

## **THE POTENTIAL OF FASHION EDUCATION FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA: AN INVESTIGATION INTO FASHION EDUCATION AND APPAREL INDUSTRY IN SOUTH ASIA**

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The apparel industry is a significant contributor to the economic development of countries engaged in export-oriented industrialization. Asian countries remain the top manufacturers of apparel, with the United States and the European Union being the main markets. For South Asian Region (SAR) countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (SL), apparel production is the largest industrial sector. However global economic changes made the industry vulnerable, particularly in the face of competition due to the lower cost of production in other countries. In response, SAR industry is in transition from cut, make, and trims (CMT) assembly to original design manufacturing (ODM). Fashion design capabilities are the key, enabling industry to deliver a full package service for main apparel markets. This transition requires expert professionals in design who can offer creative and technical proficiency in manufacturing, and therefore a strong fashion education (FE) in the region is essential. This paper maps the evolution of the SL apparel industry in the context SAR in order to identify, (i) the contribution that FE makes in the apparel value chain (AVC), (ii) the region's position in the AVC, taking SL as a focal point. The study draws on evidence from existing literature and industry reports on India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and in SL. Evidence shows that SL government's policy decision to establish FE in 2000 has had a significant impact on the industry's transition, influencing on the core competence of the buyers. The findings also reveal that SL is providing highly skilled labour to the apparel industry through specific education and training, including degrees in technical education and design provided by both private and public sectors. Since 2000, more than 600 fashion designers have graduated. Designers in the SL apparel industry have added value via technical product development, as well as contributing to the development of ODM capabilities mainly in lingerie and activewear product sectors, the areas where SL has expertise in the region. Within SAR, India has vast networks of educational institutions focused on textile and apparel education, producing designers for functional upgrading and the other two SAR countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh can work on further coordinating policies in order to enhance skills in this sector. Given the significant contribution of the apparel industry to the regional economy and employment, continued industrial upgrading through design can assist in the region remaining competitive.

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