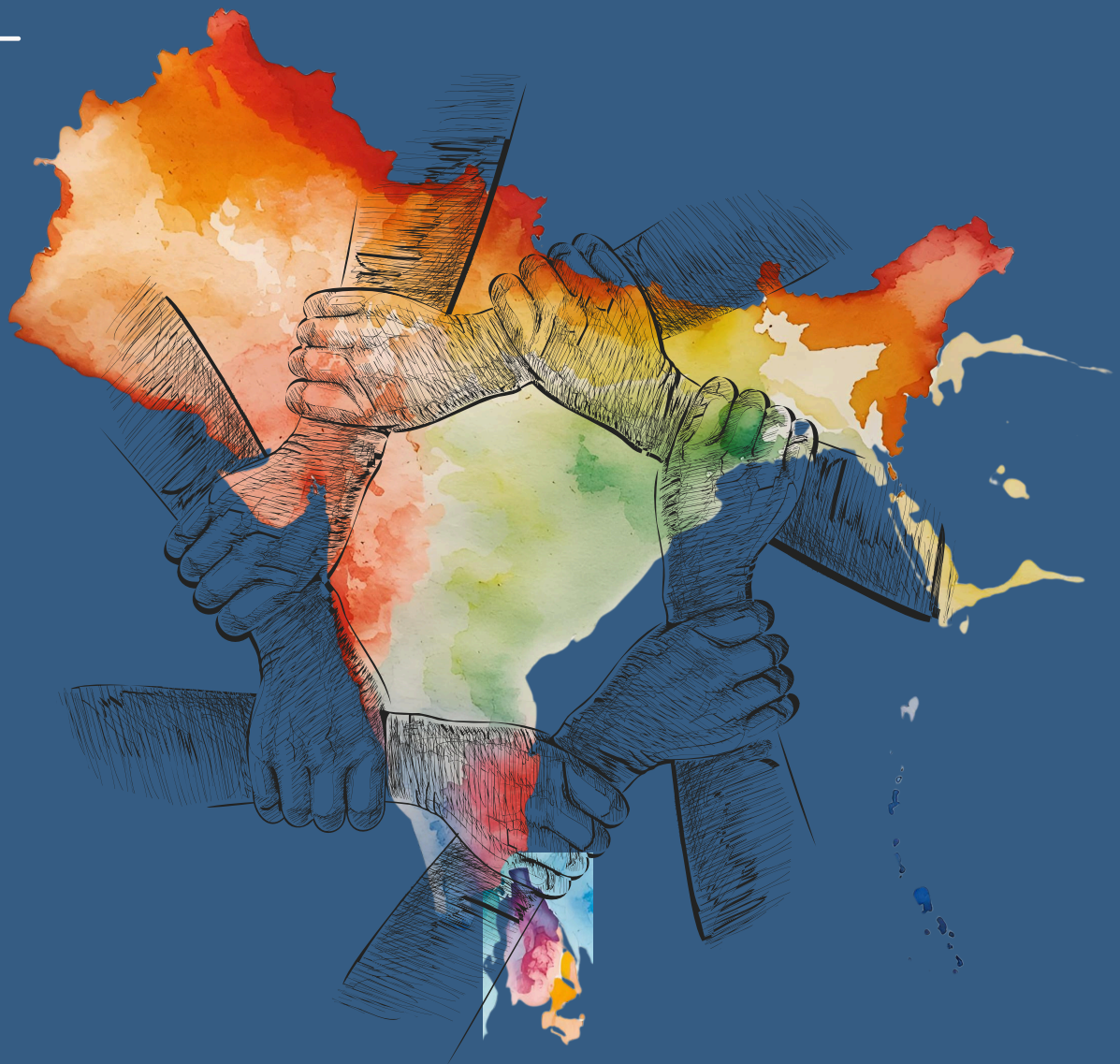


An Intersectional Equity Study of South Asia's Labour Market and Trade Unions



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Foreword

It is an honor to write this foreword for the South Asian Regional Trade Union Council's (SARTUC) Research Study on Intersectionality. Examining the many interconnected aspects of inequality that influence the South Asian labor market and the trade union movement is a noteworthy and topical academic endeavor. The report provides a deeper understanding of how various forms of discrimination overlap to affect workers' lived realities throughout the region by placing gender, caste, class, disability, sexual orientation, and migration within an intersectional framework. As a member of SARTUC's Youth Executive Committee and Vice President of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), I have seen firsthand how systemic injustices still prevent women, young people, migrant workers, and LGBTQIA+ people from fully participating in the workforce. Therefore, the study's insights are crucial for pointing policymakers and trade union leaders in the direction of inclusive approaches that address these intertwined issues.

The study emphasizes how important it is for trade unions to abandon conventional methods and make intersectional equity a fundamental tenet of advocacy and representation. Achieving long-term social justice in the workplace requires bolstering diversity in leadership, formalizing grievance procedures and accountability, and guaranteeing fair access to opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors.

The initiative taken by SARTUC to commission this study reaffirms the organization's longstanding dedication to promoting the values of equality, dignity, and decent work for all South Asian workers. In addition to being an academic resource, this study will be a useful manual for creating a more equitable and inclusive trade union movement throughout the area.

I would like to thank the research team for their thorough and perceptive work, as well as SARTUC for its ongoing commitment to advancing intersectional justice in the South Asian labor movement.

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I. Introduction

Achieving Equality is a fundamental human right, essential for creating a just, fair, and sustainable society. Today's prevailing culture and technological advancements require addressing both individual biases and systemic inequalities across all layers of work culture through collaboration between governments, organisations, and individuals to create a more equitable world. Trade unions are organisations where every worker has the choice to be a member to advance and protect their own and their members' interests in the workplace. Trade unions are crucial to emphasise the fact that “workplace rights belong to everyone”. Being voluntary in association, politically divided, and often sparking debate, both advantages and disadvantages were incubated in plantations, mines, railways, factories, and textile industries that expanded across the growing sectors. Tracing the rich history of trade unions, which evolved from informal worker associations to formal organisations, it began with strikes, benefits, protests, and political activism, impacting working conditions, wages, and other social benefits. The pre-industrial era is characterised by regulating the formation of trade rather than advocating for rights. Later, the rise of factories during the Industrial Revolution led to the formation of modern trade unions, which gained prominence in collective bargaining, negotiation, and setting their own working standards. Over time, trade unions gained legal recognition, instituting a formal political process. Trade unions marked their efficacy after the evolution of the International Labour Organisation, established in 1919, which promotes social justice and improved working standards, thereby strengthening the global trade union movement.

The South Asian labour market is characterised by its large, young, and rapidly growing workforce, coupled with a significant reliance on the informal sector. These dynamics create a complex landscape with distinct opportunities and challenges. Role of trade union in inscribing intersectionality, implementing the social pillar of equality at the workplace to have equal opportunities, treated and fair and create a suitable environment free of discrimination, systematic oppression and a diversified, inclusive culture requires a collective commitment from the employers, members, global institutions, national authorities and social partners to mandate for welfare, progress and justice. To address the affective areas of inequality, injustice and intolerance, adaptation of legislation to protect all people of diverse identities within the workplace remains a battleground due to economic reasons, patriarchal structure of the society and marginalisation that are externally enforced. Adopting a clear strategic line to combat discrimination, marginalisation, oppression, and inequalities, along with an intersectional perspective, is not only a powerful force for unions towards social justice but also contributes to economic effectiveness, thereby enhancing global economic growth and development. Alleviating social structural discrimination fosters a sense of community that encourages the engagement of many excellent, talented, and skilled

individuals in the labour market, thereby enhancing the productive potential of the growing economies of lower-middle-income countries. Promoting inclusion by combating discrimination, regardless of how complex it may seem, is a fundamental necessity for every human being. A trade union that is a conscience of providing meaning, strength, and perspective in promoting intersectional equality can mark a distinctive economic progress and a unique identify in upholding the labour market.

South Asia is undergoing a demographic transition, with a substantial portion of its population entering working age. However, youth unemployment remains a pressing issue, with rates in countries like Nepal (20.8%) and Sri Lanka (22.3%) being particularly high in 2024 (Bank, 2024). This often stems from a mismatch between the skills of the labour force and the demands of the modern economy. Female labour force participation (FLFP) is notably low, around 33.89% in 2024, despite women comprising a significant part of the working-age population. This represents a substantial economic loss, estimated between 13% and 50% of regional GDP, due to social norms and structural barriers (Economics, 2024)(OECD, 2025) The informal sector continues to dominate employment, accounting for over 80% of jobs in countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan(Bank, 2025). Workers in this sector often lack formal contracts, social security, and legal protections, leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks and low wages (IMF, 2025). Despite strong economic growth in some South Asian nations, the creation of decent, formal jobs has not kept pace with the growing workforce, leading to persistent working poverty. (Plutus, 2024)

Labour migration, both internal and international, is a significant feature, with millions seeking opportunities abroad, particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Remittances from these migrants are a vital source of income, significantly contributing to the GDP of several South Asian economies (Economics, 2025)(Rajan, 2024). The increasing adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation presents a mixed impact. While these technologies can displace jobs, especially routine ones, they also create new opportunities, particularly in IT, manufacturing, and healthcare (Aktar, 2024)(Faizal, 2025). This necessitates a focus on reskilling and upskilling the workforce to adapt to evolving demands and prevent a widening of the skills gap (ILO, 2024).In essence, the South Asian labour market is at a critical juncture, needing strategic interventions in job creation, skill development, and social protection to fully harness its demographic potential and navigate the challenges of a rapidly changing global economy.

II. Trade unions in South Asia

Trade unions in South Asia are a crucial force in the region's labour market, playing a significant role in advocating for workers' rights and social justice. Their influence is shaped by complex political and economic landscapes, as well as the dominance of a large informal sector. A primary function of trade unions is collective bargaining, where they negotiate with employers for better wages, benefits, and working

conditions. This process not only resolves workplace disputes but also helps to secure fairer labour contracts and improve social welfare for its members. Unions have been instrumental in pushing for stronger labour laws, workplace safety regulations, and increased social security benefits, contributing to a more equitable distribution of wealth.

The unions' role is particularly vital in addressing the region's significant challenges. They are increasingly focused on organising workers in the vast informal economy, who often lack formal contracts and legal protections. Similarly, they are tackling the rise of precarious and contract-based work to ensure these workers receive the same rights as permanent employees. Furthermore, trade unions are actively working to increase the representation and participation of women and youth, addressing issues like Gender-Based discrimination and advocating for equal pay. Despite their historical influence, South Asian trade unions face hurdles such as political affiliations, declining membership in some sectors, and restrictive labour laws. However, they are modernising their approach by adapting to new forms of work, such as the gig economy, and leveraging technology to expand their reach. Through National and regional cooperation, they continue to be a powerful voice for workers, influencing socioeconomic policies and striving for a more just and sustainable labour market.

Lens through the existing workplace culture, workplaces are diverse than ever. Today, we are witnessing the participation of members of different generations, the proportion of women serving to occupy leadership positions, an increase in the number of migrant members, and disabled individuals getting represented in visibility. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals are struggling to be represented and positioned in the decent workplace. Evolutionary changes are already impacting organisational culture, the growing requisite demands for an effective organisation, and leaders who can cultivate a culture of acceptance of diverse people into the organisational structures and functions. Training is an integral component promoting intersectionality in trade unions. Building capacities among the union leaders and members can facilitate them to address the challenges faced by marginalised groups and create initiatives to address the same. Additionally, it will help trade union leaders and members become more aware of the biases, shortfalls in creating an equitable organisation. Perceived as the most powerful organisations in creating a supportive environment for workers to advocate for their rights and lead a dignified work culture, there are several needs for dimensions of intersectional training for combatable acceptance and adjustments.

III. Trade Union Promoting LGBTIQ

Despite the fact that LGBTIQ are intractably intersectional, they affirm sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, compounded by discrimination against several social groups. The verge of unemployment pushes them towards poverty, torture, health risk behaviours and antisocial activities. Including them in the labour market is one of the

ideal plans of action to combat human rights violations. Though the protection of LGBTQI is closely connected to the normative framework on discrimination, trade unions can act on the inclusive policies to promote a greater cultural awareness among social partners. The trade union member can effectively prevent discrimination in the labour market by harmonising the process, such as recruitment, career advancement, and encouraging the gain of visibility and equal representation. The trade union can take efforts to address the root cause, alleviate discrimination, and empower all spheres of private, family, social and working life.

IV. Trade Union Promoting Gender

Historically, since time immemorial, gender-related matters have been broad and varied. Promoting gender equality by combating all forms of Gender Based Violence in the workplace or in society has emerged eventually through the action programmes level. The bulk of actions that are to be carried out by the trade union include early identification of violence, abuses and harassment, being sensitive to the health and safety at work and training them to be skilled workers. Women are usually weakened by their vulnerabilities that escalate the fear of participating in the workforce, characterised by household domestic chores and family responsibilities. Trade unions can intervene in the types of women, such as single mothers, migrant women, women with less education, young women and older women, who are impacted by the economic crisis towards empowerment. Trade union acknowledges the human rights violations of women, such as Gender Based Violence and domestic violence, by making meaningful and effective policy provisions to exercise their rights for considerable actions. Trade unions make a difference with respect to gender by facilitating “Economic Violence” and tackling the inequalities.

V. Trade Union Addressing Racism

Racism is considered one of the obstacles to friendly and peaceful relations at the workplace, not only affecting the supportive environment but also the productivity. Trade unions are profoundly aware of the importance of opposing racism at work place in order to reinforce inclusiveness and fair regulations trade union policies upon upholding solidarity, equality, improving lives and social justices for all marks the beginning to battle discriminatory practices by promoting petitions and addressing grievances by discussion with Trade Union members and supporters to institute a social network at outside the work place to collaborate trade union, political, employers, civil society and community organisations and engage with governmental agencies to plan programmes to battle discrimination by formulating a liberal, democratic and progressive forces for social integration & discrimination free work place.



VI. Trade Union Supporting Disability

Promotion of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, both in the public and private sectors, calls for the adaptation of a strategic and supportive workplace. However, it is rational that the conditions for the disabled or restricted are particularly critical in humanitarian crises and situations. Adhering to the health rights of the disabled individual promotes intersectional perspectives, addressing the risk of being disadvantaged by promoting need analysis, assessment of health through health checkups and rehabilitation needs based on the obligation of the disabled persons trade union, expressing their commitment to the access of services at the workplace can boost participation and labour market integration. Trade union makes a conscious effort to ensure social protection to provide an extensive coverage, high-quality care and an established welfare system monitoring the Labour Protection Act. Union makes an effort to engage in policy making involving social organisations representing disabled people, creating a specialised task force that will fit in their abilities and adhere to ensure the integration of people with disabilities in the established labour market, employing them in the formal market, including in vocational guidance programmes, placement services and continuing training.

VII. About SARTUC

The South Asian Regional Trade Union Council (SARTUC) is a regional federation of national-level trade unions of South Asia. Established in 1988, plays a pivotal role in addressing critical labour issues and empowering workers across South Asia. It unifies diverse national trade unions, providing a collective and stronger voice for over 50 million workers. This regional solidarity enables coordinated advocacy on common issues like low wages, precarious work, and limited social protection, which individual national unions might struggle to address alone. A cornerstone of SARTUC's efforts is the protection of South Asian migrant workers. It actively pushes for better policies on migration, including advocating for minimum wages, social security, gender equality, and ethical recruitment practices in both sending and receiving countries. SARTUC successfully lobbied for the inclusion of these demands in the SAARC Summit Declaration, a significant step in regional policy-making. It is a key advocate for the principles of social justice and decent work across South Asia. It strives for full employment, poverty eradication, and the elimination of discrimination based on gender, race, or creed. Beyond advocacy, SARTUC focuses on capacity building for its member unions. This strengthens the ability of national unions to effectively represent their members and respond to evolving labour market challenges.



VIII. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how different forms of social inequality, such as those based on gender, caste, class, sexuality, race, disability, and religion, overlap and interact to create unique systems of oppression and privilege.

IX. Need for Intersectionality Intervention in South Asia

The concept of intersectional equity is crucial for truly understanding and improving the South Asian labour market and strengthening its trade unions. Intersectionality recognises that various forms of discrimination, such as caste, gender, class, ethnicity, migrant status, and sexual orientation, do not operate in isolation but overlap and intensify, creating unique and compounded disadvantages for individuals.

In the South Asian Labour Market:

South Asia's labour market is deeply stratified. For example, Dalit women frequently face compounded discrimination based on both their gender and caste. This can lead to significantly lower wages and disproportionate engagement in hazardous, informal jobs, where protections are minimal. Similarly, female migrant workers experience intensified vulnerabilities due to the intersection of their gender, economic status, and migrant identity, often being channelled into exploitative sectors like domestic work. LGBTQIA+ individuals face severe discrimination, resulting in substantial employment barriers and higher rates of underemployment due to prejudice. Class discrimination is found at work in the way of treatment and in availing the social security benefits. This pervasive, multi-layered discrimination underscores the critical need for inclusive policies and targeted advocacy to ensure equitable opportunities for all. Without an intersectional lens, policies aimed at improving labour conditions risk overlooking these deeply rooted, compounded inequalities, thereby hindering truly inclusive growth and leaving the most marginalised populations behind.

Within Trade Unions

Historically, union leadership has often lacked diversity. An intersectional approach urges unions to actively promote leadership and participation from marginalised groups, including women, Dalits, LGBTQIA+ individuals, class, migrants and ethnic minorities. This ensures their specific concerns and unique experiences are genuinely reflected in decision-making processes and collective bargaining agendas. Furthermore, unions must actively address any internal biases and ensure their services are truly accessible to all members, regardless of their intersecting identities. By understanding and combating these layered forms of discrimination, trade unions can build greater solidarity and enhance their legitimacy. This leads to a stronger, more inclusive, and more

equitable labour movement, better equipped to represent the diverse needs of all workers across South Asia.

X. Review of Literature

10.1. Bangladesh

The most pronounced intersectional disparities are tied to gender and class. Women, particularly those from poor or rural backgrounds, experience much lower labour force participation rates than men (21.25% for women vs. 78.5% for men), with nearly half of young women classified as NEET (not in education, employment, or training) compared to just over 11% for men (Shuvo, 2025). Patriarchal social norms, wage discrimination, occupational segregation, violence, and a lack of workplace safety all restrict women's access to quality jobs, especially in urban and formal sector. These challenges are compounded for rural and poor women, who are more likely to work informally or in the lowest-paid, least secure jobs (Mohan Abusr Razzaque, 2025)

Bangladesh's labour market is dominated by informality, with over 85% of total employment, which exacerbates risks for those with intersecting vulnerabilities, such as poor, rural, and migrant workers (Mohan Abusr Razzaque, 2025). Structural constraints, such as limited skills matching, inadequate education-to-employment pathways, and persistent informality, disadvantage youth, women, and marginalised groups (Shuvo, 2025). Migrants, especially those with limited education or from marginalised backgrounds, face additional hurdles, including occupational risk, job insecurity, and limited social protection (Ulandssekretariatet, 2025).

There is also significant concern about discrimination against religious minorities and the limited, precarious participation of people with non-normative gender identities or sexual orientations. While hijra and transgender individuals have achieved some legal recognition, they largely remain excluded from mainstream employment opportunities and are funnelled into the informal sector or subsistence activities due to stigma and lack of workplace protections (Md.Al-Manum, 2022). Formal legal frameworks do not protect against workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity

Legal and Societal Barriers

Bangladesh maintains laws criminalising same-sex relationships through Section 377 of the Penal Code. While enforcement is inconsistent, these provisions fuel widespread stigma and harassment, both socially and within workplaces. There are no legal protections against workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, which leaves LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those open about their identities, vulnerable to harassment, social exclusion, and outright dismissal from employment (SIDA, 2014)

10.2.India

Intersectional equity in India's labour market is shaped by overlapping identities such as gender, caste, class, rural-urban location, religion, and, increasingly, sexual orientation. These factors jointly drive persistent disparities in labour participation, pay, and job quality.

The intersection of gender and caste is especially pronounced. Women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) experience compounded disadvantage, facing both gender- and caste-based barriers such as deprivation in educational opportunities, underrepresentation in formal employment, lower wages, and vulnerability to informal and precarious work. Patriarchal norms and socio-religious expectations further marginalise women, who are overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid household and care work. Societal, religious, and marital constraints strongly dictate a woman's labour market involvement, with caste and class compounding the effect (Analyst, 2024).

Income inequality and labour outcomes remain stark across axes of class and location. Despite growth in median earnings from 2017–24, the bottom 50% and, especially, the bottom 10% of income earners have seen only limited gains, with income gaps between genders most severe at the lowest earning levels (over 69% gender pay gap among the poorest decile) . Rural-urban divides persist: the top 10% urban income threshold is more than double that of rural areas, and income stagnation is more pronounced for the rural poor (Anandh, 2025). These multipliers of disadvantage restrict social and economic mobility, especially for women and marginalised groups.

While affirmative action exists for SC/ST groups in public hiring, the private sector's approach to caste equity is largely non-mandatory and delivers mostly training and scholarship schemes, with little substantive change in hiring. Corporate diversity efforts tend to focus on gender, with less substantive attention paid to caste or minority status (Indulekha, 2022) . For sexual minorities, reliable labour market data is lacking, but legal, normative, and economic exclusion create intersecting barriers for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transgender workers.

India's female labour force participation rate remains among the lowest in the G20, at 31.7% in 2024, and is projected to take decades to approach parity with global peers (Khongwir, 2025). Most women are self-employed or in vulnerable forms of work; few have access to formal salaried jobs with protections (IWWAGE, 2025) . Gendered barriers in platform/gig economies and in policy frameworks further limit equitable participation (Navika, 2025).

India has made important legal strides, such as the 2018 Supreme Court ruling decriminalising same-sex relationships (Section 377) and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019. However, these frameworks have yet to close the gap

between formal legal protections and everyday workplace realities. Many LGBTQIA+ individuals face ongoing harassment, discrimination, and social stigma in employment settings, limiting their access to decent work and economic inclusion (Rathee, 2025)

10.3.Nepal

A mixed-methods study of unmigrated women in Western Nepal (Gitta Shrestha, 2023) explored how the out-migration of men reconfigures the social inclusion of women left behind. The study accentuates that gendered responsibilities intersect with caste/ethnicity, kinship, age, and household economic status in determining women's options for economic and community participation. Although women who were not married had greater autonomy and mobility, intensely embedded caste-based hierarchies and patriarchal norms continued to constrain equity. This is important in that it provides insight into the multi-layered hindrances that condition women's labour participation in rural Nepal.

The theme of gendered exclusion also resonates in the study of the labour movement. *Let's Make Trade Unions More Gender Just* (Kapar, 2022) documents structural and cultural barriers faced by women workers in Nepalese trade unions, such as sexual harassment and discriminatory tactics. It speaks of the persistence of patriarchal leadership structures that exclude gender-balanced participation, even within organisations that champion workers' rights. This aligns with broader intersectional propositions that institutional representation alone will not translate into actual gender justice unless underlying power relations are addressed.

In addition, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), IndustriALL, and the World Bank's global and regional labour rights reports provide comparative information on women's employment participation, wage gaps, and union organising in Nepal and South Asia. These sources validate persistent gaps in compensation, social protection, and workplace safety, substantiating the rationale for placing women's labour participation within broader global paradigms of gender justice and fair work.

Nepal has made notable legal strides recognising LGBTQIA+ rights, including the 2007 Supreme Court ruling affirming fundamental rights for sexual and gender minorities and constitutional protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and caste (Sakshi, 2023). The 2015 Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on caste, gender, and sexual orientation and allows individuals to obtain citizenship documents aligned with their gender identity.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that women's participation in Nepal's labour market and trade unions cannot be analysed through a single-axis model of gender. Instead, intersecting social identities and structural inequalities in terms of caste, ethnicity,

economic class, and patriarchal norms strongly affect women's opportunities, constraints, and collective action.

10.4.Pakistan

Comprehensive labour market profile report detailing provincial divides, industrial disputes, regulations for trade unions, and challenges faced by marginalised labour groups in Pakistan. It is valuable for understanding how trade union structures address and often fall short of intersectional equity (Gills, 2021).

Mind the 'inequality' gap: An intersectionality-informed scoping review for Health and care workers. This scoping review maps intersectional inequalities experienced by health workers, including wage gaps and opportunity denial, with 20 social locations (such as gender, race, and cadre) analysed. It identifies knowledge gaps for Pakistan's workforce and highlights the need for intersectional policy approaches (Roomi Aziz, 2025).

Women's economic underdevelopment in Pakistan: Focuses on how gender interacts with women's economic autonomy in Pakistan by examining market and non-market work, intersectional challenges, and equity barriers (Huma Maqsood, 2024).

Pakistan's social and labour market environment is strongly influenced by conservative cultural and religious norms. Although transgender individuals (often referred to locally as hijras or khwaja siras) have gained formal legal recognition and some protections under Pakistan's 2018 Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, societal stigma and discrimination persist in education, employment, healthcare, and public life. Laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or broader LGBTQIA+ identities are largely absent or unenforced, leaving most non-heteronormative individuals vulnerable to harassment, exclusion, and job insecurity.

10.5.Sri Lanka

An Intersectional Approach to Understanding the Inequality and Subordination of Women Factory Workers in the Sri Lankan Apparel Industry (Gayani Samarakoon, 2022) provides empirical evidence of how rurality, poverty, and gender intersect to shape the lived experiences, subordination, and marginalisation of women working in Sri Lanka's export-oriented apparel sector. The study uses qualitative interviews and highlights intersections of patriarchal norms, global capitalism, and workplace hierarchy to reveal the unique burdens faced by poor rural women factory workers.

The Labour and Human Rights Issues in Sri Lankan Global Supply Chains: Hettiarachchi provides a comprehensive review of labour rights abuses, gender-based discrimination, and intersectional vulnerabilities in global supply chains operating in



Sri Lanka. The thesis recommends integrated, multilevel policy solutions to address complex equity challenges in industrial and export sectors (Hettiarachchi, 2018).

Trade Union in South Asia: A Comparative Study (Yadav, 2023) includes a comparative analysis of trade unions in Sri Lanka, focusing on milestones, organisational structures, barriers, and initiatives for gender and diversity inclusion. It specifically assesses how trade unions have shaped labour laws, provided social protection, and advocated for marginalised groups in the Sri Lankan context, while identifying key obstacles to intersectional equity within unions.

The Case of Sri Lankan Labour Law Reforms (Wickramasingha, 2025) details contemporary reforms to Sri Lankan labour law, foregrounding how discourses around crisis, narrative, and transformation intersect with policy processes to affect diverse worker demographics. It is valuable for understanding the evolving environment for labour rights and equity in Sri Lanka.

Intersectional equity, including LGBTQIA+ in Sri Lanka's labour market, reveals complex challenges stemming from legal, social, and economic discrimination that disproportionately affect sexual and gender minorities, especially when intersecting with class, education, and informal sector work.

Sri Lanka's Constitution guarantees non-discrimination on grounds of sex and other factors and the right to work (Articles 12 & 14). However, there is no explicit legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code criminalise same-sex intimacy, fostering fear and stigma (WFD, 2023).

XI. Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods approach to understand trade union dynamics across South Asia, combining surveys with in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus groups. Before commencing, all necessary ethical approvals were obtained, and informed consent was secured from participants, ensuring confidentiality and their right to withdraw. Research instruments include structured survey questionnaires for leaders and members, semi-structured interview guides for in-depth and key informant interviews, and detailed focus group discussion (FGD) guides to stimulate conversations. It was done in both online and offline modes.

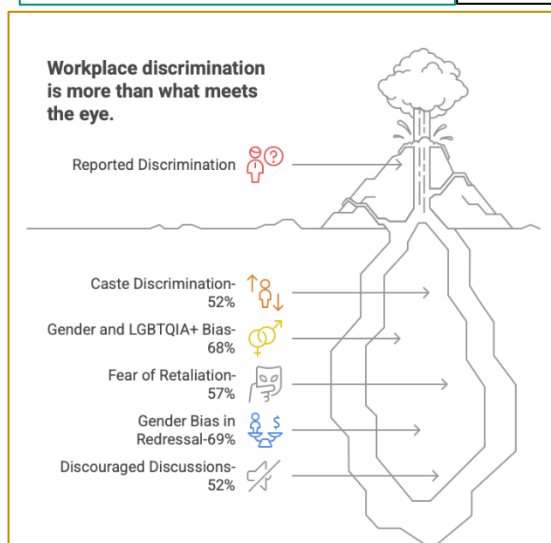
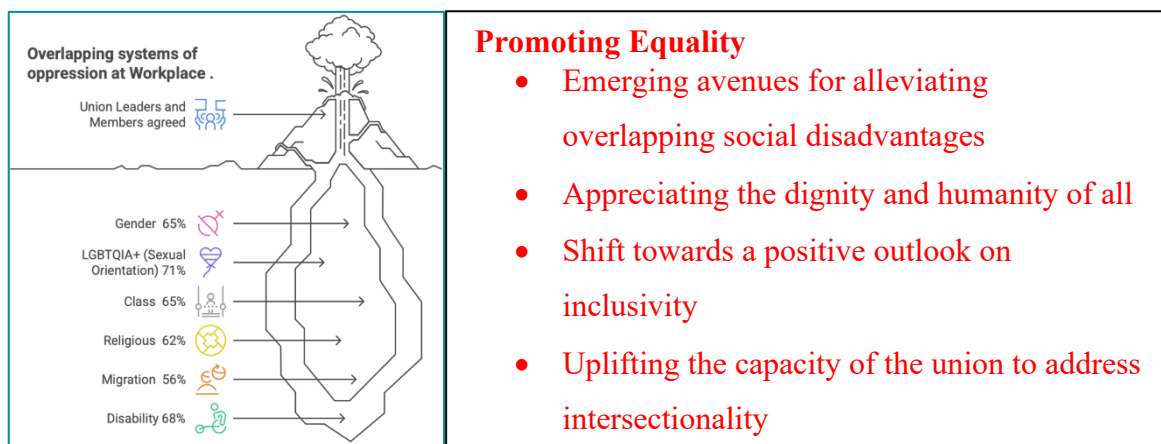
Surveys were administered to 25 trade union leaders (12 men, 13 women) and 24 members (10 men, 14 women) across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This aims to capture perspectives on key issues and member experiences. In-depth interviews with 10 participants (5 leaders, 5 members, with a specific gender

breakdown) explored individual experiences and deepened thematic insights. Key informant interviews with 9 experts (7 men, 1 woman, 1 non-disclosed) provided expert opinions and contextual understanding cross-nationally. Finally, two focus group discussions were held: one with 16 leaders in India (5 men, 11 women) and another with 17 members in Nepal (6 men, 11 women) to facilitate collective discussions. Sampling involved a mix of purposive and snowball techniques to ensure broad representation.

XII. Discussions

1. Examine the role of trade unions in addressing overlapping systems of oppression, discrimination and privilege and promoting gender equality and justice.

Union members and leaders agreed on the presence of overlapping systems of oppression in the workplace, with the following levels of acknowledgement: sexual orientation of LGBTQIA+ (71%), class (65%), gender (65%), religious (62%), migration (56%), and disability (68%)



2. To analyse the impact of various axes of discrimination and power structures on women workers and the LGBTQI community in the Labour Market (formal) in the informal sector: The labour market, particularly the formal and informal sectors, reflects deep-seated inequalities shaped by caste, gender, and power structures. Caste-based discrimination remains pervasive, with 52% of respondents reporting that managers treat workers differently based

on caste. These entrenched hierarchies restrict opportunities for marginalised caste workers, and in the informal sector, where regulations are weaker, discrimination

intensifies, leading to wage disparities and reduced job security. Gender and LGBTQIA+ bias further compound workplace inequities, as 68% of respondents believe these groups are less likely to receive promotions or favourable assignments. The glass ceiling effect systematically blocks their career advancement, while in informal settings, discrimination manifests through unequal task distribution and pay gaps, as noted by workers and union leaders.

Power imbalances also create a culture of fear, with 57% of respondents stating that women and LGBTQIA+ workers struggle to raise complaints due to potential retaliation or job loss. The absence of formal HR mechanisms in the informal sector exacerbates this vulnerability, leaving workers with little recourse against harassment or unfair treatment. Additionally, gender bias in grievance redressal is stark; 69% observers note that male workers' concerns are taken more seriously, reinforcing systemic inequities. In informal workplaces, male-dominated unions and employer networks further sideline marginalised voices.

Compounding these issues, 52% report that workplaces actively discourage discussions on discrimination, normalising oppression through silence and stigma. The lack of formal anti-discrimination policies in informal sectors allows these practices to persist unchallenged.

Prospects and impact of discrimination

- Conceding the root cause of overarching discrimination
- Manifesting the detrimental mental health effects of discrimination
- Expanding the nourishing support to seduce visibility and representation
- Installation of power polices to bridge gap

3. To study the policies, laws, and regulations in the context of equal opportunities.

The key policies, laws, and regulations related to equal opportunity and intersectional equity in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are summarised. The focus is on how legal and policy frameworks address or overlook intersectionality in the context of employment, gender, disability, caste, religion, and other marginalised identities.

Comparison Table-1: Intersectional Equity Provisions

Country	Intersectional Claims in Law	Recent Policy/Legal Developments
Bangladesh	Limited ^[4]	Disability-inclusive budgets; Vision 2041 ^[3]
India	Weak, but emerging via courts ^{[7][8]}	Proposed EOC; judicial advances on intersectionality; group-specific laws
Pakistan	Limited ^[9]	Quotas for disabled; gender-based legal reform; anti-child / bonded labour laws
Sri Lanka	Policy-level, not legal ^[12]	National Gender Policy; Gender Equality Bill debated/blocked ^[13]
Nepal	Informal, limited	2015 Inclusive Constitution; mandatory quotas

Policies, laws and regulations for equal opportunities

1. Recognition of rights, entitlements and justice
2. Creation of inclusion infrastructure
3. Protection from fundamental humanitarian

4. To identify strategies and initiatives employed by trade unions in the context of intersectional equity and inclusive workplaces and the union movement:

A. General Approaches and Progress by Trade Union:

Almost all the unions assert a commitment to treating everyone equally, irrespective of gender, caste, or background (In-Depth Interviews). They advocate for "equal pay for equal work" (In-Depth Interviews).

There is notable progress in addressing gender inequality, with unions establishing "women's wings or divisions" (KII - Sri Lanka Lesley; FGD - India) and having "a mandatory provision for women in committee" (In-Depth Interviews). Government rules in Bangladesh mandate 30% women's representation (KII - Bangladesh).

Unions engage with national labour laws (e.g., Bangladesh Labour Act, Constitution of Bangladesh) to advocate for anti-discrimination and gender justice clauses (KII - Bangladesh). They have pushed for "recognition of LGBTQIA+ individuals" in Women's Commission Reports (KII - Bangladesh).

B. Gaps and Challenges in Union Effectiveness:

Despite positive intentions, significant gaps exist: Many unions, particularly mainstream ones, are still "not effectively addressing the complex and intersecting forms of social

disadvantage" beyond basic gender issues (KII - Sri Lanka). Intersectional issues "struggle to gain prominence within the core agenda" (FGD - India).

While women's representation is increasing, it often remains "in subordinate or symbolic roles" (KII - Bangladesh), and they are "only limited in Vice Roles" (FGD - Nepal). LGBTQIA+ individuals and workers with disabilities are "minimal or non-existent" in leadership (KII - Sri Lanka).

Unions primarily represent formal sector workers, leaving the largely informal workforce, where many women, migrants, and LGBTQIA+ individuals are concentrated, with "very weak legal protections and no guaranteed contracts or benefits" (FGD - India).

Formal "monitoring, evaluation, or grievance redressal mechanisms" for gender and inclusion issues often do not currently exist (KII - Bangladesh; KII - Sri Lanka).

Complaints are frequently handled informally, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability (KII - Sri Lanka).

Unions face challenges from patriarchal mindsets within communities and even among some male members who "object, believing that the union is provoking the women" (In-Depth Interviews).

There is "limited awareness or data within the union regarding the specific types of discrimination faced by women and LGBTQIA+ workers" (KII - Sri Lanka), stemming from a lack of open discussion and reporting.

Strategies and initiatives for empowerment

- Compliance to the ratification of international labour organisation
- Upgrading the digital literacy
- Inspecting the false predicaments
- Campaigns and training to improve women visibility

5. To explore and strengthen the role of trade unions in empowering marginalised groups, particularly women, migrant workers, and other vulnerable categories, within their institutional and organisational structures.



Limited Intersectional Understanding is that unions, particularly mainstream ones, are still "not effectively addressing the complex and intersecting forms of social disadvantage" beyond basic gender issues (KII - Sri Lanka). Intersectional issues "struggle to gain prominence within the core agenda" (FGD - India).

While women's leadership and representation are increasing, it often remains "in subordinate or symbolic roles" (KII - Bangladesh), and they are "only limited in Vice Roles" (FGD - Nepal). LGBTQIA+ individuals and workers with disabilities are "minimal or non-existent" in leadership (KII - Sri Lanka).

Unions primarily represent formal sector workers, leaving the largely informal workforce, where many women, migrants, and LGBTQIA+ individuals are concentrated, with "very weak legal protections and no guaranteed contracts or benefits" (FGD - India). Underdeveloped Mechanisms of Formal "monitoring, evaluation, or grievance redressal mechanisms" for gender and inclusion issues often do not currently exist (KII - Bangladesh; KII - Sri Lanka). Complaints are frequently handled informally, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability (KII - Sri Lanka).

Unions face challenges from patriarchal resistance mindsets within communities and even among some male members who "object, believing that the union is provoking the women" (In-Depth Interviews). There is "limited awareness or data within the union regarding the specific types of discrimination faced by women and LGBTQIA+ workers" (KII - Sri Lanka), stemming from a lack of open discussion and reporting.

Collective Bargaining and Intersectional Needs:

Male-Dominated Negotiations: "It's just men whose voice is heard" at the negotiating table (FGD - Nepal). Women and marginalised groups "rarely have a strong voice" (FGD - India).

Limited Scope: Collective bargaining often overlooks intersectional needs unless actively addressed, focusing primarily on "wage negotiations and job security for permanent workers" (FGD - India).

Emerging Inclusivity: Some progressive unions are beginning to address issues like "gender wage gaps, maternity benefits, anti-harassment measures, and provisions for contract workers" (FGD - India).

Strengthening trade union functions

- Structured assessment on sanctioned capacity
- Enriching global collaboration and networking
- Periodical evaluation of substituting ideas
- Special attention on migrants
- Improve registration & enrolment of marginalised work force

XIII. Participant Voice on Expectation of the Trade Union

1. Changing trends of liberalisation & autonomy over patriarchy	2. Acceptance and Engagement of diversity in membership
3. Barriers for women to voice out their rights	4. Special provision fostering gender inclusion, marginalisation and migrants
5. Negotiations on inclusion across spheres of structural function of union	6. Insufficiency in structured training on trade union empowerment
7. Demand for effective collective bargaining	8. Success stories to manifest the power of union
9. Gender conflict overlapping the capacity of women	10. Sustaining challenges towards inclusion, equitable representation and equality
11. Vision of leaders to build an equitable work place	12. Scope of AI for labour protections, justice & equality

XIV. Conclusion

Intersectionality, defined as “a way of thinking about identity and its power relationship” (Crenshaw, 2025), served as the conceptual framework for this study. The conceptual framework for this study was Intersectionality, defined as a way of thinking about identity and its power relationship. The research utilised a mixed-methods approach, encompassing 23 distinct occupational categories, including 16 formal and 11 informal labour unions, across five South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

The findings indicate a strong aspirational demand for intersectionality initiatives among union members and leaders, confirming the widespread presence of overlapping systems of oppression in the workplace. For instance, 71% of respondents acknowledged overlapping oppression related to the sexual orientation of LGBTQIA+ individuals, 65% for gender, and 68% for disability. This deep-seated inequality is reflected by statistics showing that 52% of respondents reported managers treating workers differently based on caste, and 68% believed women and LGBTQIA+ groups are less likely to receive promotions or favourable assignments. The analysis employed intersectionality enablers, such as Reflexivity, dignity and choice, autonomy, and diverse knowledges, as analytical tools to assess the context and inform targeted interventions.

Despite this high aspirational commitment, the study revealed a critical gap in conceptual clarity and implementation within trade union structures. Many mainstream unions are “not effectively addressing the complex and intersecting forms of social disadvantage”

beyond fundamental gender issues, causing intersectional concerns to "struggle to gain prominence within the core agenda". While progress exists in formal gender representation (e.g., Bangladesh rules mandate 30% women's representation), women often remain in "subordinate or symbolic roles," and representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals and workers with disabilities is "minimal or non-existent" in leadership positions. Furthermore, unions primarily represent formal sector workers, neglecting the largely informal workforce where many marginalised groups, including women, migrants, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, are concentrated and left with "very weak legal protections and no guaranteed contracts or benefits". This systemic neglect is compounded by patriarchal resistance among some members and the absence of formal monitoring or grievance redressal mechanisms for inclusion issues, leading to a lack of accountability.

Importance and Recommendation

The comprehensive analysis underscores that tackling discrimination in South Asia requires moving beyond single-axis solutions, as the labour market is deeply stratified by overlapping disadvantages like gender, caste, class, migrant status, and sexual orientation. The findings are critical because, without embracing an intersectional lens, policies intended to improve labour conditions risk overlooking these compounded disadvantages, thereby hindering truly inclusive growth and leaving the most marginalised populations behind. The data demonstrating high levels of perceived bias, such as 69% of observers noting that male workers' concerns are taken more seriously in grievance redressal, and 57% reporting that women and LGBTQIA+ workers struggle to raise complaints due to fear of retaliation, manifests the profound need for strategic intervention. Addressing this affective area of inequality, injustice, and intolerance is a fundamental necessity for every human being.

The findings of this study are viewed as strategic recommendations, as trade unions are a vital force for workers' rights and social justice in the region. Adopting a clear strategic line to combat oppression and inequalities through an intersectional perspective is crucial not only for the union's role in social justice but also for its economic effectiveness. Promoting inclusion encourages talented and skilled individuals to enter the labour market, thereby enhancing the economy's productive potential. Therefore, the recommendations mandate a collective commitment to build greater solidarity and legitimacy, ensuring that the specific concerns and unique experiences of marginalised groups are genuinely reflected in union decision-making processes and core collective bargaining agendas. This requires embedding inclusive practices into the institutional structures of the unions themselves, moving intersectional equity from an aspirational goal to a fundamental, accountable principle.

XV. Recommendations

Unions

1. **Focus on Organising the Informal Sector and Marginalised Workers:** Unions must make a primary focus on organising workers in the vast informal economy, including women, migrants, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, where very weak legal protections and no guaranteed contracts or benefits currently exist. This requires specifically including workers from informal sectors and migrants in decision-making.
2. **Mandate and Facilitate Diverse Leadership and Participation:** Unions must actively promote leadership and participation from marginalised groups, including women, Dalits, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and ethnic minorities, to ensure their specific concerns and unique experiences are genuinely reflected in all union activities and collective bargaining agendas. Leaders should also allocate budgets for accommodations for workers with disabilities.
3. **Institutionalise Accountability and Grievance Redressal Mechanisms:** Unions must formalise "monitoring, evaluation, or grievance redressal mechanisms" for gender and inclusion issues. By strengthening these mechanisms, unions can embed inclusive practices and ensure accountability, moving away from informal complaint handling that lacks transparency.
4. **Address Internal Biases and Build Capacity through Training:** Union leaders should conduct regular bias training and audit internal power hierarchies to address patriarchal mindsets and internal biases. This is necessary to enhance the union's capacity to address intersectionality and ensure that services are truly accessible to all members, regardless of their intersecting identities and characteristics.
5. **Expand the Scope of Collective Bargaining:** Collective bargaining must be strategically enhanced to address intersectional needs explicitly. This involves pushing for agreements that address overlapping forms of discrimination, such as gender wage gaps, maternity benefits, anti-harassment measures, and specific provisions for contract workers, thereby moving beyond a primary focus on wage negotiations and job security for permanent workers.

Trade Union Members to enhance inclusivity and collective power:

1. **Form Caucuses and Demand Direct Participation:** Members should actively form caucuses (such as women's committees or migrant worker groups) to highlight the unique challenges faced by marginalised workers and to reject proxy representation. By creating these groups, members can demand direct participation in union meetings and decision-making processes.

This is vital because women often remain in subordinate or symbolic roles, and marginalised groups rarely have a strong voice at the negotiating table.

2. **Document and Share Context-Specific Discrimination:** Union members must actively document how discrimination varies by context (e.g., rural Dalit women versus urban transgender workers) to ensure these specific experiences are reflected in the union agenda. This process requires actively engaging with and learning from people who have intersecting experiences of discrimination, thereby leveraging Diverse Knowledges to inform the analysis framework of the union. This action helps address the "limited awareness or data within the union" regarding the specific types of discrimination faced by women and LGBTQIA+ workers.
3. **Practice Reflexivity and Challenge Internal Biases:** Members should strive to practice Reflexivity by seeking the feedback of those experiencing intersectional discrimination and being conscious of how their own position or status might inhibit others from speaking up. This means working to uncover and interrupt unconscious biases within the union and the broader community, especially confronting the patriarchal mindsets that cause some male members to "object, believing that the union is provoking the women".
4. **Utilise Solidarity Tactics to Amplify Informal Workers' Voices:** Members must employ solidarity tactics (such as cross-union alliances) to amplify the voices of workers in the vast informal economy. This is a strategic necessity because mainstream unions primarily represent formal sector workers, neglecting the largely informal workforce, where many women, migrants, and LGBTQIA+ individuals are concentrated and left with "very weak legal protections and no guaranteed contracts or benefits".
5. **Uphold Dignity and Demand Formal Grievance Redressal:** Members must be sensitive to people's right to Dignity, Choice, and Autonomy. They should actively use and demand the institutionalisation of formal monitoring, evaluation, or grievance redressal mechanisms for gender and inclusion issues. This action is critical because the existing handling of complaints is often informal, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability, and 57% of respondents report that women and LGBTQIA+ workers struggle to raise complaints due to fear of retaliation or job loss.

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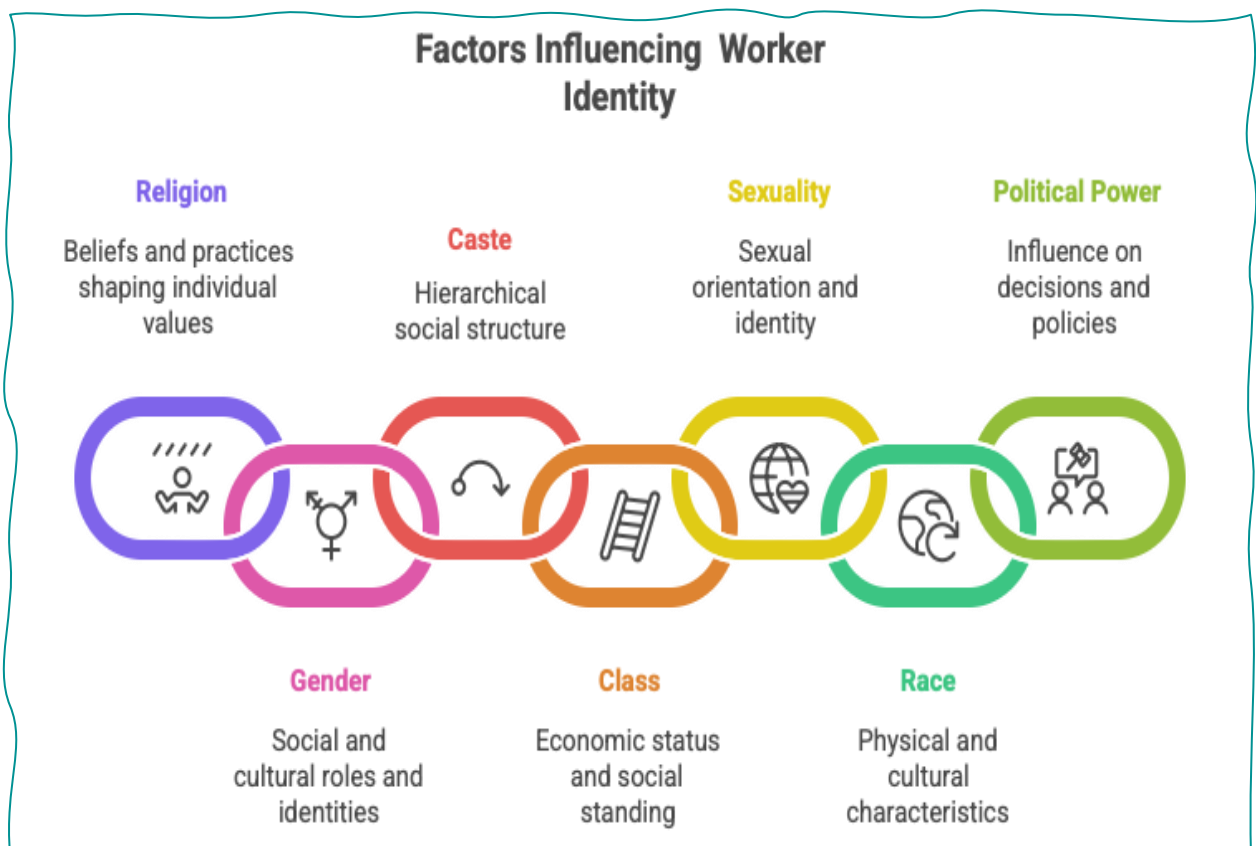


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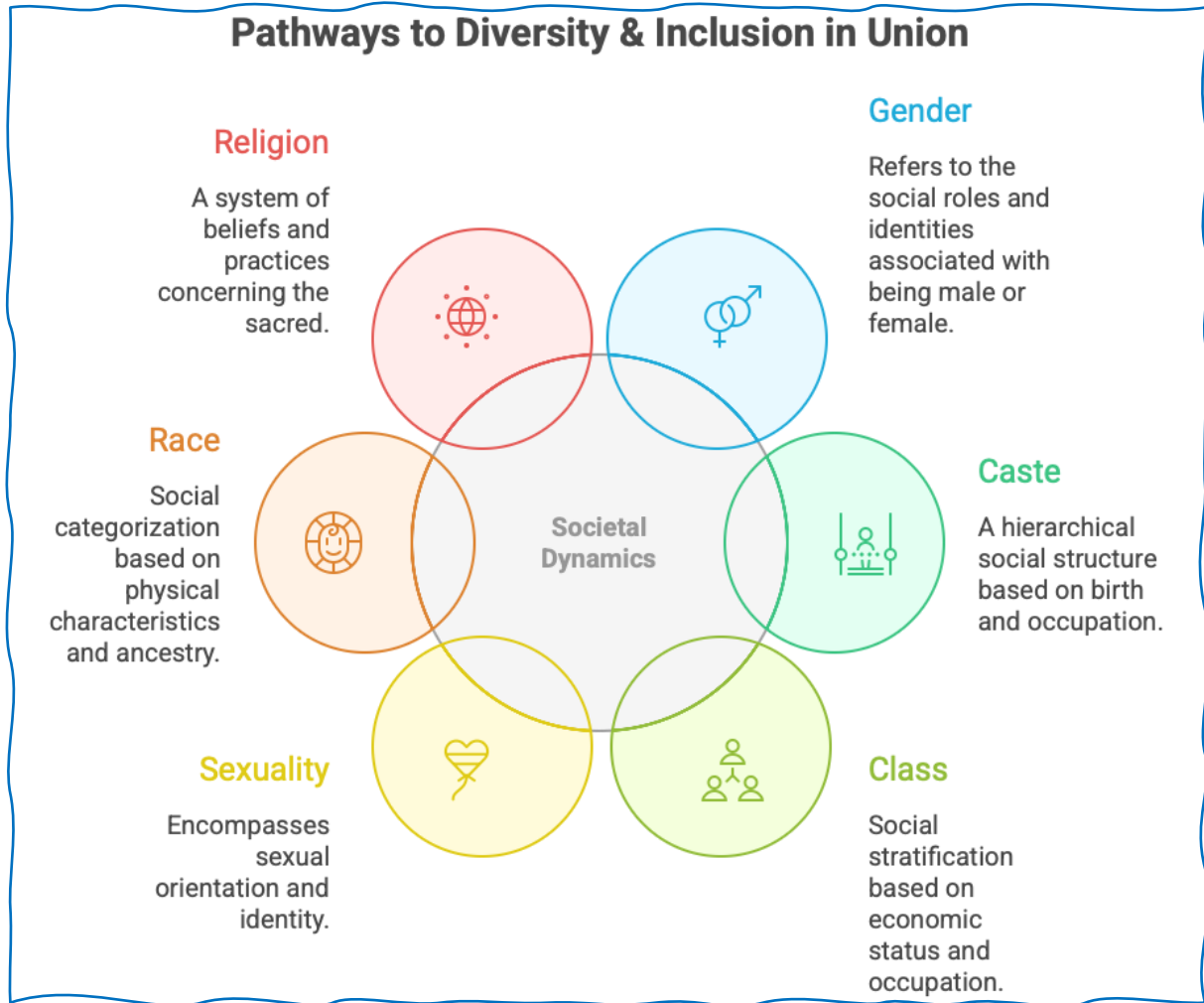
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Pathways to Diversity & Inclusion in Union



Intersectionality Framework Pyramid

