration with both traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors, including with governments and NGOs, to better develop systems of identifying and addressing gendered issues within supply chains.

A key shift must come from the purchasing practices of buyers and brands. Procurement teams within the garment industry must recognise the negative impact that

their purchasing practices can have on suppliers. The impact of negative purchasing practices gets passed down from procurement teams to suppliers to women workers, contributing to gender inequality within supply chains.

2.8.4 Future Research Agenda

This paper is a starting point for further OSCM research that incorporates a gendered perspective, and there are various lines of enquiry that stem directly from its contribution. The paper has produced a taxonomy of SSSCM issues from a gender perspective, so an obvious next step would be to use this as a basis for empirical research, such as through case study and action research, that validates the set of issues and begins to explore how they can be overcome in particular contexts. This could be done initially in the garment industry but then extended to other industries potentially leading to identifying other key issues and context-specific solutions. Rarely does the worker-victim voice get heard in OSCM research so, where possible, it would also be beneficial to incorporate the views of female garment workers in future research if access challenges can be overcome and workers are able to share their experiences safely and without recourse. This could include going beyond the factory walls to consider the particular challenges of home-working by females in the garment industry. Another avenue to explore might be ex-garment workers who may offer a unique perspective and be more candid in their views.

There is a great deal of scope to focus on how firms can go about detecting and remediating gender inequalities in global supply chains, including by following a similar path to research into issues like modern slavery. This might involve expanding the focus of a traditional social audit to go beyond the boundaries of the firm, not only by examining

the recruitment practices and the role of third-party labour agencies but by looking at aspects like the dormitories provided by some factories, where it is claimed there is a higher risk of issues like sexual violence (Pearson et al., 2013), and the grievance mechanisms available to female workers for issues such as violence and sexual assault (Dey and Basak, 2017; Carpenter, 2019). It could also be helpful to look at the wider community in which a factory is embedded to consider issues like toxic chemicals and reproductive health. Meanwhile, one particular gender-specific issue that has come through strongly in this review and that has rarely been considered from an OSCM perspective is the issue of pregnancy (Barnes and Kozar, 2008). Pregnant women face a myriad of issues including health and safety risks, job insecurity, and a lack of maternity benefits (Pearson et al., 2013; Chua, 2021c; Kabir et al., 2018). These issues are serious and varied and require further understanding from a global supply chain perspective.

There is some evidence in the literature that addressing gender inequality can help to improve productivity and reduce employee turnover, but stakeholders are seemingly still not sufficiently incentivized to achieve this (Oddone, 2018). A natural next step for this research would also be to develop a deeper understanding of the possible solutions. This includes looking at how contributing factors can be tackled, as well as how key stakeholders like NGOs can be mobilized to help address gender inequality in global supply chains (International Labour Organisation, 2021). This could again include engaged action research in collaboration with prominent NGOs, including trade unions. Further research could be undertaken into the power dynamics between buyers and suppliers, to explore how supplier development or transparency initiatives can be constructed to address gender inequality behaviour, and how suppliers can be educated

or incentivized to improve gender equality. A deeper understanding of the interplay between capitalism and patriarchy could help shed light on these issues.

Further, it is important to adopt a global outlook when considering the issues identified in this paper. Although much of the literature that has informed this study is set in the global south, gender inequality is a universal problem that is relevant in some form to all organisations, irrespective of their size, supply chain tier, or location. That is, the gender inequalities in Western buyers and their role in SSSCM must also be examined. But we need to ensure a Western perspective on these issues – using western theories of feminism and ideas of gender equality and patriarchy – is not universally applied because it is clear that context really matters. As outlined by Ozkazanc-Pan (2019), research and discussions regarding gender, CSR and governance are mostly absent with regards to capitalism, neoliberalism and discussions of the global north-south divide, and this deserves further attention in future research.

Finally, this paper has focused specifically on gender. It is also important to be aware of how gender intersects with other factors and protected characteristics, potentially leading to even more acute challenges for particular minority groups. Thus, an intersectional approach could be adopted in the future where our gendered view is expanded to consider more specific issues around race, religion, sexuality, migration status, etc. (International Labour Organisation, 2021; Carpenter, 2019; Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012) and how they exacerbate the issues faced by women. Some of these factors are difficult to observe and there can be invisible inequalities at play; but future research should be conducted to consider this even more granular level of detail.

2.9 Conclusions

This paper has contributed to the OSCM literature by responding to a clear gender gap in the socially sustainable SCM literature, with a particular focus on the garment industry. It represents part of the process of moving the field from being gender blind to gender aware or focused, demonstrating the need to consider SSSCM issues specifically in terms of how they affect or are experienced by women. This is more important than ever before in the socio-economic conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

By addressing RQ1, this paper has shown how a gendered lens can shed new light on human rights abuses in the garment industry, revealing their gendered nature, including those that are obviously gendered but also those that manifest in a gendered way and those that are compounded by gender. Meanwhile, by addressing RQ2, this paper has highlighted key stakeholders that can contribute to addressing the issues identified and identified major contributing factors and systems, such as patriarchy and capitalism. For example, NGOs could be further mobilised to provide greater support to women workers and prevent further abuses. Additionally, many buyers have a great deal of power over suppliers, and this could be better utilized to support female workers. In short, this research has re-asserted the necessity for further research into gender and OSCM, as reflected in the future research agenda outlined.

Chapter 3: Paper 2

Paper 2: Achieving gender equality in supply chains: A scoping study of the issues facing female garment workers and policy recommendations

3.1 Background to Paper 2

Paper 2 builds upon the findings of Paper 1 and further explores the role of NGOs as key actors in achieving gender equality within garment supply chains. In doing so, it demonstrates that issues identified within Paper 1 from literature published between 1994 and 2023 are persistent and continue to be reported by NGOs, underscoring the need for further research. It undertook a scoping study of grey literature published by NGOs on gender due diligence within the garment industry. This process involved mapping existing research, identifying key themes, and highlighting gaps in the literature. This continued to develop a background of knowledge and context of the issues facing women in the garment industry. Additionally, Paper 2 marks the beginning of the Action Research project, acting as a key context development stage of the project. The findings of the study were presented to the CSR team within the focal form and used to inform the development of recommendations for enhancing gender due diligence of their supply chains.

As the first author, I was responsible for 80% of the work. I conceptualised the research idea, conducted an initial review of grey literature and carried out a structured data collection process. I identified and retrieved relevant grey literature sources, systematically coded and analysed the data.

This paper was written in collaboration with my supervisors who co-authored this paper, Professor Mark Stevenson and Dr Lingxuan Liu. My supervisors played a crucial role in guiding the methodological process, particularly in refining the analysis processes, suggesting strategies to enhance the depth of the findings and refining thematic codes. We discussed these iteratively as a research team to refine them over time. Their contributions accounted for 20% of the total work related to this paper.

My co-authors have certified below that they agree with the above claim with regards to everyone's contribution to this paper.

Professor Mark Stevenson

Date: 28th February 2025

Dr Lingxuan Liu

Date: 28th February 2025

3.2 Abstract

Focal firms have an important role to play in achieving gender equality in their supply chains, yet gender continues to be under researched within the academic operations and supply chain management literature. Although much has been written about this topic in the grey literature, existing knowledge is spread across many different sources. This paper presents a scoping study that synthesises insights from 34 publications produced by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) into the issues faced by women working in garment supply chains and how they can be addressed. Twenty-four challenges facing women workers are identified. Even more significantly, the research identifies 628 individual recommendations for enhancing gender equality, 256 policies to address specific challenges faced by women workers and 372 targeted and supply chain operations. Organised into four themes: (i) embedding gender equality into business practices, (ii) sustainability-orientated collaboration, (iii) sustainability-orientated suppler assessments, and (iv) communication and disclosure to achieve gender equality. Further analysis reveals that many policy recommendations produced by NGOs focus on the short to medium term and on first-tier supply relationships. A more holistic and long-term perspective that reaches further upstream in supply chains will be required if gender inequalities, and the underlying causes, are to be addressed. The research expands extant literature and provides important implications for practice. For example, to be most effective, actions aimed at enhancing gender equality should be tailored to the local context, designed and monitored in consultation with the workers that will be impacted, and involve collaborating with both traditional and non-traditional actors to develop the supply base.

Key words: Gender equality; social sustainability; supply chain management; garment industry; non-governmental organisations

3.3 Introduction

Gender equality has been identified as a key development priority by organisations such as the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations (UN). This emphasis is partly motivated by the global benefits of achieving gender equality; for example, enabling more women to enter the workplace contributes to economic development, alleviating poverty and expanding gross domestic product (UN Women, 2018). Indeed, UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 is focused on Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering All Women and Girls (United Nations, 2023). Organisations have an important role to play in achieving gender equality in their supply chains, including through organisational and supplier development initiatives, with gender equality being increasingly added to the corporate and supply chain strategies of focal firms (Ruel et al., 2020). Yet, gender continues to be under researched within the field of operations and supply chain management (OSCM) (Tang, 2022).

Although the academic OSCM literature is limited in its consideration of gender, this has been a core concern in publications produced by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), especially among NGOs that specialise in women's rights, workers' rights, and poverty alleviation. These organisations publish reports on the issues faced by women workers, including in the garment industry, and how they can be addressed thereby offering important insights that can inform future research.

NGOs have emerged as key actors in addressing labour conditions within the garment industry, particularly in advocating for women workers in global supply chains (Rahman, 2014; Akhter et al., 2017; Dey and Basak, 2017). Despite their prominent role and the breadth of reports and targets they have produced (United Nations, 2023),

academic literature has been comparatively slow to engage with the gendered dimensions of supply chain governance. This paper responds to this gap by examining how NGOs can contribute to addressing gender inequality in garment supply chains. By drawing on the practices and guidance of NGOs, the research aims to explore their potential to influence more gender-responsive forms of supply chain governance and contribute to gender equality.

This paper provides a scoping study of NGO literature to identify the issues facing women workers in garment supply chains and to synthesise the guidance made available to organisations for providing greater gender due diligence in supply chains. Literature has identified 11 issues facing women workers in the garment industry. This research deepens understanding of these issues and expands the set of issues to 24. More significantly, it identifies hundreds of policy recommendations that are organised into four themes: (i) embedding gender equality into buyer business practices; (ii) sustainability-oriented collaboration; (iii) sustainability-oriented supplier assessments; and, (iv) communication and disclosure to achieve gender equality. In doing so, the research contributes to the existing literature on sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) and provides a case for the use of supplier development for achieving greater social sustainability and gender equality within the supply chains of the garment industry. Moreover, the paper includes discussion on the utilisation of non-traditional supply chain actors to enhance supplier development and sustainable supply chain management efforts.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. After a literature review, the methodology is outlined, i.e., a scoping study for the collection of grey literature,

including the search process and source analysis. The key challenges faced by women working in the garment industry, as outlined by NGOs, are then identified followed by the key recommendations provided by NGOs to tackle the identified challenges. The recommendations are then analysed in more detail followed by a discussion and conclusion.

3.4 Literature Review

3.4.1 SSCM Literature

Ongoing discussions within the field of SSCM and OSCM have drawn attention to the growing need to study gender, with Tang (2022) identifying a 'gender gap' within the literature. Similarly, there have been calls by Akbari et al. (2024) for further research into gender issues within OSCM. Earlier, Zinn et al. (2018) called for further research into gender diversity within supply chains, Chin and Tat (2015) called for research on how gender affects supply chain management and performance, and Ruel et al. (2020) called for research on gender and the sustainable management of supply chains. Where gender has been a topic of study, the focus has been more on gender diversity within management (Park and Krishnan, 2005) rather than on the issues affect women working within the factories in supply chains. For example, research has explored gender's link to a firm's performance, board membership (Bear et al., 2010; Adams, 2009), corporate social responsibility outcomes (Galbreath, 2011; Harjoto et al., 2015; Bears, 2010; Bernardi, 2010; Dawar and Singh 2016; Fernandez-Feijoo, 2012), and its effect on teamwork (Kochan et al., 2003).

Gender has received some research attention in the context of mining (Mattis, 2000; Bell, 2013; Mayes et al., 2013; Lahiri-Dutt, 2015), agriculture (Maertens and Swinnen,

2012; Hale and Apondo, 2005), and garment manufacture. With regards to the latter, which is the focus of this study, there is a range of literature discussing women workers in garment supply chains, but most of these studies are not from within the SSCM or OSCM field. Rather, these are within subject areas such as women's studies (Dey and Basak, 2017), women's health (Akhter et al., 2015), development studies (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003), economics and politics (Kaiwar, 2014). Topics covered include low wages (Ali and Medhekar, 2016; Hossain et al., 2013; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Pratima and Zohir, 1994; Dey and Basak, 2017), long hours and excessive overtime (Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012; Pearson et al., 2013), issues accessing collective action (Pearson et al., 2013; Sanborn, 2005; Dey and Basak, 2017), poor factory conditions (Hewamanne, 2017; Dilruba Shoma, 2017; McCool, 1998; Kabir et al., 2018), physical and verbal abuse (Akhter et al., 2019; Chua, 2021c; Pearson et al., 2013), sexual violence (Hossain et al., 2013; Kabir et al., 2018; Siddiqi, 2009; Sanborn, 2005), pregnancy and maternity related challenges (Barnes and Kozar, 2008; Hewamanne, 2017; Gills and Piper, 2003), and the gender pay gap (Sanborn, 2005; Pratima and Zohir, 1994; Chakravarty, 2004; Uddin 2008; Dey & Basak, 2017).

Meanwhile, there is ample literature discussing SSCM and the garment industry, including topics such as adopting new technology to enhance sustainability (Chen, 2023), the effects of market pressures on sustainability (Fontana et al., 2023), mapping corporate reports and their core themes (Turker and Altuntas, 2014), supplier selection for sustainability (Kusi-Sarpong et al., 2023), assessing risks within sustainable practices (Raian et al. 2022), and environmental sustainability and the circular economy (Abdelmeguid et al. 2023; Dragomir, 2022; Li, et al. 2021). However, there appears to be

a gap in terms of simultaneously looking at sustainable supply chain management, the garment industry, and gender.

Through a scoping study, this research will review NGO sources to demonstrate how supply chain management policies can be harnessed by brands to better protect women working within the garment industry. As part of this, the research will demonstrate how supplier development can be utilised to develop the capacity of suppliers to enhance gender equality within their supply chains.

3.4.2 Sustainable Supplier Development

Firms are facing increasing pressure to adopt socially sustainable supply chain practices to fulfil the requirements of their stakeholders (Yawar and Seuring, 2018). In order to do so, buyers must engage and collaborate with suppliers to bolster their capacity to tackle social issues within supply chains (Busse et al., 2016, Klassen and Vereecke, 2012). However, Yawar and Seuring (2018) highlighted that the supplier development literature is still lacking in exploring issues such as human and labour rights, poverty alleviation, and gender. This paper therefore contributes by focusing on how supplier development can be used to achieve greater gender equality within the supply chains of the garment industry.

The majority of the supplier development literature focuses on environmental issues (Lui, 2017; Dou et al., 2014; Fu et al., 2012; Lo et al., 2018), however literature on social sustainability is growing within the field (Yawar and Seuring, 2018). Supplier development here refers to 'any activity undertaken by buying firms to improve supplier performance and/or supplier capabilities, in order to meet the buying firms' short- and/or long-term supply needs.' (Krause et al., 2000). Supplier development can therefore be

employed as an effective approach to achieving greater social sustainability (Yawar and Seuring, 2018) and to creating competitive advantage (Jia et al., 2021). It has been demonstrated as an effective mechanism in bolstering the competitive advantage of firms in several ways (Li, 2012). These include reduced risk within supply chains (Yawar and Seuring, 2018), improved quality, increased productivity, enhanced technological capabilities, fewer accidents in the workplace, fewer disruptions, and higher worker motivation within factories (Wagner, Morris, Moon, 2019; Aqarwal and Sengupta, 2013; Pagell et al., 2010). Supplier development achieves these outcomes partly as firms invest in and develop the capacity of suppliers, resulting in supplier economic performance improvements, which in turn also improves their social performance (Yawar and Seuring, 2018). Overall, buyers who work more closely and collaboratively with their suppliers achieve better outcomes and competitive advantage (Li, 2012).

Supplier development has been demonstrated as an effective tool within OSCM to achieve social sustainability (Yawar and Seuring, 2018; Jia et al. 2023; Mani, 2018; Bai, 2022). Bai (2022) highlighted the scarcity of literature on sustainable supplier development (SSD) but indicated interest in the area is noticeable within academic literature and practice. Jia et al. (2023) outlined an increase in interest in SSD practices as a means of achieving competitive advantage and discussed the related areas of sustainability-oriented supplier collaboration and sustainability-oriented supplier assessment. This breaks SSD down further into activities focused on monitoring compliance and developing collaborative relationships between buyers and suppliers for greater sustainability.

The aforementioned subcategories are similar to those outlined by Blonska (2013), i.e., sustainability-oriented supplier assessment and supplier governance are similar

ideas in that they focus on the collection of information from the supplier by the buyer and include setting goals and evaluating suppliers. However, the idea of capability development also encapsulates the actions and investments of buyers into suppliers to develop their capacity. This may include "(onsite) training to suppliers, offering technical and quality expertise and advice, site visits or personnel exchanges between the supplier's and the buyer's facilities, involvement in the buyer's new product design and development, and information sharing" (Blonska, 2013. Pg2). Therefore, this research explores how SSD can be used by buyers to develop the capacity of suppliers, allowing suppliers to improve their social sustainability efforts, including gender equality.

3.4.3 The Role of Non-Traditional Supply Chain Actors

To achieve success in SSCM, buyer firms must recognise the potential contributions of non-traditional supply chain actors, such as NGOs, rather than perceiving them as adversaries (Pagell and Wu, 2009). Indeed, research suggests that stakeholders, including NGOs, can contribute to policy development, supply chain monitoring and evaluation and identifying key areas of risk and improvements (Busse at al., 2017). NGOs are also uniquely positioned to enhance social sustainability within supply chains and in the surrounding communities compared to for-profit firms such as buyers (Rodrigues et al., 2016). Therefore, the role they play within social sustainability should be investigated further.

This study will consider and explore the role that non-traditional supply chain actors and multi-stakeholder initiatives can play in achieving sustainable supplier development. This responds to Jia et al.'s (2023) calls for further research into the role that non-traditional actors can play. Additionally, Lee et al. (2017) asserted the need for

further research into the role of stakeholders in supplier development as well as how stakeholder engagement can drive social responsibility and sustainability within supply chains. Traditional approaches have prioritised the interest of buying firms, neglecting the needs of the supplier as a key stakeholder (Choi and Wong, 2006). Supplier development capability is strengthened by stakeholder collaboration, which prioritises relationship building, communication, and collaboration with suppliers (Choi and Wong, 2006). This approach can lead to improved supplier performance, enhanced supplier satisfaction, and greater innovation and competitiveness for both the buyer and supplier (Choi, and Wong, 2006; Swink and Hergarty, 2019; Cao and Zhang, 2011).

As highlighted by academics, there is a gap within the academic literature on gender and supply chains; therefore, this study explores more practice-oriented literature provided by NGOs – a type of non-traditional supply chain actor. NGOs may have greater access to female workers within the garment industry than academics and may have less restrictions on what and how they publish. Academic literature has begun to outline key issues, such as sexual violence (Islam et al., 2022; Chua, 2022) and low wages (Hossain et al., 2013); however, there remains limited understanding of the issues faced by women working within the garment industry or how they can be addressed. It is therefore argued that a study of the NGO literature will help to develop this understanding.

This research considered many areas of investigation, including the involvement of national regulatory frameworks on improving supply chain social sustainability. However, through the literature review and scoping of the subject, national regulatory frameworks were often discussed as ineffective at dealing with these issues, in part because many countries do not currently have robust frameworks or do not have effective mechanisms for enforcement and accountability. Some countries have been

criticised as not being incentivised to make sufficient changes within their garment industries as they rely too much on the industry for their GDP. Others are credited as having tried but often regulatory enforcement just encourages the exploitation of loopholes. For example, within the action research project, an interviewee identified that a country in which they were operating imposed a limit on the number of hours workers could work within a factory in an effort to address excessive overtime. However, as this failed to address the poor pay of workers and their needs, workers simply took up work in a second factory to circumvent the national laws and continue to earn enough to support themselves. NGOs however take into consideration national frameworks as well as international best practices and can offer a more holistic avenue of study. Additionally, NGOs often work directly with women workers themselves, housing experts in various fields and bringing together this expertise on both a national on international level.

This study maps out the current literature and guidance from NGOs intended to promote and support gender equality in the supply chains of the garment industry. NGOs can play a crucial role in the instigation and design of supplier development objectives (Liu et al., 2018). They can act as facilitators, playing a key role in the engagement, implementation, and monitoring of supplier development (Liu et al., 2018). The key role that NGOs can play within supplier development points to the need to study their work in promoting and supporting gender equality within supply chains. Therefore, studying their work may highlight novel areas of focus (Rodriguez at al., 2016), identify key challenges and barriers to gender equality within supply chains, as well as recommend improvements and strategies that firms can adopt to advance gender equality within their supply chains.

The following research questions will be used to guide the study:

RQ 1: What issues facing women working within the garment industry are identified by NGOs?

RQ 2: What are the current policies and initiatives being recommended by NGOs to promote gender equality through supplier development in order to protect the rights of women working within the garment industry?

Overall, this study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the current issues facing women working within the supply chains of the garment industry, as well as the current policies and initiatives recommended to tackle these issues. The scoping study method, as described in the next section, is suitable for collating grey literature, allowing for the collection of publications and information from NGOs, including due diligence, policy recommendations, and toolkits to promote and support gender equality within supply chains.

3.5 Research Method

This study has mapped out the relevant grey literature relating to guidance on achieving gender equality in the garment industry, which is often known under the umbrella term of gender due diligence. This study considered sources from NGOs, including reports, toolkits, and practical guides as well as the websites of NGOs. This study fulfils three of the four main motivations for conducting a scoping study, as identified by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), justifying this as an appropriate methodology: (i) to examine the extent, range, and nature of research activity, (ii) to summarise and disseminate research findings, and (iii) to identify research gaps in existing literature.

A scoping study methodology is commonly used to map out the literature within a field and can be conducted as a standalone project, especially in complex areas that have not been reviewed comprehensively before (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Mays et al., 2001). This is one of the key motivations for the use of a scoping study rather than a systematic literature review (SLR). Although the two approaches are similar, a scoping study differs from an SLR in several ways. SLRs predominantly utilise a clearly defined, narrow research question, retrieving studies that fit a specific pre-selected study design and have been evaluated for quality. On the other hand, scoping studies seek to understand a much broader topic, utilising broader research questions, and can include a wide variety of study designs as well as being less concerned with evaluating publication quality (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). NGOs generally do not publish academic articles in peer-reviewed journals and often the quality of the study is not indicated; therefore, an SLR would have been too rigid. In contrast, a scoping study allowed for the breadth and flexibility of retrieving a wide range of grey literature on a broad topic published by NGOs.

To achieve its aims, this study followed the framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and adapted it for grey literature in accordance with Godin's (2005) guidance. The three stages implemented are outlined in Figure 3.1. This paper focuses on NGO guidance aimed at brands and their supply chains; the unit of analysis is therefore operations and policies within garment brands and their supply chains.

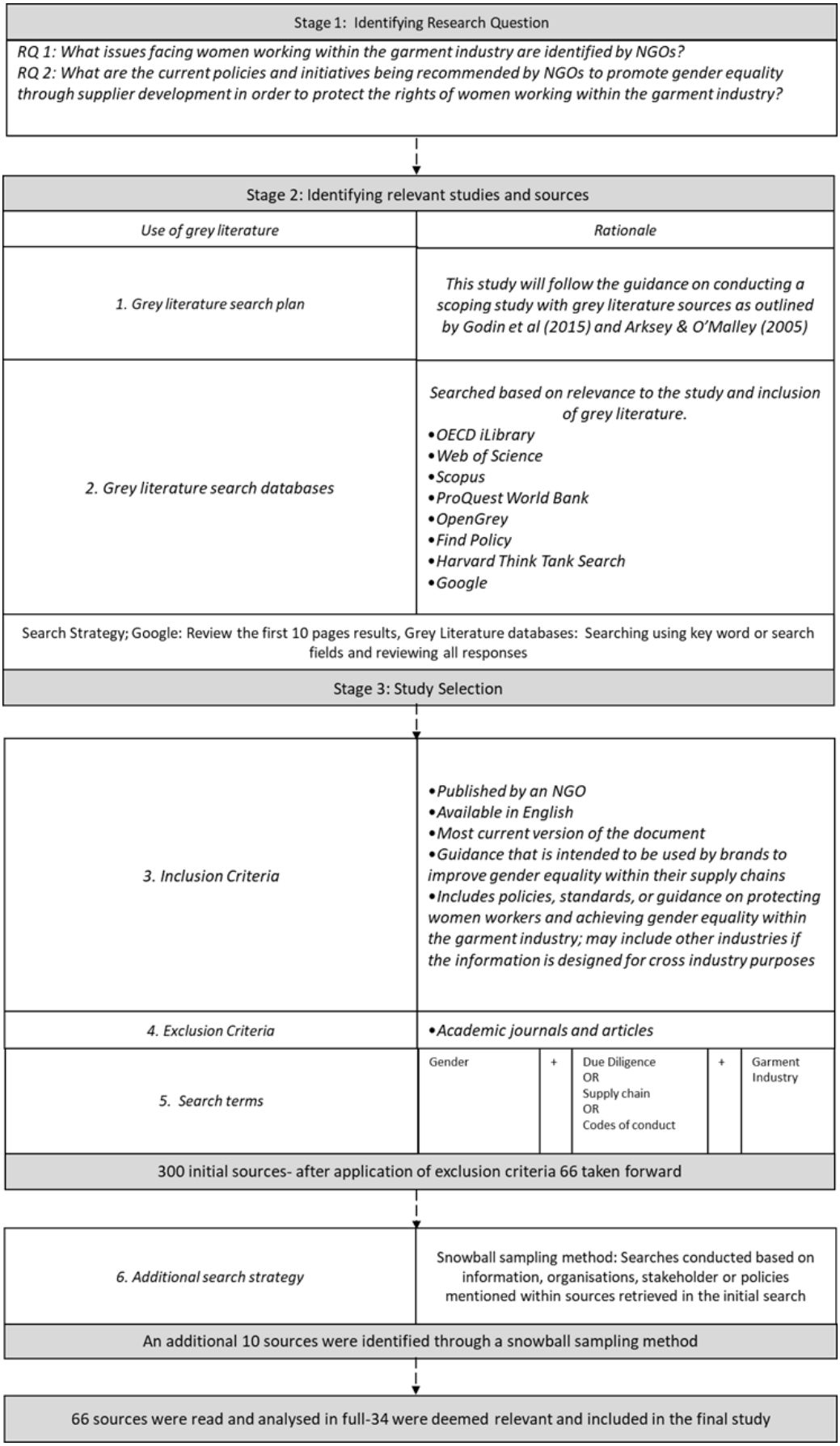


Figure 3. 1 The Three-Stage Scoping Study Process

3.5.1 Search Process

Figure 3.1, Stage 1 outlines the first stage of the research process, i.e., developing research questions 1 and 2 to guide the research. Next, the study employed Google search, as well as searching through a list of databases listed on the university online library, to retrieve all relevant sources. From this list of databases, the following were deemed relevant and included within the study: OECD iLibrary, Web of Science, Scopus, and ProQuest. Further, a Google search for 'Grey literature databases' was conducted, leading to the inclusion of World Bank, OpenGrey, Find Policy, and Harvard Think Tank Search, as outlined in Figure 3.1, Stage 2. Grey literature databases were reviewed to ensure that the Google searches had not missed any pertinent sources. The completeness of the Google searches was confirmed as the grey literature databases retrieved no additional relevant results.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed iteratively based on the research questions and aims. The sources were reviewed by examining the title and short text offered below the title. The data retrieval was conducted between November 4th and November 11th, 2022. The search terms used for searches across all platforms are included in Figure 3.1, Stage 3. Initially, additional search terms were considered, such as 'apparel industry' in addition to 'garment industry' and 'women' in addition to 'gender'. However, the chosen search terms produced a large volume of returned results, including information and sources retrieved using the other search terms; therefore, the search terms outlined in Figure 3.1 were considered broad enough to capture a wide variety of information.

Godin (2005) highlights the impossibility of reviewing all Google results, and to rely on the ability of Google to bring the most relevant results to the top of the search; therefore,

this study reviewed the first 10 pages of Google results following each search. Each search therefore produced approximately 100 results, 10 per page over 10 pages. Additionally, the level of repetition and irrelevant information produced towards the end of each 10-page search was very high, meaning that continuing to search through further pages would not have been advantageous. Three searches were conducted on Google using the search terms outlined in Figure 3.1, equating to approximately 300 results.

All returned sources were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and were reviewed for relevance and duplication. Those deemed relevant were indicated as such on the spreadsheet and bookmarked. Some information was not presented on the website or PDF initially provided by the Google search and was only accessible via separate links and PDFs included in the initial result; these were also recorded. Due to the lack of abstracts presented with Google search results, relevance was evaluated by reviewing the title and then an initial scan of the whole source to establish its adherence to the inclusion criteria outlined in Figure 3.1. The inclusion criteria remained broad to capture a wide range of information, but it was deemed essential that sources focused on programs and policies aimed at achieving greater gender equality within supply chains.

Many search results were unrelated to the topics of gender due diligence and gender equality within the garment industry in a way that made them irrelevant to the study, for example, by being related to public relations and press releases. On the other hand, there was a range of sources on gender due diligence and gender equality but which were not within the garment industry specifically. At this stage the inclusion criteria were adjusted to allow for sources of information that covered gender due diligence within other industries, that could be usefully applied to all industries. From the 300 Google

results, 66 were deemed relevant and taken forward for analysis based on the process outlined above and within Figure 3.1.

A manual snowball search of the relevant sources for any additional relevant sources or information led to the addition of 10 further sources. This brought the total sources taken forward to full text analysis to 76. These 76 were read in detail and analysed in full to determine their relevance. Some sources covered the relevant topics of gender and the garment industry; however, they did not focus on discussing the key challenges, policies or practices aimed at achieving greater gender equality within supply chains, and were therefore discarded. Following this analysis, 34 sources were included in the final study and are outlined in Table 3.1.

Number	Title	Author
1	We mean business: protecting womens rights in global supply chains	ActionAid
2	Amfori - Social Dialogue Handbook	Amfori
3	Guidelines: Apparel Industry Responses to Violence and Harassment in the Workplace	Asia Garment Hub
4	Gender Equality in the Global Garment Industry - Better Work	Better Work
5	Gender equality in social auditing guidance	BSR
6	Making Women Workers Count	BSR
7	The Gender Data Impact Tool	BSR
8	Gender Equality in Codes of Conduct Guidance | Reports - BSR	BSR
9	Empowering female workers in the apparel industry	BSR
10	Gender Equality is everyone's business	Business Fights Poverty
11	How Business Can Tackle Gender Based Violence In The World Of Work A Toolkit For Action	Business Fights Poverty
12	Guidelines: apparel industry response to violence and harassment in the workplace	CARE International
13	I know I cannot quit.' The Prevalence and Productivity Cost of (pg 49 onwards)	CARE international
14	Wages and Gender-based Violence	Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC)
15	Will women workers benefit from living wages? A gender-sensitive approach to living wage benchmarking in global garment and footwear supply chains	Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC)
16	Made by Women	Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC)
17	Base Code Guidance (B)	ETI
18	Gender Equality Policy	Fair Wear Foundation
19	A gender responsive human rights due diligence tool	Girls Advocacy Alliance
20	Gender Based Violence in the HandM Garment Supply Chain	Global Labour Justice
21	What works? Prevent and responding to sexual harassment in the workplace	Helen Campbell and Suzi Chinnery (CARE international)
22	Textile, clothing, and footwear manufacturing sector tools	ICRW
23	Moving the needle: Gender equality and decent work in Asia's garment sector Regional Road Map	ILO
24	Action-oriented research on gender equality and the working (Section 10)	ILO

25	Chapter 3: GBVH in the garment and textile sector	Industrial union.org
26	GENDER EQUALITY AT WORK PLACE FOR IMPROVING	Multi stakeholder initiative-Tamil Nadu (MSI-TN)
27	OECD Due Diligence guidance for responsible supply chains in the garment and footwear industry	OECD
28	Supply Chain Governance	Perspective
29	Gender Equality - Shift Project (Section5)	Shift
30	Guide: Assessing Gender Non Discrimination Management ...	Social accountability international
31	Addressing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH	Social Development Direct
32	Womens Empowerment Principles	UN Womens
33	Gender equality in supply chains	Virke
34	Gender responsive procurement	Womens Empowerment Principles

Table 3.1 Sources Retrieved from Scoping Study Search

3.5.2 Analysis of Sources

To ensure consistency in the analysis, a codebook was developed based on the research questions and themes emerging from the literature, which were developed iteratively as the analysis of the sources progressed. The final codes were organised into themes and sub-themes, which were used to address the research question. These themes are presented in two main groups, firstly the 'Key Challenges' faced by women within the garment industry and secondly the recommendations to tackle these challenges.

The key challenges were broken down into 24 individual topics. Meanwhile, the recommendations were broken down into 4 sub-themes, based on the aim or subject of the recommendation. The subthemes are as follows, with the number of individual topics discussed within each one indicated in brackets: Embedding gender equality into business practices (6), Sustainability-orientated collaboration (7), Sustainability-

orientated suppler assessments (8), and Communication and disclosure to achieve gender equality (6). Further detail of these is outlined in Section 3.6.

3.6 Results

The following section discusses the results of the scoping study. These are presented in two main sections. The first outlines the identified challenges faced by women working within the garment industry (Section 3.6.1. The second section provides an overview of the policies and recommendations provided by NGOs to tackle these challenges and implement an effective gender due diligence program (Section 3.6.2).

3.6.1 Key Challenges Faced by Women In The Garment Industry

This research has found 24 key topics from the challenges facing women working within the supply chains of the garment industry. These 24 topics are outlined in Table 3.2, column 1. Table 3.2, column 2 indicates the frequency with which each topic occurs out of the 34 sources used within the study. The topics covered in Table 3.2 are presented according to this frequency. For example, a gender pay gap is discussed within 14 of the 34 sources. Column 3 refers to how many of the 34 sources provide policy recommendations for the area; for example, 9 of the 34 sources provide policy recommendations for addressing the gender pay gap. Column 4 refers to the number of individual policy recommendations for a given topic (potentially multiple from one source), whereas column 5 indicates the number of different policies by taking into consideration the duplication of policies across different sources. Using the gender pay gap as an example, within the 9 sources that provide policy recommendations, 12 individual policy recommendations are made between the 9 sources, however when

reviewed, these are only 7 different policies, as some are repeated. Finally, column 6 provides an example of the issues taken directly from the source.

Topic	Number of sources discussing the topic	Number of sources containing policies	Number of policies per topic	Number of different policies	Example
Sexual and gender-based violence (GBV)	31	31	155	84	"The impact of violence and harassment on individual health and well-being is significant - for those experiencing it and those witnessing it. Violence and harassment have serious business implications, with impacts on productivity, employee turnover and absenteeism, business and industry reputation and has the potential to result in financial loss" (CARE international)
Inadequate grievance mechanisms	23	23	90	36	"... the absence of reported grievances may not necessarily imply that no violations are occurring but rather that workers do not trust the effectiveness of the grievance mechanism in place and fear reporting the issues" (BSR) "there is strong evidence to suggest that employees often perceive grievance processes to be: adversarial and hostile (Marshall 2005; Vijayasiri 2008); lacking confidentiality (Marshall 2005); risky in terms of isolation or reprisal from the workgroup (Bowen and Blackmon 2003; Vijayasiri 2008); and likely to fall on deaf ears (Harlos 2001)." (CARE international)
Lack of women in leadership	22	22	37	16	"women's voice and representation are to date largely absent from relevant decision-making and social dialogue processes. This is unsurprising, in light of the already prevalent underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles within trade unions, employers' organisations, factory management and other sector institutions." (ILO)

Poor health and safety	17	7	14	10	“Women face more health and safety risks than men. They often lack access to safety training, personal protective equipment, clean toilets, safe drinking water, etc. When harassed or violated it is also hard for women to get medical and psychological support.” (Girls Advocacy Alliance)
Inaccessible collective action	16	11	17	8	“Gender-based blindness or discrimination: at the workplace where women are either not aware or informed of their rights or are not reachable by their representatives (intentionally or unintentionally, e.g., trade unions often fail to recruit non-permanent workers who are often female); or at trade unions and committees, that may not take appropriate measures to integrate, include, and represent women and their specific needs. It is worth noting that the representatives are often men, and that men dominate leadership positions.” (BSR)
Gender pay gap	14	9	12	7	“Various studies report that there are differential economic gains for women and men working in the lower tiers of the T and A [Textile and apparel] manufacturing sector. Although factors such as education can be attributed to the pay gap, the inherent discrimination against women is also a major factor contributing to this pay gap.” (Tamil Nadu)
Unpaid domestic labour	14	11	21	11	“Without effective and adequately resourced policies and measures to address the unequal distribution of unpaid care within the household, women will face ongoing barriers to their full and equal participation at all levels of the sector.” (ILO)
Hiring discriminatio n	14	10	26	14	“There have been cases in some companies where women have had to take pregnancy tests in order to be recruited – migrant workers in particular can be subjected to mandatory pregnancy testing before they leave their home country, as well as testing as a condition for continued employment.” (ETI)
Long hours and overtime	14	5	9	7	“Workers sometimes have little choice but to accept overtime, and overtime is often requested at the last minute. This may put women workers in particular in difficult situations where they are subjected to

					verbal, physical, or even sexual abuse. It may also add stress as they try to balance their jobs with their caregiving and home duties. Overtime also raises security issues for women because traveling to and from work very early in the day or late in the evening may put them at risk of abuse and violence outside of the workplace" (BSR)
Reproductive and pregnancy health, maternity and breastfeeding	13	13	37	24	"it was also reported by women working in some Indian supplier factories that they were fired from their jobs during their pregnancy and permanent workers were forced to take leaves without pay for the period of their pregnancy." (Tamil Nadu)
Low wages	13	8	13	6	"Poverty wages place women in such drastic economic dependence that in many cases they are forced to endure other forms of exploitation and violence for both themselves and their children, including the risk of sexual exploitation as well as of child labour and trafficking. Economic exploitation leads to malnutrition, overwork and exhaustion which have adverse effects on the health of women (including maternal mortality) and their children" (CCC)
Inadequate contracts	13	6	7	4	"many of the first opportunities outside of domestic responsibilities that women encounter are informal or home-based roles, which often do not come with formal employment contracts. Without contracts, workers are vulnerable to poorer working conditions, including long hours, unstable work, and increased risk of violence and harassment, as well as mistreatment during wage negotiations, lack of access to benefits, and exclusion from union representation" (BSR)
Restraints on women's agency	7	4	8	6	"… women do not always have full agency over the income that they earn, or control over (their own) financial resources more generally…. Women also face added pressures from other family members on how money is saved or spent." (Girls Advocacy Alliance)

Unsafe dormitories and poor living conditions	6	4	9	7	“Risk factors that increase the potential for GBVH [GBV and harassment] in the manufacturing sector include: Worker accommodation that is overcrowded, without separate, lockable sanitary facilities or living areas.” (Social Development Direct)
Unfavourable buyer practices	5	5	10	9	“64% of the female workers interviewed report that they are under enormous production pressure, and a third have been threatened or beaten by superiors due to production pressure. Supervisors and management often threaten to dismiss or withhold bonuses if certain targets are not met. This confirms the results of previous studies, which show that the purchasing practices of international brand companies directly contribute to violence and harassment in textile factories” (CCC)
Lack of financial literacy	5	5	7	3	“These jobs oblige women to work more hours for less pay. In addition to these issues, a lack of financial literacy, which is common amongst women workers, facilitates supplier mis-payments.” (BSR)
Domestic abuse	5	2	2	2	“Garment and textile workers also report that they experience high levels of domestic violence. In one study one-third (34%) of garment workers reported physical domestic violence and almost half (43%) sexual domestic violence in the past year” (Industrial Union.org)
Lack of Social Services and Benefits	5	1	1	1	“Some employers use precarious work arrangements to evade obligations related to social security provision, pensions, maternity and family leave, overtime payments, and vacation and holidays, as well occupational health and safety.” (BSR)
Harmful supervisor pay structures	3	2	2	1	“Risk factors that increase the potential for GBVH in the manufacturing sector include: incentive structures which allow individual supervisors to assess workers' productivity and performance. These can create opportunities for sexual harassment and exploitation, including through the misuse of performance-related pay, bonus schemes and piece-rate systems.” (Social Development Direct)

Verbal Abuse	17	0	0	0	“Female workers are especially vulnerable to harassment and violence—ranging from verbal abuse and sexual harassment to forced labour, assault, and rape—at work and at home.” (BSR)
Humiliation	3	0	0	0	“The study found that many women workers were abused by male line supervisors. This includes being asked for sexual favours in exchange for leave approval and sexualized humiliation and verbal insults to push them to do more work.” (BSR)
Homeworking conditions	3	0	0	0	“Certain indicators cover particularly vulnerable groups, including migrants, workers paid by time or piece rate and informal/homeworkers. These groups may face intersecting inequalities based on gender, age, or contract vulnerability.” (BSR)
Forced labour	4	0	0	0	“gender discrimination can be the root cause of non-compliance related to other principles such as employment relationship, wages, working hours, and forced labour” (BSR)

Table 3.2 Challenges Faced by Women Workers

Table 3.2 provides a high-level understanding of the challenges faced by women working within the garment industry and provides an insight into how well, or not, each topic is focused on and covered by recommendations. This builds upon the understanding of gender inequality within the garment industry within the field of SSCM. Outlined within the literature review were 8 SSCM issues within the garment industry discussed in academic literature. The information provided by NGOs has provided an expanded list of 24 challenges faced by women within the garment industry. The additional 16 issues from the NGO literature have been identified by an asterisk within Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 highlights that gender-based violence (GBV) is a very well covered topic, being discussed in almost all sources (31 out of 34) and with 84 different policy recommendations. It is one of only three topics discussed in more than half of the sources. This shows that GBV is not only well covered with regards to how many NGOs have been discussing it, but it has also provoked a wide range of recommendations, suggesting that thought in this area is well developed. Another of the topics discussed in over half of the sources is grievance mechanisms, which are heavily linked to GBV. This demonstrates a wide awareness of the issue, suggesting great attention is being dedicated to this area. However, this could possibly suggest, considering the persistence of the issue, that current recommendations are ineffective or not being well implemented.

The final topic to be discussed in more than half of the sources was women in leadership (or a lack thereof), as discussed in 22 of the 34 sources. This area is well covered however, it does not have anywhere near as many policy recommendations as GBV or grievance mechanisms, with 16 different recommendations over 22 sources

referring to the issue. Many of the recommendations are focused on the core idea of providing training to women on both hard and soft skills and developing a commitment to promoting women into leadership positions. For example, the following recommendation was provided by the ICRW (2022): *"Invest in supervisory skills training specifically focused on equipping female operators with skills to become group or team leaders, supervisors, or managers. Training should include technical skills required to supervise a production line (e.g., production processes, solving bottlenecks, line balancing, etc.), soft skills (e.g., on leadership, communication, etc.), and business knowledge (e.g., on human resources management, labour rights, etc.)"*. This suggests that, despite this topic being widely recognised, perhaps more work is needed on developing recommendations for getting women into leadership. On the other hand, this may suggest that there is consensus within the industry on how to tackle this topic. A sense of coherence and agreed upon direction to tackle these issues indicates a shared direction within the industry. Coherent policy recommendations and objectives working for women within the garment industry are more likely to be successful than competing and different objectives.

Seven topics are discussed in less than a third of the sources. It can be concluded that these topics are either under researched or are not considered a priority compared to the other key challenges. These topics include, women's agency, dormitories and living conditions, domestic abuse, financial literacy, unfavourable buyer practices, social services and benefits, and supervisor pay structure. The topic of supervisor pay structure is only covered within three sources, leading to only one key policy recommendation. This is surprising as the IFC (2022) outlines that there is a correlation between how male supervisors are paid and violence towards women workers. Some pay structures can be

seen to incentivise violence against women, deploying violence as a management tool to force women to work faster to meet quotas (IFC, 2022). This, therefore, could be considered a key area of discussion, however, it is covered in few sources. Perhaps this is due to a lack of research into the area, or a lack of understanding in identifying and tackling the issue, as the policy recommendations for this area are brief, highlighting the need to ensure supervisor pay structures and bonuses are not set up in a way that incentivises violence, without providing substantial detail on how to achieve this.

3.6.1.1 Applying a Gender Lens to Workers' Issues

The NGO information does well to highlight the gendered nature of seemingly gender-neutral issues. There are several key challenges which could appear initially to affect all workers regardless of gender, such as poor health and safety, inaccessible collective action, long hours and overtime, low wages, inadequate contracts, unsafe dormitories and poor living conditions, unfavourable buyer practices, lack of financial literacy, lack of social service and benefits as well as supervisor pay structures. However, NGOs successfully highlight the gendered nature of these key challenges by uncovering the ways in which they uniquely impact women. For example, within the Clean Clothes Campaign (2019), the report uses data to support its policy recommendations. Here they outline a study by the OECD demonstrating why women are unequally impacted by long hours and excessive overtime at work. Over a study of four countries, China, India, Turkey, and Italy, the OECD reports that women in all these countries spend more minutes per week engaging in unpaid domestic labour than men. Alongside this, in all four countries, women spend more combined minutes in both paid and unpaid work per week than men. For example, a woman in India will spend on average 352 minutes per

week engaging in unpaid domestic labour, compared to 52 minutes for men in India (CCC, 2019).

Alongside an expanded understanding of the issues themselves, NGOs have gone further to provide recommendations and details on how brands can address these challenges, whereas academic literature often stops short of doing so. These recommendations are outlined in the following section.

3.6.2 Key Recommendations for Enhancing Gender Equality

The incorporation of gender equality into policies and practice is a critical component of SSCM. As outlined in the 'Key Challenges' section, women workers within the garment industry are currently facing a multitude of challenges and human rights abuses. This reasserts the need for the 'gender gap' within SSCM to be addressed. To achieve this, business values, plans and organisational culture should reflect gender equality values and create a shift away from policies and decisions that increase the risk of gender inequality in supply chains. This section outlines how to achieve this, which positions this study as helping to address the gap in the SSCM literature.

The following section is not broken up into 24 corresponding key topic areas to address the 24 key challenges outlined in the previous section. Instead, it is broken down into four sub-themes that were developed iteratively through the data analysis process. This is because, although some NGOs provided recommendations for directly addressing specific issues, most emphasised the need for gender equality to be embedded into overarching business practices, which transcend specific issues. That is, overall, the four groups outline how brands need to change their business practices to

better achieve gender equality within their supply chains, focussing on overarching action rather than individual issues.

These four sub-themes are:

1. Embedding gender equality into buyer business practices: how best to embed policies into focal firms' practices and supply chains.
2. Sustainability-oriented collaboration: how to better collaborate with traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors.
3. Sustainability-oriented supplier assessments: how best to monitor and review policies within supply chains.
4. Communication and disclosure to achieve gender equality: how best to communicate policies to support implementation and promote accountability.

Each sub-theme has a corresponding table outlining the topics covered within each group, a summary of the policies within each topic, an example provided directly from a source, and the corresponding number of policies taken from the sources for each topic. These four sub-themes are not independent of each other; they are interlinked and run in parallel to create a holistic approach to achieving gender equality within supply chains. A summary of the main policies and recommendations has been provided instead of a list of all the individual policies and recommendations due to the volume of policies and recommendations. Overlapping and duplicate policies have been consolidated and summarised.

The following sections present a comprehensive set of policy recommendations intended to cultivate gender equality and women's empowerment within the supply

chains of the garment industry. These recommendations are intended to be employed throughout all tiers of management and organisations to create an effective framework to achieve gender equality. It is essential for firms to embed gender equality into all business operations and objectives, including engaging senior leadership, engaging suppliers, transforming internal culture, and allocating sufficient resources to achieve this. The recommendations demonstrate the need for firms to go further than pilot and short projects and embed gender into performance assessment, grievance mechanisms, communication, due diligence processes, and supplier relationships.

3.6.2.1 Embedding Gender Equality into Buyer Business Practices

Embedding gender equality into business practices focuses on Integrating policies and practices into the everyday operations of a buyer or brand. These are therefore within the direct control of the buyer themselves, as opposed to certain supply chain programs that occur within their supply chains or supplier factories. Table 3.3 provides an overview of the sub-themes within this category, with examples provided directly from the NGOs. The last column outlines how many policies are recommended for each sub-theme. Table 3.3 also outlines that there were 149 individual policy recommendations for this area, which is the most of any sub-theme. This could indicate NGOs believe that buyers and brands need to make significant changes to their business practices to achieve greater gender equality within their supply chains. The volume of sources found indicates that NGOs have identified many areas in which buyers could act to achieve greater gender equality.

Embedding Gender Equality into Business Practices and supply chain's sub-theme **Number of policies: 149**	**Recommendation**	**Examples**	**Number of recommendations per sub-theme**
Holding managers publicly accountable for gender equality	Managers at all levels should be held accountable for achieving gender equality by incorporating key performance indicators into performance plans and assessments for top executives	"Senior leadership are accountable for performance against key performance indicators (KPIs) for prevention and remediation of GBVH"- CARE International	17
Embedding Gender Equality into policies and practices	Policies such as codes of conduct and grievance mechanisms must gender sensitive and be clearly communicated to suppliers as minimum standards requirements	"Set minimum expectations of CSR/compliance requirements for production of orders"	19
	Gender equality and human rights risk-based due diligence must be embedded into decision making processes and practices of the buyer firm and must be completely internally aligned, in order to support the creation of an organisational culture which promotes gender equality, tie these principles into business and management goals and targets. Internal working groups may be set up in order to facilitate this	"Embed gender issues into policies and management systems- A risk-based due diligence process should be applied to identify the most material risk related to potential women's rights violations and gender inequality issues in the company's own operations and supply chain"	3
	Make training on gender equality mandatory and part of the minimum requirements requested from suppliers, for all workers (men and women,	"Train all staff in the impacts of (gender-based) abuse, threats, intimidation, or assault, and the consequences perpetrators will face"	9

	managers and supervisors) incentivise management to promote attendance		
	Review and ensure all internal processes and policies and require all supplier policies and processes including HR and recruitment are in line with gender-equality strategies and targets, including pay structures (equal-pay for equal work) and support of collective action	"Revise employment and recruitment policies and processes in line with gender strategy and priorities; support unions to enable collective action and inclusive approach; review pay structures to eliminate gender pay gaps."	5
Allocate appropriate resources to achieving gender equality	Continuously Adequate resource, attention and priority must be provided to gender and human rights due diligence	"Invest resources in commitments to gender equality and recognise that it is a continuous journey"	4
	Adequate resources must be provided to build on and develop the capacity of supplier to better support them to achieve gender equality and womens empowerment within supply chains, including funding, systems of operation and supporting training for all workers	"Fund training for skill building/ capacity development"	26
Prove workers the time and space to come together and support each other	Create and support the establishment of worker committees and groups to support gender equality internally and within factories	"To drive the internal work, it is advisable to have at least one person in the organisation who has some gender expertise and understanding. This can be complemented with a gender task force or working group who would be responsible for policy development and implementation across the organisation. Where possible, companies should work with their trade union representatives to shape the action plan."	32

	Establish women mentorship programs internally and throughout the supply chains in order to support the embedding if gender equality policies and practices within buyer firms and supplier firms	"Set up women mentorship programmes to develop leadership skills and support career progression and ambition"	3
Tackle underlying causes of gender equality	Buyers must contribute to tackle both specific issues and underlying causes of gender equality	"businesses should go beyond a 'do no harm' approach, that is preventing and mitigating, to actively advance the rights of women with gender transformative measures – that is, measures that transform underlying power structures and relations, in the form of affirmative action to advance gender equality and women's rights. This includes creating an enabling environment for women to have access to all opportunities on an equitable basis with men"	8
Buyer practices must not exacerbate gender inequality and GBV	Buyers must engage with gender-responsive procurement and eliminate buyer practices which heighten the risk to women workers by place accurate timely, stable orders, providing an appropriate tech package, ordering directly from suppliers, pay deposits on large orders and volume orders in full on shipment and providing fair pay enabling suppliers to provide a living wage and within a volume within the capacity of the supplier to prevent excessive overtime.	"Pay deposits on volume orders. Pay for volume orders in full on or before shipment"	11
	Provide incentives for compliance and deter poor practices such as long-term business and premium prices	"Pay premium prices and provide other incentives for compliant production"	2

	Develop long term relationships with suppliers to provide financial stability and build better relationships with suppliers in order to develop and encourage compliance	“Building strong and long-term relationships By working with existing suppliers and building long-term relationships, a company can have greater influence on the supplier's working conditions. Building trust is key here. In dialogue with suppliers, women's rights and gender equality should play just as important a role as other ESG topics”	10

Table 3.3 Recommendations for Embedding Gender Equality into Business Practices

This section highlights the important role that corporate leadership, resource allocation, adequate training, gender-responsive buyer practices and accountability play in creating a culture able to facilitate gender equality, with 17 recommendations on this area. This section also highlights the need for a multi-faceted approach to achieving gender equality by constructing a holistic approach beyond pilot programs and token gestures, summarised well by CARE International as the need for *"Comprehensiveness or a 'whole-of-organisation' approach: utilising multiple strategies designed to initiate change at multiple levels within an organisation (e.g. individual, colleagues and management), and for multiple outcomes (e.g. staff knowledge and attitudes, formal policy and practices, as well as informal culture and behaviours)"* (Cambell and Chinnery, 2018).

There are eight recommendations that emphasise the need for businesses to go further and tackle these underlying factors. The range of recommendations, reflecting the complexity of both supply chains and the gender inequality within them. This research has identified the need for the proactive pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment from buyers; and with the most policy recommendations of any area, this topic is a priority according to NGOs.

Recommendations focus on the full integration of gender equality and women's empowerment into every facet of business policies and practices. This includes embedding gender equality into the organisational culture to create a shift which promotes gender equality throughout the business. To ensure the collective effectiveness, and to prevent competing policies, these must be fully aligned. In addition to this, the management and leadership of brands must be held accountable for upholding these values as they play a key role in creating organisational culture and

developing an environment for gender equality. This research has found that this can be achieved in several ways, such as; embedding gender equality into business values, establishing companywide goals, managers being held accountable for achieving gender equality against key performance indicators (KPIs) (UN Women, 2020), ensuring workplace culture is constantly monitored (Social Accountability International, 2019), creating committees trained at addressing GBV, promoting women in leadership (IFC, 2020; ICRW), and finally disseminating this within both the headquarters of the company as well as its supply chain (ETI, 2018). Additionally, as outlined here by UN Women: *"Embed values of gender equality into your business values, business plan and overall organisational culture. Establish company-wide goals and targets for gender equality and women's empowerment and measure progress through clear performance indicators. Make managers at all levels accountable for results against these goals and targets through their performance reviews"* (UN Women, 2020).

Embedding gender equality into policies and practices should include full integration into codes of conduct and other disseminated literature. This must be integrated not only into written policies but also practices, processes, and mechanisms. This includes but is not limited to internal hiring and HR processes, equal pay for equal work, and flexible working arrangements as well as the elimination of certain practices which do not support gender equality and women's empowerment, such as having individuals being subject to harassment and sexual violence at work having to sign NDAs, as outlined by Business Fights Poverty (2019): *"Ensure all policies and practices that might impact on gender equality are aligned internally, e.g. end the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) for sexual harassment cases at work to signal the seriousness with which the issue is taken and that someone in a powerful position cannot 'get away with it"*.

This may require significant organisational change. In fact, it is suggested that mandatory training should be undertaken by employees, of both buyers and suppliers, throughout all levels of the organisations and of all genders: *"Make education and training mandatory for women and men and set corresponding management targets to enable attendance to trainings."* (Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2020). With 36 policies focusing on how best to embed these policies, it is highlighted as a key area of focus by NGOs. This kind of training will ease the necessary changes and cultivate a culture which supports gender equality. Training is highly emphasised within the research with 105 recommendations discussing training on various topics, with 57 recommendations discussing training to prevent sexual and GBV and 16 on training women workers to better enable them to undertake leadership positions. Many of these recommendations around training emphasise the need for buyers to invest in training for suppliers; for example: "*Support capacity building for suppliers and workers on gender equality through training and awareness raising workshops"* (ETI, 2018). IFC (2020) highlighted the need for this training to be periodic and comprehensive so brands will increase the capacity of suppliers to better tackle sexual and GBV.

There is an emphasis on leadership creating a top-down approach to create a culture of gender equality within buyer firms. This feeds into the idea of taking a holistic approach to achieving gender equality within the supply chains. This top-down approach will need to include public commitments from leadership themselves to starting at the top and setting an example publicly, as demonstrated here: *"A strong commitment to gender equality and the tone set by corporate leadership and senior management ensures that all the stakeholders have a common understanding of the company's standpoint on*

gender and human rights, are empowered to take action where needed, and know that non-compliance is unacceptable" (Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2020).

A top-down approach is therefore an essential element of disseminating a culture of gender equality and women's empowerment throughout a supply chain, creating a culture and communicating a minimum standard. An effective mechanism to build in further accountability for leadership to achieve gender equality, is setting leadership and organisational targets to continuously measure against, as discussed within 17 recommendations. To do so, UN Women (2020) recommends embedding key performance indicators into performance assessments for senior leadership as well as suppliers. This will communicate the commitment to achieving gender equality, keep leadership on track, and make leadership accountable.

Attention must be given not only to specific issues, such as GBV, but also to underlying factors: *"Addressing structural factors: targeting structural and underlying causes of social problems for change rather than focusing only on individual behaviour or the 'symptoms' of larger problems"* (CARE International). This connects with the ideas of risk mapping within the sustainability-orientated supplier assessment section. Root cause analysis can be used to dig further into the causes and driving factors of gendered abuses. Without a focus on these underlying structures and forces, efforts to support gender equality will not be sustainable as they will only be tackling the initial issues, and the underlying issues will remain unresolved. Alongside a top-down approach by senior management, this research advises a bottom-up approach to approach gender equality holistically. Working with grassroots and local organisations on shifting patriarchal norms and beliefs which uphold gender inequality will drive sustainable change. Working

in collaboration with local and community organisations will be detailed further in the next section.

Certain buyer practices can be harmful to women workers within the garment industry. A link has been found between buyer practices that put excessive pressure on suppliers and a rise in gender-based violence (IFC, 2023). Unfavourable buyer practices can include short lead times, low pay, last minute changes to orders and providing inaccurate or untimely tech packs (CCC, 2020; IFC, 2023; Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2020; BSR, 2020). The IFC outlined that "*Engage expertise to map GBVH* [gender-based violence and harassment] *risks in the supply chain and identify areas of influence, for example around production pressures*." (IFC, 2020), thereby asserting the need for buyers to be aware of and identify areas in which their practices are currently being harmful and exacerbating gender-based violence within their supply chains.

However, recommendations relating to buyer practices only come from four sources (11 recommendations), and with over half of the recommendations coming from one source (BSR, 2021). This suggests either this area is under researched or it is not currently considered a priority for many within the industry. More research may be needed as the link between GBV and buyer practices means improved buyer practices could have a significant impact on women's lives. BSR (2021) highlighted that brands often overlook their internal practices when undertaking human rights due diligence, but buying practices can directly impact and contribute to abuses by suppliers towards women workers. The recommendations for brands on better buyer practices centre around not putting unnecessary pressure on suppliers, giving them enough time, money, and information to best fulfil orders as well as collaborating and communicating with suppliers frequently to tackle issues as and when they arise. Brands therefore should

engage in these recommendations as part of their gender-responsive procurement practices, as outlined by the Women's Empowerment Principles (2020).

A key focus in eliminating unfavourable buyer practices comes from developing closer, long-term relationships with suppliers*: "To support suppliers in adhering to these agreements, member brands should commit to long-term relationships with suppliers (several years or more) so as to provide the financial stability and predictability needed to implement measures to address Fair Wear Code of Labour Practice violations, including gender inequality"* (Fair Wear Foundation, 2021. Pg 6). This is also key to effective supplier development. This requires strengthening collaboration and communication, as well as building trust with suppliers to allow them to open up and engage fully in supplier development activities. Buyers often carry substantial influence over suppliers meaning they can drive change within supply chains. This could be used to enhance gender equality within the industry, for example favourable action towards and providing financial incentives too compliant suppliers can help encourage these initiatives. Developing the capacity of suppliers will require an investment from both buyers and suppliers of time, resources, and personnel.

Brands must allocate adequate resources to achieve and embed gender equality into their supply chains. This could include, to, *"Establish a working group to decide how your business wants to tackle the issue in your own context. Ensure it is made up of senior staff and employees."* (Business Fights Poverty, 2019). Achieving gender equality must also be understood as an ongoing pursuit; therefore, resources must be continuously allocated and replenished where necessary. Buyers should have someone within their firms who is themselves an expert in gender-based violence and gender equality within supply chains; and worker groups and committees should be provided with adequate

time and resources to fully evaluate the firm's supply chains and make commitments towards gender equality.

Worker committees within both buyers and suppliers was covered in 32 recommendations and is clearly therefore a priority for NGOs. Staff should be encouraged to engage and be supported by leadership to signal the importance of this topic to stakeholders. All policies within codes of conduct must apply to buyers as well as suppliers. This can include initiatives such as women mentor programs to support women workers, however, with only three recommendations on this topic, further investigation is needed into whether this is as an effective idea for achieving gender equality. Resources should also be allocated directly to suppliers to develop the capacity of suppliers. In doing so, buyers are providing suppliers with the resources they require to undertake the necessary initiatives to achieve gender equality. Supplier development and the corresponding required resources can include training and education and technology, empowering stakeholders within the firms' supply chains to create a culture of gender equality. This is discussed further in the next section.

3.6.2.2 Sustainability-Orientated Collaboration

Recommendations focusing on collaboration total 39, compared to the 149 within embedding business practices. Collaborating with other traditional and non-traditional supply chains actors is a theme threaded through all other issues and topics. In summary, all efforts to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment within supply chains can be enhanced and better achieved by working with various other stakeholders. Table 3 provides further details of these stakeholders and the corresponding recommendations. This includes the number of recommendations for

each stakeholder with which to collaborate; the numbers however do not total the 39 overall recommendations because there is significant overlap within the recommendations. The number of times each stakeholder was suggested has been recorded; however, these often occurred within the same policy or recommendation, of which there were 39 in total. NGOs are by far the most discussed with 20 recommendations, followed by suppliers (14), workers (12), government (7), brands (4), and local communities (2).

Multi-stakeholder Collaboration sub-theme Number of policies:39	Recommendation	Examples	Number of recommendations per sub-theme
Collaboration with governments	Advocate and lobby for creating or strengthening national legislation where existing laws do not meet international standards and develop national gender-responsive policies and frameworks	"Advocate for creating or strengthening national legislation where existing laws do not meet international standards. For example, consider supporting national ratification campaigns for the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention." (Business Fights Poverty)	7
Collaboration with suppliers	Work and design programs with suppliers to facilitate better more sustainable gender equality programs	"Buy-in from suppliers and behaviour changes at the management level are key in enhancing the long-term impacts of initiatives that may be initiated by global brands but require sustained commitments from suppliers."	14
Collaboration with NGOs	Collaborating with various NGOs and community organisations can be beneficial for all stages of the policy process including agenda setting, policy design, implementation, and monitoring	"Consult with tripartite constituents, women's organisations, other international and national organisations to identify opportunities for improving the living conditions of rural migrant garment industry workers in areas such as food and nutrition, access to health services, including reproductive health, access to water, sanitation and energy, improving childcare and school facilities, etc."	20
Collaboration with workers	Dispute prevention, resolution and grievance mechanisms should be prioritised and	"Dispute prevention and resolution Regular communication between	7

	facilitated through developing channels for regular cooperation and communication with workers	employers and employees through social dialogue can hopefully detect issues before they escalate into a dispute. In the case where disagreement between employers and employees is unavoidable, social dialogue can serve as a platform to resolve issues peacefully; preventing any strikes that would result in loss of productivity."	
	Employees and, where possible, unions or staff representatives should participate in the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies that pertain to them	"Worker-driven standard-setting and feedback loops can capture risks and impacts in a way that traditional social policies and audit systems might not."	5
Collaboration with other brands	Work collaboratively with other brands to pool resources, knowledge and leverage to make sustainable and substantial change	"Working together towards a common goal - Cross-industry corporation Collaboration within the industry is essential. Joining forces can solve the most common problems in the textile and clothing industry. By working together and sharing best practices, companies can set more ambitious supplier requirements, especially in a competitive and price-driven industry. Fair Wear is such an example - a multi-stakeholder organisation that works with brands and industry influencers to improve labour conditions in garment factories." (Virke)	4
Collaborate with local communities	Companies should engage in community mobilisation, involving community-driven, participatory projects that engage multiple	"partnering to enable NGOs, community organisations, and business partners to	2

	stakeholders to address gender norms and deep-rooted underlying norms which contribute to gender inequality	promote women's empowerment along the supply chain"	
Collaboration with other stakeholders	Seek collaborative opportunities with other businesses, trade unions, local NGOs, donor programs, and academic institutions	"Addressing systemic gender issues with a wider range of partners, through multi-stakeholder partnerships that focus on pervasive issues that affect both the workplace and the community."	1
	Support advocacy efforts that promote gender equality and gender transformative actions, such as influencing new international standards or global campaigns via social media	"Partnerships with national stakeholders and advocacy campaign for gender responsive policies and practices"	1

Table 3.4 Recommendations for Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Buyers should collaborate with traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors throughout all stages of the policy formation and implementation process. Overall, there are 39 policies over the 34 sources, with 20 focusing on collaboration with NGOs in some capacity. There is also a focus on collaborating with as many internal and external stakeholders as possible to develop a holistic approach to achieving gender equality by drawing upon the knowledge and resources of multiple stakeholders. This includes working with stakeholders of various sizes, levels of society and purpose, such as trade unions, women's organisations and governments. This kind of vertical collaboration can target individual issues as well as broad underlying root causes, as highlighted here by the ETI: "*Partnership building across and between stakeholders at different levels – local women's organisations, trade union federations, government institutions, donors, NGOs and standards systems – are critical to bringing about sustainable, transformational changes for women workers"* (ETI, 2018).

Non-governmental organisation (NGO) is a term which can cover a multitude of organisations, which may illustrate why they are so heavily discussed and promoted within the research. It may also be important to reassert the fact that the sources used were all published by NGOs so this may make the research biased towards promoting the role of NGOs. Nonetheless, NGOs are well positioned and also vary greatly, meaning they can play a key role in all stages of the policy process, from agenda setting, to policy formation, policy implementation and monitoring. As outlined here, for example, regarding effective grievance mechanisms: *"There are clear, independent, and transparent complaints channels ensuring that all cases are handled fairly and without interference. To ensure that grievance mechanisms are perceived as legitimate, its design, revision, and monitoring should be done in consultation both internally and*

externally." (Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Meanwhile, firms are advised to: *"Adopt a workplace policy on GBV that includes the formation of Anti-Harassment Committees with external experts and support your suppliers in implementation"* (CCC, 2018). NGOs can act as excellent external experts to bolster and legitimise these activities. Indeed, NGOs, including women's organisations and trade unions, can provide independent, impartial, and external adjudication for effective grievance mechanisms.

Drawing on the resources of NGOs can bolster the capacity of buyers and suppliers. NGOs can provide key research and information to prioritise salient issues and inform the activities of brands and suppliers. Another advantage of utilising the knowledge and resources of NGOs is they often specialise, for example on workers' rights, women's health or childcare, providing brands and suppliers with access to highly specialised research and guidance. This includes examples of successful collaborations between brands and NGOs, such as the Fair Wear Foundations program, which integrated anti-harassment laws into garment factories through the implementation of anti-harassment committees (BSR, 2017).

The research regarding buyers and suppliers working more closely together to achieve gender equality, mirrored the previously outlined literature on supplier development. Supplier development often emphasises training to suppliers, with many NGOs offering their own training programs, such as the steps Better Work has undertaken to address sexual harassment in Jordan's garment industry (BSR, 2017a).

Working with and designing policies and programs with suppliers will lead to more effective policies that are adopted and adhered to by the supplier. Obtaining buy-in from suppliers early on will contribute to the long-term success of initiatives and engaging in supplier development practices will enhance the capacity of the supplier to undertake

the desired changes and policies. By providing resources, knowledge, technology, and support to suppliers they will be better able to make the changes requested by buyers and have the necessary resources to do so: *"Companies should provide adequate managements systems support to their suppliers to ensure data collection is effectively conducted and integrated into business-as-usual"* (BSR, 2018).

As outlined in Table 3.4, collaboration with governments can strengthen legal and legislative frameworks intended to protect women workers. This includes both working with governments as well as buyers leveraging their economic power to lobby against national governments. Introducing and improving legal channels to support workers is beneficial for buyers, suppliers, and workers by relieving the burden of resources on both buyers and suppliers whilst creating a larger infrastructure to support workers. However, this is a long-term strategy as legal change is slow and resource intensive. Additionally, some governments may not be incentivised to implement such changes if they believe it will impact the economic benefits of the industry and the country. However, such change could create a shift towards gender equality that exceeds the boundaries of the industry and create positive change throughout society, linking back to the previously outlined holistic approach promoted by NGOs. Nonetheless, policies promoting working with governments are limited in detail, often limited to what buyers should do but without discussing how they should do it; for example: "*Collaboration with national governments on gender responsive policy and legal frameworks*" (BSR, 2023). There are only 10 recommendations covering this topic, suggesting that work in this area is still being developed.

Buyers may be hesitant to work more closely with other brands within the industry due to competition. However, collaborating vertically within the industry with other buyers

can pool resources and knowledge as well as having a much greater and unified impact within the industry. No one brand or buyer alone can create lasting change within a whole industry. Sharing best practices and resources can therefore help to shift practices within the industry. By working together, powerful firms in the garment industry should have the influence to shift the standards across the whole industry and in *"Joining forces can solve the most common problems in the textile and clothing industry"* (Virke, 2020).

Workers are a key stakeholder within the garment industry, and it is essential to involve women workers in the development of policies aimed at protecting and benefiting them. "*Since women represent the greatest majority of garment workers, the situation of women should be urgently included in monitoring programmes to assess the spectrum of their clinical, social, and personal risks*." (Global Labour Justice, 2022). This quote highlights the emphasis from NGOs on incorporating women workers into policy development and monitoring processes, ensuring they target the most salient issues.

Women workers should also be built into the monitoring of policies and grievance mechanisms, providing a constant feedback loop where workers can challenge policy effectiveness. This will bolster the impact of grievance mechanisms, as outlined by CCC (2005): *"participatory methodologies, particularly women-only focus groups, should be used to help uncover violations that are of priority to women worker"*. Although there is an emphasis on grievance mechanisms in the sample, there is much discussion from NGOs that they are currently not completely effective at being a channel in which workers can challenge and address issues; therefore, building workers further into their design and operations can help address this. The research also outlines that brands, suppliers and workers should develop more formal and integrated communication channels, opening dialogue between these stakeholders to bring forward issues early

and create an open channel for finding solutions. In fact, the research emphasises that women workers are the most essential stakeholder to prioritise and collaborate with further to create the changes the protect and benefit them.

Many of the problems facing women workers have been attributed to systematic underlying issues, such as patriarchal culture. Tackling this requires work to be done outside of the factory within local communities. The research outlines the benefits of brands working with NGOs and local communities, including schools, local police and especially men and young boys. It is not enough to just tackle the individual issues; rather, efforts need to be targeted at tackling the underlying contributing factors to create lasting change, as emphasised by CARE International (2018). That is, a holistic and wide-reaching approach is needed. As this is obviously resource intensive, brands should do this in conjunction with local community organisations and NGOs. This helps to pool resources and make efforts better informed. For example, "*School programs and community workshops with men and boys to promote changes in social norms and behaviours that encourage violence against women and gender inequality… programs to improve women's and girls' agency. Can include other components such as safe spaces, mentoring and life skills training"*. (CARE International, 2018). These efforts will not make lead to immediate results – changing opinions and patriarchal culture will take years, probably decades, with working cross-industry essential for the success of long-term programs and efforts, leading to benefits not only for women working within the garment industry but for society as a whole (Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2020).

Brands and suppliers can also work with other non-traditional supply chain actors; for example, working closely with universities and academics can bring a new perspective to tackling challenges women workers face within the industry, utilising additional

resources and knowledge: *"Academic partnership or other approaches to build rigorous and much-needed evidence about what works to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace."* (CARE International, 2018). Moreover, bringing in an academic point of view may bring novel solutions to these challenges. This can also be efficient if brands do not have the resources to conduct research themselves. Brands should also engage in wider global campaigns, including those on social media, to mobilise resources, people, shift opinions and bring salient issues to the public and consumer (Care International, 2017).

3.6.2.3 Sustainability-Orientated Supplier Assessments

The Following eight topics within this section on Sustainability-Orientated Supplier assessment focus on gathering sufficient detailed gendered information and building in processes to support its collection. This enhances understanding of how effective a policy has been and is a critical aspect of the policy development cycle. There is a clear focus within NGO recommendations on engaging in sustainable supplier development efforts to expand supplier capacity and support the gathering of necessary data. It is also important to collaborate with traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors in order to gather data and monitor policy meaning there is overlap with other categories of recommendations. Details of these recommendations are outlined in Table 3.5.

Sustainability-orientated supplier assessments **Number of recommendations: 156**	**Recommendations**	**Examples**	**Number of policy recommendations**
Gender must be mainstreamed into supplier monitoring practices	Gender must be mainstreamed into workplace monitoring practices, including collection of data and records of all incidences including sexual harassment, both minor and potential incidences, incidences include but not limited to verbal harm, physical harm, psychological harm, sexual violence and threats of harm and ensure they are disaggregated by sex and using appropriate indicators and metrics	"Further mainstream gender in workplace monitoring practices, such as the BFC programme, ensuring women's participation in monitoring teams and expand monitoring criteria on key gender equality indicators (sexual harassment complaint mechanisms, timing and amount of maternity benefits, time off for prenatal leave, work adjustments during pregnancy, family-related leave policies, etc.). "	28
	Methods of monitoring should include but are not limited to social audits, supplier self-assessment questionnaire, worker surveys, worker focus groups, suggestion boxes, and cannot be limited to quantitative data analysis, must include qualitative data collection. All data collection should be companywide and anonymous.	"Conduct gender-sensitive risk and impact assessments, through meaningful consultations with potentially affected women, women's organisations and women human rights defenders to identify and address any actual or potential adverse human rights impacts, including how corporate activities may inadvertently be exploiting and reinforcing existing gender inequalities for different groups of	10

		women. This also includes putting in place gender-sensitive alert mechanisms."	
	Methods of monitoring must be gender-sensitive, include gender-sensitive risk assessments, impact assessments and alert-mechanisms, requiring participatory approaches and must include female investigators	"Another factory has a suggestion box for workers where they can submit ideas for improving the factory and the workplace. The same factory allows unions to hold parties and facilitates workers' social activities".	3
	Benchmark and measure against international standards	"Equal Measures 2030 SDG Gender Index. UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII). OECD Development Centre's Social Institution and Gender Index (SIGI). World Bank's Women, Business, and Law Index. WEF Gender Gap Index"	3
	Gender-sensitive monitoring methods including audits should be designed and carried out in consultation with those affected, this should also include women workers, womens community organisations and women human rights workers. To ensure they are effectively designed and faithfully carried out.	"Ensure that women's rights organisations and unions can verify and critically examine evidence so that it is widely understood and trusted"	5
Buyers should support the capacity of supplier to monitor their factories	Buyers should provide suppliers adequate resources, and include technology, software and management systems to effectively record incidences, this will build upon their capacity	"Companies should provide adequate managements systems support to their suppliers to ensure data collection is effectively conducted and integrated into business-as-usual"	4

Data gathered throughout supply chains must be gender disaggregated	Data should not only be gender-disaggregated but disaggregated by other intersectional factors such as caste, race, ethnicity, religion, LGBTQIA+ status and migrant status	"gender desegregation of the information generated by an audit can be used to detect gender-related discrimination. For example: looking at the percentage of men and women at supervisor level, at whether women are provided with training to become supervisors, at how women's employment status compares to men's, at whether women workers are predominantly the ones on temporary contracts, at whether there is occupational segregation, at whether women earn less than men for the same work"	17
Buyers should lobby government to enhance monitoring of suppliers	Buyers should use their leverage to lobby and work with government to strengthen their abilities to monitor and enforce labour laws to protect workers		2
Risk mapping should be conducted of the supply base	Risk assessments and mapping must be carried out prior to and during work to map out and predict risk, with special attention to gender-based discrimination, actions should be taken accordingly	"Risk assessment is key to identifying and assessing any actual or potential social and environmental risk, particularly where extra vigilance is required on gender-based discrimination."	6
Develop social audits effective at detecting GBV and other gender	Audits must incorporate a gender lens, which includes training auditors detecting gender sensitive methods using gender sensitive audits	"Effective auditor training on gender-sensitive auditing is crucial to improve the ability of social auditors to unearth gender-specific issues."	7

inequality within supplier factories	Audit teams must be gender balanced, female auditors must be included in audit teams	"Clear requirements and guidance should be provided to companies with regards to gender-balanced audit team composition for their audits. This is even more relevant when gender-sensitive topics are the focus of the audit (for instance, in the case of follow-up audits on suspected gender-specific violations). Suppliers who commission their audits directly should also be required to use gender balanced audit teams."	3
	Workers, especially women workers, should be involved in the remediation following audits, women workers, supervisors and managers should be trained to help monitor compliance on a regular basis	"Workers should receive information and training on codes, implementation procedures and associated issues; women workers should be involved in remedial actions following monitoring and auditing reports, particularly in relation to highly sensitive issues; specific training should be provided to enable more female supervisors and managers to be in a position to monitor compliance on a regular basis."	1
Mapping country and cultural context of supplier base	Develop a deep understanding of the country context in all countries of production, in order to map out culturally specific risk in each country. Including a deep understanding of local culture.	"Assessment and analysis: Understand the importance of context; undertake gender equality analysis to understand the issues and inform strategic approaches that	7

	This should include a mapping of local and national laws. Develop this in order to map out gender-specific risks and therefore requires a gender lens. This includes conducting a root analysis to understand the underlying factors of gender issues	address root causes not just symptoms of inequality”	
Developing effective grievance mechanisms for women workers within supplier factories	Interviews of workers should be off-site, in a confidential setting, face-to-face so that women workers feel safer and have less fear when reporting	“off-site interviews should be used to reduce the risk of retribution and provide a safe space where women workers do not fear speaking about sensitive issues”	1
	Workers should have easy to access and well publicised anonymous reporting channels to make women workers feel safer when reporting, there should be multiple reporting channels, these can be supported by technology such as hotlines, SMS, e-mail, apps and supported by non-discrimination policies that protect workers against backlash. These systems should be manned by women external to the factory and should have corresponding worker and grievance redressal committees who receive tailored training to support this role	“Complaints and grievance processes should be overseen by independent bodies and trade unions or in specific cases worker organisations should be represented on these bodies”	44
	Remedies following reports to grievance mechanisms should be timely and gender transformative, supporting women to attain justice and have enforceable consequences	“Remedies should be effective, timely and gender transformative, and consider the specific barriers women experience in accessing justice. Corporate grievance	11

	and be accompanied by a detailed report of the findings and final resolution	mechanisms must be accessible, efficient, safe and fair to women. For example, businesses should make sure these mechanisms are accessible to women, taking account of barriers, they are more likely to face with respect to language, literacy levels, access to information and digital technology, mobility and time poverty due to unpaid care responsibilities."	
	Provide adequate support for victims including psychological support, emergency paid leave and immediate crisis accommodation and provide a mapping of formal services to support victims such as healthcare	"Crisis accommodation: It may be that immediate removal from a normal site of accommodation is needed, which requires identifying crisis accommodation. Ensure that information about a person's whereabouts is kept secure and confidential"	4

Table 3.5 Recommendations for Sustainability-Orientated Supplier Assessment

This research outlines the importance of gathering good data, in ways that are rigorous, gender disaggregated and gender sensitive. As summarised in Table 3.5, there are 17 recommendations calling for the collection of gender disaggregated data. This data requires gender-sensitive mechanisms and methods to be collected. As outlined within Table 3.5, there are 77 policies dedicated to the collection of adequate data, not including the detailed guidance on grievance mechanisms, which provides an additional 60 policies from within the 34 sources. These high numbers demonstrate the importance given to effective sustainability-orientated supplier assessments, as outlined here: *"Calling for better gender-disaggregated data collection and more transparency: This requires better data collection, such that for any activity, program, or operation, a supplier will be able to track the level of participation of women and men workers. Good gender-disaggregated data collection is fundamental to transparency and crucial in driving meaningful change in global supply chains."* (BSR, 2017a)

Data collection is a key stage of the policy development cycle, without which it would not be possible to determine the effectiveness of a policy. Reviewing the success of policies and practices is an essential step towards continuously improving due diligence and the effective protection of women within the supply chains of the garment industry. This also provides an opportunity to stay up to date with international standards (BSR, 2020). There is ample guidance from NGOs on what gendered data should be collected as well as how to collect it. NGOs have provided thousands of pages of guidance in this area in the form of toolkits, checklists, guidance and roadmaps. This includes, for example, "*How Business Can Tackle Gender Based Violence in The World of Work a Toolkit For Action*" (Business Fights Poverty, 2019).

This research has identified the importance of firms acting proactively, rather than reactively, with policies focused on mapping out risks throughout a supply chain and developing a detailed understanding of country context and culture prior to work beginning with a supplier. For example, Virke (2020) provided an example demonstrating the importance of collecting adequate data, risk mapping and understanding the impact that different country contexts may have: *"Understanding the cultural context The gender-specific issues of the different production countries can be inherently different. Knowing your local risks allows for better risk reduction. A woman working in a factory in China, for example, faces different challenges than a woman working in a factory in India. The first could be a rural-urban migrant worker whose children were left behind, while the latter cannot commute to work without the risk of being sexually harassed or abused. Different measures are therefore required"*.

Despite country context only being mentioned in seven recommendations, its importance cannot be understated due to its link with tackling underlying and contributing factors, including patriarchy. Additionally, the OECD (2017) highlights the need to fully understand cultural context in order to tailor supplier assessments to local needs and understand the current legislative frameworks and initiatives available to workers. This is also important when considering the increased risk of gender-based violence some may face due to an intersectionality of identities. Some of the other characteristics that intersect with gender, along with the corresponding number of recommendations in the sources, are as follows: migrant status (13), LGBTQ (3), ethnicity (5), religion (3), disability (2), and caste (1).

A key part of supplier assessment is auditing, yet traditional audits have been outlined as ineffective at detecting gendered issues within supply chains. It has also been claimed

that traditional and quantitative audits are ineffective at detecting gender-based violence, and risk under reporting (Global Labour Justice, 2018). There must be a shift in how audits are conducted, who conducts them, and how auditors are trained. The Clean Clothes Campaign (2005) details the need for female auditors to be included in all audits, as they have been found to be more successful at identifying social and gendered issues. To further the effectiveness of gender-sensitive audits, workers should be integrated into their design and implementation, as outlined here: *"Audit methodologies should actively engage worker committees (when they exist) within the auditing process and the design of corrective action plans and should encourage ongoing monitoring." (BSR, 2018)*.

Additionally, "*low reporting of sexual harassment could be related to issues with the policy or the process, where workers are not comfortable reporting grievances or complaints (Agency) or they are not aware of what constitutes sexual harassment and how to report it (Violence and Harassment). However, it is also influenced by people: lack of women supervisors or managers (Leadership) may deter reporting if women workers do not feel comfortable reporting incidences of sexual harassment to men."* (BSR, 2019). This reasserts the importance to women workers of having effective gender-responsive and sensitive data collection methods and mechanisms. For example, it is recommended that worker interviews, which often form part of an audit, be conducted off-site so workers can feel safer speaking freely about issues they may be facing (CCC, 2005). Overall, this research highlights that the current standard auditing approach is not effective at detecting gender-based violence.

The topic of grievance mechanisms, including how best to design and operate them, has been widely discussed, with 60 policies discussing the topic. There was much discussion around how to effectively design gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms,

their importance, and how they are not always effective in achieving their intended purpose. In particular, collaboration with workers, especially women workers, when designing and operating grievance mechanisms is emphasised.

In general, grievance mechanisms should: enable anonymous feedback, with multiple reporting channels and no negative repercussions for reporting; be supported by a worker-elected committee that also includes an external organisation to ensure unbiased outcomes; be efficient and timely; be accessible despite language or literacy levels; be built, revised, and monitored by both internal and external people, especially trade unions and women's organisations; ensure victims are provided with counselling and psychological support as well as crisis accommodation; be formalised, with clear accountability and consequences known to all for violation of policies, with disciplinary action proportionate to offences and channels available for legal redress where necessary. An example is provided here: *"Beyond formal grievance channels, victims and witnesses should have access to a wide range of channels to file complaints, for instance, through telephone, SMS, e-mail hotlines, online or app-based mobile to provide anonymous tips about potential harassment taking place"* (Asian Garment Hub, 2023).

3.6.2.4 Communication and Disclosure to Achieve Gender Equality

Overall, the public communication of policies is intended to develop accountability for firms, although there are only 22 recommendations regarding communication, the recommendations are clear, simple, and aligned throughout the sources. These are outlined in Table 3.6.

Communication and Disclosure to Achieve Gender Equality recommendation's sub-theme **Number of total recommendations: 28**	**Recommendations**	**Examples**	**Number of recommendations per sub-theme**
Public communication of policies	Gender equality must receive public commitment from senior leadership to signal the companies values and build in accountability	"senior leadership are vocal and visible in preventing and responding to GBVH through, making formal commitment to action in the workplace, launching resourcing and supporting GBVH policies, procedures, training and awareness campaigns and modelling positive bystander action within the workforce"	4
	Publicly communicate internal and external policies disseminated throughout supply chain	"The enterprise RBC policy should be made publicly available and communicated to all employees, suppliers and other business partners and other relevant parties"	8
	Publicly disclose progress on gender equality programs and policies	"Gender equality policies should be accompanied by plans and strategies that include indicators for measuring progress. Regularly reporting on and communicating progress against ambitions for gender equality is a key way of celebrating success, highlighting ongoing challenges,	3

		maintaining momentum and signalling that the company takes it seriously."	
Publicly commit to engagement with external stakeholders	Buyers should publicly commit to working with external stakeholders to build accountability	"[policies] Should include a commitment to meaningful engagement with affected stakeholders through the course of due diligence.	1
	Publicly support and engage with campaigns that promote gender equality	"Endorse and engage with public and social media campaigns promoting respectful relationships, changing harmful gendered social norms and engaging all community members to intervene when it comes to sexual harassment and gender-based violence"	2
Gender equitable language	Using gender inclusive language to signal the importance of gender equality	"Assess and revise internal and external communications to contain gender neutral and/or gender equitable language and photos" (ICRW)	3
Embedding gender equality into business communications and language	Gender equality principles and practices should be clearly communicated and embedded into all business practices to create a culture of gender equality and signal to other its importance	"Integrating these considerations into corporate tools such as codes of conduct, self-assessment questionnaires (SAQ), and auditing verifications will send strong signals to the market, highlighting that gender equality is no longer an add-on topic but is essential to achieving decent working conditions for all."	2
Gender equality must be reflected through publicly available targets	Setting gender equality targets and publicly communicating them builds in accountability for buyers	"Set specific targets and success indicators to promote gender equality in your supply chains. By defining specific targets and related success indicators, companies are in a better position to: –	1

		Communicate gender equality agenda among their staff and business partners. – Allocate necessary budget and human resources to reach their targets. – Communicate their commitment and progress to both internal and external stakeholders.”	
Engaging and facilitating dialogue throughout supply chains	Utilise dialogue to facilitate achieving gender equality	“Regular dialogues with the government, industry (factories and associations), NGOs and trade unions both at the state level and at the district level to initiate measures for social improvements in the textile sector. A dialogue between the main stakeholder groups in the local textile industry helps to raise awareness about workers’ rights”	3
	Engage in social dialogue with workers to help mitigate risk and disputes	“Social dialogue can manage conflict for fair and stable workplaces • Social dialogue helps improve the design of training systems and retention of skills • Social dialogue creates and contributes to the wider enabling environment for enterprise sustainability • Social dialogue can play a role in improving transparency and accountability, thus offsetting the risk”	1

Table 3.6 Recommendations for Communication and Disclosure to Achieve Gender Equality

Leadership within firms must publicly communicate their policies, processes, failures, and successes regarding gender equality within their supply chains, as well as other social sustainability issues. For example: *"An enterprise should communicate both publicly and directly to affected stakeholders how its due diligence system works, including how the complaints and grievance mechanism functions"* (Perspective, 2022).

In communicating their policies and practices, brands can build in accountability by allowing the public to hold them to account based on their public commitments. As outlined above, these should be made available to all relevant stakeholders, including the public, suppliers, and workers. This will require firms to actively disseminate their policies throughout their supply chains, and ensure they are available to all relevant stakeholders for example "*senior leadership are vocal and visible in preventing and responding to GBVH through, making formal commitment to action in the workplace, launching resourcing and supporting GBVH policies*" (CARE International, 2021).

In addition to policies, buyers and brands should publicly commit to working with other traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors to drive change in ways outlined in the section covering sustainability-orientated collaboration. As highlighted by the research, this requires regular updating on the progress of policies as well as publishing violations and steps taken to address these. This should be a standard part of a company's reporting and could be built into other CSR and annual reporting activities.

Communication can be used as tool to achieve greater gender equality, opening up channels of dialogue with workers and suppliers to mitigate risk and facilitate better dispute resolutions, as outlined here by the ETI: "*Build an inclusive communications approach for internal and external communications. Communications on gender*

mainstreaming should not just be confined to publicising policies, but also communicate progress and ensure dialogue" (ETI, 2018).

Language is an essential part of communication; and communication is essential in building accountability, inclusivity, and a culture of gender equality. In some communications it may be important to use gender inclusive language, for example by referring to "women workers" as "women workers" rather than simply as "workers", demonstrating gender awareness and signalling to others that gender and gender equality is a priority (ICRW, 2023). However, in some corporate reports, for example, a more gender-neutral approach may be beneficial. Gender neutral and gender equitable language are two different concepts which should both be considered to determine which is necessary for each circumstance.

3.6.2.5 Symptoms And Additional Consequences of Gender Inequality

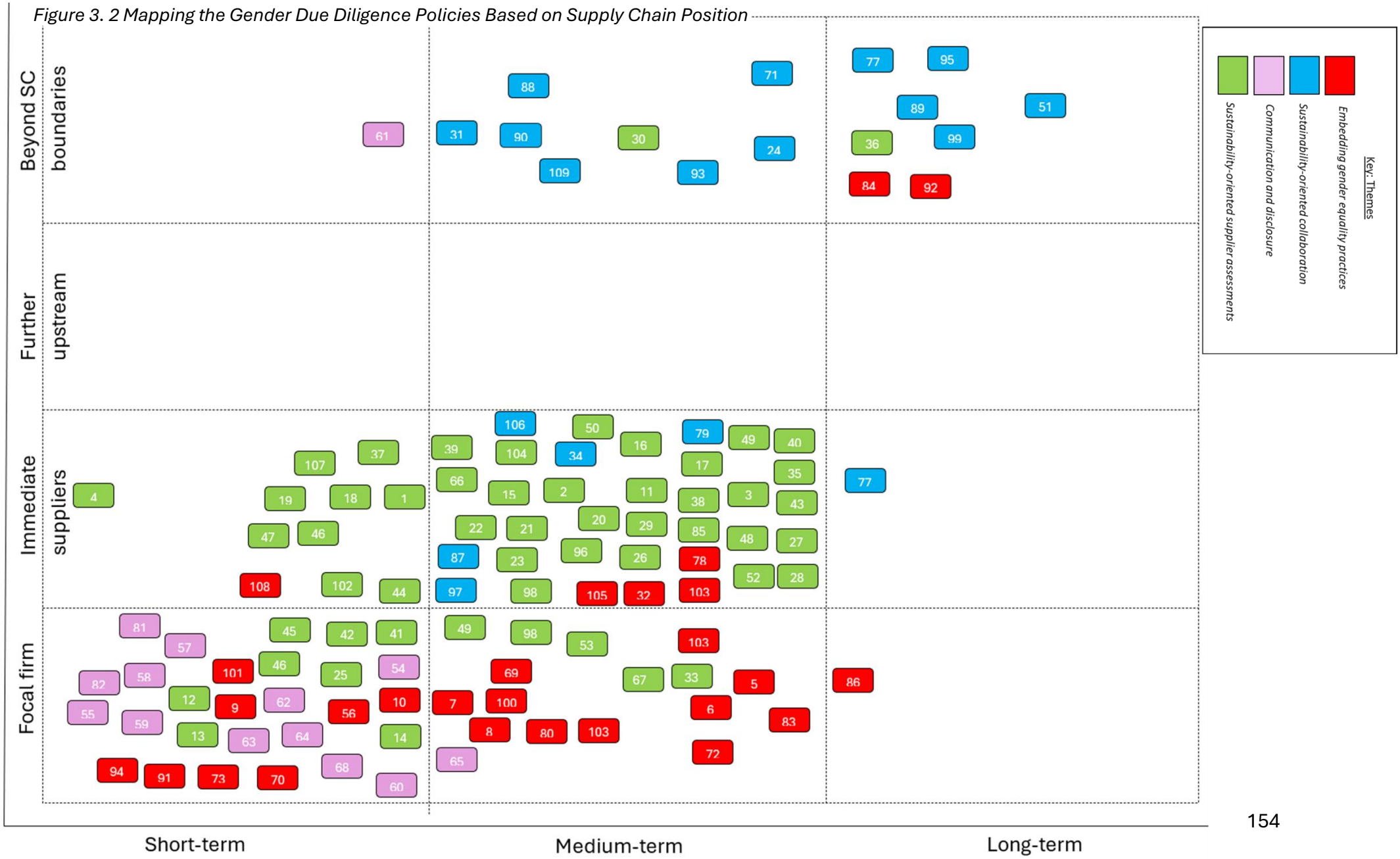
Five additional topics were discussed in the NGO sources without any recommendations or remediations. These are as follows, with the number of sources mentioning each topic given in brackets: worker turnover (8), reduced productivity (8), absenteeism (6), poor mental health (3), drug and alcohol abuse (1). High worker turnover, absenteeism and reduced productivity within a factory can be strong indicators that women workers are facing abuse. Alongside this, poor mental health, and drug and alcohol abuse can be consequences for women workers who face challenges, especially sexual violence, at work. In serious instances, this has ultimately resulted in suicide. These factors represent an important avenue for future research as they can be considered symptoms or consequences of deeper issues.

3.6.3 Analysis: Mapping Policies

This section provides a further analysis of the policies identified in the previous section in terms of the part of the supply chain being targeted and the time horizon of a policy. This results in a matrix for further understanding the focus of policy recommendations. To plot the policies on the matrix, they first had to be condensed into a more manageable number. Thus, the policies were reduced down from hundreds to 109, as listed in Appendix A, still categorised according to the four themes.

Figure 3.2 provides a mapping of the 109 policies onto the matrix, with the themes indicated by different colours. The X axis outlines the timeframe required to plan and implement the policy, divided into short, medium, and long term. The Y axis is divided into: (1) focal firm, referring to policies relating to the firm/ brand level; (2) immediate suppliers, referring to policies that directly impact or are applied to direct first tier suppliers; (3) further upstream, referring to second tier suppliers or further above; and, (4) beyond supply chain boundaries, referring to policies that operate outside the direct manufacturing supply chains and with other stakeholders, such as NGOs and customers.

Figure 3. 2 Mapping the Gender Due Diligence Policies Based on Supply Chain Position



Sustainability-oriented supplier assessment, in green, represents 52 of the 109 policies. These policies can be found in three of the four parts of the X axis, located within the focal firm, immediate suppliers, and beyond the supply chain boundary. However, most of these policies are medium-term and focus on immediate suppliers. Although there are also several policies that are short-term and that focus on the focal firm, there is a clear trend towards policies focusing on or working with first tier suppliers. The two policies which fall outside the supply chain boundaries involve collaborating with external organisations, such as women organisations, to improve gender mainstreaming in auditing.

Communication and disclosure policies, in pink, are predominantly direct and short term, with one other policy, 'Regular dialogue with various stakeholders, including government, NGOs, and trade unions', helping to initiate social improvements in the wider textile sector. The focus of these policies is mainly on the focal firm or brand better communicating within themselves and with external stakeholders to build accountability and better facilitate information sharing. Meanwhile, most policies are short term as communication, although it may take time to plan, is achievable in the short-term.

Policies pertaining to embedding gender equality into business practices, in red, are mostly in near and mid-range parts of the matrix. In addition, two policies fall outside of this by being long-term and beyond the supply chain boundaries. These refer to work that must be conducted outside of the supply chain to change gender discrimination and inequality within society and communities. One policy is long term but still within the focal firm, asserting that brands need to focus on actively promoting gender equality more widely within the industry and society.

Sustainability-oriented collaboration, in blue, is comprised of 18 policies, naturally located beyond just the firm itself and being scattered through immediate suppliers and beyond the supply chain boundary, as well as being primarily medium to long-term in timeframe. Most of these policies focus on further collaboration with actors outside of the supply chain boundary, including NGOs, trade unions and women's organisations. These are medium to long term policies as they involve continued collaboration with external stakeholders.

Positioning the policies in the matrix highlights some interesting characteristics. First, there are no policies within the third layer of the X axis, pertaining to further upstream in the supply chains. This highlights that the focus of policy recommendations for gender due diligence within the garment industry tends not to focus on the supply chain past the first-tier direct suppliers. Second, there are only ten policies that fall into long-term. This is surprising and raises questions as to whether the focus is on 'quick fixes'. A stronger focus on longer term policies may encourage sustainable change. This includes four policies focusing on lobbying and collaborating on a national and global level, with just two targeting underlying factors contributing to gender inequality and abuse. Third, the policies are primarily bunched within two main sections: within focal firms and focused on the short term and within immediate suppliers and focused on the medium term. This reflects the main policy focus being on reforming the practices of focal firms and brands and improving sustainability-oriented supplier assessments. The latter requires continued collaborative work between focal firms and suppliers to implement effective policy monitoring and assessments.

3.7 Discussion

This paper responds to recent observations about a gender gap in OSCM research (Tang, 2022) and to calls for further insight into both the challenges women workers face and the role gender plays in global supply chains (Vijeyarasa, 2020). In particular, the research uses NGO sources to further understanding of the issues faced by women workers and how these can be tackled within the supply chains of the garment industry. The key challenges faced by women working within the garment industry presented by NGOs are an expansion on those presented by academics, providing more challenges, discussion, and granularity than the academic literature. Moreover, the research maps out the current best practice recommendations from NGOs on how to best protect women workers, achieve gender equality and women's empowerment within the garment industry.

Academic literature had already discussed low wages (Hossain *et al*., 2013), long hours and excessive overtime (Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012), issues accessing collective action (Pearson *et al*., 2013), poor factory conditions (Kabir *et al*., 2018), physical and verbal abuse (Akhter *et al*., 2019), sexual violence (Sanborn, 2005), pregnancy and maternity related challenges (Barnes and Kozar), and the gender pay gap (Chakravarty, 2004; Uddin 2008; Dey & Basak, 2017). This research has expanded on this by discussing inadequate grievance mechanisms (CARE International, 2018), lack of women in leadership (ILO, 2012), unpaid domestic labour (ILO, 2012), hiring discrimination (ETI, 2018), inadequate contracts (BSR, 2017a), women's agency (Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2020), poor living conditions (IFC,2020), unfavourable buyer practices (CCC, 2005), lack of financial literacy (BSR, 2017a), domestic abuse

(IndustriAll Union, 2022), inaccessibility of benefits (BSR, 2017a), harmful supervisor pay structure (IFC, 2020), poor mental health (Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2020), and drugs and alcohol abuse (Business Fights Poverty, 2019). In addition, the NGO sources used in this paper are arguably more action oriented than many academic sources meaning there is more discussion on how to address the issues, with policies categorised into four themes and mapped onto a matrix demonstrating that the policy recommendations focus primarily on short to medium-term actions and on the first tier.

There is a wider social sustainability literature that considers gender within certain industries such as mining and agriculture (Mattis, 2000; Bell, 2013; Mayes *et al*., 2013; Lahiri-Dutt, 2015; Maertens and Swinnen, 2012). Although these industries differ from the garment industry, there are some similarities that can be drawn. For example, they often lack transparency within their complex supply chains, there are often large numbers of migrant workers who are at greater risk, and there are often large numbers of women workers and sometimes children. There is also research on gender within the management of firms (Park and Krishnan, 2005) and how this links to CSR outcomes (Bears, 2010; Bernardi, 2010; Dawar 2016; Fernandez-Feijoo, 2012), but limited attention has been given to gender equality in supply chains.

This paper recognises gender as a key aspect of socially sustainable supply chain management and complements literature on supplier development by building on the current discussion of how supplier development can help to achieve social sustainability through decreasing risk (Yawar and Seuring, 2018; Jia *et al*., 2021) and improving worker motivation (Pagell *et al*., 2010). More specifically, prioritising supplier development for the purposes of achieving gender equality can benefit buyers in achieving greater social sustainability within their supply chains. Many of the recommendations for developing

gender due diligence described in this paper can be resource intensive, such as in terms of time, money, technology, or knowledge. Many suppliers will not initially have the capacity to undertake or implement the suggested policies, but supplier development can increase the supplier's capacity and ensure buyers are able to effectively monitor policies and practices.

When buyers invest in sustainable practices and support women within their supply chains, they often improve their performance (Ma *et al*., 2020). As previously outlined, supplier development activities can include "*(onsite) training to suppliers, offering technical and quality expertise and advice, site visits or personnel exchanges between the supplier's and the buyer's facilities, involvement in the buyer's new product design and development, and information sharing*" (Blonska, 2013). These activities increase a supplier's capacity, providing the necessary resources they previously would not have had to instigate changes. Through training and providing specific technology and systems, suppliers would be able to collect more gendered data. Additionally, it has been shown that in supporting their capacity, it is possible to boost the economic performance of a supplier, providing them with the economic resources to invest in social sustainability initiatives and policies (Yawar and Seuring, 2018).

There is an emphasis in the NGO recommendations on the top-down promotion of gender equality, with senior leadership and management at the forefront of driving change and developing a culture of gender equality. Indeed, the importance of leadership in driving sustainability within supply chains has been demonstrated within SSCM literature. For example, Gosling (*et al*., 2016) outlined the role of leadership in promoting sustainability within supply chains and highlighted that multi-national companies, which garment brands often are, have influence over their suppliers, through

activities such as process specifications. Therefore, they are well positioned to disseminate gender equality and women's empowerment through their supply chains. Leaders within these companies are the agenda setters and policy makers, therefore they have an essential role to play in driving social sustainability (Amin *et al.*, 2019).

Van Hoof and Thiell (2014) emphasised the role of leadership in solving collective complex issues. Due to the complexity of supply chains, leadership plays an essential role in instigating change throughout the whole supply chain; sustainability and supplier development therefore depend on this leadership (Defee *et al*. 2009; Marali and Searcy, 2013). Leadership has been identified as a key focus to reduce risk within OSCM literature, moreover, brands should understand and actualise the importance of taking leadership within their supply chains to reduce risk, achieve gender equality and sustainability (Gosling *et al.*, 2016; Lambert, 1998). Despite the importance of leadership, this research has also pointed to the importance of pairing a top-down approach with a bottom-up perspective.

Finally, this research has highlighted the benefits of collaborating with traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors to create an approach to gender equality which is holistic. This includes vertically with grassroots organisation, women's organisations, trade unions, NGOs, and governments, and horizontally with other brands, will tackle both specific issues as well as underlying contributing factors. This holistic approach could therefore be more effective at tackling gender inequality within the garment industry.

3.8 Conclusions

This paper has presented an analysis of the issues facing women workers in the garment industry and the recommendations for enhancing gender equality based on a scoping study of NGO literature. Addressing gender inequality is complex, as are the supply chains of the garment industry, requiring collaboration between traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors to create meaningful change. Change must also be both top-down and bottom up, with commitment and drive from leadership to create a culture of gender equality and collaboration with community organisations to disseminate and effectively monitor efforts. A cornerstone of enhancing gender equality in supply chains is engaging in supplier development. To be effective, this requires working with many stakeholders. Moreover, the creation of an organisational culture that allows for the development of gender equality must be communicated from top leadership and set clear goals, to ensure accountability.

Although the research presented here expands understanding of the issues facing women workers and of key policy recommendations, there is much yet to achieve in this space. The analysis revealed that some aspects of gender inequality have received more attention than others, while much of the emphasis of policy recommendations is on the immediate supply chain and the short to medium term. It is important to address both short-term individual issues and long-term underlying causes and contributing factors. This includes focusing on effective grievance mechanisms in the short-term as well as long-term efforts to lobby for better regulatory frameworks. Tackling the root causes, such as patriarchy, will require sustained efforts over many years to slowly shift cultural norms.

3.8.1 Implications for Research

Eleven challenges facing women workers had previously been identified within the academic literature. This scoping study has deepened our understanding of these issues and expanded the list by a further 13 challenges. Even more significantly, the research has provided an insight into how gender inequalities can be tackled in supply chains. It has identified 366 individual recommendations, organised into four themes. Overall, this research outlines that, in order to tackle a myriad of challenges facing women working within the garment industry, as well as the underlying factors that contribute to these, there must be greater collaboration within the industry, with both traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors. Buyers must also focus and invest in supplier development to benefit themselves, their suppliers and the women.

3.8.2 Implications for Practice

The implication of this research for the garment industry and for managers within buyers and suppliers is that gender equality and women's empowerment must be a key priority. The set of issues faced by women workers in supply chains can inform future risk assessments. Meanwhile, by consolidating recommendations from 34 separate sources in one place, this research has created a roadmap for brands and suppliers to better achieve gender equality within their supply chains. Some of the key take-aways include the following:

- In seeking to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, actions must be tailored to the local context if they are to be effective.
- Policies and procedures will be most effective if they are designed and monitored in consultation with the workers that will be impacted.

- Working with non-traditional supply chain actors can contribute to building capacity and improving due diligence within supply chains.
- Current auditing models and methods are not effective at detecting gendered issues meaning they need to be redesigned. This could include outlining the connection between secondary factors such as worker turnover and absenteeism that can be indicators of gender-based violence and challenges facing workers.

Overall, this research asserts that the garment industry and brands need to go beyond doing the minimum and move towards effective holistic action to benefit not only their workers but their own operations.

3.8.3 Future Research Direction

There are several avenues for future research that emerge from this study. Firstly, this paper has mapped out the key policy recommendations but it would be useful to know more about how these policies and practices are actually working in practice. Secondly, this paper has discussed the interconnected nature of many of the issues, but a deeper exploration of this would greatly contribute to a more holistic understanding of how to tackle all the challenges facing women working within the garment industry. Thirdly, the paper has been highlighted that tackling underlying factors and changing cultures will take years, meaning future longitudinal research would be beneficial. More research and discussion on how patriarchal culture and gender norms negatively affect women within supply chains would be beneficial and could inform the further development of policies. Fourthly, the research has highlighted the importance of collaborating with traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors. It would therefore be important to conduct

further research into this in order, for example, to develop a deeper understanding of which stakeholders to involve and how.

3.8.4 Research Limitations

The study is limited in that it used a non-exhaustive pool of sources as the basis of the study. This reflected the infinite nature of Google, which was the best tool for retrieving non-academic sources but meant a limit had to be set on how many sources to retrieve and review. Additionally, the google algorithm may have affected the results that were retrieved and in what order they appeared. This research did investigate other databases, including grey literature and NGO databases, however these did not return any relevant information.

While the NGO reports provided an important source of contemporary information on gendered issues in supply chains and how they could be addressed, the quality of NGO reports varies, with limited information provided in some cases on their methodology, and it is important to acknowledge that NGOs may over-emphasise the importance of non-traditional actors in addressing gender inequalities in supply chains.

Chapter 4: Paper 3

Paper 3: Achieving gender equality in garment industry supply chains:

From buyer-led to worker-centric supplier development

4.1 Background to Paper 3

This paper builds on papers 1 and 2, which identified a gap between guidance and practice on gender equality in the garment industry. Paper 2 demonstrated a wealth of guidance for achieving greater gender equality in the garment industry; however, papers 1 and 2 also demonstrated a lack of progress within academic literature and practice on these issues. Therefore Paper 3 explores this gap through interviews with (i) brands, to better understand why and how they are struggling to achieve gender equality in the garment industry, and (ii) NGOs, to better understand where and how brands are still failing.

An earlier version of this paper titled: “Gender-sensitive due diligence in garment supply chains: Unravelling the influence of brand practices, power dynamics, and patriarchy” was presented at the 31st European Operations Management Association (EurOMA) Conference held in Barcelona, Spain in July 2024. The feedback received at this conference helped to refine and improve this subsequent version and guided the direction of the paper. This included developing a deeper secondary level of analysis which led to an improved theoretical contribution. Paper 3 was then submitted to a special issue of the International Journal of Operations and Production Management on diversity equity and inclusion (DEI). This is a leading international, peer-reviewed journal

in the field (AJG 4). A set of revisions have been provided and are being worked on currently. This is the second special issue targeted, which demonstrated the growing emphasis on DEI in the OSCM field.

This paper was written in collaboration with my supervisors who co-authored this paper, Professor Mark Stevenson and Dr Lingxuan Liu. My supervisors played a crucial role in helping to refine the interview questions and developing the best codes for making sense of the interviews. I initiated the paper idea, planned, executed and transcribed the interviews. After we developed the interview questions, I took the lead on coding the interviews. Codes were developed iteratively in conversation with my supervisors to refine them. I then drafted the paper and my co-authors offered feedback and comments on its improvement, which were then acted upon by myself.

My co-authors have certified below that they agree with the above claim with regards to everyone's contribution to this paper.

Professor Mark Stevenson

Date: 28th February 2025

Dr Lingxuan Liu

Date: 28th February 2025

4.2 Abstract

Purpose: To explore how gender inequalities manifest upstream in garment supply chains, the barriers to tackling the problem, and the role of supplier development initiatives in achieving greater gender equality.

Design/methodology/approach: Exploratory semi-structured interviews with buyer organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as part of a broader action research project with a multinational garment brand. Supply network analysis (SNA) is used to evaluate two alternative approaches to supplier development for gender equality that were discussed in the interviews.

Findings: Eighteen issues affecting women workers and three key barriers to tackling gender inequality are identified. The research identifies the potential of adopting a worker-centric supplier development (WCSD) approach for gender equality. This amplifies women's voices and embeds a broader range of non-traditional supply chain actors, including grassroots NGOs and women led trade unions, in the network.

Originality: Contributes to a movement away from operations and supply chain management being a gender blind or unaware field of study. Prior social sustainability research has largely treated workers as one homogenous group, whereas this research demonstrates social issues can be, for example, compounded by gender (e.g. low wages being magnified by the gender pay gap) or gender specific (e.g. a lack of policies to support pregnant workers and mothers). The WCSD approach described contrasts with the buyer-led approach that dominates extant literature.

Practical implications: Buyers must ensure their purchasing practices do not contribute to upstream gender inequalities and that their teams responsible for enhancing gender equality are properly resourced. Moreover, adopting a WCSD approach must not be

misinterpreted as passing responsibility for addressing gender inequalities to women. Rather, it is about putting women at the centre of solution design.

Social implications: The findings have the potential to contribute to women's empowerment, better protecting women workers and improving the social sustainability of supply chains.

Article type: Research paper

Key words: Socially sustainable supply chain management, gender equality, supplier development, supply network analysis

4.3 Introduction

Gender has matured as a subject of study within various fields of management research, including organisation studies, business ethics, and entrepreneurship; but the operations and supply chain management (OSCM) field has so far remained relatively gender unaware, or even gender blind. Adopting a gender lens could help to better understand certain OSCM phenomena that affect men and women differently and how inequalities that manifest in supply chains can be tackled.

Many news articles and NGO reports have identified the exploitation and abuse of female workers in the garment industry, highlighting the global nature of this social problem. For example, ActionAid (2019) found that 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh have experienced or witnessed some form of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) at work. Meanwhile, it was reported that, in Cambodia, 46% of female garment workers have been coerced into an intimate relationship with a supervisor or manager and 48% have been subjected to GBVH (Solidarity Centre, 2019). Similarly, there are reports of intimidation and violence against women in Pakistan (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2022) and of GBVH in both Myanmar (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2023) and Jordan (Better Work, 2024). Thus, although achieving gender equality and eradicating the exploitation of women is an important priority – as highlighted by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, i.e., "to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations, 2020) – it remains a distant goal. For example, the UN has outlined that "at the current rate, achieving gender parity in managerial positions will take 176 years" (United Nations, 2020). Moreover, there is a need for further academic research that takes a gender perspective when studying the development of more socially sustainable supply chain practices.

Focal firms have the potential to contribute to achieving gender equality in multi-tier supply chains by engaging in gender-aware supplier development initiatives, including training and education programmes as well as financial and resource investments. Although much of the focus of sustainability-oriented supplier development has been on environmental concerns (Liu et al., 2018; Dou et al., 2014; Fu et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2018), supplier development can also be an effective approach for achieving more socially sustainable supply chains (Yawar and Seuring, 2018; Jia et al. 2023; Bai, 2022). Yet, to the best of our knowledge, there are no prior studies in the OSCM literature on supplier development for gender equality. Indeed, there have been calls for further research into the role of sustainability-oriented supplier development for tackling social issues such as human rights violations, poverty, and gender inequality (Yawar and Seuring, 2018; Bai, 2022).

Extant literature demonstrates that supplier development initiatives have been employed to enhance social sustainability within supply chains (Yawar and Seuring, 2018; Jia et al. 2023; Bai, 2022). Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of incorporating the worker voice as a critical component of both supplier development and broader social sustainability efforts (Stephens et al., 2024; Outhwaite and Martin-Ortega 2019). Additionally, social network analysis (SNA) has been used to examine power dynamics and operational structures within supply chains. However, there remains a lack of research that integrates these elements, i.e., supplier development, worker voice, and SNA, within a single analytical framework. This study seeks to address this gap by employing a novel methodological approach that combines these perspectives. In doing so, it aims to contribute to ongoing efforts within the operations and supply chain management (OSCM) literature to advance understanding of how

gender equality can be effectively promoted in supply chain contexts.

Against this backdrop, the following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do gender inequalities manifest upstream in garment supply chains and what are the barriers to tackling this problem?

RQ2: How can supplier development initiatives contribute to achieving greater gender equality in the garment industry?

The research reported in this manuscript forms part of a broader action research project that focused on helping a UK-based garment brand improve gender equality within its supply chains and engage in more socially sustainable supply chain practices. Part of the research involved interviewing other garment brands and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with women workers. This paper reports on the findings from these interviews, informed by supply network analysis (SNA). Lu et al. (2018) called for further research from a supply networks perspective within sustainable OSCM, highlighting that stronger networks improve communication, trust, knowledge sharing, skills acquisition, and resource accessibility, and reduce supply risk (Lu et al., 2018). As supplier development often relies on managing complex 'soft ties' between organisations, SNA offers a useful toolkit (Han et al., 2020).

Overall, the paper contributes to establishing a gender lens within the field of OSCM. It expands the field of socially sustainable SCM, where studies often treat workers as one homogenous group. More specifically, the research highlights the importance of considering gender for enhancing social sustainability, identifying eighteen gendered challenges that manifest in supply chains. This complements extant literature that has

examined other social issues in supply chains, some of which intersect with gender, such as modern slavery. Furthermore, SNA provides a useful theoretical framework for revealing novel insights. In particular, the research highlights the importance of adopting a worker-centric supplier development (WCSD) approach for gender equality. This contrasts with the dominant buyer-led, dyadic organisation-to-organisation approach more typically described in the broader supplier development literature (Håkansson and Persson, 2004; Wichmann and Kauffman, 2016).

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 4.4 reviews the relevant literature on social sustainability, gender equality in supply chains, and supplier development, before outlining SNA as a theoretical framework. Section 4.5 presents the research method adopted in this study, describing how the data were collected and analysed. The findings are then presented in Section 4.6, including an overview of the way in which gender inequalities manifest in supply chains and the challenges to addressing them, followed by an analysis using SNA that contrasts buyer-led with worker-centric supplier development approaches. Section 4.7 presents a discussion before Section 4.8 outlines the conclusions, including implications for research and practice.

4.4 Literature Review

4.4.1 Social Sustainability

Nakamba et al. (2017, p. 6) defined social sustainability as “the management of practices, capabilities, stakeholders and resources to address human potential and welfare both within and outside the communities of the supply chain”. Social practices therefore include how a firm promotes human potential and protects people from harm. Although social sustainability remains relatively underdeveloped, both from a research

and practice perspective when compared to environmental sustainability (Zorzini et al., 2015; Seuring and Muller, 2008; Ruel and Fritz, 2021; Koksal et al., 2017), there is growing interest in social challenges within supply chains. Areas of focus include decent work (Soundararajan et al., 2021), working conditions (Nakamba et al., 2017), freedom of association (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021; Kuruvilla and Li, 2021), and modern slavery (Gold et al., 2015; Carpenter, 2019).

Specifically in the context of the garment industry, the socially sustainable SCM literature has highlighted a range of issues, including long hours (Huq et al., 2014), withheld pay and low wages (Uddin et al., 2008), modern slavery (Benstead et al., 2018), and poor working conditions (Nakamba et al., 2017). The literature makes few references to gendered issues in the garment industry, including sexual violence (Hossain et al., 2013), poor maternal health and maternity benefits (Barnes and Kozar, 2008), and a gender pay gap (Sanborn, 2005). Instead, much of the literature treats workers as one homogenous group, failing to acknowledge the impact of gender on the manifestation of social issues in supply chains or how they should be tackled.

Worker-driven or worker-led initiatives have emerged as an important part of effective socially sustainable SCM, enabling effective governance and the promotion of decent work. This emphasises the importance of putting workers at the heart of the design, implementation, and monitoring of labour rights initiatives. A core component of worker-driven approaches is enabling the worker voice to be heard (Stephens et al., 2024), especially in developing countries where it is often overlooked in monitoring systems (Rodriguez-Garavito, 2005). For example, Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) argued for greater participation from workers and worker representatives in governance systems through trade unions, NGOs, and representative structures; and Outhwaite and Martin-

Ortega (2019) discussed incorporating workers in the design and implementation of monitoring systems. This approach contrasts with traditional 'top-down' approaches, which can be ineffective in the context of social sustainability, especially when buyer behaviours, including unethical purchasing practices, contribute to the problem (New, 2015; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021).

4.4.2 Gender and Global Supply Chains

Although the topic is growing in prominence (Yang et al., 2024), the OSCM literature has so far given only limited attention to gender (Vijeyarasa, 2020; Tang, 2022; Akbari et al., 2024). Rarely is gender a central focus – more typically, it is a control variable in a survey study and considered alongside other characteristics of a respondent or their organisation. Where gender has been a core consideration, most attention has been on women in downstream, focal firms. This includes a focus on the performance implications of women in leadership or on executive boards (Park and Krishnan, 2005; Bear et al., 2010; Galbreath, 2011; Bernardi and Threadgill, 2010; Dawar and Singh 2016); or on how gender, as a component of diversity, impacts collaboration and trust in supply chain relationships (Ta et al., 2024). In contrast, there is limited attention given to women at lower levels of an organisation's hierarchy, such as on the shop floor of garment factories, or on women upstream in supply chains.

Where research has examined, for example, the underrepresentation of women, pay disparities between men and women, gender-based biases and harassment, or gender-based stereotypes, the primary focus has been on describing the issues without examining *how* they can be tackled by focal firms (Akbari et al., 2024). Meanwhile, there have been calls for further research into women's empowerment (Yang et al., 2024),

including work on gender and supply chain performance (Ma et al., 2021; Chin and Tat, 2015), logistics and SCM (Zinn et al., 2018), relationships in supply chains (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008), sustainability, both upstream and downstream (Ruel et al., 2020), the development of suppliers or distributors (Sodhi and Tang, 2014), innovative technologies (Tang, 2022), and business model innovation (Plambeck and Ramdas, 2020; Yang et al., 2024).

Beyond OSCM, the literature on global value chains has highlighted how globalisation has disproportionately negatively impacted women in the southern hemisphere (Barrientos, 2013; LeBaron and Gore, 2020). This is particularly evident in the garment industry, where much production has been offshored to the global south. Paiva et al. (2020, p. 81) highlighted how "Gendered globalization produces and reproduces gendered forms of organisation with consequences for management and supply chains". Yet, regardless of where in the world they are situated, women workers face unequal treatment (Frohlich, 2022). That is, patriarchal gendered norms and power relations (i) affect women in the workplace, leading to gender-based violence, harassment, physical violence, and coercion at work (Gore and LeBaron, 2019; LeBaron and Gore, 2020; Frohlich, 2022), and this is compounded by (ii) the burden of an unequal share of the responsibility for unpaid domestic labour at home (Gore and LeBaron, 2019). Within the garment industry, women typically occupy low skilled and low paid roles, with their managers and supervisors often being male (Carpenter, 2019; Barnes and Kozar, 2008). Furthermore, in the fast fashion sector, many supply chains are characterised as being complex and opaque, locked in a 'race to the bottom'. This model perpetuates inequalities, keeping women in low paid, precarious, and insecure jobs where they are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses (Frohlich, 2022).

Although some organisations are recognising the significance of the issues facing women workers (Ruel et al., 2020), many are allegedly only superficially engaged in addressing the problem, also known as purplewashing (Paiva et al., 2020). Rather, Ruel and Fritz (2021) highlighted the need to empower women not just as victims but also as agents of change within supply chains to tackle gender inequalities. Supplier development, as described below, is one potential avenue for achieving this.

4.4.3 Supplier Development Literature

The term "supplier development" has been traditionally used to refer to "any activity or resource investment initiated by a buying organisation to improve the performance of its supplier... The cooperative effort between a buying firm and its suppliers aims to upgrade suppliers' technical, quality, delivery, and cost management capabilities and foster ongoing improvements" (Blonska et al., 2013, p2). The scope of supplier development has since evolved to incorporate achieving sustainability within supply chains. Thus, sustainability-oriented supplier development (SSD) is "any initiative aimed at improving supplier sustainability performance or capability to meet two or more elements of the triple bottom line (TBL) ... The TBL emphasises the simultaneous achievement of economic/business, social, and environmental benefits" (Jia et al., 2023. p2).

The SSD literature has focused more on the role of supplier development for tackling environmental issues than social issues, even if socially responsible supplier development (SRSD) can be an effective route to enhancing supplier capabilities (Lu et al., 2018). The aim of SRSD is to build capabilities and enhance the economic performance of suppliers whilst reducing social risks (Yawar and Seuring, 2018). This can include developing long term relationships and improving social capital, making technical and financial investments, engaging in knowledge transfer and capability

development activities to improve supplier performance, and supplier monitoring or governance (Handfield et al., 2006; Wagner, 2006; Parmigiani et al., 2011; Blonska et al., 2013). There is, however, a distinct lack of research into the role of SRSD for addressing gender issues in supply chains (Yawar and Seuring, 2018).

Supplier development initiatives are not always effective at building trust and transparency, leading to misconceptions, misunderstandings, and mistrust within buyer-supplier relationships (Blonska et al., 2013). As a result, some suppliers may not reap the benefits of supplier development initiatives (Krause et al., 2000). One of the underlying reasons for this is that the initiatives are often buyer centric and do not properly take the supplier perspective into account (Saghiri and Mirzabeiki, 2021).

Generating social capital through collaboration is thus critical to an effective supplier development initiative (Blonska et al., 2013). Social capital, as a form of relational capital, is “the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from networks of relationships between organisations” (Blonska et al., 2013, p3). A focus on social capital shows that value can be created within a network through shared information, influence, and commitment (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Cooper (2024) asserted that better collaboration, not only between buyers and suppliers but with other stakeholders, such as other supply chain partners, governments, and civil society, including through resource sharing, is needed to collectively achieve gender equality within supply chains (Cooper, 2024). Thus, there is a need for further research into how supplier development can be used effectively to achieve gender equality in supply chains, considering the roles of buyers, suppliers, and other actors within the network.

4.4.4 Supply Network Analysis (SNA) as a Theoretical Framework

Networks do not operate in isolation; they are affected by the social and cultural context in which they are embedded (Gamper, 2022). Hence, networks shape and are shaped by society and institutional structures, affecting the relationships and behaviours of the actors within them (Gamper, 2022). This is particularly relevant to gender dynamics in global supply chains as patriarchal norms influence these environments, manifesting within relationships and communications, and affecting the efficiency and sustainability of supply chains.

SNA has been used to understand the complexity of relationships within modern supply chains (Miemczyk et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2018). In particular, SNA offers three insights: (i) how the supply network functions at an individual and network level; (ii) the position and importance of each individual actor within the network; and (iii) the impact of the overall network structure on the performance of both individuals and the network (Fouad and Rego, 2024).

Further insights into supply networks can be drawn by applying SNA's core concepts. Table 1 outlines five primary concepts and twelve sub-concepts of SNA, as identified by Han et al. (2020). These concepts can be used to understand the features of a network and how they impact both individual actors and the functioning of the network. For example, the concept of prominence includes examining degree centrality and closeness centrality, which helps to understand an actor's connections (ties) and how information is transferred within a network (Borgatti and Li, 2009). Similarly, the concepts of cohesion, including network density, and brokerage, including structural holes, provide insights into cooperation, coordination, and collaboration within supply networks, and helps to identify where brokerage actions are needed.

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Cohesion	[*Cohesion*]	The cohesiveness of the whole network, indicating the likelihood of strong common relationships between actors in the same network.
	Network Density	The level of connectedness between network members. This measures the number of existing ties in a network in relation to the number of all possible ties.
	Embeddedness	The state of dependence of members in a certain network structure. This shows how the common ties between network actors are interconnected.
Equivalence	[*Equivalence*]	Identifies actors with similar roles. Structurally equivalent actors are those who have the same types of ties to and from all other actors in the network.
	Structural equivalence	Two forms are structurally equivalent to the extent they have the same customers and suppliers, and this similarity may provide a performance benchmark or stimulus for innovation adoption.
Prominence	[*Prominence*]	Denotes which actor or cluster of actors have power or influence within a network, and who is in demand.
	Degree Centrality	The number of relationships one actor maintains in a given network. A high degree centrality indicates an actor has a central position in the network and will be more visible.
	Closeness Centrality	How close an actor is to all the other actors beyond those it is directly linked to in the network. Actors with high closeness centrality can quickly have access to interactions with all the other actors. Such nodes become less reliant on others.
	Eigenvector Centrality	The number and importance of adjacent nodes around an actor. Actors with high eigenvector centrality are likely to have a higher influence towards decision-making.
	Social Capital	The collection of resources that a firm receives as a result of possessing a network of interfirm relationships, which is context-specific and therefore sensitive to changes. This perspective highlights the value of relationships instead of the actors themselves.
Range	[*Range*]	Refers to the size of the network. The bigger the size, the more resources and information an actor has access to, and the more access to places where the resources can be used.
	Network size	The number of suppliers has a moderating impact on the type of strategies to foster supplier's performance.
	Graph theory	The identification of available arrays of contacts helps to visualise the micro-interactions that formulate macro-organisational structures.
Brokerage	[*Brokerage*]	A process of linking otherwise isolated individuals or groups. Strengthening and maintaining opportunities is valuable for sourcing firms, putting them in a strategic position through having access to a diverse set of partners and resources.
	Betweenness centrality	The share of times that an actor is needed to create the shortest pathway between other pairs of actors in a network. Strong betweenness centrality indicates control of information and resources.
	Structural hole	A situation where two actors are disconnected in a network. Actors that bridge two otherwise disconnected parties could benefit from the mediating role as a conduit for additional resources and information.

Table 4.1 Key Concepts from Supply Network Analysis (Source: Adapted from Han et al., 2020)

SNA shares some commonalities with supplier development as both emphasise the importance of collaborative relationships for improved supply chain outcomes. As supplier development frequently depends on soft-ties and informal relationships that are difficult to observe, SNA offers a valuable toolkit for understanding and addressing these complexities (Han et al., 2020). By understanding the structure of relationships within networks and their dynamics, the challenges to achieving effective supplier development can be identified. SNA is therefore a useful tool for understanding the role of supplier development in achieving gender equality.

4.5 Research Method

This research is based on qualitative interviews supplemented by secondary data from brands and NGOs to understand the gender inequalities that manifest in supply chains, the challenges to addressing them, and the role of supplier development initiatives. Interviews offer the opportunity to collect rich, exploratory data, which is particularly valuable when a field of research is at a nascent stage of development (Stuart et al., 2002; Barratt et al., 2011). The research forms part of a broader action research project (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002; Olhager, 2024) that involved working closely with one garment brand. The interviews within this paper focus on how garment brands are still struggling to achieve gender equality within their supply chains. Discussions with NGOs also focus on the actions and progress of brands in achieving gender equality within their supply chains. The focus of this paper, alongside the focus of the overall research, is garment brands and their supply chains.

4.5.1 Data Collection

Six interviews were conducted with garment brands that have international supply chains and six with NGOs that work with women in the garment industry, referred to as Brand 1 to Brand 6 and NGO1 to NGO 6, respectively, in the remainder of this manuscript. The sample of brands began with existing contacts obtained through the action research project, followed by a snowballing method (Corley and Gioia, 2004) to connect with other brands and NGOs.

All six brands are focal firms within their international supply chains, are headquartered in Europe, and operate across multiple continents. Five of the six brands have physical stores while one sells their products exclusively online. The brands vary in size and production volumes, and the gross annual profits of the brands range from £14 million to £1.5 billion. Interviewees held positions with responsibility for sustainability initiatives, including corporate social responsibility (CSR) and/or environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance; and had responsibility for creating and monitoring sustainability policies for their organisation's supply chains. The top 10 sourcing countries for the six brands are as follows, with the number of brands sourcing from each country given in brackets: China (6), India (6), Turkey (6), Cambodia (5), Sri Lanka (5), Vietnam (5), Italy (4), Portugal (4), Bangladesh (3), and Pakistan (3). The six NGOs are all charities and organisations that work directly with women in the garment industry. Five of the NGOs are centred in Europe and one in Asia, and all have global operations. One NGO focuses primarily on women, while the other five incorporated a focus on women within a broader portfolio of work. All but one of the twelve interviewees identified as female.

The interview questions were produced in consultation with other academic and industry experts and refined through multiple iterations. Separate sets of questions were

developed for the brands and NGOs but focused on gender inequalities, barriers, and initiatives. As the interviews were semi-structured, some of the questions arose through discussion with a given interviewee. Pre-interview research was conducted into the brands' and NGOs' websites and publicly available reports, providing valuable supplementary material that helped to validate the testimonies of interviewees. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were conducted online. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Although it might be argued that the total volume of data is limited, this is compensated for by the richness and novelty of insight provided into this under-researched phenomenon.

4.5.2 Data Analysis

SNA informed the analysis in two ways. First, key SNA concepts were used to inform the coding process. Second, actors, their relationships and involvement in supplier development were mapped using SNA modelling techniques.

4.5.2.1 Coding the Data

The data were first categorised descriptively according to the gendered issues identified and the challenges to addressing them. A more formal inductive concept development process was then adopted to fully organise the data (Gioia et al., 2013). First order concepts were developed via open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) using informant-centric terms and codes. This order was derived and developed from the direct quotations and language of the interviewees. First order codes were then further distilled into second order codes and aggregate theoretical dimensions from SNA. Some of the themes in the data overlapped, which resulted in the five SNA concepts from Table 1

being reduced to four aggregate themes, with range and brokerage being combined. The coding process was initiated by the first author then iteratively refined through multiple rounds of discussion with the rest of the research team. Table 4.2 provides a traceable path from the data to the aggregate dimensions.

Example Quotation	First Order Code	Second Order Code	Aggregate Theme
"So billions of dollars are being spent on these programmes, and that money could just go to garment workers and they might be able to afford the broccoli that these guys are promoting workers to eat." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Challenges with partnering with large western NGOs	Challenges with collaboration and stakeholders	Cohesion
"Working with on the ground NGOs is particularly challenging." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	Challenges in selecting appropriate and correct supply chain partners		
"Consultancies mushrooming… You know, let's create an industry on the back of another industry on the back of another industry that is exploiting people." (Head of Human Rights, Brand 3)	Challenges of working with consultants		
"Importance of direct engagement with local NGOs and partners." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Greater collaboration with NGOs	Greater collaboration with women led supply chain partners	
"Importance of direct engagement with trade unions." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Greater collaboration with trade unions		
"Success of Dindigul agreement and multi-stakeholder initiatives." (Garment and Footwear Sector Lead, NGO 1)	Using multi-stakeholder initiatives to promote collaboration		
"We haven't actually scaled up and rolled it out any further." (Regional Ethical Trade Manager, Brand 4)	Scaling interventions and initiatives from a pilot to the long-term	Greater stakeholder collaboration and partnerships	
"There must be mass change where all the pieces come together, i.e., community/culture must shift for change to happen… Need for sustainable and comprehensive programs." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Holistic and sustainable action for gender equality		
"Importance of partnering with women-led organisations, especially in the Global South." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Greater collaboration with women's organisations, including grassroots organisations	Long-term commitments	
"Work with the women in leadership in trade unions because in patriarchal conservative communities, women will not feel	Greater collaboration with women led trade unions		

comfortable going to a male led NGO talking about issues." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)			
"Stable relationships, making sure that suppliers understand we're in this together. We are partners in this it's not a top-down thing, which is currently how it is right. Long-term relationships."(Gender Advisor, NGO 3)	Strengthen relationships with suppliers	Building trust with better relationships with suppliers	
"Trust-building with suppliers." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	Supporting suppliers through collaboration		
"Living wages for men and women are different, you've got to take into account those extra responsibilities that women typically take on." (Gender Advisor, NGO 3)	Unequal impact of unpaid domestic labour and care	Economic Justice	Equivalence
"Indebtedness and hidden financial issues among workers." (Gender Expert, NGO 4)	Addressing worker debt and poverty through adequate wages		
"One or two segregated initiatives taken by brands cannot make a significant impact…why don't we see women there." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Overcoming siloed projects	Industry-wide collaboration	
"The only thing that has worked everywhere from Indonesia to Pakistan to India is freedom of association." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Supporting freedom of association within the industry		
"Lack of transparency and accountability. No accountability." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Emphasising collective industry responsibility and accountability		
"Brands must work collectively, as one supplier doesn't just work for one brand." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Greater brand collaboration		
"Greater sharing data across sectors." (Garment and Footwear Sector Lead, NGO 1)	Sharing data across the industry		
"brands are mostly concerned with money and PR." (Head of Human Rights, Brand 3)	Supply chain profit maximisation	Unequal power dynamics and asymmetries	
"the garment industry itself is driven by capitalist, colonialist, racist, sexist structure." (Head of Human Rights, Brand 3)	Impact of neo-liberal economic pressures on supply chains		

"We're not a huge brand. For context, the highest percentage we have of business in a factory is 5%. Or we sometimes have 3%, so in terms of leverage, we have to be conscious of that." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	The limited brand capacity and resources of smaller brands		
"The infrastructure that allows the supplier to operate in a certain way, what are governments local governments doing to enabled that. I do think there's still a role for governments and labour legislation." (Gender Expert, NGO 4)	Need to lobby government for sustainable change		
"Factories don't always want to instigate these things... might not be nefarious, just that they don't want to do it." (Gender Expert, NGO 4)	Lack of engagement from some suppliers		
"The multinationals have a lot of power in the countries." (Head of Human Rights, Brand 3)	Multi-national companies with significant power within the industry and over governments		
"Need for leadership from Dalit women in transforming power dynamics." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Empowering women workers through leadership	Empowerment	Prominence
"Need for a living wage to break the cycle of poverty." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Economic empowerment through wages		
"Empowering women through financial education." (Project Manager, NGO 6)	Empowerment through education and training		
"Fear is only taken away through freedom of association." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Empowerment through access to freedom of association		
"Even if women are enabled to be in positions, e.g., HR or health and safety, the environment is not there, their voices aren't being heard as the underlying factors haven't been addressed." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Listening to and engaging with the voices of women workers		
"You end up just making assumptions and you're doing things that are not necessarily going to change anything. the first thing is really to listen. Listen to the needs of people make	Prioritising women-worker led initiatives		

sure that also workers are represented." (Project Manager, NGO 6)			
"Peer-to-peer education modules in factories." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	Supporting peer education models		
"Brands need to be more proactive rather than wait for another disaster to happen to make changes." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Brands needing to be proactive not reactive	Top-down commitment from brands	
"There is no concrete mainstream gender policy to help the brands." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Need for gender-sensitive supply chain policies		
"Brands are trying to do the minimum that they can, you can't expect to do the minimum and expect change, it won't happen." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Need for commitment and signalling of the importance of gender equality efforts		
"We don't have a gender policy."(Regional Ethical Trade Manager, Brand 4)	Need to address lack of prioritisation from brands		
"Policies we don't run a gauge of success, the policies aren't refreshed that often and we don't necessarily report against the policies." (Head of CSR and Sustainability, Brand 5)	Develop effective and robust policy feedback loops	Policy frameworks	
"Binding agreements are essential." (Gender Expert, NGO 4)	Ineffective nature of voluntary regulations		
"International standards should be the benchmark, i.e., OECD." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Benchmarking against international standards		
"Purchasing practices of brands define factory conditions." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Harmful brand purchasing practices	Brand policies and practices and accountability	
"Brands need to be transparent, there is a lot of green washing and purplewashing." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Purplewashing		
"That we have right now brands doing is a lot of CSR programmes, which are like putting bandages on a fracture." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Need for transparent CSR efforts		

"The cases we see in the media are just the tip of the iceberg. It's like the ones that make it to the public domain. There's so much more that happens behind the scenes that we don't hear about that we don't know about. " (Gender Advisor, NGO 3)	Need for greater brand accountability		
"Businesses must ensure they are investing to ensure human rights are upheld." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Allocating adequate resources to gender equality initiatives		
"But they normally have a primary job with management or HR, ethical sourcing side of things is their second job." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	Allocating adequate resources and capacity to CSR teams		
"Zero tolerance policy pushing issues underground." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	Negative impact of zero tolerance policies		
“Impact is short term if underlying issues are not tackled" (Project Manager, NGO 6)	Tackling underlying contributing factors to gender equality	Addressing structural barriers to achieving gender equality	
"Lots of underlying/root causes to symptomatic issues i.e. lack of women in leadership, i.e. patriarchy. Often… we found is that the managers and supervisors are typically male, and the workers are female." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	Addressing patriarchal norms		
"they're also vulnerable, because they lack agency in the workplace often, so they may not be organised or they may not feel represented by those worker organisations that shouldn't be representing them" (Garment and Footwear Sector Lead, NGO 1)	Tackling barriers to women agency		
"There has to be mass change where all the pieces come together, i.e., community/culture must also shift for change to happen" (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Shifting local community norms		
"Not labour rights, but human rights—need to shift the language" (	Human rights approach over labour rights approach		

Head of Human Rights, Brand 3)			
"Working training awareness programmes need to be at the factory or the management level, to be able to actually bring back women to the factories and make sure they have a safe and, in a place, where they are taking care of." (Ethical Sourcing Specialist, Brand 6)	Training suppliers' management and supervisors	Sustainable supplier development initiatives to build capacity	
"Investment in supplier development." (Regional Ethical Trade Manager, Brand 4)	Financial investment in suppliers		
"Businesses must ensure they are investing to ensure human rights are upheld" (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Adequate resource allocation from brands to suppliers		
"The gender disaggregated data, that's very hard for us to one collect but most suppliers don't have the management systems to collect it." (Ethical Sourcing Specialist, Brand 6)	Leveraging technology for capacity building		
"Social dialogue between management and workers and how we can level the playing fields in terms of relationship and engaged with them a psychotherapist as well within the working environment that have enabled the break down the barrier of communication between workers and management so that we could look at all the needs that these female workers would have on a factory floor." (Responsible Sourcing Coordinator Brand 2)	Facilitating dialogue between women workers and suppliers	Dialogue	Range and Brokerage
"The safe space where the workers can come and get information about anything related to their jobs or their lives and hopefully, a space where if something were to happen to them, they can come and report and it can be investigated. I think the core principle is actually giving women workers safe spaces." (Gender Expert, NGO 4)	Creating safe spaces for women workers to engage in open dialogue		

"Using local stakeholders for monitoring Brands need to be working with local NGOs within the country context." (Business and Human Rights Specialist, NGO 5)	Working with local women's organisation for effective policy, design, implementation and monitoring	Cultural adaptation	
"Intersection of gender equality with other human rights concerns." (Gender Advisor, NGO 3)	Intersectional approaches to achieve gender equality		
"Difficulty applying policies in different cultural contexts."(Regional Ethical Trade Manager, Brand 4)	Policy adaptation for different cultural contexts		
"We have local people on the ground who have lived and worked in that country all their lives, so they are able to bring that knowledge into whatever pieces of work and project work we might have to initiate." (Regional Ethical Trade Manager, Brand 4)	Working with local communities to adapt and embed initiatives		
"We already have a strong way of implementing and assessing factories we have our own teams go out and assess it. They are trained on how to interview workers; they always make sure they're talking to a diverse set of workers. but our teams are always visiting if not for the audit there they are visiting for other reasons to check on the factory. So, we have a very close relationship with the suppliers." (Regional Ethical Trade Manager, Brand 4)	Benefits of in-house audits	Auditing, monitoring and policy improvements	
"Audits do not give you the true sense of picture, especially when it comes to gender-based risks." (Gender Advisor, NGO 3)	Gender sensitive auditing and monitoring frameworks		
"Roleplay and interactive methods to reveal issues." (Gender Expert, NGO 4)	Novel approaches to detecting gender related issues within supply chains		
"Difficulty in measuring gender-related outcomes and lack of gender-disaggregated data."(Ethical Sourcing Specialist, Brand 6)	Collecting gender disaggregated data		
"Need for gender specific risk assessments within supply chains." (Head of CRS, Brand 1)	Gender sensitive risk identification		

"Fear is the biggest thing that keeps women from reporting gender-based violence." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2)	Developing gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms		

Table 4.2 First Order, Second Order, and Aggregate Themes with Example Evidence from the Interviews

4.5.3 SNA Modelling

SNA is a useful tool for evaluating networks (Wichmann and Kauffman, 2016). As a methodology, SNA is “a modelling technique and analytical approach well-suited for identifying and examining the structural features of supply networks and the patterns of connections between members within the network” (Fouad and Rego, 2024, p1). It aims to “manage the connections between entities through investigating and understanding behaviours and relationships.” (Han et al., 2020, p1).

In mapping out networks using nodes (actors) and edges (bridges/connections), SNA identifies the social structures formed by relationships. It then provides the tools to analyse these relationships and structures (Tichy et al., 1979; Kim et al., 2011; Wichmann and Kauffman, 2016). The structural position and embeddedness of each actor within the network becomes an important element, with greater embeddedness indicating an enhanced capacity to facilitate knowledge sharing through the network (Han et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2018).

Ties can represent different relationships: hard ties reflect situations such as material flows or flows of money; whereas soft ties reflect, for example, flows of information and friendships (Borgatti and Li, 2009). Ties may also be continuous or discrete, based on specific possibly ad-hoc events. This approach, and these insights, will be used to analyse the supply network and evaluate the role of supplier development in achieving gender equality in supply chains.

4.6 Findings

4.6.1 First Level Analysis: Gender Inequality & Barriers to Tackling the Problem

4.6.1.1 Specific Challenges Facing Women Workers

Eighteen challenges facing women workers within the garment industry were identified, as outlined in Table 4.3. An example interview quotation is provided for each challenge together with an indication of which brands and NGOs discussed these within the interviews. Issues such as low wages, GBVH, and lack of freedom of association were discussed the most. In contrast, pregnancy and maternity issues were mentioned infrequently. Many of the issues in the table are interconnected; for example, low wages are closely related to long hours and overtime, as low wages meant women were vulnerable to working longer hours to earn enough money.

Challenge facing women workers	Example Quotation from Interview Data	Identified by Brand	Identified by NGO
Sexual and gender-based violence and harassment	“Violence and harassment. I think that would be the most significant challenge” (Brand 5)	*Brand 1,2,3,4,5,6*	*NGO 1,2,3,4,5,6*
Lack of maternity and pregnancy provision	“Gender related topics, such as pregnancy" (Brand 5)	*Brand 5*	*NGO 4*
Lack of women in leadership and career mobility	"Promoting women to line manager roles. Programs and projects to protect women and women in leadership must talk to women to ensure it caters to what they need" (NGO 1)	*Barnd 3*	*NGO 1,2,4,5*
Lack of women’s agency	“They're also vulnerable [women workers], because they lack agency in the workplace often” (NGO 1)	*X*	*NGO 1,4,6*
Lack of fair and decent wages	“We're never going to see workers being paid a living wage and for women in particular, because of the extra responsibilities they have of the children” (NGO 3)	*Brand 1,2,3,4*	*NGO 1,2,3,4,5,6*
Overtime and long hours	“A salary that is not enough to help you make ends meet, which means you then have to work overtime hours” (NGO 3)	*Brand 1,2,4,5*	*NGO 1,3,4*
Lack of freedom of association for women	"The only thing that has worked everywhere from Indonesia to Pakistan to India is freedom of association” (NGO 6)	*Brand 1,2,3,4,6*	*NGO 1,2,3,4,5,6*
Poor working conditions	“In access to facilities such as toilets, and poor dormitories” (Brand 5)	*Brand 2*	*NGO 1,2,3,4*
Gender-blind and ineffective audits	“They [brands] should stop relying on audits, because audits do not give you the true sense of the picture, especially when it comes to gender-based risks” (NGO 3)	*Brand 1,2,3,4,5,6*	*NGO 1,2,3,4,5,6*
Poor mental health	“[Regarding women’s responses to sexual violence] the strategy is they leave the factory, or, in the worst case, they commit suicide.” (NGO 6)	*X*	*NGO 3*
Modern slavery	“modern slavery … we have worked extensively with external partners to try and remedy the situation” (Brand 1)	*Brand 2,4*	*NGO 4*
Domestic abuse	“With cases of domestic abuse… a certain level of support I think can be provided with local implementing partners” (Brand 2)	*Brand 6*	*X*
Unpaid domestic labour/care	“Living wages for men and women are different, like you've got to take into account those extra responsibilities that women typically take on [outside of work]” (NGO 4)	*Brand 2,6*	*X*

Lack of financial literacy	"They're going to teach you financial management and financial literacy. But they say they've got no money anyway." (Brand 4)	*Brand 3*	*NGO 6*
Unfavourable buyer practices	"They pass these costs onto suppliers, suppliers pass the costs on to workers, so everybody's trying to keep costs low down the chain, right" (NGO 2)	*Brand 1,2*	*NGO 1,2,3,4,5,6*
Homeworker challenges	"I think a lot of brands tend to shy away from the conversations of home workers" (Brand 3)	*Brand 2,4*	*NGO 1*
Lack of job security	"Women are in the more vulnerable worker categories and they're in the sort of less skilled jobs you know… they're the operators on the sewing machines and you can replace them so easily. You can replace them so quickly" (NGO 1)	*X*	*NGO 2,3*
Contractual precarity	"They're [women workers] not on permanent contracts" (NGO 2)	*Brand 2*	*NGO 4,2*

Table 4.3 Specific Issues Facing Women Workers Identified in the Interviews

4.6.2 Barriers and Contributing Factors to Gender Inequality

4.6.2.1 Negative Brand Practices

Negative brand practices, including purchasing practices, resource allocation, and CSR initiatives, were identified by NGOs and brands alike as a barrier to gender equality. All six NGOs and two brands referred to brands' purchasing practices, including putting excessive pressure on suppliers by demanding short lead times, low prices, and last-minute order changes, contributing to GBVH and poor working conditions. As outlined by the Gender Advisor at NGO 3: "It is impossible to change working conditions in factories because the purchasing practices from brands define everything. If you are setting the cost so low for your supplier, gender-based violence will definitely be there". The pressure for speed and low cost gets passed from buyers to suppliers, and then from the suppliers' (predominantly male) managers to female shop floor workers, manifesting in, for example, GBVH. More generally, the garment industry, and particularly its fast fashion supply chains, has been criticised for operating a 'race to the bottom' profit maximisation approach, which disproportionately affects women. The Gender Advisor at NGO 3 even

claimed: “The industry itself is driven by capitalist, colonialist, racist, sexist structure." This has contributed to the feminisation of labour, with women being recruited into low paid and precarious roles as a cheaper, more disposable alternative to men.

Three of the garment brands conceded they do not have any specific policies or programs for achieving gender equality in their supply chains; whereas one brand referred to a general policy that includes a gender element and two brands had some specific gender programs for suppliers. Where gender-specific plans do exist, there are few mechanisms for measuring or monitoring performance. The Head of Human Rights at Brand 3 explained: “we don't run a gauge of success, the policies aren't refreshed that often and we don't necessarily report against the policies... we don't really collect any type of data point to be able to rate how successful they are, or whether they're actually having impact over time.” Moreover, interviewees criticised the auditing of supply chains by buyers. There was a consensus that current audits are ineffective at detecting social issues, especially gendered issues. The Gender Advisor at NGO 3 stated that "Social audits never produce any data that's worth anything at all".

Meanwhile, NGOs criticised the lack of buyer coordination that leads to siloed projects, duplicated effort, competing priorities, and the ineffective allocation of resources. The Garment and Footwear Sector Lead at Brand 1 summarised this issue through an example from attempting to tackle excessive working hours: “When putting a cap on working hours, [female] workers then also went and worked for another factory down the road and took extra jobs”. Failure to collaborate across the industry and address the root cause of the problem, i.e., low wages, and a lack of communication across suppliers led to the failure of the initiative.

Finally, it was claimed some buyer CSR teams operate more like public relations (PR) teams, pointing to the phenomenon of purplewashing. Responsible Sourcing Coordinator at Brand 2 argued: “we know corporates are not going to act in the interest of people. There is a real problem… The same voices who are saying that things are going well are the ones who are creating the problem.” This lack of action may be due in part to the voluntary nature of policies, with NGOs highlighting the lack of accountability on whether brands tackle gender inequalities in their supply chains.

4.6.2.2 Power Asymmetry

Power asymmetries were a key focus of the interviews, both within and across organisations. Within organisations, it was claimed CSR teams often have limited power or influence, and often lack the resources required to enact change. The Head of CSR and Sustainability at Brand 5 asserted: “CSR teams often don’t have enough power … within their companies to create the necessary change … budgets are being cut quite drastically”. This suggests a lack of prioritisation from brands, again pointing to purplewashing. Most significant, however, was the power asymmetry between male managers and female factory workers that contributes to issues like GBVH.

Across organisations, there are instances where powerful buyers abused their position, such as through the purchasing practices described above. As outlined by the Strategic Campaigns Coordinator at NGO 2 “… unequal power relationships between buyers and suppliers. Until that's equalised, we're not going to see significant improvements in working conditions, but especially for women workers who dominate the industry “. Meanwhile, some smaller brands can lack leverage over their larger

suppliers, representing less than 5% of the supplier's order book, meaning they have limited ability to initiate reform or influence industry norms.

4.6.2.3 Cultural and Structural Barriers to Gender Equality

Although the impact of patriarchy on women at work and in wider society is globally relevant, how it manifests can be shaped by regional, national, and local culture. Culture impacts, for example, attitudes towards speaking out about gender-based abuses, meaning they often go unreported. The Gender Expert at NGO 4 explained that, in some cultures, "feelings around shame are much more entrenched", pointing to this as a key reason why women workers may not speak about their abuses. Brands and NGOs also referred to the challenge of having to adapt generic gender-based policies and programs to the nuances of individual cultural contexts. A lack of collaboration with like-minded non-traditional supply chain actors (NTSCAs), including NGOs and trade unions, is also a constant theme in the data. Further collaboration with like-minded NTSCAs would improve supplier development and gender equality initiatives by improving trust, enhancing communication, and enabling resource pooling.

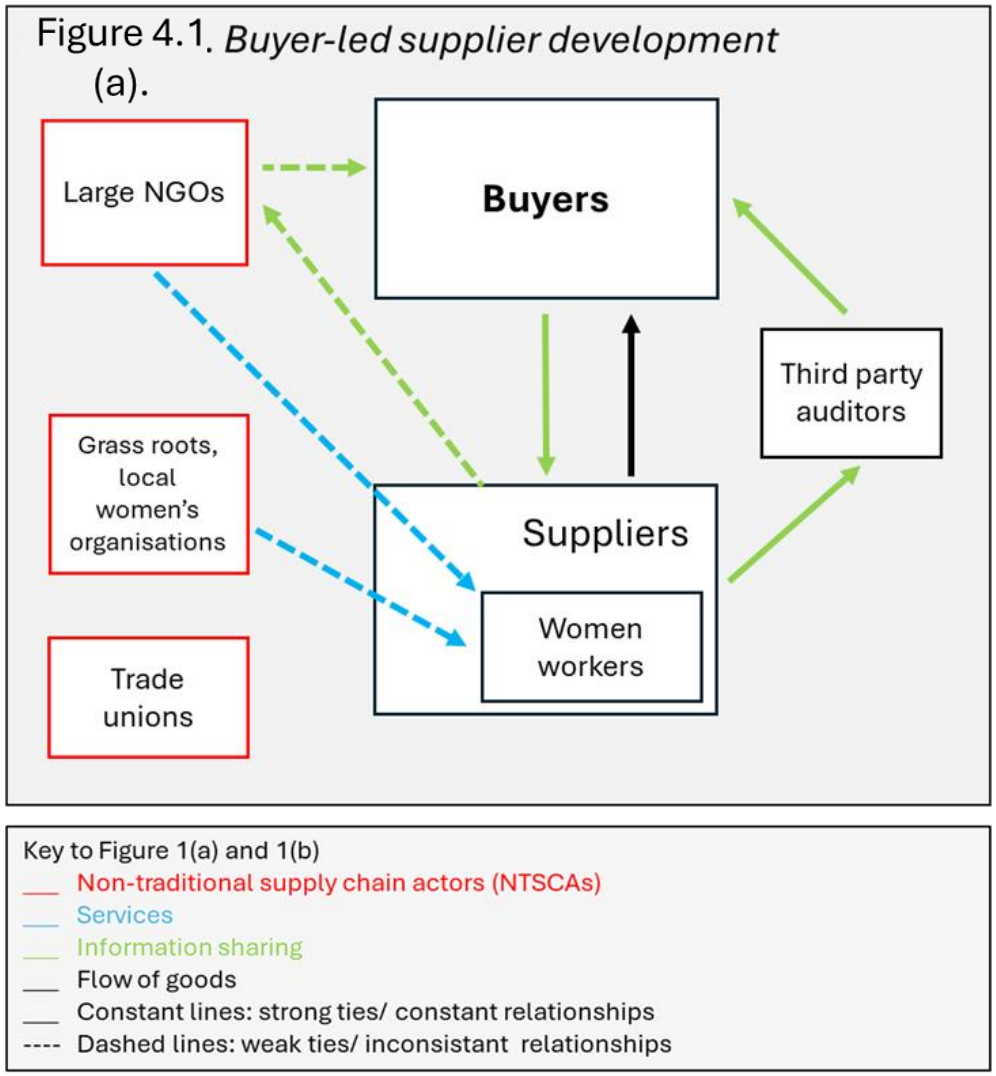
Despite the potential enabling role of NTSCAs, interviewees criticised the corporatisation of some (mostly large, Western) NGOs that are paid to act as consultants, advising on the risk of labour exploitation, particularly the risk to women. This business model means NGO consultants are not properly incentivised to deal with the root cause of a problem. The Responsible Sourcing Coordinator at Brand 2 argued that these actors are "creating an industry on the back of another industry on the back of another industry that is exploiting women." Any training provided may also not provide the right signals or reflect the local context. The Responsible Sourcing Coordinator at Brand 2 further stated

that: “NGOs run programs on issues like financial literacy and financial management, teaching women to handle their finances and telling them that they need to save money when they can’t even afford basic needs … [and yet the NGO has] flown four people in from Germany and hired out a nice [expensive] venue to give this training … that’s how far away things are.” Meanwhile, Strategic Campaigns Coordinator at NGO 2 explained: “I've had sessions with workers who have been part of a programme where we have laughed at the module … they’ve been asked to eat vegetables they cannot even afford with the pay they have. Billions of dollars are being spent on these programmes, and that money could just go to garment workers, and then they might be able to afford the broccoli that these guys are promoting workers to eat.” This, in part, has been attributed to a focus of brands on working with large western charities that reflect the white, liberal, middle-class background of much of their workforce as opposed to smaller, local women’s organisations that understand the on-the-ground realities.

4.6.3 Second Level Analysis: Gender Equality through Supplier Development

This section examines the data through the lens of SNA, unpacking how supplier development can contribute to gender equality upstream in the supply chain. Two distinct scenarios emerged from the data, as illustrated in Figure 4.1, identifying the actors involved, their relationships, and how they contribute to supplier development. The current typical system, based on buyer-led supplier development, is depicted in Figure 4.1 (a) and contains relatively few ties. Excluding the flow of goods from supplier to buyer, there are only three strong ties and four weak or inconsistent ties between actors. Women workers have no solid ties and only two weak (incoming) ties; and trade

unions are disconnected from all other actors within the network. Trade unions in many garment-producing countries are led by men who may not be responsive to the needs of women workers. Women are often excluded from or have inadequate access to these unions.



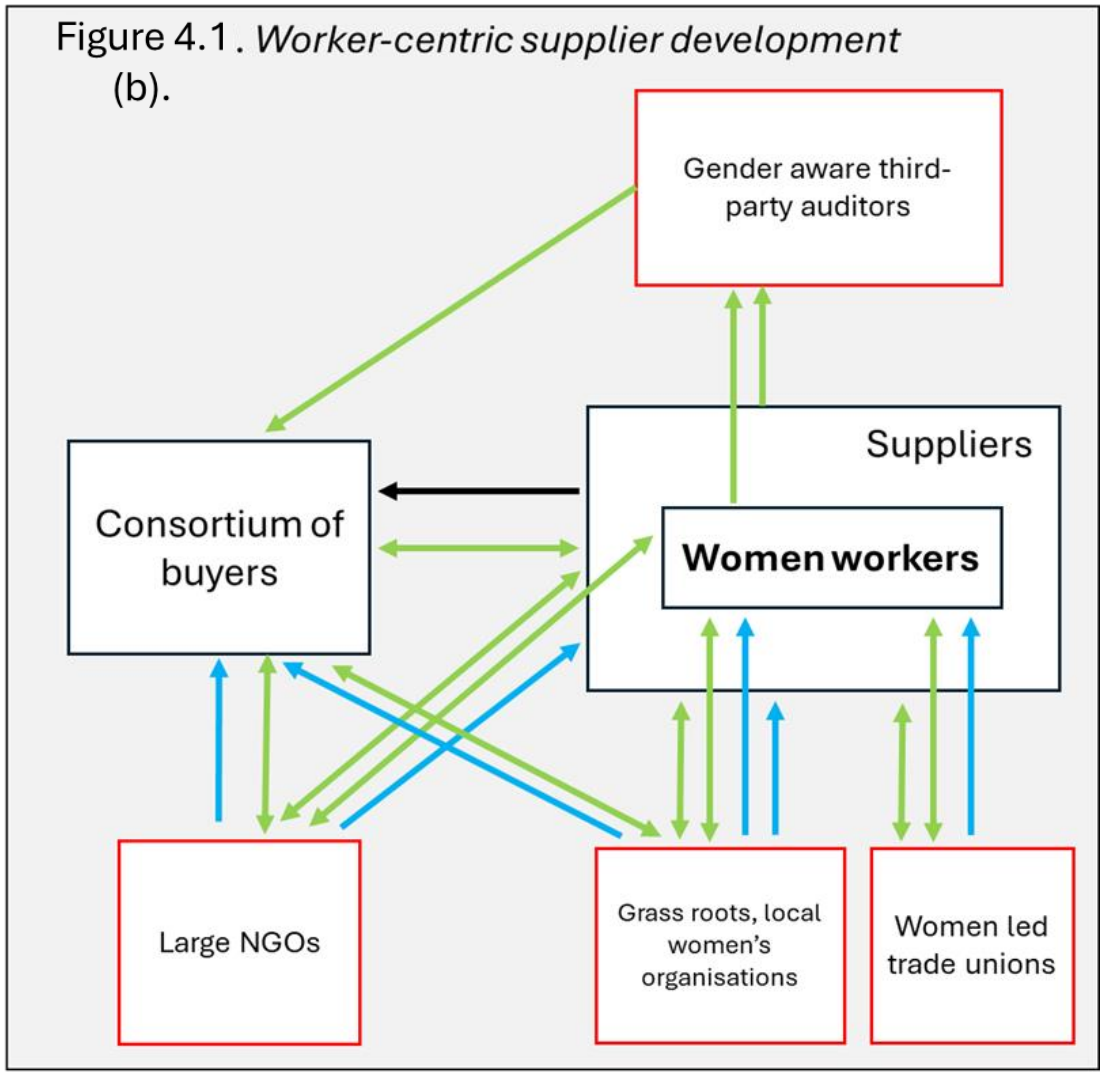


Figure 4.1 Buyer-Led and Worker-Centric Supplier Development

The envisioned future system of the interviewees, based on moving away from a buyer-led, top-down approach to a worker-centric supplier development (WCSD) approach, is depicted in Figure 4.1 (b). This network has 19 strong ties, including both flows of information and services. Meanwhile, women workers have six strong ties; there are no disconnected actors and fewer structural holes, leading to greater cohesion and network density and enabling greater information sharing between actors. The following section will discuss each of the main concepts from SNA in greater detail, using data from the interviews to contrast the buyer-led and worker-centric models.

4.6.3.1 Cohesion

Buyer-led supplier development for gender equality Figure 4.1 (a) adopts a top-down organisation-to-organisation level approach between the buyer and supplier. The only strong ties are between the buyer and supplier and with any third-party auditors working on the buyer's behalf. As the Gender Expert at NGO 4 explained, buyers and suppliers can, however, "lack long-term relationships", which contributes to unsustainable and ineffective supplier development initiatives for gender equality. Meanwhile, although a development program may incorporate a large NGO or a local grassroots women's organisation, rarely are both involved in the same program and opportunities are missed to develop local, contextualised initiatives. Western NGOs are criticised for lacking the ability to be objective towards their buyer clients and for a lack of understanding of the local context, meaning their gender equality programs are ineffective. There is a lack of cohesion in the network, reflected in a low network density, a limited number of full connections between actors in the network, and structural holes. The lack of cohesion results in limited cooperation or information exchange; and the resources of key actors,

such as trade unions and NGOs, are often underutilised. Supplier development programs are often organised bilaterally between one buyer and one supplier rather than broader multi-stakeholder initiatives.

In the WCSD approach proposed in the interviews Figure 4.1 (b), there are far more strong ties between actors (3 *vs*. 14) and the network is much denser. Brand 2 emphasised the importance of deep inter-organisational relationships that go beyond the organisation-to-organisation level, asserting that: “We really want to have a solid relationship with a factory and factory management… that actually drives change." Meanwhile, the Head of CSR and Sustainability at Brand 5 highlighted the "Importance of stable, long-term supplier relationships" that allow an organisation to work closely with its suppliers, increasing capacity by investing in and leveraging technology, and building trust. This needs to be complemented by relationships with other actors that understand the local context. The Garment and Footwear Sector Lead at NGO 1 stressed that “brands need to be working with local NGOs within the country context.” Local organisations, including women-led trade unions and grassroots women’s organisations, help to build rapport and trust with women workers, providing an independent third-party grievance mechanism. These NTSCAs enhance network density and embed women within the network.

4.6.3.2 Equivalence

The buyer-led supplier development approach Figure 4.1 (a) exhibits limited structural equivalence between connected actors. Trade unions are effectively isolated and not routinely replaced by other NTSCAs, such as grassroots or local women’s organisations. A lack of collaboration between brands leads to fractured, siloed initiatives that are

inefficient in terms of resources and fail to be impactful. The Gender Expert at NGO 4 referred to “Programmatic attempts to help workers that don't address the main issues". The Garment and Footwear Sector Lead at NGO 1 referred to “Short-term programs and quick fixes" while the Responsible Sourcing Coordinator at Brand 2 stressed the need to move towards “sustainable and comprehensive programs for long-term impact and commitment”.

The WCSD approach Figure 4.1 (b) reflects calls for greater collaboration and a consortium or collective of brands. This would enable information sharing and resource pooling, address the problem of fragmented initiatives, reducing waste and achieving more sustainable initiatives. Suppliers and women workers can be seen as having structural equivalence, as women workers are situated within suppliers. For WCSD to be effective, it is argued that traditional firm level initiatives, like building capacity and trust, making financial investments, and listening to the needs of the supplier must be applied at the within-firm level of women workers. The Project Manager at NGO 6 highlighted the need for “Women workers to have an input into decision-making" to ensure their needs are central to the process. In Figure 4.1 (b), NTSCAs also have structural equivalence, providing information and services to buyers, suppliers, and women workers. This enhances the cohesion of the overall network to achieve impactful initiatives.

4.6.3.3 Prominence

Focal buying organisations have significant prominence in the buyer-led approach to supplier development depicted in Figure 4.1 (a), dictating the flow of information to suppliers whilst primarily relying on incoming information from third-party auditors. This dynamic, alongside negative brand practices, creates barriers to the empowerment of

suppliers and women workers. Women workers, within suppliers, are rarely reached by other actors, reflected in their low degree of closeness centrality and their limited access to information within the network. They are shielded by the supplier organisation, with a low eigenvector centrality, and have limited influence on or access to powerful actors within the network. It was thus claimed that programs will continue to fail if they do not consult the intended recipient of the initiative "having a women (worker) led process, which is the most effective process because it is by giving power changing power dynamics, that you can only bring change, changing power dynamics. So, if you're not able to do that, and if your programme does not do that, your programme is pretty much going to fail." (Strategic Campaigns Coordinator, NGO 2). Supplier development and auditing typically take place at the managerial level of the supplier firm and information regarding policies and grievance channels is rarely communicated to the shop floor, reinforcing women's lack of power and agency.

A WCSD approach attempts to shift network prominence somewhat from buyers to women workers who, according to Brand 3, otherwise have a "Lack of agency in the workplace". Thus, in Figure 4.1 (b), women workers have a higher degree of centrality and hold a more central network position, providing access to information and the ability to influence decision making. In fact, there was a strong emphasis on empowering women workers from both the NGOs and brands interviewed. Gender Expert at NGO 4 referred to the importance of "Empowerment through learning and leadership." Meanwhile, the Project Manager at NGO 6 highlighted that "Programs and projects to protect women and women in leadership must talk to women to ensure it caters to what they need." In addition, there is a movement towards elevating the role of NTSCAs, particularly through grassroots or local women's organisations and women-led trade unions. For example, the

Head of Human Rights at Brand 3 explained that working with local women's organisations will help with "Addressing structural barriers and social norms." These actors can facilitate the agency of women workers, mediating and supporting their relationships with buyers and suppliers.

The Head of CSR and Sustainability at Brand 5 stressed that "Businesses must ensure they are investing [in suppliers] to ensure human rights are upheld" (Brand 5). Buyers must also reform their own purchasing practices. For example, the Strategic Campaigns Coordinator at NGO 2 highlighted that "brands are liable and responsible for paying a living wage" while the Garment and Footwear Sector Lead at NGO 1 explained there is a "need for a living wage to break the cycle of poverty". Buyers must also invest in their own organisations to achieve gender equality in their upstream supply chains. In particular, there is a need to ensure CSR teams are adequately resourced and sufficiently prominent within the buying organisation. In fact, the Responsible Sourcing Coordinator at Brand 2 conceded that "brands are making millions and billions in profit, there is enough resources for these projects".

4.6.3.4 Range and Brokerage

Although seven actors are depicted within the network, only three are well connected in the buyer-led approach Figure 4.1 (a). Women workers are disconnected from the buyers driving supplier development and NTSCAs are on the periphery of the network. This creates structural holes and a low network density, presenting an argument for intervention. In the WCSD approach Figure 4.1 (b), instead of a single buying organisation orchestrating supplier development initiatives, it is argued that buyers should collaborate with one another and with other actors (and workers), drawing on collective resources

and expertise. Buyers working together avoids siloed projects, increases their leverage, and reflects the complexity of contemporary supply chains. Garment and Footwear Sector Lead at NGO 1 argued: “brands must work collectively, as one supplier does not just work for one brand". Meanwhile, women-led trade unions and gender-aware third-party auditors help to bridge structural holes, connecting buyers to women workers inside suppliers. These organisations are embedded in the same cultural context and language as the workers, establishing greater trust and empathy, and inputting their own knowledge and capacity to support initiatives. They can also play a role in monitoring supply chains, supporting grievance mechanisms, and detecting gender issues better than those conducted by other, more traditional third-party auditors that were criticised for being superficial and detached from the challenges faced by women workers.

Overall, the WCSD approach seeks to break down the barriers faced by women workers, establishing them as legitimate, key actors with greater agency. This represents a shift from a buyer-led, top-down model of supplier development dictated by the agenda of western focal firms towards a worker-centric bottom-up approach supported by top-down commitment, non-traditional supply chain actors, and gender-sensitive auditing. This is a more collaborative, inclusive network for advancing gender equality in supply chains, where women workers and their voices are at the centre of the design of supplier development initiatives and gender equality solutions.

4.7 Discussion

There is a growing body of research on socially sustainable SCM (e.g. Zorzini et al., 2015). This literature has primarily focused on considerations such as decent work (Soundararajan et al., 2021), working conditions (Nakamba et al., 2017), and modern

slavery (Gold et al., 2015). Research has paid only limited attention to gender equality in supply chains (Akbari et al., 2024). Instead, the literature largely treats workers as one homogenous group, thereby failing to identify the challenges and barriers faced specifically by women workers. This research therefore expands the literature by adopting a gender lens when studying socially sustainable SCM, responding to calls for further research into gender within supply chains (Chin and Tat, 2015; Zinn et al., 2018; Ruel et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2021; Akbari et al., 2024). With a focus on upstream issues in the supply chain, the research complements work on the issues affecting women downstream in focal firms, including the role of women in leadership and on executive boards (Park and Krishnan, 2005; Bear et al., 2010; Galbreath, 2011; Bernardi and Threadgill, 2010; Dawar and Singh 2016). Meanwhile, by focusing on the garment industry, the research complements earlier work by Barnes and Kozar (2008) and Köksal et al. (2017).

Eighteen issues facing women are identified, including those related to low wages, violence and harassment, and the lack of effective pregnancy and maternity policies. Some of the issues identified affect both men and women, meaning they were already known in the literature (see, e.g., Govindan et al., 2021). This research, however, demonstrates that these issues can be compounded by gender. For example, although low wages are a generic issue, it is a particularly pronounced problem for women given their typically lower hierarchical position within garment suppliers and given the gender pay gap. Other issues may appear generic, but they manifest in a gendered way, such as when violence and harassment take on a gendered form (GBVH). Meanwhile, other issues, such as concerning pregnancy and maternity, are specifically directed towards women. These issues are largely neglected in the socially sustainable SCM literature. It

is therefore important that social audit protocols (e.g., Benstead et al., 2021) are augmented to identify such signs of gender inequality. The research has also identified some of the challenges to addressing gender inequalities in supply chains. This includes the need for buyers to look at their own purchasing practices, as is also the case for tackling modern slavery (New, 2015), as well as more complex challenges relating to the patriarchal nature of societies.

This research has emphasised the role of supplier development in tackling gender inequalities in supply chains. Prior literature on supplier development includes a focus on sustainability-oriented supplier development (e.g., Jia et al., 2023), but much of this literature is concentrated on addressing environmental issues rather than social issues (Lu et al., 2018). This research expands the literature by identifying the importance of adopting a WCSD approach if gender inequalities are to be addressed. This contrasts with the dominant buyer-led approach more typically described in prior research (Håkansson and Persson, 2004; Wichmann and Kauffman, 2016). Furthermore, SNA has been helpful in unpacking why buyer-led approaches fail to address gender inequalities in supply chains and how a worker-centric approach would succeed using evidence from the exploratory interviews.

A WCSD approach is about putting the worker, and in this case the women workers, at the heart of the solution. Importantly, it is not about adopted a worker-led approach, which would put the emphasis on women taking responsibility for solving the problem. Rather, it is about putting women workers at the centre of solution design, supported by other actors who can amplify their voices, increasing their agency and capacity, and leading to a more holistic, collaborative and sustainable approach. This builds on earlier critiques of buyer-led supplier development (Saghiri and Mirzabeiki, 2021) by examining

its effectiveness for achieving gender equality. The research reinforces Blonska et al.'s (2013) assertion that most supplier development initiatives are buyer centric, overlooking the perspective and voices of the central figures within the network that the initiatives are aimed at – in this case, the women workers.

Although this research advocates for a shift to WCSD, the buyer-led supplier development literature still provides some transferrable insights. That is, developing long term relationships, making technical and financial investments, conducting training, monitoring, and knowledge transfer activities, improving social capital, and ensuring effective governance (Handfield et al., 2006; Wagner, 2006; Parmigiani et al., 2011; Blonska et al., 2013), is still relevant to addressing barriers to gender equality. The difference is that these aspects need to be combined with a deep understanding of the perspective of women workers, including connections outside the factory to unpaid domestic labour, which is key to holistically tackling gender inequality.

Collaboration is identified as a key element of building a cohesive network of actors, including collaboration with common, locally embedded NTSCAs, such as women-led trade unions and grassroots women's organisations. These actors can provide culturally contextualised support to women workers and help to amplify their voices (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021). This supports Cooper's (2024) argument that better collaboration amongst stakeholders, not only buyers and suppliers, is required to achieve gender equality within supply chains. This collaboration builds trust and facilitates knowledge sharing between buyers, suppliers, NTSCAs, and women workers (Blonska et al., 2013; Adler and Kwon, 2002; Modi and Mabert, 2007). Overall, this discussion leads to the following propositions:

Proposition 1: *A worker-centric approach to supplier development for gender equality promotes collaboration between traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors to bridge gaps in the network and create a supportive environment for enacting change.*

Proposition 2: *A worker-centric approach to supplier development for gender equality is aided by the integration of a more diverse set of locally embedded actors. This enhances contextual understanding and provides access to the knowledge and resources needed to implement effective solutions.*

Furthermore, this research builds on Reinecke and Donaghey's (2021) discussion of worker-driven initiatives that promote decent work, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive practices when designing, implementing, and monitoring supplier development initiatives. Moreover, it expands on Lu et al.'s (2018) discussion of using socially responsible supplier development to build the capacity of suppliers and empower women workers. This seeks to put women at the heart of supplier development for gender equality, elevating their position and amplifying the female worker voice (Rodriguez-Garavito, 2005; Stephens et al., 2024). This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3: *A worker-centric approach to supplier development for gender equality elevates women workers, amplifying and shifting their voices from the periphery to the centre and fostering an environment for sustainable change.*

4.8 Conclusions

This research contributes to addressing the gender gap in OSCM research (Tang, 2022) by applying a gender lens to the field of socially sustainable SCM. It has identified eighteen issues affecting women workers in garment suppliers and three key barriers to tackling gender inequality in supply chains. Moreover, the research has outlined the potential of adopting a WCSD approach for gender equality using SNA.

4.8.1 Research Implications

This research contributes to the emerging body of research on gender in OSCM (Akbari et al., 2024), underscoring the importance of conducting further research into the phenomenon, especially within the garment industry. Moreover, it expands the literature on socially sustainable SCM (Zorzini et al., 2015), which has typically treated supplier factory workers as a single homogenous group. In this research, a gender perspective has provided new insight into known social issues and identified novel social issues not previously referred to in this literature.

Meanwhile, the research contributes to the supplier development literature, which has predominantly focused on environmental sustainability (Jia et al., 2023), by highlighting the importance of adopting a WCSD approach for gender equality. This can be facilitated by embedding a broader range of NTSCAs, including grassroots NGOs and women-led trade unions, within the network and ensuring the (women) worker voice is heard (Stephens et al., 2024). This approach may also have implications for engaging in supplier development to address other social issues, including those that intersect with gender such as concerning migrant workers or caste-based discrimination (Soundararajan et al., 2024).

4.8.2 Practical Implications

Focal firms looking to achieve gender equality in their supply chains must look within their own organisations and into the wider supply network. Gender equality is a universal problem; hence buyers should look at the treatment of women within their own organisation before looking externally. It is important buyers consider how their own purchasing behaviours may contribute to the problem upstream and that they ensure teams responsible for enhancing gender equality in the supply chain are properly resourced and connected to the boardroom to ensure their actions are not merely purplewashing. This would be legitimised by ensuring accessible grievance mechanisms for all workers; integrating policy feedback loops for monitoring the effectiveness of initiatives in a gender-sensitive manner; and committing to a transparent and accountable approach, such as by publicly reporting on gender equality, measuring performance against international benchmarks and goals such as UN SDG 5.

Beyond the boundaries of the buying organisation, it is important that firms adopt a WCSD approach for gender equality, amplifying the voices of women in the design, implementation, and monitoring of gender equality plans but without passing responsibility for addressing the problem to women. Enacting genuine change will also be enabled by working with local organisations that are culturally embedded and with women-led trade unions that reach into supplier organisations. Moreover, buyers are encouraged to work together with other buyers as a collective, so they have greater leverage over common suppliers and can share intelligence and resources.

The insights provided into the way in which gender inequality manifests in supply chains also have implications for those actors conducting social auditing by pointing to

additional factors to consider when visiting factories. Finally, although the findings are in the context of the garment industry, they may also be useful to managers in other industries, especially where women are disproportionately represented at lower hierarchical levels.

4.8.3 Limitations and Future Research

The first author of this research is a white western woman who cannot claim to fully understand the experiences of women garment workers in other cultural contexts. This research should therefore be interpreted with this in mind. Additionally, this research is from the buyer and NGO perspectives only. Although the NGOs that were interviewed work directly with female garment workers, it was not possible to access these workers directly. It is argued that the originality of insight provided compensates for any shortcomings in the data. Nonetheless, future research should look to expand the scope of the research, where possible, by incorporating other actors, especially women workers. Finally, the interviews discussed women workers as one group, but gender intersects with many other important personal characteristics. Therefore, future research should explore how other characteristics also affect the lived experiences of women workers.

Chapter 5: Paper 4

Paper 4: The Equality Paradox: Why Gender Initiatives Are Always on the Agenda, But Never a Priority

5.1 Background on Paper 4

Paper 4 provides an overview of the Action Research project, which in part includes papers 2 and 3. The action research project took place over 18 months with a UK based garment brand with international supply chains. By engaging directly with key stakeholders and implementing iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, this study aims to generate both practical solutions and theoretical insights. The study broadly contributes to the OSCM field by demonstrating the value of action research in addressing gender issues within SSSCM.

The paper includes evidence from the focal firm and from interviews with NGOs and other brands. Note that these interviews were conducted separately from those reported on in Paper 3. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a PhD seminar, a departmental research seminar, and a seminar organised by Lancaster University Management School's Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business.

This paper was written in collaboration with my supervisors who co-authored this paper, Professor Mark Stevenson and Dr Lingxuan Liu. As the first author I contributed the majority of the work, 80%, which included undertaking the action research project and working within the UK brand for 18 months. During this time, I made observations, wrote

notes, undertook interviews, and participated in workshops, webinars and events. I conceptualised the research idea, conducted an initial review of the literature to assess the existing knowledge base, designed and implemented the action research cycles, and carried out the data collection through stakeholder interactions. I transcribed and analysed the data, refining insights through continuous reflection and adaptation. Additionally, I wrote all first full draft versions of the paper.

My co-authors played a crucial role in guiding the methodology, particularly in refining the iterative research cycles, suggesting strategies to enhance stakeholder engagement, and strengthening the theoretical arguments before submission. Their contributions accounted for 20% of the total work related to this paper. My co-authors have certified below that they agree with the above claim with regards to everyone's contribution to this paper.

Professor Mark Stevenson

Date: 28th February 2025

Dr Lingxuan Liu

Date: 28th February 2025

5.2 Abstract

Despite the centrality of gender equality to the United Nations' sustainable development goals and the increasing prominence of gender equality within corporate social responsibility (CSR) agendas, gender-oriented initiatives remain secondary to other social sustainability concerns in supply chains, such as the elimination of modern slavery and child labour. Through an action research project with a UK based garment brand, this research examines the intra-firm barriers preventing the effective implementation of gender equality initiatives in supply chains. Supply network analysis (SNA) is used to investigate the intra-firm relationships and structures that inhibit gender equality initiatives, leading to the identification of six barriers. More specifically, these are: (1) a lack of cross departmental collaboration; (2) internal goal misalignment between departments; (3) a lack of power, influence, and agency within the firm; (4) a lack of dedicated resources, capacity, and capabilities; (5) inability to diffuse initiatives and information throughout the company; and, (6) a lack of boundary spanners for intra- and inter-firm relationships. The research outlines three propositions for effective gender due diligence of the supply chain while the study contributes to a broadening of research on socially sustainable challenges in supply chains. It demonstrates the value of action research for better understanding complex challenges in achieving gender equality and the utility of SNA for studying intra-firm, rather than inter-firm, dynamics.

Keywords: gender equality, sustainable supply chain management, supply network analysis, garment industry, action research.

5.3 Introduction

In recent years, some corporations have begun to take greater ownership of addressing unethical practices in their supply chains, often by engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. While the emphasis of this work is more often on environmental dimensions of sustainability, social issues have received increasing attention. Despite this, social sustainability challenges continue to plague supply chains. For example, Inditex, Bestseller, Primark, and HandM were recently named and shamed for repeated human rights violations (BHRRC,2023). Where social issues are being considered, the focus is often on issues like child labour and modern slavery. In contrast, and despite often intersecting with child labour and modern slavery concerns, gender inequalities are often overlooked (Akbari et al., 2024) or only superficially addressed, leading to claims of Purplewashing[1].

Despite a rise in global frameworks, such as the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs) – including SDG5 specifically on 'Gender Equality' – gender inequalities continue to be a major concern in global supply chains. Women workers face many challenges including, for example, sexual harassment (Hossain et al., 2013; Kabir et al., 2018), a lack of access to collective action (Pearson at al., 2013; Sanborne, 2005), and low wages (Ali and Medhekar, 2016). This is a particular concern in labour-intensive industries employing a high proportion of women like the garment industry, where 80% of workers are women (ILO, 2019).

Focal firms play an important role in driving successful sustainable supply chain initiatives, including via supplier selection and management, the implementation of

[1] Purplewashing is when a company claims to be in support and pursuit of gender equality or women's rights "without actually taking concrete or significant action… often used to gain popularity or improve brand image" (Republik, 2024).

governance mechanisms, and collaborative partnerships with stakeholders (Morais and Barbieri, 2022). Research that seeks to enhance gender equality would therefore benefit from adopting a focal firm perspective, exploring how organisational structures and processes can be shaped to address gender inequalities. Hence, it is important to examine how the inter-firm practices of the focal firm are geared towards tackling gender inequality in the supply chain. Despite the potential of operations and supply chain management to contribute to addressing the challenge of gender inequality in supply chains, the topic has received only limited attention from scholars working in this domain (Tang, 2022; Akbari et al., 2024). Although some research has looked at factors such as senior management buy-in and aligning internal firm policies (e.g., Teixeira, 2022), further research is required from a focal firm perspective that seeks to understand how organisations approach gender equality in the supply chain and why this remains such a prevailing problem.

This study forms part of an action research project undertaken within a garment brand that sought to develop and implement gender due diligence strategies for its supply chain. While the project made positive strides, the organisation is yet to make significant changes to its approach to gender due diligence of the supply chain. The research points to an "equality paradox" – that is, although gender inequality is considered a global problem that also features on the organisation's agenda, it fails to become a key organisational priority. The research identifies barriers within the focal firm to enhancing gender equality and seeks to triangulate the findings through interviews with other garment brands and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The research is aided by a novel application of supply network analysis (SNA), often reserved for studying inter-firm structures and relationships, to understand structural and relational dimensions within

the firm, highlighting opportunities for targeted interventions. To explore these topics, the research addresses the following question:

RQ: What are the barriers within focal firms to tackling gender equality within the supply chain?

The research identifies six key intra-firm barriers to achieving gender equality within garment supply chains, leading to a series of propositions. Addressing the identified barriers will contribute to achieving gender equality within garment firms and their supply chains. Meanwhile, by focusing on gender, the study contributes to a broadening of research on socially sustainable challenges in supply chains. From a methodological and theoretical perspective, the study demonstrates how action research can be a useful tool of enquiry for better understanding complex challenges in achieving gender equality from an intra-organisational perspective; and it demonstrates the utility of SNA for studying intra-firm, rather than inter-firm, dynamics. More specifically, action research, with its participatory and iterative nature, offers a practical pathway to co-creating solutions, whilst SNA provides a valuable framework for revealing how power imbalances, communication flows, and informal relationships perpetuate gender inequalities.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 5.4 presents a literature review exploring relevant studies before the methodology is presented in Section 5.5, describing the action research study approach used. The findings are then presented in Section 5.6 and analysed using SNA, followed by a discussion in Section 5.7 and conclusions in Section 5.8.

5.4 Literature Review

5.4.1 Socially Sustainable Supply Chain Management

Socially sustainable supply chain management refers to the practices and policies that protect human welfare and promote equity throughout supply chains (Nakamba et al., 2017). While environmental concerns dominate the sustainability literature, there is growing recognition of social issues and increasing attention on social sustainability within the field of supply chain management (Yawar and Seuring, 2017; Zorzini et al., 2015). This has included work on topics such as decent working conditions, freedom of association, and the elimination of forced labour (Seuring and Müller, 2008; Soundararajan et al., 2021).

Many studies, however, have examined sustainability and social sustainability through the lens of a dyadic buyer-supplier relationship (Najjar et al., 2020), including how buyer-supplier relationships influence sustainable practices (Björkman and Green, 2024), supply chain leadership within buyer-supplier relationships (Ahmadi-Gh and Bello-Pintado, 2024), and the impact of relational governance on commitment to sustainability in buyer-supplier relationships (Awan et al., 2018). This research offers a complementary focus on the intra-firm level and how structures and relationships within the focal firm can be valuable in supporting social sustainability initiatives within supply chains.

Extant literature on socially sustainable supply chain management is mostly conceptual leading to calls for more empirical research into how social sustainability can be enhanced within supply chains, including practice-based approaches such as action research (Missimer and Mesquita, 2022). Additionally, literature suggests that social sustainability initiatives may fail within firms due to fragmented organisational structures, calling for further research into how these structures can be reformed,

including by fostering cross-cutting collaboration and restructuring (Missimer and Mesquita, 2022). It is also claimed that social sustainability efforts fail when firms do not fully integrate them or treat them as add-ons, requiring an overhaul of firm processes and decision-making procedures (Missimer and Mesquita, 2022).

Despite the firm level challenges to enhancing social sustainability, it is recognised that there is a connection between commitment to sustainability and improved firm performance. For example, "collaboration between the purchasing function and other departments involved in the supply process (such as operations or logistics) is important when approaching sustainability" (Luzzini et al., 2015, pg 20). This collaboration can enable boundary spanning within a firm, leading to competitive advantage (Luzzini et al., 2015). Other studies have focused on how a variety of individual factors within firms' impact sustainability and CSR. This includes the impact of managerial practices (Zangara and Filice, 2024), the alignment and integration of social sustainability practices within a firm (Alghababsheh and Gallear, 2022), and links between a firm's social performance, employee wellbeing, and financial performance (Wang et al., 2022). This research builds upon this literature by exploring gender equality as a dimension of socially sustainable supply chain management, utilising and studying the internal dynamics within one focal garment organisation to better understand how intra-firm dynamics impact the effectiveness and success of social sustainability within supply chains.

5.4.2 Gender within SSCM and the Garment Industry

Discussions of gender equality largely exist outside operations and supply chain management scholarship; however, this is beginning to change as gender equality is increasingly understood as being a crucial aspect of social sustainability. There are calls

within sustainable supply chain management for further research into gender, which has "been overlooked in the literature and still remains a marginal subject for most companies even though it is part of the Sustainable Development Goals from the United Nations." (Ruel et al., 2024). Within the field of sustainable supply chain management, there has been a rise in literature focused on equality and diversity within firms and supply chains (Ruel, 2021), including gender diversity on boards (Benjamin et al., 2020) and the impact of gender diversity on decision making (Ruel, 2024). These studies have often taken a focal firm perspective in understanding the impact of gender on the firm itself. This study will look at the impact of the firm, its structure and internal dynamics on gender, and the barriers to achieving gender equality.

Beyond the field of operations and supply chain management, fields like women's studies and development economics have long since documented the challenges affecting female workers within the garment industry, including low wages (Ali and Medhekar, 2016; Dey and Basak, 2017), long working hours (Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012), a lack of collective action (Sanborn, 2005), and widespread physical and sexual abuse (Akhter et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2013). Non-academic literature, particularly from NGOs, also highlights additional dimensions of these challenges, emphasising the disproportionate impact of poor labour conditions on women. For example, NGOs have shed light on issues relating to maternity protection, workplace harassment, and gender pay gaps that are often overlooked in the academic discourse. This is reflected through the inclusion of gender equality in the UN's SDGs, with SDG 5 focusing on 'Gender Equality', and through the Women's Empowerment Principles and other initiatives.

Overall, the garment industry is plagued by an unenviable record of abuses against workers, especially women, and faces continuous challenges in addressing social

sustainability issues. These challenges are often attributed to its long, international, and often complex supply chains. Despite this, many papers discussing social sustainability within the garment industry fail to discuss gender, instead focusing on drivers of social sustainability (Huq et al., 2012), sourcing decisions (Koksal, 2021), the challenges in implementing other social initiatives (Akbar and Ahsan, 2020), or issues that intersect with gender like child labour and modern slavery. NGOs have helped to elevate gender equality, putting it on the social sustainability agenda. Additionally, there have been calls from within the field for further research on gender equality as a key dimension of social sustainability (Tang, 2022; Vijeyarasa, 2020). ~~Calls for this research increased after the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated poor working conditions throughout global supply chains (Sajjad and Eweje, 2021) and disproportionately affected female garment workers (Brown, 2021; Islam et al., 2022).~~ While there has been an increase in research within supply chain management on gender, including within the garment industry (Prieto-Carron, 2008; Ruel et al., 2020; Ruel and Fritz, 2021; Akbari, et al., 2024), there is still significant scope for further study, including into the role of focal firms and how their intra-firm structures and relationships support or otherwise gender equality initiatives for the supply chain.

5.4.3 Supply Network Analysis

Supply network analysis (SNA) offers a theoretical framework for examining relationships and power dynamics within supply networks. It “seeks to manage the connections between entities through investigating and understanding behaviours and relationships." (Han et al., 2020, pg1). Furthermore, it is “appropriate for detecting and examining the structural features of supply networks and the relationship patterns among the individuals or groups involved in those networks. SNA helps to understand 1) the

functioning of supply networks, both at individual companies and the entire network levels" (Fouad and Rego, 2024).

Networks are influenced by the contexts in which they exist, shaping and being shaped by societal and institutional structures. These dynamics impact the relationships and behaviours of the actors involved (Miemczyk et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2018). In global supply chains, patriarchal norms seep into businesses and their operations from society, affecting the efficiency and sustainability of these systems. SNA offers a lens for gaining insights into: (i) the functioning of supply networks at both an individual and network level, (ii) the roles and significance of individual actors within the network, and (iii) how the overall network structure impacts the performance of actors and the network as a whole (Fouad and Rego, 2024).

Specific constructs from SNA can be used to provide deeper insights into supply networks, helping to unveil network features and their effects on individual actors and the overall functioning of the network, including the flow of information, resources, and trust within networks (Lu et al., 2018; Han et al., 2020). For instance, the concept of prominence, through measures like degree centrality and closeness centrality, reveals an actor's connections and how information flows within the network (Borgatti and Li, 2009). Similarly, cohesion, including network density and embeddedness, helps to highlight patterns of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration, while brokerage, including the role of structural holes, identifies where brokerage actions are necessary to improve network performance. Table 5.1 provides an outline of key SNA concepts considered relevant to this study.

SNA Construct		Description
Cohesion	[*Cohesion*]	The cohesiveness of the whole network, indicating the likelihood of strong common relationships between actors in the same network.
	Network Density	The level of connectedness between network members. This measures the number of existing ties in a network in relation to the number of all possible ties.
	Embeddedness	The state of dependence of members in a certain network structure. This shows how the common ties between network actors are interconnected.
Prominence	[*Prominence*]	Denotes which actor or cluster of actors have power or influence within a network, and who is in demand.
	Degree Centrality	The number of relationships one actor maintains in a given network. A high degree centrality indicates an actor has a central position in the network and will be more visible.
	Closeness Centrality	How close an actor is to all the other actors beyond those it is directly linked to in the network. Actors with high closeness centrality can quickly have access to interactions with all the other actors. Such nodes become less reliant on others.
	Eigenvector Centrality	The number and importance of adjacent nodes around an actor. Actors with high eigenvector centrality are likely to have a higher influence towards decision-making.
	Social Capital	The collection of resources that a firm receives as a result of possessing a network of interfirm relationships, which is context-specific and therefore sensitive to changes. This perspective highlights the value of relationships instead of the actors themselves.
Brokerage	[*Brokerage*]	A process of linking otherwise isolated individuals or groups. Strengthening and maintaining opportunities is valuable for sourcing firms, putting them in a strategic position through having access to a diverse set of partners and resources.
	Betweenness centrality	The share of times that an actor is needed to create the shortest pathway between other pairs of actors in a network. Strong betweenness centrality indicates control of information and resources.
	Structural hole	A situation where two actors are disconnected in a network. Actors that bridge two otherwise disconnected parties could benefit from the mediating role as a conduit for additional resources and information.

Table 5.1 Supply Network Analysis Constructs Relevant to this Research

Carter et al (2007) explained how SNA can be advantageous within the fields of logistics and supply chain management by considering concepts such as centrality and its correlation to influence information flows and identify boundary spanners for better internal and external collaboration. Most research that has adopted the SNA lens is at the inter-firm level. For example, Humphries and Mena (2012) explored how studying supply networks and their internal relationships can unveil major drivers and themes that characterise the operations of networks, including network complexity, the exercise of power, objectives and their alignment, knowledge management and dissemination, and network coordination. The authors discussed the challenges between different departments or divisions of a firm in coordinating, planning, and measuring the performance of various activities for engaging with external stakeholders.

In contrast, only a few studies have employed SNA to study structures and relationships at the intra-firm level. For example, Chen et al. (2024) discussed the importance of intra-organisational networks, identifying the different types of relationships found within firms, including "formal communication, informal communication, information sharing, advice seeking, role awareness, and trust." (Chen et al., 2024, pg3). This research therefore aims to explore gender inequality within OSCM from an intra-firm perspective using SNA. Understanding networked dynamics can reveal how work is coordinated and influences decision-making, collaboration, and power relations within firms. SNA can therefore offer a valuable methodological lens for understanding the complex, informal structures that shape organisations (Chen et al., 2024). However, SNA has rarely been used to examine issues of gender inequality within the field of OSCM, particularly at an intra-organisational level. Extant research has largely focused on inter-firm relationships, overlooking how gendered dynamics play out

within the internal networks of organisations. This research therefore addresses a gap by applying SNA to explore how gendered power dynamics influence and manifest within intra-firm networks. By doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of inequality within supply chains.

Finally, SNA is considered a useful tool for drawing insights from the social systems in which supply chains are embedded. Thus, there have been recent calls for further applications of SNA that take a 'people perspective' to address gaps in the operations and supply chain management literature (Han et al., 2020). SNA can also provide insights into the soft-tie relationships that shape supply chain dynamics. This understanding enables firms to design targeted interventions, such as gender-sensitive training or inclusive procurement policies. By applying SNA in the context of action research, this study bridges the gap between theoretical and practical approaches to gender equality in supply chains. It highlights the potential of supply network analysis to inform socially sustainable practices that prioritise gender equality as a core component of supply chain management.

5.5 Research Method

5.5.1 Action Research for Supply Chain Sustainability

This study employs action research to gain deep insights into the internal workings of a UK-based garment brand. By embedding a researcher within the organisation, the research aims to uncover the complex intra-organisational dynamics that influence gender equality initiatives for the supply chain.

Action research allows for an iterative process of action and knowledge creation through simultaneous participation and observation. It has become a well-established

method for research within sustainable supply chain management, integrating knowledge to address real-world challenges through collaboration and co-inquiry (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002; Touboulic and Walker, 2015). Additionally, it has been highlighted that other forms of research, such as case studies and surveys, may fail to capture the complexity of sustainable supply chain management (Gold et al., 2010). For example, Dentoni et al. (2012) highlighted the need for methods that are both informative and create transformative change. Thus, the focus of action research on practical change enables researchers to co-create solutions to sustainability issues (Galdwin et al., 1995). Indeed, Touboulic and Walker (2015) outlined how action research is particularly suited to working towards greater sustainability within supply chains as it is suited towards improvement, learning, and change. Furthermore. action research can develop practical solutions and contribute to theory simultaneously (Touboulic and Walker, 2018; Romsdal, 2009). The action research is undertaken from within the brand and the unit of analysis is the garment brand and its supply chains.

Molineux (2018) highlighted the usefulness of action research for complex organisational systems, which describes the modern, globalised and complex nature of supply chains in the garment industry (Gold, 2015). Furthermore, the author outlined how a linear process is less useful than the cyclical process of action research due to the ability of the latter to review and reflect on a whole system. Additionally, action research is a useful method of enquiry for investigating how organisations can implement socially sustainable practices in their procurement practices due to its collaboration between researchers and practitioners within a firm, as well as its use in studying real world problems, leading to real world solutions (Boak et al., 2016; Näslund, 2010). Touboulic

and Walker (2018) further discussed the suitability of action research for supply chain management as an applied field, where issues are often complex and concerned with the development of individuals and organisations.

Successful examples of using action research within the field of sustainable supply chain management include Benstead et al.'s (2018) use of the method to explore the topic of modern slavery, situated within a UK based garment brand. The study presented a compelling case for the use of action research to investigate social sustainability issues within supply chains, and within the supply chains of the garment industry specifically. Alongside this, action research has been used to explore sustainability within the supply chains of the automotive industry (Koplin, 2007), within sea food supply chains (Tiwari and Khan, 2019), environmental sustainability in supply chains (Hossein, 2019), for ethical and sustainable procurement (Boak et al., 2016), and the integration of environmental and social standards in supply management (Kopal, 2005

5.5.2 Data Collection

This research draws on a combination of works and guidance, including Näslund et al. (2010), Koplin (2005), Touboulic (2017), Coughlan and Coghlan (2016), Touboulic and Walker (2015), and Touboulic et al (2022). However, most significantly, the design and structure of the action research project is drawn primarily from the processes described in Toubloulic and Walker (2015) and Näslund et al. (2010). The overall action research process is outlined in Figure 5.1, demonstrating the cyclical nature of the research design.

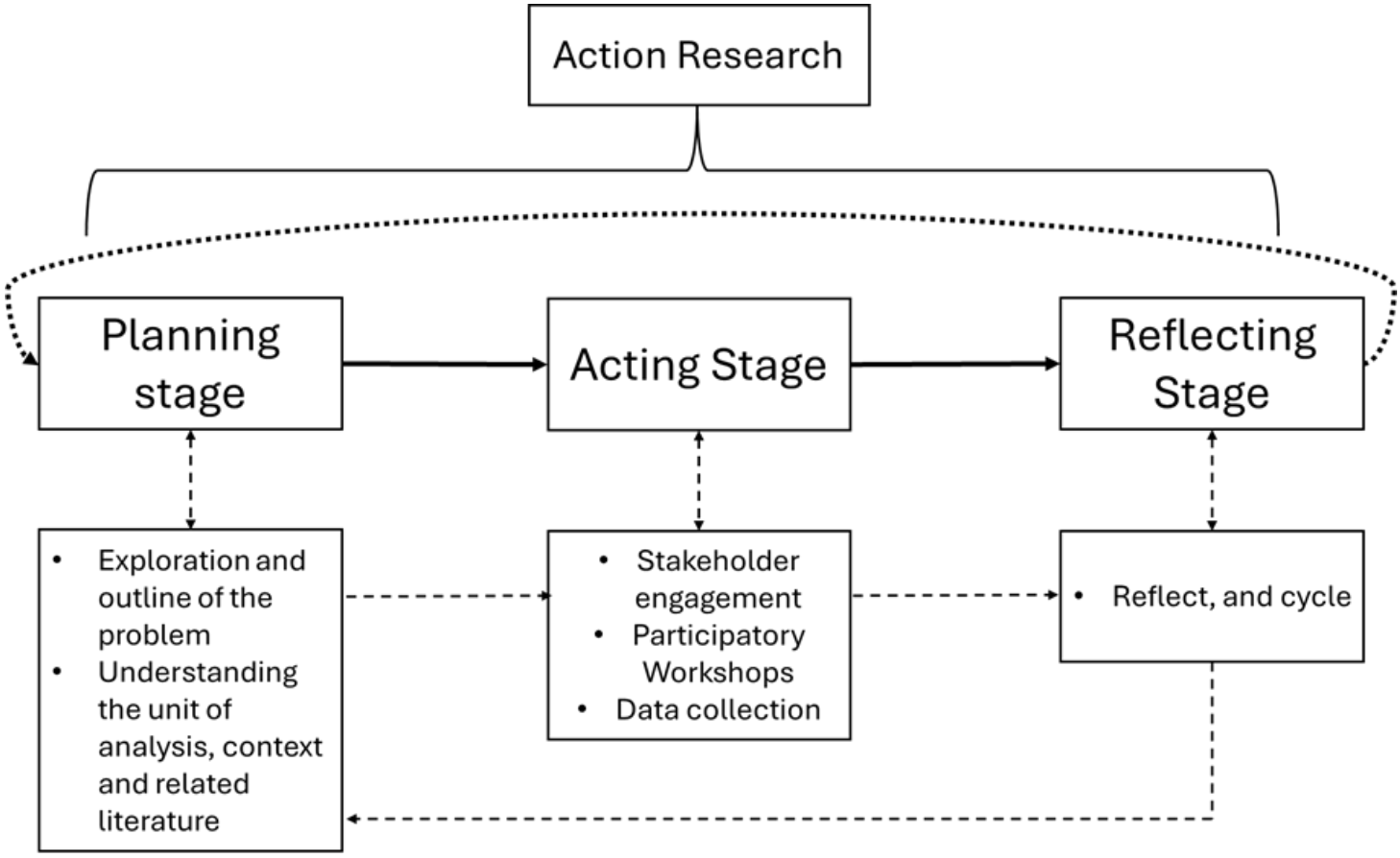


Figure 5.1 The Action Research Process – Planning, Acting, and Reflecting Stages

Action research encompasses multiple embedded cycles of action. Within this process, the following six steps were completed, as outlined by Näslund et al. (2010), Koplin (2005), Touboulic (2017), Coughlan and Coghlan (2016), Touboulic and Walker (2015), and Touboulic et al (2022).

1. Exploration and outline of the problem (Touboulic and Walker, 2015): Initial meetings and discussions with key stakeholders helped define the research area, identify existing issues, establish the researcher's role and outline the goals of the project. This stage included secondary data analysis and context development to develop an understanding of the background to the problem.
2. Understanding the unit of analysis, context, and related literature (Näslund et al., 2010): This involved reviewing internal and publicly available documents and policies of the firm, as well as reviewing available guidance for garment brands on gender due diligence within the garment industry.
3. Stakeholder engagement (Touboulic and Walker, 2015): Discussions were held with the CSR team of the focal firm, as well as with suppliers, consultants, and industry experts.
4. Participatory workshops (Touboulic and Walker, 2015): Iterative workshops facilitated the co-exploration of solutions to improve inter- and intra-organisational relationships and to align sustainability objectives.
5. Data collection (Näslund et al., 2010): Triangulated data collection methods were employed, including participant observation during day-to-day activities, reviewing meeting minutes and discussion documents, conducting semi-structured interviews, and writing up iterative workshop notes. Reflective interviews were conducted within the focal firm itself, as well as with six NGOs, six other brands, one supplier, one industry expert, one consultancy group, and one NGO used for a specific sub project. This research kept note of workshops and events attended and documents reviewed, and an action research diary was maintained. The activities

within the project, the data collected, the methodology behind the data collection, and the outcomes of the data collection are all outlined in Tabe 5.2.

6. Reflect and cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2004; Koplin, 2005): Based on evaluations, action research adjusts the interventions as needed and proceed to a new cycle of enquiry. Koplin (2005) emphasised the need to “Employ an iterative approach, allowing for continuous feedback and adjustments to the integration strategy based on real-world observations and outcomes”. The cycling process for this research is illustrated in Figures 5.1 and 5.2.

Cycle	Micro Cycle	Methodology	Data Collected	Outcomes
1. Initial Meetings and Project set up	1. Introductions and initial discussion with head of CSR and CSR team	In person meeting	Initial project scope	Established project scope, objectives, and early data collection strategy.
	2. Context development: Reviewed 37 documents on gender due diligence provided by NGOs presented to the CSR team	Scoping study of secondary data analysis	Background and context development of gender due diligence within the garment industry and relevant guidance	
2. Internal Document and Policy Review	1. Review of 17 internal documents and policies, including: - Online auditing system - Internal policies and design feedback loops - Previous human rights Higg Index assessment spreadsheet - Codes of conduct and supplier information sourcing manual Publicly available information, including press releases and PR materials	Secondary data analysis	Developed understanding of the firm's current policies, policy development and monitoring systems	Drafted initial themes for recommendations and planned key interviews to refine understanding of the project themes. Highlighted gaps in human rights policies, identifying a lack of foundation to build upon. Identified areas needing improvement based on previous year's Higg Index assessment. Interviews with 6 NGOs and 6 garment brands with international supply chains.
	2. Coordinated and set up interviews with brands and NGOs	Snowball sampling	Developed contacts and booked in interviews	

3. Workshops, MSI and Roundtable Participation	1. Participated in ETI workshops on caste discrimination and gender.	Webinar	In depth information on issues facing women workers in the garment industry	Informed project direction and provided specific information on issues facing women garment workers as well as challenges gender due diligence best practice.
	2. Participated in ETI roundtable discussion. Engaged in discussions on specific challenges (e.g., unpaid care work, cultural norms, gender-based violence).	Online focus group style conversation	In depth information on challenges facing garment brands in achieving gender equality within their supply chains	
	3. Meeting with external consultancy team regarding gender due diligence	Online video meeting	Expansion on gender due diligence best practice within the garment industry	
	4. Networking breakfast on tackling gender-based violence within garment industry	In-person event	In depth information on issues facing women workers in the garment industry and challenges facing garment brands in achieving gender equality within the garment industry	
	5. Reviewed and participated in informative session on OXFAM tools for grievance mechanisms and visibility of women. (recommended by the brand)	Observations	Observational data on grievance mechanisms and addressing specific challenges facing women workers	
	6. In-person conference on business and human rights	In-person event	Further informed how to address sustainability challenges within supply chains	
4. Brand, NGO and	1. Conducted interviews with NGOs who work with women garment workers	Open ended semi-structured	Ongoing issues within the garment industry facing women workers from the	Project adjusted based on interview data, Informed project outcome

Expert Interviews		online interview, recorded and transcribed	perspective of NGOs who work with women garment workers	used to refined and informed actionable recommendations. Project adjusted based on interview data, Informed project outcome and recommendations. Project adjusted based on interview data, Informed project outcome and recommendations.
	2. Conducted interviews with other garment brands	Open ended semi-structured online interview, recorded and transcribed	Better understanding of challenges facing garment brands in establishing better gender equality within their supply chains	
	3. Interviewed industry expert on developing policies for manufacturing supply chains for project context and development with a focus on adapting to different cultural contexts	Open ended semi-structured interview	Better understanding and inclusion of cultural and contextual issues affecting global manufacturing supply chains	
5. Scheduled Mid-Project Review	1. Adjusted roadmap based on feedback.	In-person discussion with CSR team on project so far and project deliverables	Observations and feedback through comments	Refocused deliverables on guidance reports and feasibility for future implementation. Splitting recommendations and initiatives into short, medium, and long term; and differentiating between adjustments to business practices and actions targeting women workers specifically. Greater detail and guidance on designing gender due diligence that works for suppliers and the challenges suppliers have faced in implementing due diligence.
	2. Interview with a supplier for further context and detail on design of due diligence	Open ended semi-structured interview	Interview data	
	3. In-depth review of auditing system and platform alongside a	In-person meeting	Notes and observations through conversation	

	member of the CSR team, including discussions and questions on the system			Identified misalignments in auditing systems with BSI and SMETA standards. Proposed auditing changes towards social auditing.
6. Review of Pilot Project	1. Evaluation of pilot documents included: - Application of BSR gender due diligence framework for factories: worker interview questionnaire - Application of BSR gender due diligence framework for factories: worker focus group discussion questionnaire - BSR Gender Due Diligence Framework- KII Tool – Guiding questions for Factory Management (Owners/Sr. Management/HR/Admin.) - Interview with NGO who conducted the pilot Review of all BSR framework documents produced	Secondary data analysis	Interview data, details on brand factory based on BSR framework collected by third-party NGO	Raised concerns about the approach to the pilot project and its methodology.
	2. Interview with the NGO who conducted the pilot for context and clarity	Semi structured	Interview data	

		open-ended interview		
7. Presentations of Work	1. Presentations of the project overview and specific aspects of the project at the university, to specific research groups, to the brand team, and at conferences	In-person presentations	Feedback through comments and questions	Feeback based on presentations.
8. Refining Deliverables	1. Continuous in-depth discussions and iterative process of evaluating end-project deliverables	In-person and online meetings, including written feedback and brainstorming sessions	Feedback through comments and questions	Developed an actionable report structure and recommended foundational steps for future alignment with human rights. Structured report to include business cases for gender due diligence, actionable policies, and implementation strategies. Proposed foundational human rights program and emphasised the integration of gender-sensitive recommendations into broader strategies. Recommended the development of a comprehensive human rights program. Suggested simplified, actionable guidance tailored to current resource constraints. Highlighted the importance of grassroots partnerships and transparency platforms.
	2. Presented findings to the team in the UK and Asia.	In-person and online meeting	Feedback through comments and questions	
	3. Closing interview with CSR lead.	Open ended semi-structured interview	Overview of action research project, its challenges and successes.	

				Identified opportunities for collaboration gender-based initiatives. Specific recommendations for the challenges facing women workers. Guidance on policy design, implementation, and monitoring. Guidance on developing country context.

Table 5.2 Details on the Action Research Cycles and Outcomes

As previously outlined, action research is not a linear process, but rather a series of action cycles and smaller micro-cycles within a larger cycle. Therefore, Step 6 involves reflecting on the previous steps, to first reflect, then iterate and begin a new cycle. Figure 5.2 outlines the eight cycles within this action research project, with further detail on each outlined in Table 5.2. Figure 5.2 also presents the cycles and examples of micro-cycles that occurred within the first cycle. As each individual task was undertaken, there was a period of reflection and adjustments before the next action or cycle/micro-cycle was undertaken. The cycles included initial meetings and the set-up of the project, the development of a plan and planning the actions of the research, participation in workshops and multi-stakeholder initiatives, interviews (with brands, NGOs, industry experts, suppliers and consulting groups), project reviews, a review of the pilot project, presentations, and receiving feedback from a variety of audiences, and developing deliverables. After every conversation and meeting there was a period of writing down observations, reflecting and adjusting the process.

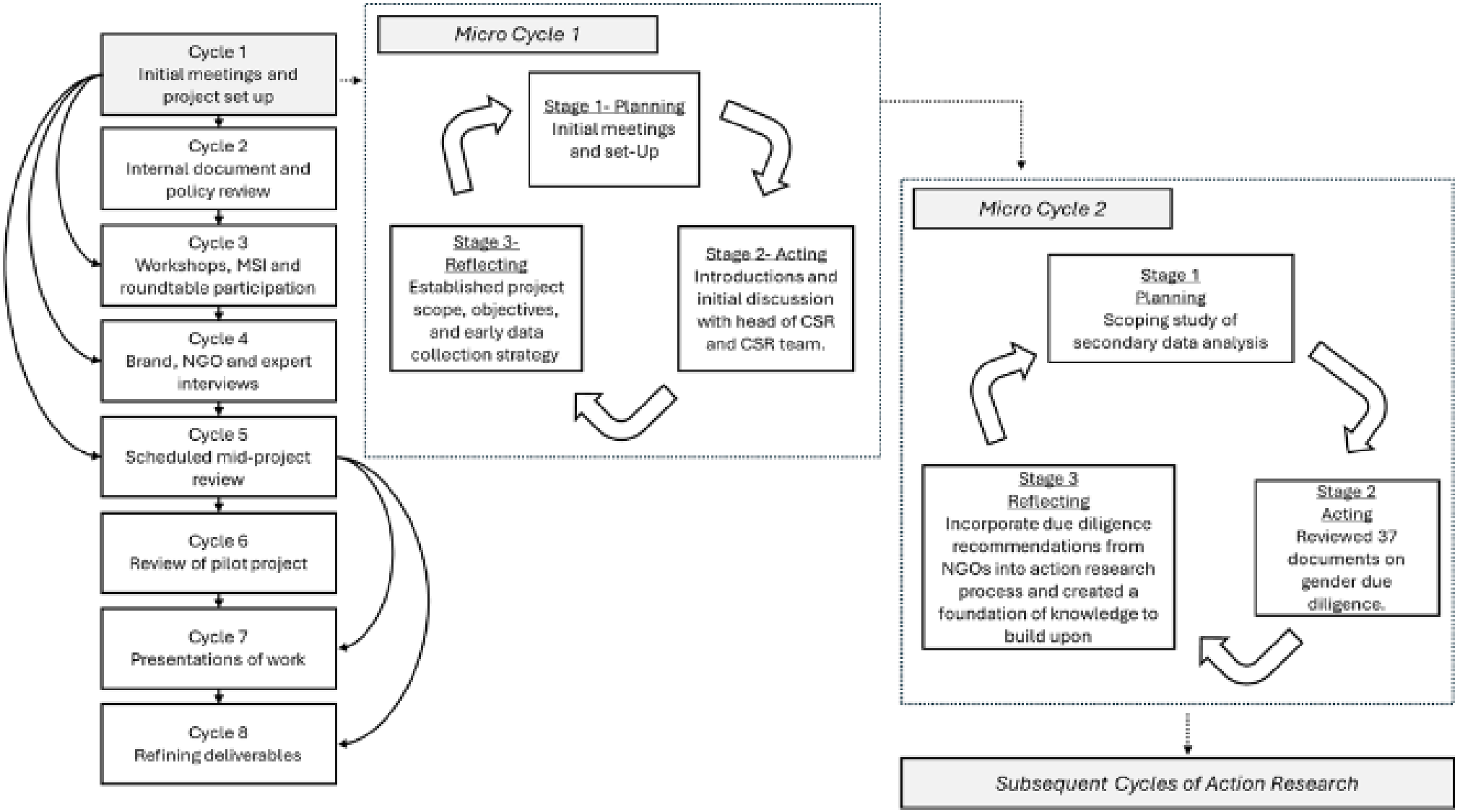


Figure 5.2 The Cycles and Micro-Cycles of the Action Research Project

5.5.3 Data Analysis

This research employed a multi-layered analytical strategy to examine the eight action research cycles. Each of the eight cycles was treated as an embedded unit of analysis, as suggested as an approach used in case study research and therefore applicable to action research as a specialised form of case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Näslund et al., 2010). All of these forms of data were reflected on and triangulated. Further detail on the analysis process is provided below.

5.5.3.1 Analysis Process

The analysis process incorporates a within-cycle analysis, which involves conducting an in-depth analysis of each individual cycle, followed by a cross-cycle comparison across all eight cycles. In conducting the analysis, the research used a thematic analysis to facilitate a two-stage data coding process (Yin, 2014; Miles and Huberman, 2013): (i) initial coding: the identification of preliminary themes and categories informed by SNA, and (ii) refinement: further development and refinement of themes. Themes emerged through both inductive, data-driven analysis and deductive, literature-informed approaches. The research team engaged in collaborative discussions to reach consensus on the final categorisation of codes.

5.5.3.2 Reflexive Research

There are potential pitfalls when undertaking action research. As the researcher is embedded within the company, they may lose objectivity or the ability to be critical (Touboulic and Walker, 2015; Touboulic at al, 2020). In order to navigate these issues, clear boundaries and expectations were drawn from the start of the project, and revisited

throughout the project (Oura, et al., 2024). Alongside this, maintaining a reflexive approach is key to recognising a researcher's own biases and how these may impact data collection (Motsa, 2023). Maintaining an action research journal, withdrawing from the field for periods of reflection, and presenting findings to academic audiences helped maintain a critical and reflexive approach. Reflecting on the data, data collection, and action cycles with the other members of the research team also helped to maintain objectivity.

Throughout Step 6, the researcher understood and maintained the importance of a reflective or reflexive approach to the action research as a key quality indicator (Marshall and Reason, 2007). This reflexivity becomes increasingly important when considering the subject of the research. That is, a reflexive approach proved to be particularly important when studying gender, ensuring that as the main researcher I recognised how my own gender identity and positionality as a woman and my experiences and biases may influence the interpretation of the project and its findings (Motsa, 2023).

Positionality here is relevant in multiple ways and understood as "… a scholarly exercise that discloses the scholar's (or the scholarly field's) social/political position as (potentially) relevant for research, or as an exploration of the implications of the inseparability of subject and object" (Dottolo and Tillery, 2015, pg4). This incorporates considering my position not only as a woman, as above, but also as a white western woman doing research into and making recommendations for the working conditions of women working in the garment industry in countries predominately within the global south. The researcher engaged in the project with the firm for approximately 18 months part time. This allowed for the development of trust throughout the project with the firm.

This led to more in-depth conversations, access to other stakeholders, workshops, meetings and detailed feedback, which added to the richness of the research.

5.6 Findings

This research was conducted within a UK based garment firm with international supply chains. The research involved working within the CSR team of the focal firm to co-design a gender due diligence program for their supply chains. The firm operated a hierarchical organisational structure, with the CSR team positioned under the senior leadership team but working relatively independently from the leadership team or any of the other departments within the organisation. The following section provides an overview of the key barriers to achieving gender equality within the firm. These barriers are framed using three constructs from SNA, which highlight how and why the identified barriers prevent the successful design and implementation of gender equality initiatives. The findings include reference to anecdotal evidence recorded in an action research diary (see Anecdotes 1 to 5 below). Meanwhile, example evidence from the supplementary interviews with other brands and NGOs is used to demonstrate that the identified barriers are relevant beyond the focal brand.

5.6.1 Cohesion

5.6.1.1 Lack of Cross Departmental Collaboration

There is a lack of intra-firm cohesion within the focal firm due to disconnected departments that are pursuing separate remits, including a lack of cohesion between the CSR team, the procurement function (buyers), and senior leadership. This fragmentation extends to contracting with external third-party auditors, which further inhibits

information flow and the internal alignment of policies, leading to a lack of cohesion, communication, and collaboration within the firm over its social sustainability agenda. The lack of cohesion meant the scope of the gender equality project initially lacked clarity as it took time for the full parameters and goals to unfold. Despite obvious wider connections, the project was limited to working with the CSR team and was unable to cross over into auditing, buying, or the senior leadership team. This reduced the scope and impact of the project.

As an example, a link was identified through interviews and secondary data analysis between negative purchasing practices and the abuse of women workers in the supply chain, including gender-based violence. However, power imbalances meant the CSR team was unable to influence the negative purchasing policies of the procurement function. This became apparent through a conversation with a member of the CSR team.

> *Anecdote 1: In discovering links between negative purchasing practices – that drove down prices and lead times, thereby putting pressure on suppliers – and violence against women workers, I raised the issue with the CSR team. I was informed that this would be out of the scope of the project and that they* [the CSR team] *had no power or input over the policies and functioning of the buying team. Buyers operated on their own policies dictated by senior leadership. The CSR team lacked a direct reporting channel to senior leadership of the organisation, e.g., to report back on the misalignment between departments and how this impacted the achievement of gender equality in the supply chain. I did not have the opportunity to meet with or speak to any members of the senior leadership team throughout the project. This was a missed opportunity*

to signal the importance of the project to the organisation or get leadership to take ownership of the problem.

Through interviews with other actors, it became clear that the above was not unique to the focal firm. Reflecting on the challenges in implementing gendered policies within their supply chains, the CSR Manager of another brand explained: "*my CSR team and sustainability team can say* [to suppliers]*, 'please comply with this code of conduct' … but if the buyers on the other team say, 'but I also want my goods yesterday and with a 2% margin' … then automatically you're setting them up for failure.*" This highlights other instances where competing objectives and a lack of internal coordination and collaboration inhibits the success of gender equality initiatives.

5.6.1.2 Internal Goal Misalignment Between Department

An early part of the action research involved evaluating the previous Higg BRM Index results of the company. These human rights due diligence assessment was undertaken approximately six months prior to the project beginning. On reviewing the Higg BRM Index results, it became clear that the company lacked a foundation of human rights due diligence for the present gender equality project to build upon. This lack of foundational work is a critical failing, as supported by secondary data published by NGOs that have provided a wealth of guidance on human rights and gender due diligence within the garment industry (OECD, 2017; BSR, 2017; Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2021). Without a foundation of human rights due diligence, the project faced several challenges and meant it first needed to commit time to developing human rights due diligence before more specific issues relating to gender could be tackled.

The CSR team creates policies with limited ability to control how they are implemented, monitored, or updated. Moreover, the focal firm generally lacks robust internal feedback loops to align policy intent with policy implementation. CSR policies are designed by the CSR team but are not measured against or integrated into the operations of other departments. When questioned on their internal policy development process, the CSR Manager explained: *"We refresh our policies every two years or so, but we don't have a specific process for this. We also don't really measure against these policies; we don't have a process for that."* It would therefore be nearly impossible to gauge the success of policies or projects, even within the firm, let alone across the supply chain. Without robust internal policy feedback loops and effective holistic cross-departmental policy dissemination, the brand cannot begin to bridge the disconnect present between departments. This had a knock-on effect on the gender equality project.

Concerns over the misalignment of goals within the firm were echoed by the CSR managers of other brands and NGOs. Informants acknowledged that current auditing practices, including the use of third-party auditing, did not effectively measure gendered issues or gather relevant information on gendered policies and programs. Yet, actors appeared unable to influence this choice. As NGO 1 outlined: *"The brands rely on social audits, and they are a useless way to find out what the level of sexual harassment is. So, people are leaving the factory or, in the worst case, they commit suicide. There's the lack of really good data and the lack of real work on it"*. Furthermore, the informant outlined the importance of *"making sure that they are there and that they're working and that women workers feel safe to use them and we expect that they deliver some kind of remedy to them. And then the way you do that is not just a tick box in your audit like oh,*

do you have a kind of a worker committee? No, you have to kind of dig into understanding how it works for women and ask them if they feel safe".

The above quotes highlight the importance of moving away from traditional third-party audits due to their ineffectiveness at detecting gender-based issues. The CSR team's and NGO's disapproval of third-party auditing alongside its continued selection by the senior leadership of firms highlights a lack of internal goal alignment. It also highlights that the issues faced within the focal firm are not unique but, rather, that they encountered throughout the industry.

5.6.2 Prominence

5.6.2.1 Lack of Power, Influence, and Agency Within the Firm

Internally, the intra-firm relationships display an asymmetry of power, with limited integration of CSR initiatives. Through discussions regarding embedding policies into the firm's overall actions, as well as specific policies targeted at individual departments, it became clear that the CSR team had not been provided with the power and agency to alter the policies or behaviour of other departments, including buyers, senior leadership, and auditing. The CSR team maintains connections within the firm but lacks substantial influence, including over third-party auditing. This lack of power over auditing practices is illustrated by the following anecdote.

> *Anecdote 2: When I raised with the rest of the CSR team that their current auditing system would be ineffective at capturing or gathering the right data on gendered issues, it became clear that there wasn't anything the CSR team could do to influence this. I reviewed the company's internal auditing reporting*

platform alongside a member of the CSR team who talked me through the platform and highlighted several issues with its functioning. It became clear that they are dissatisfied with the platform – gender was not a theme included in the current system. They acknowledged its failings at highlighting even simple social sustainability issues, and remarked that they have mentioned this to senior managers, vocalising that the system needs to change. However, I was informed during the project that changes to auditing would not be possible. Through discussion it became clear it would be too expensive to bring the auditing in house, and I should be reassured that they are using one of the highest regarded third-party auditors in the industry. Yet, the third-party auditor in question didn't offer any gender due diligence services or available gender-sensitive auditing options. The team did not have the power or resources to make or recommend changes to the auditing systems. Even after a member of the CSR team had outlined their dissatisfaction to others within the firm, no change was possible.

The importance of power and resourcing was reflected in interviews with other brands and NGOs, both in terms of intra- and inter-firm dynamics. The CSR Manager of another brand described the challenge of trying to influence gendered policies and achieve higher minimum standards for gender equality: "*we are a relatively small business with a relatively small turnover compared to big players like you know, big corporations, and obviously a lot of these dynamics are still dictated by the bigger buyers with much bigger power for investing"*. Those with more money, be it a department or a brand, appear to have the most power to dictate practice and policy. Therefore, those without it, e.g., a

CSR team or a smaller brand, will continue to struggle. When considering the CSR team's social capital, it was constrained by limited authority and unequal relationships. On an industry scale, brands' social capital correlates with their market share and financial power, which dictate their influence in setting standards. For both inter and intra-firm relationships, a redistribution of the power and prominence within the networks would benefit social sustainability initiatives.

5.6.2.2 Lack of Dedicated Resources, Capacity and Capabilities

Prior to the action research project, the brand engaged in a pilot project in India with a local trade justice NGO using Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) guidance and processes. As part of the action research project, documents from the pilot project were evaluated, including questionnaires used for workers and management within a factory and the outcome documents put together by the NGO; the NGO was also interviewed. The pilot identified several areas of improvement as well as some helpful guidance in a country context report. However, through initial discussions with the CSR team regarding the NGO they partnered with and the pilot project as a whole, some issues came to light connected to the availability of internal resources. The CSR team had a lack of adequate human and financial capital resourcing, which exacerbated the problem of its lack of power and agency within the firm.

> *Anecdote 3: When discussing the choice of NGO, a member of the CSR team informed me that this NGO was not their first choice to work with. However, due to budget constraints, they were unable to work with their first choice NGO. Additionally, the NGO did not appear to identify as many issues as I had with the*

pilot project, which made me question the thoroughness of the approach. The NGO report indicated that the factory in question had reported no accidents or incidents of sexual violence in the last three years. This, however, is unlikely to be a sign of no problems and more likely to be an indication of ineffective grievance mechanisms. There were two policies within the factory that only applied to women workers. Firstly, that women workers had to hand their phones over to management at the beginning of their shifts as they enter the factory, and secondly that if a female worker needed to leave the factory early for any reason, she must be collected by a man. This, on its own, was problematic; however, when I interviewed the male employee from the NGO who conducted the work with the factory, he justified and supported these policies. Concerningly, he outlined that he had spoken with the male factory owner himself, and he cared for the women workers 'as if they were his daughters'. The NGO worker continued to say that the policies were to protect women workers and, although the women workers had openly said they did not like the policies, they were for their own good. Firstly, the paternalistic and unhelpful approach from the factory manager reinforced negative practices and approaches to women. Secondly, the fact that women workers had openly highlighted that they disliked these policies, yet they were still being defended by men, reinforces much of the problem facing women workers within international supply chains.

The view from the NGO who conducted the pilot, as reflected in the above anecdote, raised concerns over the validity and effectiveness of the overall pilot project for

detecting gender-based issues. It was evident that the NGO, acting as a facilitator between the brand and women workers, did not actively engage in gender sensitive methods, failing to bridge the gap between the brand and the workers. Therefore, this bridge still needs to be developed. There were aspects of the NGO's methodology, e.g., in terms of how they approached talking to the women, which meant they were unlikely to obtain reliable data, especially on gendered issues. The approach of the NGO included interviewing women workers on-site and interviewing workers that were pre-selected by factory management (and, therefore, workers who had potentially been coached on what to say or threatened beforehand). The CSR team had not identified many of these issues with the pilot project when discussing its success. This may indicate a significant gap in the team's expertise and that gender expertise has not been a priority through the hiring processes or through internal training of their existing employees. This may link again to a lack of resources and investment being provided to the team, including the lack of provision for education and training.

Limited capacity and time were frequent subjects of conversation as the gender project was competing for resources with another project being undertaken by the CSR team focused on supply chain transparency. The team did not have the capacity to engage effectively in both projects. Additionally, the ongoing project on supply chain transparency could have been seen as another key foundational piece of work to collect the necessary data and develop the groundwork for the gender due diligence project. Running the two projects concurrently meant they competed rather than complemented each other.

The engagement by the action research project in workshops, in-person seminars, and networking events also demonstrated that although much information and guidance was

being provided, a lack of human and financial capital meant it would not be actioned in the near future. This prevented the final implementation stage from being undertaken and meant the project's focus shifted to working with the team to develop a future plan of implementation that would be undertaken after the end of the action research project. This lack of capacity and resources did not appear to be unique to the focal firm involved in the action research. Through interviews, it became clear that other CSR teams were also struggling. The CSR Manager of Brand 1 explained the challenges of undertaking gendered projects with limited capacity: *"another challenge is capacity. We are a team of three, but there are so many issues in this sphere. We would love to tackle things from a gender lens looking at things from a just transition, and I know that they will kind of overlap but you've also got loads of legislation coming through, you've got to keep a commercial head on."*

5.6.3 Brokerage

The action research project revealed a high number of intra-firm ties but that these lacked depth, with weak connections to other departments and to senior leadership. Weak ties here are characterised by a lack of internal alignment, communication and collaboration, linking back to a lack of cohesion. Similarly, there were weak external ties to third-party auditors, NGOs, and upstream factory workers.

5.6.3.1 Inability to Diffuse Initiatives and Information Throughout The Company

The project to develop a gender due diligence program presented an issue in and of itself. Much work on social sustainability is siloed, working in isolation rather than moving towards a holistic shift in business practices. This became more apparent as the project

progressed and as issues arose that needed to be addressed or efforts needed to be aligned with other teams or departments. This may stem from the hierarchical structure of the company, which meant information appeared to be unidirectional, flowing from senior leadership down to different departments who do not communicate horizontally, and with minimum direction or guidance flowing upwards back to senior leadership. This was coupled with the fact that, throughout the duration of the project, senior leadership were not seen to be present. It could be concluded that the project lacked genuine buy-in from senior leadership. It became evident through discussions within the focal firm as well as through interviews that CSR and social sustainability are somewhat ring-fenced.

> *Anecdote 4: Throughout the process of conducting this project, I did not directly encounter other teams or departments from within the firm. The project remained firmly about working within the CSR team on activities and initiatives considered important to the CSR team. I had asked to meet with the buying team to explore how their work connected in, but this was not possible. Project meetings remained predominately between me and two other members of the CSR team, apart from external meetings and sessions with other like-minded individuals and teams from other organisations. There was more exposure to inter-firm networks than to intra-firm networks within the focal organisation.*

Discussions about gender equality appeared to only be ongoing within the CSR team. This was mirrored by other actors, who referred to *"Programmatic attempts to help women that don't address main issues"* (Brand 2) *and "One or two segregated initiatives taken by brands* [that] *cannot make a significant impact"* (NGO 2). This siloing, alongside

the hierarchical unidirectional flow of information, prevents the holistic adoption and embedding of gender equality projects, confining them to the domain of the CSR team only.

5.6.3.2 Lack of Boundary Spanners for Intra- And Inter-Firm Relationships

When investigating the barriers to gender equality within firms, a lot can be learnt from what is missing within the firm. The gaps between departments, leading to misaligned goals, a lack of information diffusion, and a lack of cross departmental collaboration, exemplify what is missing in terms of ties, relationships, and communication channels. The focal firm lacks boundary spanners to form bridges or ties between teams within the organisation. This, of course, connects to other barriers identified earlier in this study. That is, without appropriate prominence and centrality within the firm, the CSR team will struggle to span boundaries or develop relationships.

From an inter-firm perspective, the pilot project referred to earlier also highlighted the weak access of the brand to the women workers in its supplier factories. Similarly, interviews with other brands and NGOs highlighted that this was a persistent issue across the industry exacerbated by third party auditing and a lack of collaboration with grass roots and local NGOs. The CSR Manager of another brand reasserted the need to work with local women's organisations to bridge gaps: "*We need to work with local women's rights organisations, not just local workers' rights, women's rights and feminist organisations… you need local human rights activists, It's not about labour rights*". This quote acknowledges that there are further collaborative relationships that need to be developed and that specific NGOs exist for achieving gender equality within supply chains.

Anecdote 5: My interviews with other brands and NGOs emphasised the importance of cross industry collaboration. Yet, there did not seem to be any effective mechanism for creating truly meaningful connections across the industry. This was apparent during the workshops, webinars, and in-person networking events I attended. Inter-firm ties within the garment industry often rely on unidirectional information sharing via multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) such as the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), roundtables, and networking breakfasts. Although useful, these mechanisms rarely foster true collaboration, despite some success in facilitating focused discussions on best practices. Although many brands, trade unions and NGOs came together for such events, I witnessed limited genuine non-superficial collaboration. This was equally the case for in-person events as for online events; although in-person events facilitated social networking, they did not necessarily lead to tangible actions or follow-on activities.

The above suggests that gender equality efforts remain siloed within specific isolated teams and confined to certain pockets of signature activities and projects. There is much work to be done to span boundaries at both the intra- and inter-firm levels.

5.7 Discussion

Through a novel intra-firm application of supply network analysis, this research identifies six barriers that prevent progress in achieving gender equality in supply chains. More specifically, the six barriers are: (1) a lack of cross departmental collaboration; (2) internal goal misalignment between departments; (3) a lack of power, influence, and

agency within the firm; (4) a lack of dedicated resources, capacity, and capabilities; (5) inability to diffuse initiatives and information throughout the company; and, (6) a lack of boundary spanners for intra- and inter-firm relationships. Figure 5.3 summarises these barriers and illustrates that they combine within focal firms to stall progress on gender equality initiatives. A weak line penetrates through the barriers in the figure to represent the potential for limited progress, i.e., only diluted, stunted, or restricted progress on initiatives, policies, and programs. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental rethinking of how firms approach social sustainability, focusing on collaboration, power distribution, and gender prioritisation. Without these changes, the gender due diligence and social sustainability initiatives will remain a topic for discussion rather than an achieved outcome.

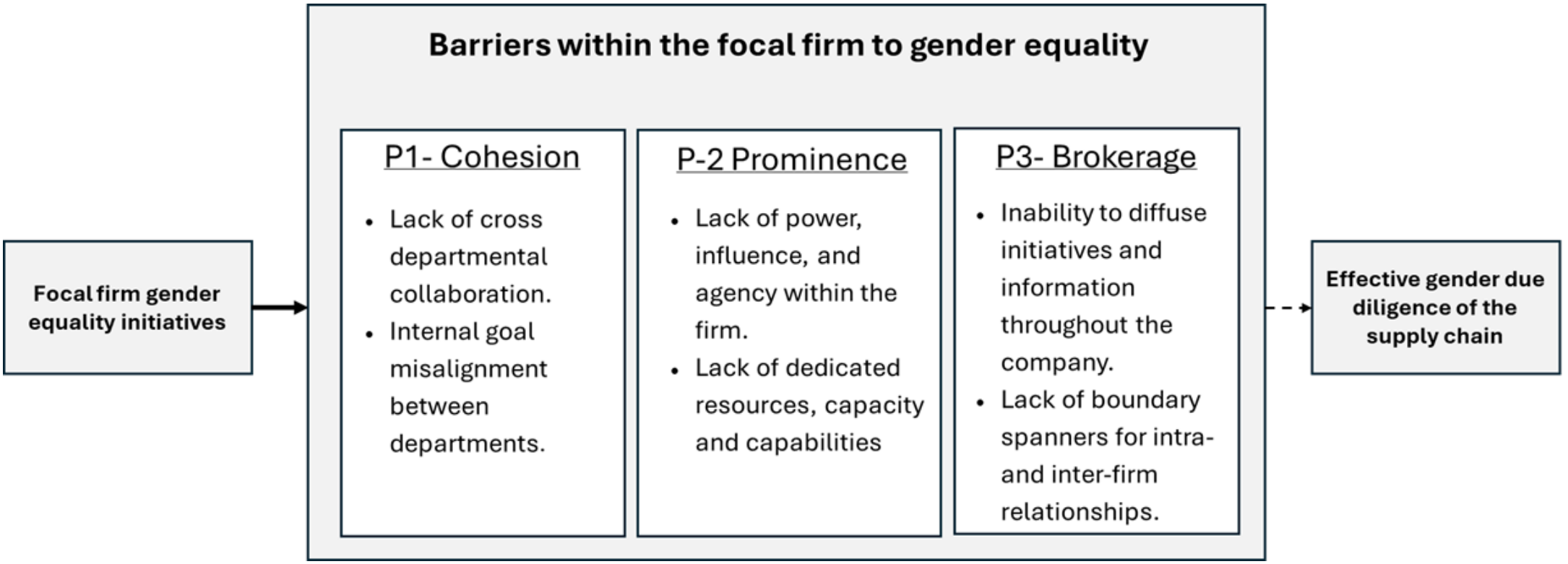


Figure 5.3 Barriers within the Focal Firm to Gender Equality

The research builds upon extant literature, including Humphries and Mena (2012) who demonstrated how certain dynamics and internal relationships drive the operation of a network, including how power is exercised and its impact, the alignment of objectives, knowledge dissemination, and overall coordination. This research highlights the importance of these factors in the context of gender equality and demonstrates how they can create barriers to achieving gender equality if not properly organised or focused on. The research also builds upon discussions about the importance of the focal firm to enhancing social sustainability in supply chains, including the importance of focal firms to implementing and embedding SDGs within operations and supply chains (Teixeira, et al., 2022). It adds to the discussion on how different focal firms approach social sustainability, i.e., their archetypal approach, and how this may impact its effectiveness (Morais and Barbierei, 2022). Lastly, it uses SNA to build upon research that adopts a network approach to understand how the structure of the firm creates barriers for itself in designing and implementing gender equality initiatives (Frostenson and Prenkert, 2015).

In this action research, a lack of cohesion within the firm negatively impacted the ability of the CSR team to effectively design and implement gender equality initiatives. There was a lack of collaboration between departments within the focal firm that inhibited the progress of the project, particularly between the CSR team and the procurement function and with senior leadership. This led to a misalignment of policies and initiatives across the organisation. This served to maintain the status quo within the organisation and meant the CSR team had little influence over, for example, negative purchasing practices, which in turn contribute to gender-based violence upstream in supply chains. The lack of cohesion was exacerbated by third-party auditing and a lack

of policy feedback loops, which led to an inability to influence the governance of policy. This lack of internal cohesion is consolidated in Proposition 1.

Proposition 1: *A lack of intra-firm cohesion, which manifests in the form of a lack of cross-departmental collaboration and goal misalignment between departments, inhibits effective gender due diligence of the supply chain*.

The CSR team in the focal firm operated at the peripheries of the organisation. It was not positioned sufficiently to influence decision makers. Moreover, there was an asymmetry of power, which prevented the integration of social sustainability and gender equality practices into core business operations. The team lacked the agency and resources to address persistent issues like ineffective third-party auditing systems and gender-sensitive auditing practices. Additionally, CSR initiatives often lack prominence due to the unidirectional flow of information within the firm, whereby initiatives are dictated by senior leadership without feedback or cross departmental collaboration. This lack of prominence, coupled with a hierarchical and siloed structure, resulted in CSR initiatives being disconnected and the CSR team without the power to change this. This leads to Proposition 2.

Proposition 2: *A lack of CSR team prominence within the firm, which manifests in the form of a lack of power, influence, and agency and is compounded by a lack of dedicated resources, inhibits effective gender due diligence of the supply chain*.

This research has also revealed that structural holes in intra- and inter-firm networks prevent the diffusion and implementation of gender equality initiatives. Weak departmental ties and a lack of boundary spanners create barriers to collaboration and knowledge sharing. This lack of ties and relationships can be just as impactful as the presence of barriers. At the intra-firm level, the hierarchical nature of the focal firm restricted information flow and prevented integration across departments. In addition, the experience of this action research showed that gender equality initiatives in focal firms can be confined to individual projects and owned by a singular CSR team rather than being embedded in the organisational culture or diffused through a holistic approach to social sustainability. Meanwhile, inter-firm networks often rely on unidirectional information-sharing mechanisms like multi-stakeholder initiatives, which fail to foster meaningful collaboration. This research emphasises the importance of boundary spanners in bridging structural gaps and enabling collaboration. This leads to the final proposition.

Proposition 3: *A lack of intra-firm brokerage, exacerbated by an absence of boundary spanners, which in turn contributes to an inability to diffuse information, inhibits effective gender due diligence of the supply chain*.

5.8 Conclusions

This research has revealed six key intra-firm barriers to the successful implementation of social sustainability initiatives aimed at gender equality in global garment supply chains. These barriers, which explain the “inequality paradox”, whereby achieving gender equality is a global concern but one that fails to become an organisational priority,

include siloed working practices, weak intra-firm communication, and hierarchical structures. Furthermore, CSR teams can lack the necessary resources and agency to influence broader policies, leaving critical issues like gender-based violence unaddressed. These challenges are further exacerbated by weak intra-firm ties and the absence of boundary spanners**.** External factors like third-party auditors, grievance mechanisms, and limited engagement with grassroots women's organisations hinder worker-centric approaches, while multi-stakeholder initiatives and industry networking events create dialogue but fail to foster meaningful collaboration systemic change. The study also underscores the necessity for structural and relational reforms in CSR teams to facilitate change and remove barriers to achieving gender equality within the supply chains of the garment industry.

5.8.1 Implications for Research and Contribution

This research responds to calls for further research into gender within supply chain management (Tang, 2022; Vijeyarasa, 2020; Akbari, 2024). It builds on literature concerned with gender in an intra-firm context (Bear et al., 2010; Benjamin et al., 2019; Ruel et al., 2020) by moving from how gender impacts the performance of a firm, or its impact on sustainable decision making, towards a more granular understanding of the barriers to achieving gender equality. It expands on extant literature by identifying six individual barriers within a garment firm, organised within three groups, that inhibit gender equality in supply chains. Through SNA, the barriers within the intra-firm dynamics became apparent and centred around a lack of cohesion, prominence, and brokerage within the firm. The discussion on barriers, including the direction of information flows and how this can either inhibit or enable gender equality initiatives,

supports Carter et al.'s (2007) notion that information flows and knowledge management are vital to the ability of firms to compete. This suggests that harnessing these factors, and removing the outlined barriers, could lead to competitive advantage for a firm.

The research reveals how organisational silos impact the design of gender equality and due diligence initiatives within firms. The research supports the findings of Teixeira (2022), i.e., that factors such as senior buy-in and the internal misalignment of firm policies impact the success of social sustainability initiatives. Alongside organisational silos, there is a clear problem of power asymmetry within the firm, creating significant barriers to achieving social sustainability initiatives. More specifically, without authentic buy-in from senior leadership and other departments, the CSR team is unable to access the power, resources, capacity, or agency necessary to faithfully and successfully undertake new initiatives for gender equality. This research therefore contributes to conversations on organisational structure and power within networks (Humphries and Men, 2013), supporting assertions that studying networks can provide valuable insights into areas such as how power is exercised as well as how knowledge is disseminated through networks. The research expands these conversations by discussing how barriers to gender equality can be identified within these areas, including the challenges faced between different departments of the firm.

Finally, the research demonstrates the value of action research for investigating complex social phenomena (e.g., Touboulic and Walker, 2015) and contributes to the SNA literature where the focus is more typically on inter-firm structures and relations. More specifically, the depth and richness of insight provided into how one organisation is approaching the challenge of gender inequality in its supply chains was only possible by becoming a participant-observer, experiencing and witnessing the barriers to tackling

gender inequalities firsthand. Meanwhile, the study expands on SNA's ability to already detect and examine structural features amongst individuals or departments across a supply network (Fouad and Rego, 2024) by applying SNA at the intra-firm level. By better understanding the cohesion, prominence, and brokerage of individuals and departments within a firm in relation to each other (Fouad and Rego, 2024), this reveals how intra-firm dynamics impact the performance of the network as a whole in achieving gender equality

5.8.2 Implications for Managers

Managers must recognise that gender due diligence efforts should be built upon a robust foundation of human rights due diligence. Without this baseline, gender-specific initiatives risk being ineffective or superficial. Managers should therefore start by evaluating their existing human rights frameworks to identify gaps and address critical issues such as workers' rights, safety, and fair treatment within the supply chain. This strengthening of human rights due diligence provides a holistic understanding of supply chain dynamics and creates an enabling environment for gender-focused interventions to flourish.

Building on this foundation, achieving gender equality and broader social sustainability goals requires dedicated resources. This includes financial investments in human resources and the provision of adequate time for planning and implementation. Moreover, managers must address internal silos and misalignments that impact the success of gender equality and social sustainability efforts. If an organisation is operating with a hierarchical structure, accompanied by unidirectional information flows, it should consider moving to a more networked structure, with cross-departmental information

sharing and collaboration. Here developing the skills and roles of boundary spanners to build ties between departments could help to bridge any gaps.

CSR teams should be empowered with the tools, authority, and capacity to move beyond performative efforts to enact meaningful change. This will enable them to play a central role in directing cross-departmental policies and practices, ensuring that sustainability initiatives are integrated across all functions, including procurement, production, and human resources. Managers should also establish policy feedback loops that allow for the ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and refinement of gender equality initiatives. These loops can be informed by worker feedback, (third-party) audits, and performance metrics, ensuring that policies remain responsive to evolving challenges and needs within the supply chain.

5.8.3 Limitations and Future Research

A key limitation of this research is the relatively short-term nature of the engagement with the focal firm on a project that is reliant on long-term change. Thus, it would be helpful to conduct more longitudinal research in the future. This would allow the researcher to observe whether the full project ultimately achieved its targets and how the barriers were overcome. The sensitive nature of this research topic and the potential reputation risk of disclosing gender-based issues in the supply chain means it is possible that informants were not fully transparent in their dealings with the researcher. This was mitigated by remaining critical at all times and by being part of the CSR team, which meant informants would not be able to keep their guard up continuously.

Meanwhile, the in-depth nature of this action research means the focus has been on a single firm, which means the findings may not be directly translatable to other firms or

contexts (Romsdal, 2009). This has been mitigated through supplementary interviews with other organisations, but future research could build on this through multi-case study research across a cross-section of organisational or industrial contexts. Finally, this research identified weak boundary spanning capabilities within the firm for both enhancing intra- and inter-firm relationships. This lack of boundary spanners greatly affected the overall coordination of operations within the firm as well as relationships and connections with external stakeholders. Further research into the development and role of boundary spanners would benefit gender equality initiatives within firms.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This thesis aimed to better understand the challenges that prevent the alignment of garment industry supply chains with the global gender equality narrative and how these can be overcome. This was motivated by both research and practice. From a research perspective, gender equality has been neglected in the OSCM literature, including that specifically on SSSCM (Akbari, 2024; Tang, 2022; Vijeyarasa, 2020; Ruel, 2024). From a practical perspective, there continue to be reports of gendered abuses in the garment industry (HRW, 2023) despite the rise of gender equality on the global agenda.

The research sought to explore the reasons for the gap between the global narrative around gender equality, reflected in the UN's SDGs, and the current state of research and practice. More specifically, this research examined the barriers to achieving gender equality in global supply chains, with a particular focus on the garment industry, where women make up the majority of the workforce but face systemic exploitation, precarious employment, and gender-based violence (Soundararajan et al., 2021). To address this gap, the research applied a gender lens to SSSCM through four papers, incorporating a systematic literature review and an action research project, which included a scoping study of NGO reports, semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of intra-firm barriers within a UK based garment brand aimed at developing a gender due diligence programme.

In addressing the overarching research question – *What are the challenges that prevent the alignment of garment industry supply chains with the global gender equality narrative, and how can they be overcome?* – this research asserts the need for a shift from

gender-blind approaches to social sustainability towards a more inclusive model that embeds gender policies across all organisational levels and does not consider workers as one homogenous group. It also provides practical insights for garment brands and policymakers, advocating for greater collaboration with NGOs, worker-led trade unions, and other stakeholders.

6.2 Discussion of Overall Research

Figure 6.1 illustrates how the four papers that make up this thesis relate to each other and the contribution that each one makes to our understanding of the barriers to achieving gender equality within the garment industry. The two dashed boxes separating the left- and right-hand sides of the diagram represent a separation in geography and cultural context. As the Western-oriented supply chains of the garment industry are increasingly globalised, the lefthand box containing buyers is typically located in the global north, often in Western Europe and North America. In contrast, the righthand box represents countries in which suppliers are located, often in the global south. The circled areas are deeper insights into buyers and suppliers, with the blue providing a more granular view inside suppliers, especially their workers (including women workers). The green provides a view of the teams and departments within focal firms. The following discusses each of the papers in relation to the figure.

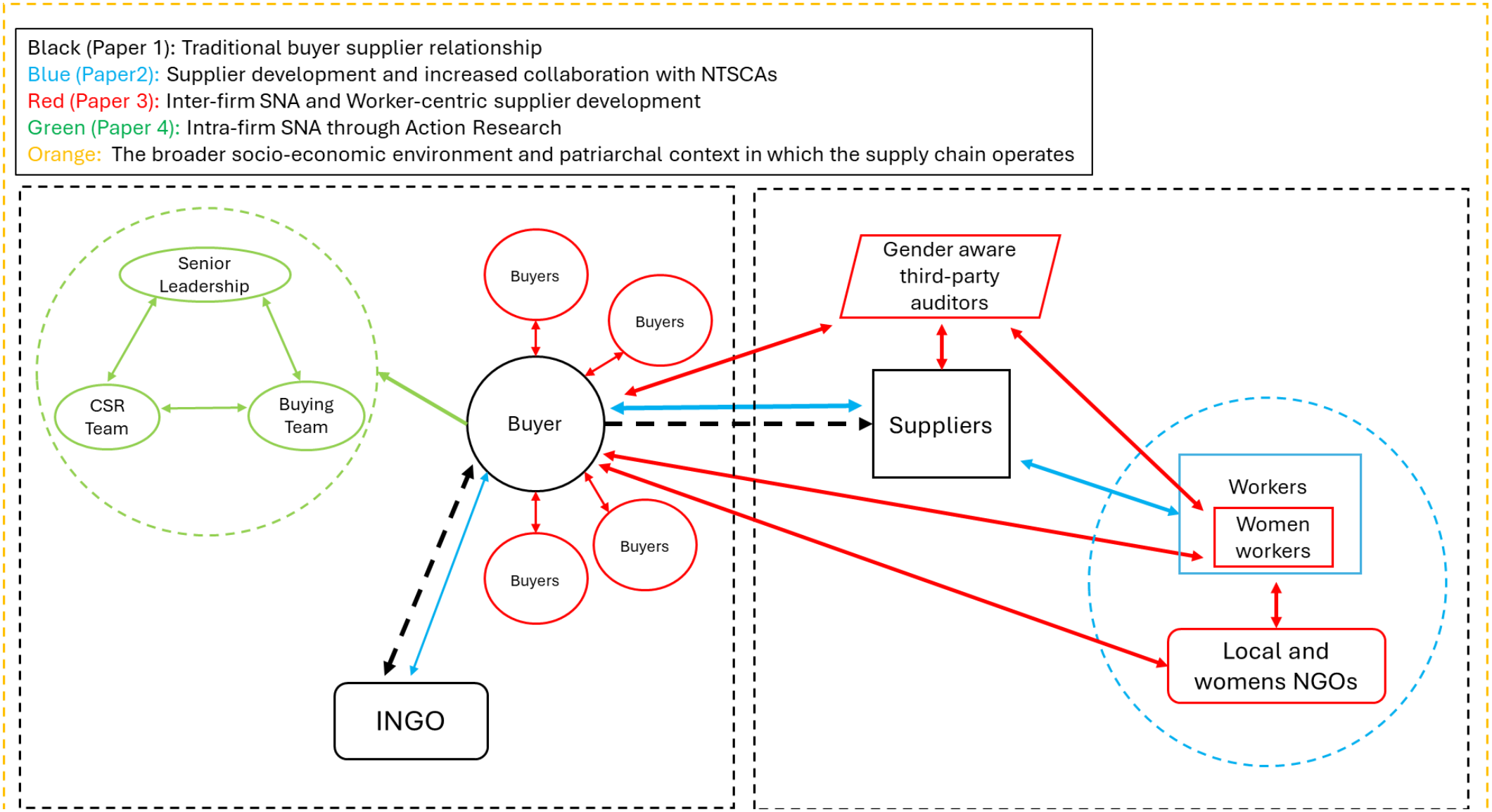


Figure 6.1 Overview of the Research and its Contribution

6.2.1 Paper 1: Addressing the gender gap in socially sustainable supply chain management

The black portion of the diagram represents the relationships outlined in the academic literature, as put forward by the SLR in Paper 1. Extant research focuses on the traditional buyer-supplier relationship. Buyer-supplier relationships are not always strong and are often unilateral, with buyers outlining their expectations to suppliers in a top-down way that is not necessarily collaborative or effective.

Paper 1 maps out the current state of the academic literature, starting to discuss the issues faced by women working within the garment industry and outlining 11 issues viewed through a gendered lens. The paper presents these issues in 3 groups: (i) already known SSSCM issues that are compounded by gender, where we reveal a previously hidden gender dimension; (ii) SSSCM issues that manifest in a gendered way, meaning they are experienced differently by men and women; and, (iii) more obvious gender-specific SSSCM issues. Alongside this, the paper begins to map out relevant stakeholders and contributing factors to these issues. The relevant stakeholders discussed are buyers, suppliers, governments and NGOs. The discussion of NGOs in extant research remains relatively limited and broadly focused on larger western INGOs who work in this space. Governments are discussed as stakeholders who contribute to the development of the socio-economic environment and context in which supply chains operate.

Paper 1 also begins to discuss how capitalism, patriarchy, and the feminization of labour impact women workers within global supply chains, contributing to a lack of agency (Hossain, 2013; Barnes and Kozar, 2008; Beasley, 1999; Werner, 2005). This begins to build a picture of the socio-economic and cultural context, represented by

the orange dashed outer line. Although Paper 1 began to tease out these discussions, the literature remains limited and mostly occurring within other fields and not OSCM.

6.2.2 Paper 2: A scoping study of the issues facing female garment workers and policy recommendations

The blue parts of the diagram represent how traditional supplier development can be used to strengthen relationships between buyers and suppliers. This also expands into and emphasises the importance of creating better access, information sharing, and relationships with suppliers and workers. Figure 6.1 also outlines the importance of strengthening relationships and further collaboration with NGOs, as they have produced a wealth of useful work in the area of gender equality and due diligence within global supply chains and the garment industry.

After Paper 1 pointed to the work that NGOs are doing in the garment industry, Paper 2 undertook a scoping study of grey literature, including reports and guidance produced and published by NGOs, in order to further understand the current state of best practice within the garment industry supply chains. This also represented the first step in the action research project, involving a desk-based analysis of NGO reports to lay the foundations for empirical work. That is, together with Paper 1, Paper 2 develops a contextual background that informs papers 3 and 4.

Paper 2 outlines 24 key challenges faced by women workers within the garment industry, expanding on the 11 issues identified in Paper 1. The study included 34 reports, studies or publications, including hundreds of pages and 628 recommendations or policies for gender equality within the garment industry. This included 256 policies to address specific challenges faced by women workers and 372 targeted at supply chain

operations. These are organised into 4 key areas of recommendations: embedding gender equality into business practices, sustainability-orientated collaboration, sustainability-orientated supplier assessments, and communication and disclosure to achieve gender equality.

Paper 2 also synthesises the huge number of overlapping policies into 109 policies. This allowed for the research to create a matrix, mapping out the consolidated set of 109 policies and drawing insights from the focus of the policies. The X axis represented short-, medium-, and long-term policies. The Y axis was divided into: (1) focal firm, referring to policies relating to the firm/brand level; (2) immediate suppliers, referring to policies that directly impact or are applied to direct first-tier suppliers; (3) further upstream, referring to second-tier suppliers or further above; and, (4) beyond supply chain boundaries (referring to policies that operate outside the direct manufacturing supply chains and with other stakeholders, such as NGOs and customers).

Sustainability-oriented supplier assessment policies (green) made up 52 of the 109 policies, mostly focusing on medium-term improvements with immediate suppliers or short-term and focal firm-focused improvements. This underscored the importance of supplier development to achieving gender equality, which became a key focus of Paper 3. Communication and disclosure policies (pink) were primarily short-term and focal firm-focused, aiming to enhance transparency and accountability within firms and among stakeholders. This indicates that brands also need to expand their focus to promoting gender equality more widely within the industry and society. Sustainability-oriented collaboration policies (blue) emphasised medium- to long-term partnerships

with external organisations, while overall policy trends showed a focus on short-term fixes and first-tier suppliers rather than deeper supply chain changes.

Paper 2 also contributed to the development of the broader socio-economic environment and patriarchal context in which the supply chain operates, represented in orange, building on Paper 1 and previous literature (Grosser and Tyler, 2022; Grosser and Moon, 2019; Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003; Walaby, 1989). Many of the reports analysed in the scoping study have large sections detailing the issues faced by women workers in the garment industry and highlighting their contributing factors and context, adding to discussion on negative brand practices and patriarchal cultural contexts (BSR, 2021; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Hossain *et al.*, 2013).

Overall, Paper 2 points to the need for focal firms to develop better relationships with suppliers, for suppliers to develop better relationships with their workers, and for buyers and suppliers to work more closely with NGOs to bridge the gaps and overcome the barriers to achieving gender equality within the industry.

6.2.3 Paper 3: From buyer-led to worker-centric supplier development

Paper 3 adds the red areas to Figure 6.1. Paper 3 includes semi-structured open-ended interviews with six garment brands and six NGOs who work directly with women workers in the garment industry. It makes up part of the action research project. This moves from traditional supplier development and builds upon SSD (Jia et al, 2022) to recommend a worker-centric approach to supplier development to enhance gender equality. This approach enables focal firms to better understand the challenges faced by women workers within their supply chains, and allows better monitoring systems to be

developed alongside workers. Paper 3 also reasserts the need to avoid treating workers as one homogenous group by tailoring supplier development to the specific workers targeted by a particular initiative. Thus, 'women workers' are depicted in red within the homogenous blue 'worker' box in the figure.

To facilitate worker-centric supplier development, Paper 3 highlights the need to work with locally contextualised and grassroots women's organisations, such as NGOs and women-led trade unions, to amplify women's voices. This way, brands can better monitor their supply chain policies and practices, as well as better understand and serve the needs of women workers within their supply chains. This differs from worker-led supplier development. Women need to be central to the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and initiatives; however, they should not be made solely responsible for their progress.

Gender equality may be aided by a shift away from traditional third-party audits, which are known to be ineffective at detecting social issues, especially gendered issues like GBVH. Paper 3 outlines a need to move towards gender-aware auditing to facilitate data collection and monitoring of supply chain policies (Global Labour Justice, 2018; The Clean Clothes Campaign, 2005). If working with third-party auditors, these organisations must be carefully selected and specifically trained in working with women (The Clean Clothes Campaign, 2005).

Although Paper 3 raises issues with working with large Western INGOs and consultancies on gender equality initiatives, it also suggests that, at times, they can be well positioned and resourced to facilitate effective action; for example, through facilitating MSIs within the industry (ETI, 2018). It also reasserts the need for focal firms

to ensure their own negative purchasing practices do not reinforce and worsen gender inequality and GBVH within the supply chain (BSR, 2021).

Additionally, Paper 3 emphasises the need for brands to work collaboratively, promoting MSIs. Brands identified challenges in having sufficient capacity and resources to undertake initiatives on their own; therefore, tackling gender inequality can require collaboration, as reflected in Figure 6.1. Paper 3 utilised SNA to map out the inter-firm connections and barriers to achieving gender equality. This provides a visual representation, making it easier to review relationships and structures within the industry. It also responds to calls from Lu et al. (2018) for further research into supply networks from an OSCM perspective. In doing so, the paper was able to identify three key barriers: Negative Brand Practices, Power Asymmetries, and Cultural and Structural Barriers to Gender Equality, which contribute to a lack of progress on gender equality. Identifying these barriers, including through core SNA concepts such as Cohesion, Equivalence, Prominence, Range, and Brokerage, helps to build a better understanding of the broader socio-economic environment and patriarchal context in which supply chains operate, as seen in orange in Figure 1.

6.2.4 Paper 4: Why Gender Initiatives Are Always on the Agenda, But Never a Priority

Paper 4 added the green elements to the diagram. The circle represents a more granular look into a focal firm, discussing its individual internal departments such as CSR team, buyers, and senior leadership. The paper overviewed the action research project and utilised SNA to investigate intra-firm dynamics and their influence on gender equality initiatives (Chen et al, 2024). The diagram illustrates multi-directional arrows between

departments, reflecting the need for increased collaboration and communication within focal firms. The action research project involved interviews with brands, NGOs, and suppliers; a review of the pilot project and the NGO with which it was conducted; a review of internal and external documents; cycles of review; presentations of the work; workshops, roundtables, MSIs; and interviews with the brand in which it was being conducted.

Paper 4 identifies six key barriers to achieving gender equality within garment supply chains that are organised under three SNA concepts relevant to an intra-firm perspective: Cohesion (lack of cross departmental collaboration; internal goal misalignment between departments), Prominence (lack of power, influence, and agency within the firm; lack of dedicated resources, capacity and capabilities), and Brokerage (inability to diffuse initiatives and information throughout the company; lack of boundary spanners for intra- and inter-firm relationships). The paper also emphasises the importance of the focal firm in driving forward social sustainability within supply chains.

Through interviews with suppliers and NGOs local to supplier factories, Paper 4 also added to the development of knowledge on the broader socio-economic environment and patriarchal context in which the supply chain operates (Paiva et al., 2020; Gore and LeBaron, 2019; LeBaron and Gore, 2020; Frohlich, 2022). The discussion with the NGO that undertook the pilot project was particularly alarming. The pilot project was undertaken by a labour justice NGO and managed by a male member of staff who justified and supported the patriarchal policies and culture that the factory at the centre of the pilot study operated within. This further echoed the need to work with locally

contextualised women-led NGOs and organisations and further demonstrated the patriarchal contexts in which garment workers operate.

6.3 Contribution to Research

Overall, the research asserts the need for further application of a gendered lens in OSCM research (Akbari, 2024; Tang 2022, Ruel, 2024; Vijeyarasa, 2020), including within social sustainability research. Through the application of a gender lens, the research has provided a new perspective on existing knowledge of social issues in supply chains and it has identified new challenges not previously identified in the SSSCM field. Moreover, this highlights the importance of not treating workers as one homogenous group.

The research presents an argument for using SNA to study both intra- and inter-firm dynamics (Fouad & Rego, 2024; Han et al., 2020; Chen. 2024). The research demonstrated SNA's ability to effectively identify gendered barriers within supply chains between and amongst stakeholders, providing valuable insights into the barriers to achieving gender equality. Additionally, it contributes by expanding on traditional supplier development. Building upon concepts of sustainable supplier development (Jia et al., 2021; Bai, 2022), it advocates for a movement towards WCSD for social sustainability and gender equality (Yawar & Seuring, 2018). The application of a gendered lens to supplier development is also a novel contribution. Working together, SNA and WCSD provide a roadmap towards tackling these barriers, connecting stakeholders and fostering collaboration, building upon previous understanding of SD's ability to enhance worker wellbeing (Han et al., 2020; Agarwal & Sengupta, 2013).

Additionally, the research has demonstrated the benefits of using action research within OSCM for interrogating social sustainability issues (Romsdal, 2009) and PhD research (Benstead et al, 2018; Vaughan et al, 2018). Using a more personally integrated and collaborative research method to approach OSCM has been effective at unearthing operational barriers (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002; Touboulic and Walker, 2015).

Figure 6.1 demonstrates the development of knowledge and the contribution each paper makes throughout the research to create a better understanding of the barriers to achieving gender equality within garment supply chains. It demonstrates the need for SSSCM and OSCM literature to move much further on than the traditional buyer-supplier relationships. Considering papers 1 and 2 together, it is clear that OSCM and SSSCM literature needs to engage in further research on gender within supply chains in the garment industry (Akbari et al, 20204; Tang,2022). Considering papers 2 and 3 together, we can see a clear mismatch and disconnect between the wealth of guidance for achieving gender equality within the industry and practice. Papers 2, 3 and 4 interrogate and demonstrate why this disconnect might be occurring, providing insight from within the industry. This also shows a mismatch within brands themselves as to the lack of disconnect between their CSR and gender equality goals and progress.

We can clearly see growth in research on gender equality since the inception of this PhD in 2020. Since then, there is a wealth of literature on gender within supply chains, including on the issues women have faced at work within different industries (e.g., Vijeyarasa, 2020). In 2021, papers such as Soundararajan et al. (2021) emerged that illustrated the growth in conversation about working conditions within global supply chains. Although this paper does not focus on gender, it does include a discussion on

women workers, demonstrating the rise in focus on the issue. However, at this point, gender was still rarely seen as a core focus of research specifically within the field of OSCM. Tang (2022) built on this by calling for further research on gender within OSCM, focusing on how improving women's economic empowerment can lift whole societies out of poverty.

Subsequently Peredo (2022) and Kroes et al. (2024) both discussed gender within OSCM, while Yang et al. (2024) discussed gender diversity as a persistent and under-addressed problem in logistics and SCM, identifying five major research gaps that remain unexplored. Additionally, there have been special issues on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in leading journals such as the International Journal of Operations and Production Management (IJOPM) and Production and Operations Management (POM). These special issues have not only increased the visibility of gender topics in OSCM but have also shaped research priorities, introducing calls for intersectional and multi-dimensional frameworks. Despite the evident growth over the last 5 years, leading to a review of OSCM research on gender by Akbari et al. (2024), calls for further research persist.

The research contributes to practice within the garment industry by discussing how focal firms must take a holistic, integrated approach to gender equality, moving beyond superficial initiatives to address the root causes of inequality within supply chains. This requires aligning business practices with human rights due diligence, embedding gender policies across all levels of the organisation, and fostering meaningful collaboration with traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors. Additionally, firms should improve both inter-firm and intra-firm collaboration by shifting away from hierarchical structures

to network-based models that enhance information sharing and cross-departmental coordination. This will be discussed further in the managerial implications section. These recommendations could also apply to other industries that face similar issues, such as agriculture and mining. A limitation of the overall research, which should be taken into consideration, is the inability to access women workers themselves to interview or consult with due to resource constraints and the effects of the global pandemic.

6.3.1 Theoretical Contributions to SSSCM and Gender Equality Literature

Stepping away from the figure to reflect on the thesis more holistically, this research contributes to the growing body of research that applies feminist theories such as Marxist, radical, and socialist feminism to supply chain management by using these to inform the development of an interdisciplinary gendered lens (Götzmann et al., 2022; Prieto-Carrón, 2008, Paiva, et al 2020). While gender has been explored in, for example, the business ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR) literatures, the intersection of feminist theories, gender and SSSCM remains underexplored (Barrientos et al., 2019; Grosser & Tyler, 2022; Grosser & Moon, 2019). By highlighting the role of patriarchal norms, globalisation, and neoliberalism in shaping supply chain inequalities, this research expands theoretical understanding of how gendered asymmetries of power manifest in supply chains (Frohlich, 2022). It reasserts that gender and sustainability are interconnected (Sila, 2022; Götzmann et al., 2022).

This thesis also advances the application of SNA in supply chain research by demonstrating its effectiveness in analysing gender equality within supply chains (Han, 2020; Chen, 2024). SNA provides a structured way of assessing the power dynamics and

structural barriers that shape supply chain relationships (Fouad & Rego, 2024; Gamper, 2022). By combining a gendered perspective with SNA, this research demonstrates how organisational structures, intra- and inter-firm dynamics, and patriarchal norms impact gender equality and SSSCM. This also offers a methodological approach for examining gender within supply chains (Fouad and Rego, 2024).

Finally, this thesis contributes to discussions on supplier development by linking it to social sustainability and gender equality, expanding ideas of SSD to ideas that incorporate worker-centric supplier development (Jia et al, 2022). This study highlights the potential for SD to be harnessed to achieve gender equality. By integrating insights from a gendered lens and SNA, the research provides a novel approach to how supplier development can drive meaningful social sustainability and gender equality.

Overall, this research addresses shortcomings in extant literature, contributing to both a theoretical and practical application in supply chain management. Key contributions include the following:

- **Applying a gendered lens to OSCM:** The thesis applies a gender lens to the field of OSCM, thereby contributing to moving the field away from being largely gender blind towards being gender aware. This is an important step with implications for many other areas of OSCM research other than social sustainability.

- **A new perspective on social sustainability:** The thesis expands the literature on socially sustainable supply chain management by categorising social issues from a gendered perspective and highlighting the importance of not treating workers as one homogenous group. While the SSSCM literature highlights the importance of focusing

on the welfare of people within operations and supply chains, this research adds another layer of granularity.

- **Policy intent versus policy implementation:** The wide range of policies available to support gender equality in supply chains and yet the size of the problem highlights the gap between policy intent and policy implementation. The thesis highlights the gap between (i) the state of research and practice and (ii) the current policy recommendations of NGOs for gender equality. The research synthesises the myriad of recommendations into a comprehensive set of measures that can be taken over the short, medium, and longer term at the focal firm, tier 1, and beyond levels to enhance gender equality in supply chains, whilst highlighting gaps in existing policy provision.

- **A new worker-centric approach to supplier development:** The thesis expands the sustainable supplier development literature to include a focus on gender equality in supply chains. Importantly, it proposes a worker-centric approach to supplier development for gender equality rather than a top down or worker-led approach. This ensures the voices of women workers are heard but that responsibility for tackling inequalities are not passed to the victims.

- **An intra-and inter-firm insight into the barriers to gender equality:** The thesis combines an inter- with an intra-firm perspective on the barriers to gender equality in supply chains, including a novel application of supply network analysis to understand how the relationships and structures within the focal firm inhibit efforts to address gender equality in the supply chain.

6.3.2 Managerial Implications

Focal firms, suppliers, and the industry as a whole must move towards a holistic and integrated approach to gendered initiatives and equality. This must include a movement away from superficial initiatives and 'purplewashing' to engage in more meaningful action (Republik, 2024). This includes a shift away from siloed and short-lived pilot projects aimed at addressing individual issues and symptoms to a focus on targeting the root causes of gender inequality within supply chains. This also includes ensuring a brand's own business practices do not contribute to gender inequality and abuses, including reforming negative purchasing practices that put undue pressure on suppliers, which is then passed on to women workers. Alongside ensuring existing policies are not harmful, brands must build gender initiatives and policies from a strong foundation of human rights due diligence, with robust and effective policy feedback loops in place to ensure their effectiveness. Policies must also be fully integrated throughout the business, from senior leadership to every woman in the supply chain. Senior leadership must lead from the front to ensure these principles and policies become part of the organisation's culture and practices.

Another important managerial implication is the need to better collaborate with traditional, non-traditional, internal and external stakeholders. Partnering with locally contextualised, women-led organisations such as grassroots groups and trade unions should be a priority. These are best positioned to facilitate worker-centric supplier development, developing stronger connections and information flows between buyers, suppliers, and women workers.

Although brands do collaborate and engage in MSIs, this engagement may often be superficial and siloed. Better inter-organisational and cross-industry collaboration a deeper level is essential to address barriers to gender equality. Alongside inter-firm barriers, firms need to address the barriers in their intra-firm dynamics. Greater cross-departmental collaboration and information sharing would help here. This could be achieved by developing and investing in boundary spanners within firms. Firms need to move away from a hierarchical organisational structure characterised by unidirectional information flows as a more network-focused model would better facilitate collaboration and information sharing.

This thesis has highlighted that although there is a wealth of recommendations and policies publicly available to garment brands, it can be hard for brands to know where to start or which guidance to follow. However, the gap between recommendations and practice within the garment industry is still so great that choosing any one path and beginning to work towards gender equality is better than trying to process, understand and act on all available guidance, especially considering the limited resource and capacity constraints of CSR teams.

This research also demonstrates that focal firms need to approach all supply chain activities, including auditing, sourcing, and location decisions, with a gendered lens as a gender-blind approach overlooks ongoing challenges occurring within supply chains. Therefore, managers and practitioners should be using a gendered lens to approach all supply chain activities. Alongside a gendered lens, firms must understand and incorporate an understanding of the varied cultural contexts in which they are working.

Preferably, the socio-cultural context should be understood prior to engaging with a factoring or starting operations within a country.

6.4 Future Research Agenda

This study serves as a foundation for future research incorporating a gendered perspective into OSCM. Further research should be done on the intersection of gender equality and SCM. More specifically, seven future areas of research are identified as follows:

1. **Broadening out from the action research project:** Further case studies and action research could be conducted to provide a deeper insight into how gender inequalities manifest in supply chains, initially focusing on the garment industry before extending to other sectors. It would be beneficial for future research to replicate the study in the garment industry with varied firm sizes to understand if this has a significant impact on outcomes. For example, comparing large, medium and small firms with differing degrees of supply chain complexity could provide useful insights. Meanwhile, the agri-food (Maertens & Swinnen, 2012; Hale & Apondo, 2005) and mining (Mattis, 2000; Bell, 2013; Mayes *et al.*, 2013; Lahiri-Dutt, 2015) sectors would represent an important extension to this research as they have similar complexities, a lack of transparency, and have had similar reports of worker abuses.

2. **Listening to women workers' voices:** Future research should prioritise amplifying the voices of female workers and prioritise this in the research design

if possible (Global Labour Justice, 2018). Engaging with women workers themselves would have improved the present research; however, this was not logistically possible at the time of research due the COVID-19 pandemic. This would, however, have allowed for a better understanding of the disconnect between women workers, suppliers, and buyers, and would have provided further insight into how to overcome the disconnect. Being directly informed by women workers would have allowed for a deeper understanding of the lack of progress and protection of women workers within garment supply chains, building on the WCSD concepts and further researching how these can best be undertaken.

3. **An intersectionality perspective:** Other marginalised identities should be studied and better understood within OSCM and SSSCM, including by taking an intersectional perspective to the study of gender equality in supply chains. Gender is not the only factor that may be impacted by discrimination and systems of oppression. Other intersectional issues, such as religion, class, caste, disability, migration status, and sexuality should also be researched (International Labour Organisation, 2021; Carpenter, 2019; Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012). This would require a more granular approach to SCM, not treating workers like a homogeneous group and collecting data and research on a more detailed level.

4. **Impact of fast fashion business models:** Studies should further integrate the relationship between a Capitalist race-to the-bottom approach and fast fashion alongside patriarchy from a SCM perspective (Chua, 2022b), better understanding how supply chains can best respond to these phenomena. Topics like fast fashion and how this comes together with patriarchy to form the feminization of labour

were raised within this research and could be further investigated. How these phenomena occur within various different cultural contexts and how they impact different groups of people and workers within a supply chain context could produce further insights.

5. **Grievance mechanisms:** Research should take a deeper look at the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms for gender-based violence and how these can best be designed and implemented. This research found that traditional auditing and monitoring fails to effectively detect gendered issues, especially GBVH (Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Discussions within the research included responding to abuses and GBVH by moving from zero-tolerance towards a focus on zero-tolerance towards *inaction*. Further research into more effective methods of detection, as well as looking at how best to manage and respond to abuses and GBVH, would improve gender equality initiatives within the garment industry.

6. **Incentivising focal firms:** From a focal-firm perspective, studies could expand on how best to incentivise focal firms to undertake better gender equality initiatives, and how these can best be designed and implemented to work with brands. There is a continued disconnect between the progressive global sustainability agenda, such as UN SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and the drive from garment brands; therefore, further research on how best to encourage and incentivise brands to engage in this could help further achieve gender equality globally.

7. **Multi-stakeholder initiatives:** One of the criticisms identified in this thesis concerned the usefulness of current MSIs. Future research could focus on the usefulness and ability of various types of MSIs to engage with and tackle barriers

to gender equality. As much of the research points to the need for greater multi-stakeholder collaboration, it would be valuable to better understand how these can best be structured and facilitated.

6.5 Final Conclusions

This research provides an overview of the barriers to achieving gender equality within garment industry supply chains. By integrating insights from four interrelated papers, the thesis reveals how a focus on traditional buyer-supplier relationships, generic supplier development strategies, poorly coordinated intra-firm dynamics, and a lack of stakeholder collaborations contribute to the systemic challenges faced by women workers in this sector. Through the application of a gendered lens, the research highlights the limitations of existing OSCM and SSSCM literature in addressing gendered challenges, calling for a more granular and inclusive approach.

Paper 1 set the foundation by mapping the academic literature on gendered challenges within garment supply chains, identifying 11 key issues exacerbated by existing socio-economic and cultural structures. It underscored the unilateral nature of buyer-supplier relationships and the limited engagement with NGOs, which often provide crucial support for gender equality initiatives. Paper 2 built upon this by conducting a scoping study of grey literature, identifying 24 challenges and over 600 policies aimed at promoting gender equality. The findings emphasised the need for stronger collaboration among buyers, suppliers, and NGOs to bridge the gap between policy recommendations and practical implementation.

Paper 3 introduced the concept of worker-centric supplier development (WCSD), advocating for direct engagement with women workers and grassroots organisations to

amplify women workers' voices. It criticised traditional third-party audits and emphasised the importance of gender-aware auditing. Additionally, it identified structural barriers, such as negative brand practices, power asymmetries, and cultural constraints, that hinder progress. Paper 4 extended this by examining intra-firm dynamics and using SNA to uncover internal barriers within brands, including a lack of cross-departmental collaboration, misalignment of internal goals, and insufficient resources for CSR teams. These findings reinforced the critical role of internal organisational structures in driving gender equality initiatives.

Overall, the thesis underscores the need for firms to move beyond superficial CSR initiatives and adopt holistic, integrated approaches that align business practices with human rights due diligence. This includes embedding gender policies at all levels of the organisation, fostering collaboration with both traditional and non-traditional supply chain actors, and shifting from hierarchical to network-based collaboration models. The research provides insights into the challenges that hinder gender equality in the garment industry and maps out a route for overcoming these barriers. The findings have implications beyond this sector, as similar gendered dynamics and power asymmetries exist in industries such as agriculture and mining. Future research should continue to explore these intersections, ensuring that gender considerations are systematically integrated into OSCM and SSSCM scholarship and practice.

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Appendix A

Policies 1 to 109 included in the matrix (Figure 3.2)

1. Use IT-supported surveys for anonymous worker feedback via mobile phones and other channels.
2. Conduct off-site interviews to reduce retribution risk and ensure worker safety.
3. Conduct face-to-face interviews in confidential settings, preferably by women for women.
4. Ensure interviews start with introductions and clear objectives, guaranteeing anonymity of workers' responses.
5. Forecast orders 120+ days in advance and ensure fair prices to support living wages.
6. Provide timely and stable production orders without the need for overtime.
7. Support workers' unions for gender equality and women led unions
8. Commit to long-term relationships with suppliers.
9. Maintain high order accuracy, deliver tech packs accurately and promptly, and directly order from suppliers to avoid third parties.
10. Place large volume orders.
11. Conduct root cause analysis, collecting gender-disaggregated data, and track and communicate results publicly
12. Conduct gender equality analysis to address root causes of inequality and mitigate risks in high-risk areas.
13. Understand cultural context for gender-specific issues in different production countries and assess external risks through a gender lens.
14. Focus on and prioritise work in countries based on severity and likelihood of issues, legal protection, and cultural practices, building a database of gender-inclusive organisations and supportive entities to work with.
15. Address complaints in partnership with suppliers, workers, and their representatives.
16.Establish easy-to-access, confidential, and anonymous feedback mechanisms with non-discrimination policies.
17. Introduce safe grievance mechanisms for gender-based violence victims and provide effective, timely, and gender-transformative remedies including strengthen systems to address sexual harassment in factories
18. Promote measures to stop harassment and ensure independent complaint mechanisms with confidential hotlines.
19. Conduct comprehensive training programs for management and workers, involving women and their organisations in designing grievance mechanisms.
20. Offer multiple reporting channels and, establish gender-balanced grievance committees, and publicize operational protocols.
21. Provide confidential support to victims, implementing timely investigations with impartial decision-making, this may require partnering with local womens organisations and external organisations.
22. Establish supportive policies and practices for victims, ensure proportional accountability measures for perpetrators, and promote continuous training
23. Provide access to mediation and counselling, manage fear of retaliation, and develop workplace policies and programs collaboratively.

24. Assess opportunities for tackling gender-based violence through community engagement projects.
25. Codes of conduct and auditing questionnaires should address issues disproportionately affecting women workers.
26. Include policies and protections against sexual harassment in inspection checklists.
27. Train labour inspectors on sexual harassment and gender awareness.
28. Provide gender awareness training to auditors, buyers, and factory managers.
29. Provide clear guidance for gender-balanced audit team composition.
30. Establish partnerships with local trade unions and women's organisations for audits.
31. Create partnerships with training institutions to attract more women to social auditing.
32. Involve women workers in training and remedial actions, as well as promote within supervisory roles.
33. Invest in fewer but better-designed audits.
34. Engage worker committees in auditing processes and corrective action plans.
35. Revise audit protocols to collect specific gendered data and revise protocols when necessary
36. Mainstream gender-sensitive issues in auditor training and certification exams.
37. Collate records of workplace harassment and violence incidents.
38. Provide management systems and technology for data collection by suppliers.
39. Utilize various indices for gender analysis such as Equal Measures 2030 SDG Gender Index.
40. Conduct gender-sensitive risk assessments through consultations with affected women.
41. Identify all internal and external risks upfront when beginning work with a supplier and within supply chains, including gender-specific risks.
42. Acknowledge limitations of quantitative approaches to documenting gender-based violence and engage in gender sensitive methods.
43. Develop and implement an e-procurement platform for systematic data collection.
44. Include quantitative and qualitative gender-disaggregated indicators and targets.
45. Deploy company-wide anonymous online surveys.
46. Establish suggestion boxes for workers.
47. Measure the gender pay gap between male and female workers.
48. Use supplier self-assessment questionnaires.
49. Mainstream gender in all workplace monitoring practices.
50. Conduct employee focus groups to identify gender equality barriers.
51. Lobby governments in order to strengthen national inspection and monitoring capacity.
52. Develop monitoring methodologies and tools with female and male evaluators experienced in gender-sensitive research.
53. Align communication and commitments regarding gender diversity and inclusion with Women's Empowerment Principles and Sustainable Development Goals.
54. Senior leadership should actively prevent and respond to gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) by making formal commitments, launching awareness campaigns, and modelling positive bystander action.
55. Companies need to assess and revise internal and external communications to ensure gender-neutral or equitable language and imagery.
56. Adopting a policy on responsible business conduct that extends to suppliers and intermediaries across the supply chain is essential.

57. Raising suppliers' awareness about gender equality through social audits and integrating gender considerations into corporate tools like codes of conduct sends strong signals about its importance.
58. Clear communication of gender equality requirements to suppliers and commitment to engagement when challenges arise are necessary for driving action.
59. Signing transparency pledges and disclosing data, including gender breakdowns of the workforce, migrant worker percentages, and union presence, promote accountability.
60. Integrate gender equality policies into existing corporate policies and communicating them effectively internally and externally are crucial steps.
61. Regular dialogue with various stakeholders, including government, NGOs, and trade unions, help initiate social improvements in the sector.
62. Ensuring all staff are familiar with frameworks for supporting employees at risk of domestic violence.
63. Making internal and external commitments to addressing GBV, both at work and within local communities.
64. Transparency about policies and incidents, disaggregated by gender, and monitoring to be included in annual reports are essential for accountability.
65. Leadership commitment, policy transparency, and communication of actions taken to address GBV contribute to progress against Sustainable Development Goals.
66. Engaging in social dialogue helps manage conflict, improve training systems, and contribute to sustainability.
67. Setting specific targets and success indicators for gender equality in supply chains facilitates progress tracking and accountability.
68. Advocating for national legislation that aligns with international standards is crucial for combating GBV.
69. Internal incentive structures reinforce procurement and purchasing policy objectives and discourage shifts away from policy changes that increase risks of GBVH.
70. Embedding values of gender equality into business values, plans, and organisational culture is essential, along with setting company-wide goals and targets for gender equality and women's empowerment.
71. Collaboration with governments, employees' and employers' organisations is crucial for promoting gender equity at work.
72. Due diligence on human rights, labour should receive adequate attention and support, with resources allocated accordingly.
73. Senior management commitment and strategy development to promote gender equality in the workplace are necessary.
74. Businesses should engage with governments to reform discriminatory laws and embed gender issues into policies and management systems.
75. Ensuring and supporting suppliers to have the financial capacity to comply with human rights and gender equality standards is vital.
76. Leadership commitment ensures stakeholders understand the company's stance on gender and human rights.
77. Collaboration at regional, subregional, and national levels amplifies impact and enhances communication.

78. Gender-responsive procurement leverages purchasing policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.
79. Buy-in from suppliers and behaviour changes at the management level are crucial for sustained initiatives.
80. Integrating gender considerations into buying practices is pivotal for supply chain business strategies.
81. Agents, suppliers, and vendors should receive communication about supply chain management policies and avenues for complaints.
82. Formal leadership commitment signals awareness of the importance of gender equity.
83. Adequate resources should be allocated for gender-sensitive policy implementation and monitoring.
84. Efforts must address both specific and systematic abuses to effect meaningful change.
85. Monitoring with relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) ensures fair and safe working conditions for women.
86. Advancing women's rights requires going beyond a 'do no harm' approach to actively promoting gender equality.
87. Leverage should be used to compel suppliers to cease business activities that pose gender-related risks.
88. Strategic partnerships with technical experts and peer companies are instrumental in addressing systemic issues.
89. Collaboration at national levels is essential for advocating gender-responsive policies and practices.
90. Engagement and consultation with internal and external stakeholders are vital for policy development and implementation.
91. Incorporating due diligence into decision-making processes ensures responsible business conduct.
92. Remedies should aim to change discriminatory power structures and reduce violence.
93. Engagement at the local level through dialogue and partnerships is critical for understanding and addressing gender-related issues.
94. Linking executives' pay and bonuses to gender equality targets fosters accountability.
95. Collaboration at global levels is necessary for advocating gender-responsive policies and practices.
96. Collecting information on suppliers and business partners helps identify risks and impacts.
97. Building long-term relationships with existing suppliers is key to influencing working conditions positively.
98. Monitoring procedures with red-flag systems help identify risks before they occur.
99. Collaboration through cross-industry partnerships is essential for addressing common problems.
100. Implementation strategies with clear roadmaps and accountability mechanisms ensure results.
101. HR should revise employment and recruitment policies in line with gender strategy and priorities.
102. Whistle-blower channels and protections against retaliation are necessary for reporting wrongdoing.

103. Providing education and training for women and men and setting management targets enable attendance and skill building.
104. Operational-level grievance mechanisms ensure affected stakeholders have access to remedy.
105. Expecting similar practices from suppliers and setting minimum expectations for CSR/compliance requirements is important.
106. Supporting capacity building for suppliers and workers on gender equality is crucial.
107. Collecting information on who is working in the supply chain helps identify vulnerable workers.
108. Leveraging company influence to advance gender equality and encourage suppliers
109. Designing evidence-based solutions with targeted suppliers and trade unions ensures buy-in and effectiveness.

Appendix B Interview protocols and Consent Form

B1. Consent form

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Can socially sustainable supply chain management policies address gender inequality in the garment industry?
Name of Researchers: Ophelia Chidgey
Email:
Please tick each box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	..
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 6 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 6 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	..
I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	..
I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	..
I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	..
I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	..
I agree to take part in the above study.	..

_____ _____ _____
Name of Participant Date Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

B2. Participant Information Sheet

Participant information sheet

Title: Can socially sustainable supply chain management policies address gender inequality in the garment industry?

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD candidate at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about: using socially sustainable supply chain management policies to address gender inequality within supply chains of the garment industry.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study aims to understand how sustainable supply chain management policies can be used to address gender-based issues within the supply chain of the garment industry.
It includes an evaluation of the policy creation process, as well as current policies and ongoing issues and challenges regarding women in the garment industry.
This will be used to further understand how policies and programs can be adapted to better tackle gendered issues within supply chains, whilst benefitting firms.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because of your experience in this area and am interested in your knowledge regarding work with women in the garment industry.
I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: Online interviews, these will be audio recorded for transcription purposed as well as anonymised. Recordings will be erased after transcription. This will occur in two stages if possible, there will be an initial interview with broader questions and a follow up interview with more in-depth questions, if your availability allows. These will last between 30 minutes – 1 hour.

These will be individual interviews.

Topics covered will include discussion of the current issues faced by women in the garment industry. What challenges do women currently face? What has been successful at attempting to tackle the issues faced by women in the garment industry?
Current programs and policies that have been successful at supporting women in the garment industry and those that have not. As well as how can these be better embedded, implemented, monitored, enforced and supported.
What part have private firms played in supporting the women within their supply chains, and how could this be improved?
A full copy of the questions can be provided prior to the interview.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
This research is intended to benefit female garment workers – by gaining a further understanding of the current situations faced by female garment workers this research can work towards creating policies that are beneficial.

If you take part in this study, your insights will contribute to our understanding of how supply chain management can be improved and how policies can be used to improve the lives of garment workers.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 6 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. However, this will require you to invest your time for the interviews as well as providing access to certain secondary data where possible.

Due to the nature of discussions regarding gender-based issues that may be uncomfortable, you are able to answer or not answer any questions and all responses are anonymous.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the ideas you share with me. These will be discussed with my supervisors but will remain anonymous.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences or to inform policy-makers about this study.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, **all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in** our publications.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact my PhD supervisors Mar Stevenson at m.stevenson@lancaster.ac.uk or by telephone on **+44 1524 593847** or Lingxuan Lui at lingxuan.liu@lancaster.ac.uk or by telephone on **+44 1524 594895.**

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Head of Department Linda Hendry at **l.hendry@lancaster.ac.uk or by telephone on +44 1524 593841**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.