

DECENT WORK ENFORCEMENT GAPS: ADAPTING GLOBAL LESSONS INTO SRI LANKAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The construction industry, while vital for economic development, faces significant challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), particularly Target 8.5, which emphasizes decent work, fair wages, and productive employment. This study investigates the barriers to SDG 8.5 implementation in Sri Lanka's construction sector through a mixed-methods approach, combining bibliometric analysis and qualitative literature review. Findings reveal critical gaps in awareness, with research predominantly focused on productivity metrics rather than worker welfare, as evidenced by weak co-occurrence of SDG 8.5-related keywords. Key barriers include gender disparities, market-driven exploitation, informal sector reliance, and stakeholder policy gaps, which hinder progress toward decent work. The study identifies three strategic interventions—promoting gender equality, strengthening labour rights, and formalizing informal work—as essential for aligning Sri Lanka's construction industry with global standards. These insights provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and industry leaders to foster a more equitable and sustainable workforce, ensuring the sector's contribution to inclusive economic growth by 2030.

Keywords: Construction Industry; Decent Work; Sri Lanka; SDG 8; Sustainable Employment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is inherently labour-intensive, relying heavily on human resources to execute planning, design, building, and maintenance activities (Fei et al., 2021). Unlike many other sectors where automation and technology dominate, construction remains deeply dependent on manual labour for its operations (Buntara et al., 2018). Buntara et al. (2018) has mentioned that labour intensiveness underscores the critical importance of safeguarding worker rights and ensuring decent working conditions. Without adequate protections, the industry faces severe repercussions, including high turnover rates, reduced productivity, and increased occupational hazards (Fadhilah et al., 2023). Labour rights are not merely ethical imperatives but also economic necessities, as the stability and growth of the construction sector hinge on the well-being

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and motivation of its workforce (Fei et al., 2021). Failure to address these issues can lead to systemic inefficiencies, project delays, and diminished quality, ultimately undermining the industry's contribution to national development (Buntara et al., 2018).

Ensuring decent work is a globally recognized priority, particularly through Sustainable Development Goal 8.5 (SDG 8.5) under the United Nations (UN) agenda, which promotes safe, fair, and equitable employment. Despite the global recognition, many countries still face considerable challenges in fully realizing these objectives, especially in labour-intensive sectors such as construction (Chigbu & Nekhwevha, 2023). Even in developed nations, enforcement of decent work standards often requires continuous policy updates, workforce education, and strong institutional support (Islam, 2020). As a committed UN member state, Sri Lanka has committed to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), which promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Target 8.5 of this goal explicitly calls for equal pay, safe working environments, and fair employment opportunities, principles that are especially relevant to the construction sector (Islam, 2020). Globally, many UN member states, such as the UK, Australia, and Germany, have made significant strides in aligning their construction industries with SDG 8.5 by enforcing stringent labour laws, promoting gender equality, and investing in worker training and safety programs (Chaha & Rani, 2024). Falk (2007) stated that these efforts have not only improved working conditions but also enhanced productivity and social equity within the industry. However, Sri Lanka lags in these advancements, with persistent challenges hindering progress. The absence of suitable strategies leaving the sector ill-equipped to meet international standards (Morton et al., 2017).

As a member of the United Nations, Sri Lanka is committed to achieving the SDG 8.5 by the year 2030. In line with this national commitment, it is essential for the Sri Lankan construction industry to adapt practices of SDG 8.5. However, prior to implementing such standards within the local construction sector, it is necessary to examine the existing body of literature to understand current research trends and the extent of awareness related to decent work in the Sri Lankan context. Identifying these patterns enables the recognition of knowledge gaps and informs the adaptation of international best practices. Furthermore, by analysing global strategies and challenges, context-specific barriers can be understood, thereby facilitating the development of appropriate interventions to support the integration of SDG 8.5 into the Sri Lankan construction industry. To achieve this aim, following objectives were formulated.

- To assess the current awareness and implementation of SDG 8.5 in Sri Lankan construction sector.
- To identify the key barriers impeding progress and propose actionable strategies to integrate decent work principles into the industry.

Through this research, policymakers, industry leaders, and stakeholders can gain insights to foster a more equitable, productive, and sustainable construction workforce in Sri Lanka. This study initially reviews existing academic literature to assess research trends related to SDG 8.5 in Sri Lanka, utilizing secondary sources such as peer-reviewed publications. A bibliometric analysis was then conducted to map these trends, followed by a manual content analysis to identify key barriers to achieving decent work in the construction industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The SDGs, adopted by all UN member states in 2015, represent a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030 (Zulu et al., 2023). Comprising 17 interconnected goals, the SDGs address global challenges through a holistic framework that balances economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Morton et al., 2017). Among these, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) stands out as a critical driver of sustainable development, aiming to promote "sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all" (Ogunmakinde et al., 2022). This goal recognizes that economic progress must be equitable, creating opportunities for meaningful employment while safeguarding workers' rights and well-being.

Table 1 narrowing the focus, Target 8.5 of SDG 8 specifically emphasizes achieving "full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value" (Paksi et al., 2024).

Table 1: Targets and indicators of SDG 8.5

Target	Description	Indicators
8.5	By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value	8.5.1 - Average hourly earnings of female and male employees, by occupation, age and persons with disabilities. 8.5.2 - Unemployment rate, by sex, age and persons with disabilities.

Figure 1 shows the four pillars of decent work, and this target highlights the importance of fair wages, job security, and safe working conditions particularly relevant to labour-intensive industries (Morton et al., 2017). According to the researcher, the construction sector, as one of the largest global employers, plays a pivotal role in advancing SDG 8.5.

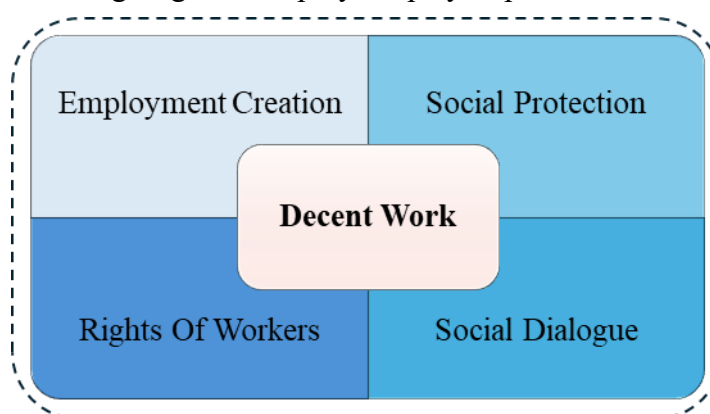


Figure 1: Four pillars of decent work

The construction industry in Sri Lanka is of key importance to the national economic development as it has a significant contribution to Gross Domestic Production and employment generation (Gnanothayan & Kauškale, 2022). However, though the sector is of key importance, it lags in adopting the principles of SDG 8.5, that is, to ensure full and productive employment and decent work for all by 2030 (Colombage et al., 2023). Informal employment, absence of social protection, weak occupational health and safety

standards, and limited occupational skill development are typical of labour conditions in the industry (Ranasinghe & Kumarasinghe, 2019). These affect especially the marginalized group like migrant workers, daily wage earners, women in construction.

Comparative studies point out that unlike Sri Lanka, developed countries like Australia and Germany have been much more successful in establishing decent work frameworks in their construction industries (Zulu et al., 2023). Strong labour regulation, stakeholder collaboration and worker protection, fair wages and job security have been enforced in these countries (Zulu et al., 2023). This gap is in the absence of similar structures and policies in Sri Lanka as a developing country. As Dissanayake et al. (2021) point out, this gap highlights the necessity of context-specific strategies that can adapt and localize successfully international practice to the socio-economic, and cultural setting in Sri Lanka. To meet global sustainability goals as well as to have a fairer, safer and more productive workforce in the Sri Lankan construction sector, these enforcement gaps need to be addressed.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively address its dual research objectives. The combination of quantitative bibliometric analysis and qualitative literature review was deliberately chosen to provide both macro-level awareness patterns and micro-level contextual insights (Bornmann, 2022). While pure quantitative methods might overlook nuanced challenges, and purely qualitative approaches could lack measurable trends, this blended methodology offers complementary strengths that enhance the validity and applicability of findings.

The first objective is focusing on scrutinizing the current awareness and implementation of SDG 8.5 in Sri Lankan construction sector as Figure 2 illustration show. Thus, bibliometric analysis was used to achieve this objective, where quantitatively evaluate the academic literature to identify the trends of publication data such as, authorship, key words, citations, co-citation, affiliation and journals. Subsequently, study extract the critical barriers from literature using manual content analysis which gives qualitative information. The review covers publications from 2015 to 2024, aligning with the UN's adoption of the SDGs in 2015. As per Figure 2, the Scopus database was chosen for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed construction literature, with the search string which mentioned below, specifically designed to capture SDG 8.5 related concepts while filtering for Sri Lankan context (Cantu-Ortiz, 2018). The subsequent co-occurrence and cluster analysis of 80 papers enables to quantify research gaps and knowledge concentrations that indicate national awareness levels.

Search string: TITLE-ABS-KEY (SDG8 OR decent OR work OR productive OR employ AND construction AND Sri AND Lanka) AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ENGI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ECON") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "cp"))

The search query was developed based on following criteria; the key words should be SDG 8, decent work, productive employment, construction, and Sri Lanka. The articles should be published withing 2014-2025 and it should be a journal or conference written in English. VOSviewer was used to conduct the bibliometric analysis based on gathered data. This approach was preferred over traditional surveys or interviews because it: (1)

objectively measures existing scholarly attention through publication patterns, (2) reveals invisible networks between research themes, and (3) provides visualizable data trends across time.

Following three types of bibliometric analysing techniques were employed to achieve the first objective.

1. Co-Authorship Analysis

This is a method to study the collaborative relationships among researchers, institutions or countries, which are based on shared authorship in academic publications. This method demonstrates how knowledge is produced and shared across geographical and institutional boundaries. One of the most important advantages of co-authorship analysis is identifying influential researchers, research groups, and potential collaborators in each domain. It offers a quantifiable and objective view of collaborative patterns.

2. Co-occurrence Analysis

Academic articles are analysed to determine how often certain keywords occur together in them. It is a technique through which one acquires the subtle theme, topic and trend of an area of research. The major advantage of the keyword co-occurrence analysis is that it provides a visually and systematically mapped conceptual structure of the literature. It helps in identifying underexplored area and gives a better proposition for future research direction.

3. Co-Citation Analysis

This is the analysis of how often two documents are cited together by other publications, therefore suggesting that they are linked or similar in content. Co-citation analysis can be used to find tides in how knowledge about a concept is acquired over time, unlike expert opinion or qualitative assessment. It provides a historical view for the evolution of research topics, which is hard to achieve through interviews or manual literature reviews.

Figure 3 represent the research process of second objective, and it adopts a qualitative systematic review methodology to examine global barriers and strategies. It prioritized over meta-analysis or case study approaches because it: (1) allows for thematic synthesis of diverse international experiences, (2) captures policy and implementation nuances lost in statistical analyses, and (3) facilitates identification of transferable best practices. The content analysis process involved iterative coding of literature from multiple databases to ensure thematic saturation. This method was selected over automated text mining as it enables deeper interpretation of contextual factors and more accurate categorization of complex strategies. The qualitative findings are systematically organized to highlight both universal principles and culturally specific adaptations relevant to Sri Lanka's construction sector.

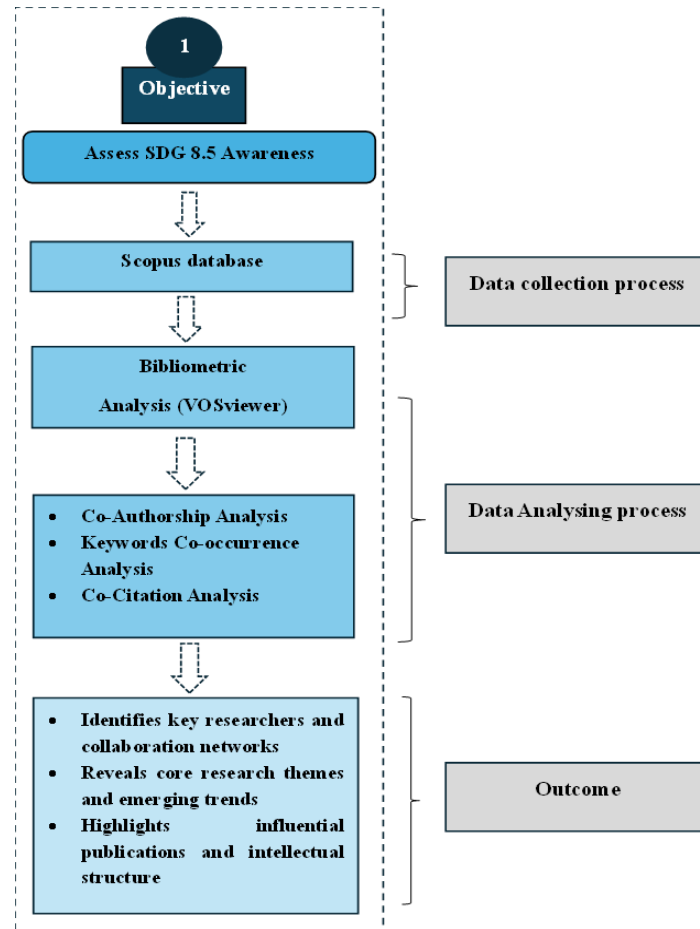


Figure 2: Methodology of objective 01

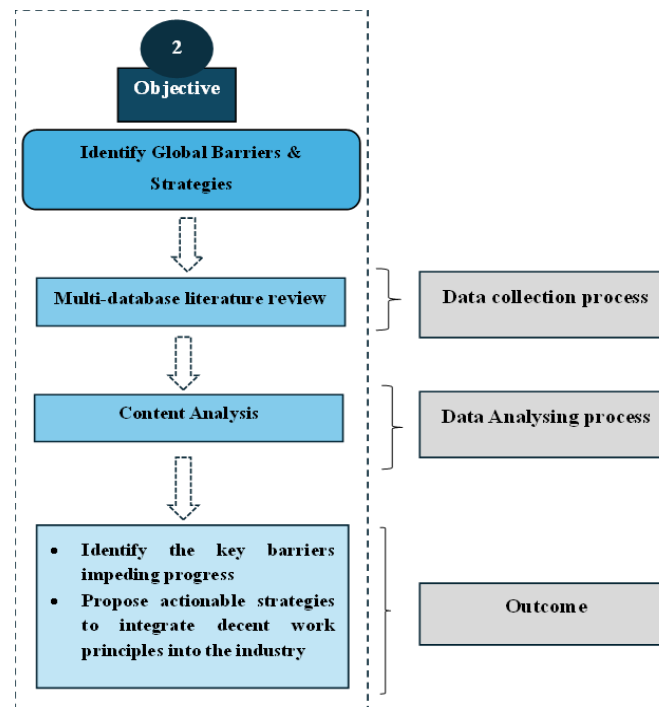


Figure 3: Methodology of objective 02

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section analysis the gathered data and discuss the results.

4.1 AWARENESS OF SRI LANKAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY ABOUT SDG 8.5

This section examines the level of awareness among stakeholders in the Sri Lankan construction industry regarding SDG 8.5, which focuses on achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all by 2030. The analysis draws on data collected to assess how familiar industry professionals are with the goals, targets, and relevance of SDG 8.5 to their daily operations and strategic planning.

4.1.1 Co-authorship Mapping

Figure 4 shows the Co-authorship analysis of Sri Lankan construction research, and it reveals limited but strategic collaborations around SDG 8.5 themes, with key authors like Dissanayake and Manoharan (link strength:19) forming strong research clusters, while isolated high-producers like Perera (7 papers) and low-citation works (e.g., Waidyasekara:1 citation) indicate fragmented knowledge dissemination. The concentration of decent work research within small academic circles, combined with weak industry-policy linkages (evident in Dodanwala's 117 citations but minimal collaborations), highlights critical gaps in translating SDG 8.5 awareness into practical implementation. Strengthening interdisciplinary networks between technical experts (Ranadewa), policymakers (Senaratne), and institutional researchers could bridge this divide, transforming academic insights into actionable strategies for improving labour conditions, gender equity, and formal employment in Sri Lanka's construction sector.

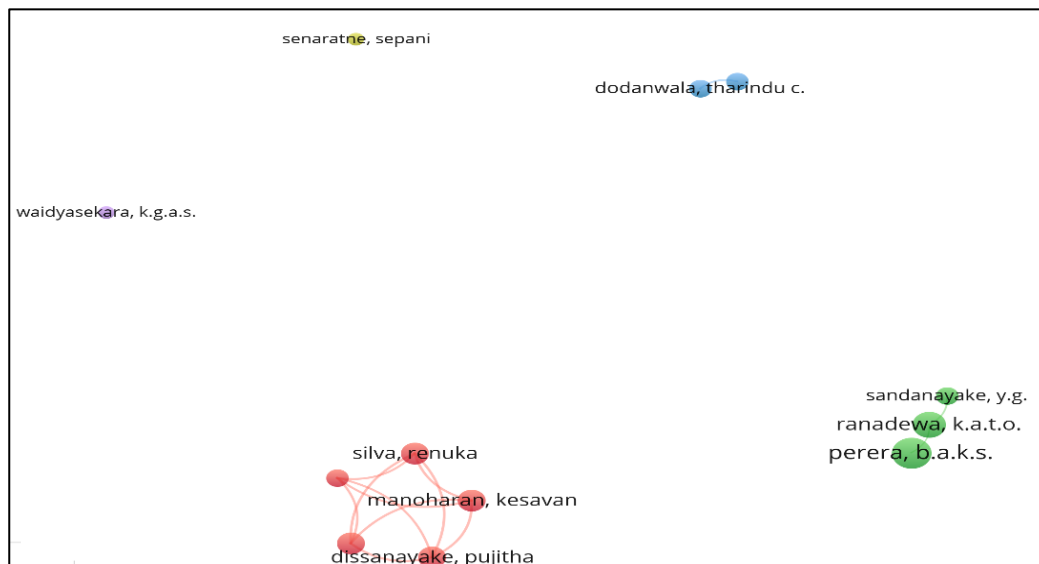


Figure 4: Bibliographic analysis co-authorship

4.1.2 Co-occurrence Analysis

The bibliographic analysis of co-occurrence of keywords of Sri Lankan construction research reveals a predominant focus on project management, cost reduction, and sustainable development, evidenced by large, interconnected nodes, while themes central to SDG 8.5 such as job stress, well-being, and role ambiguity appear as small, isolated

nodes, indicating severe neglect of decent work principles. As per the Figure 5, each node represents a keyword. The size of the nodes reflects the frequency of keyword appearance, and links between nodes indicate how often those keywords appear together in publications. Different colours represent thematic clusters, helping to identify major research areas and interrelated topics.

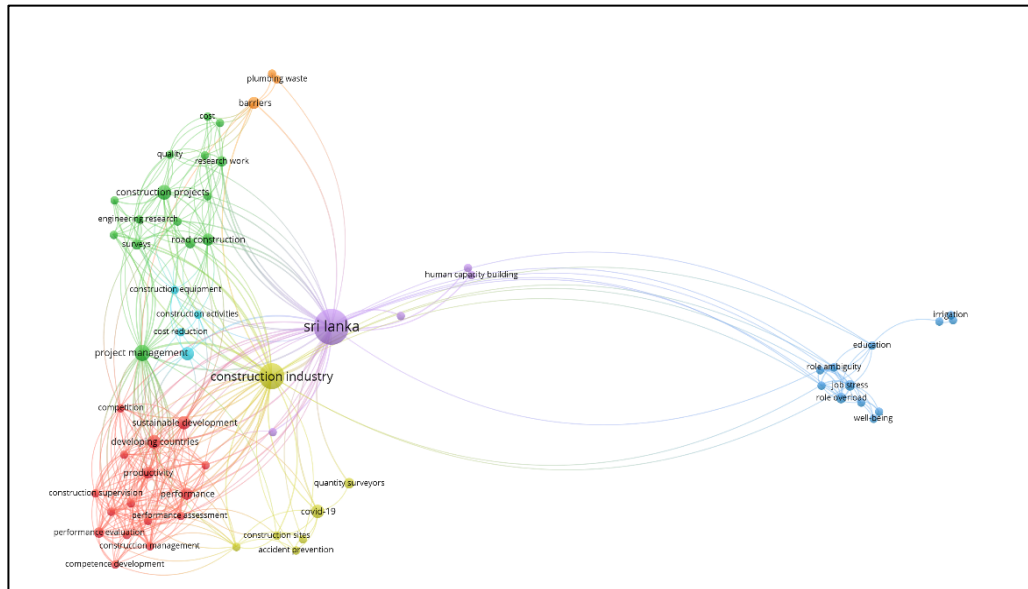


Figure 5: Bibliographic analysis of co-occurrence of keywords

This disparity highlights the industry's entrenched prioritization of productivity metrics over worker welfare, with critical gaps in research on employment conditions, psychological safety, and equitable opportunities. The weak co-occurrence of SDG 8.5-related keywords underscores an urgent need for rebalancing academic and policy attention toward human-centric studies, which could transform workplace practices and align Sri Lanka's construction sector with global sustainability targets through evidence-based interventions targeting worker empowerment and inclusive growth.

4.1.3 Co-Citation Analysis

The co-citation analysis reveals influential research relationships shaping SDG 8.5 discourse in Sri Lanka's construction sector, with *Dissanayake P.* (366 link strength) and *Deegahawature D.* (363) forming the dominant intellectual cluster, indicating their foundational role in decent work research. While local scholars demonstrate strong interconnectivity, the limited co-citation of international experts like *Lingard H.* (23) and *Ballard G.* (83) suggests weak integration of global decent work frameworks into local studies. This insular citation pattern reflects a disconnect between Sri Lankan research and international SDG 8.5 advancements, particularly in occupational health and gender equity. The high link strength among local authors (*Silva R.*, *Manoharan K.*) confirms concentrated expertise, but the sparse citations of labour sociology pioneers (*Koskela L.*, *Thornhill A.*) highlight a critical gap in applying cross-disciplinary insights to improve worker welfare. Strengthening co-citation networks with global decent work literature could accelerate policy-relevant research to address Sri Lanka's construction labour challenge.

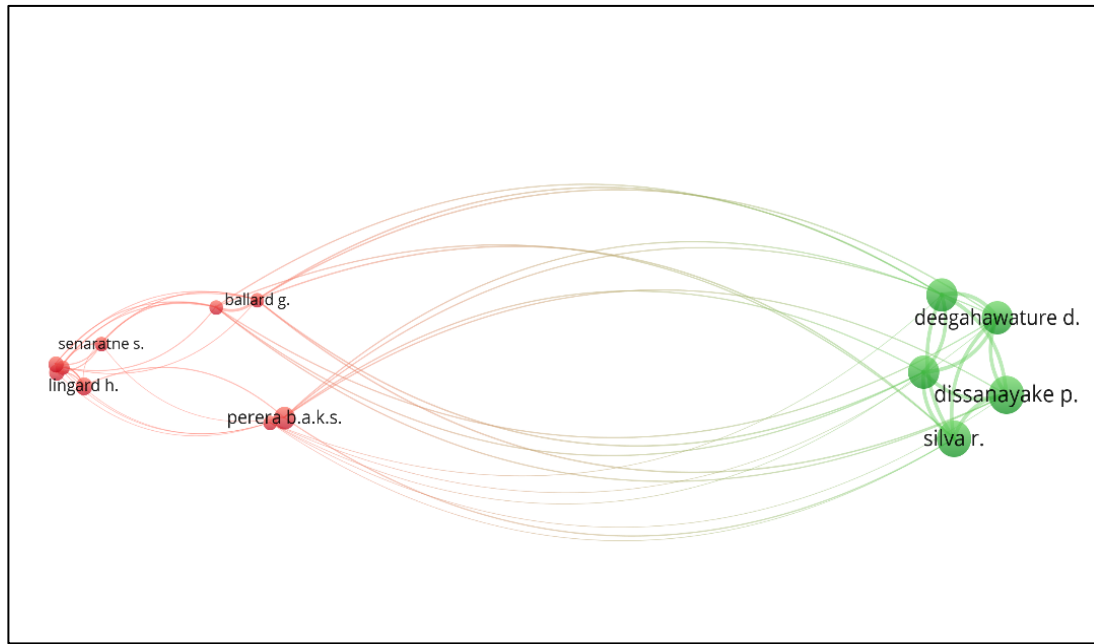


Figure 6: Bibliographic analysis of co-citation

Results of the bibliometric analysis of co-authorship, co-occurrence of keywords and co-citation mapping corroborate the fact that the construction research in Sri Lanka is specialized and yet limited in its engagement with SDG 8.5. Dissanayake-Manoharan is one of the small research clusters that demonstrate strong local influence, but the larger academic environment is characterized by fragmented collaboration, weak interdisciplinarity, and minimal international linkage. Analysis of keyword shows that cost and project performance dominate while themes of decent work like well-being and job security are sidelined. In addition, citation patterns indicate that there exists a lack of the use of literature on the global decent work to aid the sector to adopt inclusive labour strategies. These findings therefore directly meet Objective 01 by documenting the current level of awareness and research engagement regarding SDG 8.5 in Sri Lanka's construction industry and identify key areas that need academic and practical attention to promote productive and decent work in the Sri Lankan construction industry.

4.2 BARRIERS IN ACHIEVING DECENT WORK IN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The content analysis of global literature reveals six persistent barriers hindering SDG 8.5 implementation in the construction industry, categorized into four thematic areas: gender disparities, market economy pressures, informal sector reliance, and stakeholder gaps. Table 2 shows the summary of analysis of barriers. Gender inequality emerges as a cross-cutting challenge, with studies highlighting systemic discrimination, wage gaps, and limited leadership opportunities for women and persons with disabilities (Anojan & Siriwardana, 2021; Pourmazaherian M. & Musonda, 2022; Silva, 2018). Maqbool et al. (2023) states, market-driven exploitation manifests through cost-cutting practices that depress wages and weaken labour rights enforcement, while Anaman & Amponsah (2007) mentioned informal employment exacerbates vulnerabilities through absent legal protections and social security. Critically, stakeholder failures particularly inadequate policies and awareness perpetuate these issues (Anaman & Amponsah 2007; Maqbool et al., 2023). The Table 2 demonstrates how these barriers intersect globally, with

developing nations facing acute informalization and developed economies struggling with equitable growth, underscoring the need for context-specific strategies to achieve decent work.

Table 2: Barriers in achieving decent work in construction industry

	Barrier	A	B	C	D	E	F
Gender Disparities	Systemic discrimination	✓			✓		
	Wage gaps		✓			✓	
	Limited leadership opportunities for women	✓	✓	✓			
	Limits job opportunities (Women and Persons with Disabilities)	✓					
	Inadequate training opportunities		✓		✓		✓
Market Economy Pressures	Cost-driven exploitation	✓					
	Low wages						
	Lack of labour rights enforcement		✓		✓		✓
Informal Sector Reliance	Lack of legal protections	✓					
	Lack of social security				✓		✓
	Lack of safe conditions for informal workers		✓				
Stakeholders	Lack of awareness and understanding		✓			✓	
	Lack of effective policies that promote decent work			✓			✓

A- (Pourmazaherian M. & Musonda, 2022), B- (Anojan & Siriwardana, 2021), C- (Silva, 2018). D- (Bruno & Oliveira, 2024), E- (Anaman & Amponsah, 2007), F- (Maqbool et al., 2023)

4.3 STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME FROM BARRIERS IN ACHIEVING DECENT WORK IN CONSTRUCTION

Table 3 indicates the analysis which identifies three key strategic approaches to advance SDG 8.5 in the construction sector: promoting gender equality, strengthening labour rights, and formalizing informal work. As per the Islam (2020), gender-focused strategies emphasize equal pay laws, leadership representation, and targeted training programs to address systemic disparities. Labor rights reinforcement highlights stricter law enforcement, union support, and worker complaint mechanisms to combat exploitation (Chaha & Rani, 2024; Islam, 2020). For informal sector challenges, solutions centre on accessible registration, social benefits, and skills development to transition workers into formal employment (Chaha & Rani, 2024; Chigbu & Nekhwevha, 2023). These strategies directly counter the identified barriers with gender initiatives tackling discrimination, labour policies addressing market pressures, and formalization measures reducing

informal sector vulnerabilities demonstrating a targeted, multi-pronged framework for achieving decent work globally.

Table 3: Strategies to overcome from barriers

	Strategy	A	B	C	D	E	F
Promoting Gender Equality	Enforcing equal pay laws	✓					
	Improving fair representation of women in leadership and technical roles		✓		✓		✓
	Providing mentorship and vocational training			✓			
	Conducting Pursuing programs that encourage women and PWD	✓			✓		
Strengthening Labor Rights	Implement stricter enforcement of labour laws	✓	✓				
	Supporting unions	✓					✓
	Ensuring complaint mechanisms for workers.						
	Ensure legal protections for workers	✓		✓			
Formalizing Informal Work	Establish accessible registration processes			✓			✓
	Provide financial and social benefits to encourage formalization		✓				
	Expanding vocational training and skills development opportunities	✓			✓		✓
A-(Islam, 2020), B-(Chaha & Rani, 2024), C-(Chigbu & Nekhwevha, 2023), D-(Zulu et al., 2023), E-(Khalique et al., 2021), F-(Fei et al., 2021)							

The synthesis of barriers and strategies based on global literature offer a holistic view of the challenges and their solutions associated with the achievement of SDG 8.5 in the construction industry. The analysis identifies systemic gender disparities, market pressures, informal sector dependence and stakeholder failures as key barriers which strategic pathways of promoting gender equality, strengthening labour rights and formalising informal work can help overcome. The findings are consistent with Objective 02 since they provide a comprehensive appraisal of current global approaches and identify feasible tactics that can be adopted to Sri Lanka's construction context. The analysis makes a significant contribution to formulating a context sensitive roadmap for decent and productive work in the industry by linking the root causes with appropriate interventions.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research examined the enforcement gaps in the achievement of SDG 8.5, which aims to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all in the construction industry of Sri Lanka. The study is important because although the construction sector contributes a great deal to the national GDP and employment, it lags in adopting fair labour practices, equal opportunity policies and worker welfare standards. The study

utilized a mixed methods approach, whereby bibliometric analysis was used to assess national awareness, identify key barriers, propose strategies that were globally informed and pertinent to the Sri Lankan context from a qualitative systematic review.

The findings suggest that the awareness of SDG 8.5 is not very high, and that research is mainly concentrated on productivity and project management, rather than employment conditions and workers' rights. Co-occurrence and co-authorship mapping of the keywords showed fragmented scientific attempts, poor participation of expert stakeholder and minimal global best practice integration. Gender disparity, market driven exploitation, reliance on informal sector and policy gaps were identified as key barriers. To that effect, three strategic recommendations were provided: the promotion of gender equality; the strengthening of labour rights; and formalising informal work, all aimed at making progress towards decent work.

Nevertheless, this study has a few limitations. This study used only Scopus indexed literatures yet, there are literature which are not indexed in the Scopus but have appeared in other databases. Although rich in context, the qualitative analysis relied purely on secondary data and did not include direct stakeholder interview or field-level feedback. Empirical surveys or interviews with industry practitioners, labour unions and policymakers, should be conducted to validate and refine the proposed strategies in the future research.

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