

**Frontlines, Faultlines, and Walking the Line:
Women and COVID-19 in Sri Lanka**
Aaranya Rajasingam and Shakti Devapura

Abstract

As Sri Lanka continues to combat recurring spikes in COVID-19 cases, the pandemic and its management have exposed existing structural weaknesses, politicized institutions, and failing economic systems. Social relations such as gender have been destabilized in the past, because of crises like violent conflict, tsunamis, climate change, and manmade disasters. But how is COVID-19 different and why are its impacts so dangerous for gender equality? The pandemic has not only exacerbated existing social inequalities and injustices against women, but it has also disproportionately affected them. Women make up the majority in sectors that are worst hit and are left wanting in mitigation efforts, including in the drive for digitalization.

To understand the severity of the impacts of COVID-19 on women, this paper pays particular attention to impacts on extremely vulnerable segments of society such as women from sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities, war-affected women, as well as women who are involved in formal and informal labor markets, among others. The analysis focuses on the consequences of policy decisions such as militarization and lockdowns. How have women's health, safety, education, and socio-political participation been shaped by these decisions? How does the Sustainable Development Agenda contribute to this? How are women leaders and women's organizations articulating women's struggles and what type of meaningful engagement is needed to support them? The paper provides recommendations on how we can move forward, collectively, to leave no woman behind.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, COVID-19, gender equality, militarization, post-conflict, pandemic lockdown, gender-based violence (GBV)

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Introduction

In 2020, COVID-19 brought the world and progressive gains for women to a halt. Ironically, 2019 marked the 40th anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and 2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action.¹ While some gains were achieved, the subsequent global adoption of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality in 2015 and related gender targets across SDG goals promised further accountability and progress in this domain. At present, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations (UN) estimates that we are likely to witness a reversal in the gains made in the past decades (The United Nations 2020).² These impacts may be further exacerbated by conflict, global warming, and weakening of democracy, all of which prevent women from achieving equality in participation, leadership, and enjoyment of outcomes of development.

In Sri Lanka, as the country continues to combat recurring spikes in COVID-19 cases, the pandemic and its management have acted as a catalyst to expose existing structural weaknesses, politicization of institutions, and failing economic systems.³ Efforts to control the spread of COVID and (mis)management specifically ignored the needs of marginalized groups, vulnerable, conflict-affected populations, and those in the informal labor sector, thereby disproportionately affecting women.

We focus on the consequences of the pandemic and related policy decisions such as militarization and lockdowns on women's work, safety, education, and socio-political participation. For women particularly, the pandemic created an enabling environment for perpetrators of violence, expanded the digital divide, and destroyed support networks ultimately paving the way for unequal structural changes that will continue to hinder the women's agenda beyond the pandemic. Any action to mitigate its impacts needs to start by understanding the enormity of its effects on women.

Sustainable Development Goals, Targets, and Progress in Sri Lanka related to Goal 5

To ensure that countries meet the Sustainable Development Goals an all-of-society approach and collective ownership are needed. More specifically, it requires governments to own, invest and monitor their commitments. In the case of Sri Lanka, at the time of aligning national targets, there were some indications that the country was performing well. Targets under SDG³

¹ These groundbreaking efforts for gender equality were preceded by decades of work by grassroots feminists and mobilizers across the world.

² The UN estimates the pandemic and its management has affected women in every domain- cultural, social, health political, economic and social protection

³ By October 2021, Sri Lanka was in its fifth wave of infections by cautious estimates. Given the dire situation of the economy, impacts of dwindling foreign exchanges are temporarily held at bay with increased printing of money, plans are underway to impose surrender and convert rules on goods and services (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2021).

such as maternal mortality rate and neonatal mortality rate and targets under SDG 6 such as population using basic sanitation services in addition to those under SDG 5 specifically on gender equality (such as female to male ratio in education) were already areas in which Sri Lanka performed well. However, in aspects such as labor force participation and political participation, Sri Lanka continued to fare poorly and there were some reversals, given no new investments were being made in these sectors (The United Nations 2021). It needs to be noted, however, that in areas that Sri Lanka performed well, like in health and education, it relied heavily on old systems and structures and not new investments and innovation.

Sri Lanka's Sustainable Development Act, No. 19 of 2017 was adopted to develop and implement a national strategy and policy, through a Sustainable Development Council, which would aid to align international goals with national processes. The Council, under the purview of the Presidential Secretariat, Ministry of Environment, and Ministry of Finance helped track progress and profile Sri Lanka in its commitments (The Government of Sri Lanka 2020).⁴ Furthermore, Sri Lanka has nearly 25 state agencies that are interconnected and contribute toward achieving various targets under SDG 5 (Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka 2021). Even with such a mammoth apparatus in place,⁵ full alignment of the Public Investment Programme (2017-2020) with SDG 5 Targets only amount to 33%, and partial alignment manages to inch Sri Lanka up a little further to 67% in the country.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the 2019 Presidential and Parliamentary elections in the country in terms of the concentration of power it afforded.⁶ Despite the advantages to securing consensus, without a champion, this area has not been prioritized. SDG 5 languishes and stagnates, only to be brought up in passing when Sri Lanka is represented on the global stage, such as during the Fifth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals in 2021.

Furthermore, government appointments and Presidential taskforces constituted during the pandemic or for the management of COVID-19 were significantly male dominated, without expertise in gender justice; and members were predominantly from a military background.⁷ These appointments, it is estimated, are part of efforts by President Rajapaksa to further his campaign promises to prioritize "discipline, stability and security" (Centre of Policy Alternatives 2020). This underpinning attitude quickened and furthered structural disadvantages and inequalities for women leaders in Sri Lanka.

UN recommendations have reiterated the importance of having a central coordination mechanism on SDG targets, particularly on SDG 5, and crosscutting gender issues in the other

⁴ Sri Lanka's overall progress related to SDGs has placed the country in global rankings at 87 out of 165 countries, an improvement of seven positions with a score that is below the regional average (The United Nations 2021).

⁵ Despite the government maintaining institutions that directly contribute to SDG attainment, the monitoring of such agencies through government and parliamentary oversight is needed to achieve better results and efficiency.

⁶ President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, elected in 2019, also won an overwhelming 2/3 majority in Parliament the following year. The subsequent amendment to the constitution, in the form of the 20th amendment sealed the overwhelming authority of the Executive.

⁷ A continued barrier to reducing these dangers was the lack of interest shown by policy makers at the very top of the government (Phakathi 2021). The appointment of military and former military personnel in civilian positions of leadership to manage the pandemic and other aspects, instead of promoting participatory and informed measures to deal with the pandemic, showed that political priorities remained elsewhere.

goals. However, such a mandate would require resources, focal points in key government offices, and regular, transparent reporting mechanisms, none of which the present state ministry has at its disposal. In the absence of champions for SDG 5, the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs was identified as possibly playing the lead role in the past. The structural undermining of the women's agenda is evident through other institutional arrangements in the country.⁸ The lack of institutional power and representation for women leaders working for gender justice is likely to undermine the women's agenda. Sri Lanka's SDG 5 targets to "adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls at all levels" (UNDP 2021) is left wanting at the very door, as women are not even allowed in the room, let alone a seat at the table meant to transform the gender agenda.

Women First Responders and the Burden of Care

COVID-19 placed immense demands on first responders. Not surprisingly, in the case of Sri Lanka, more than 60% of all healthcare and social workers were women. Thus, a key component of keeping Sri Lankan society healthy fell on women. Health workers have been, in the recent past, protesting benefit cuts, lack of safety, and overtime work with little hope of finding solutions (World Socialist Website 2021). Women workers can be observed to be far greater in number in sectors like sanitation, another key entity on the frontlines. In addition to this, women as caregivers of young children, the sick, and the elderly at home, or living in semi-urban areas impacted by lockdown and food shortages tend to fare worse. Women in this regard emerged as one of the most affected groups during the pandemic.

Gender-Based Violence during Lockdown

In 2019, the women's wellbeing survey (Department of Census and Statistics 2019), the first national survey on violence against women in the country, identified how violence affected women's freedoms, their participation in labor and political spheres, and decision-making with regards to the household. It found that in Sri Lanka, one in five women had experienced some form of gender-based violence (GBV) and that intimate partner violence was more prevalent than other types of violence. These findings point to significant consequences not only for women but also for their families and children.

During the pandemic, globally, gender-based violence was largely left unaddressed (UN Women 2021). While the pandemic may not have been the cause of the issue, rooted deeply in patriarchal attitudes and impunity, it certainly has played a critical role in its exacerbation in Sri Lanka.

The United Nations Family Planning Association (UNFPA) has expressed its concern over the significantly increased number of calls for help (2020) reported by the National Women's

⁸ In 1978, the Women's Bureau was established under the Ministry of Plan Implementation and over the years had emerged into a full-fledged Ministry for Women's Affairs (as early as 1983) as a standalone priority area or combined with one or two other priority areas. In 2019, the ministry is under the purview of the Ministry of Education, titled "State Ministry of Women and Child Development, Pre-schools and Primary Education, School Infrastructure and Education Services" (State Ministry of Women and Child Development, Pre-Schools and Primary Education, School Infrastructure and Education Services 2020).

Hotline 1938.⁹ The Sri Lanka Epidemiological Unit identified women, particularly from ethnic minorities, indigenous populations, LGBT persons, and migrant and refugee women, to be at risk during the COVID pandemic (Ministry of Health & Indigenous Medical Services 2021). It recommended that services need to be bolstered to support women during this period when an enhanced burden of care has been placed upon them even as they face increased domestic and intimate partner violence. It was noted that being physically isolated meant that victims/survivors of violence were often cut off from access to income-generation opportunities, support services, friends, and social circles while being threatened by violent members of the family to curtail freedoms, communication, and resources including access to health-related resources outside of COVID-19 such as sexual and reproductive health.

Women's Education and Digital Access

The pandemic has inevitably made the internet an essential aspect of Sri Lankan society. Despite the technical challenges and lack of infrastructure, particularly in remote semi-urban or rural areas, Sri Lanka's data usage has exploded by a hundred percent between March 2020 and the beginning of July 2021 (UNDP 2021). The surge in data use has not been matched by infrastructure development and equipment provision, and the pandemic has widened the existing gap between the haves and have-nots of Sri Lankan society. Lack of progress or even setbacks in educational outcomes for marginalized Sri Lankans could in turn lead to long-term impacts and inter-generational setbacks for their families, particularly in developing contexts.

While Sri Lanka has been praised for its literacy levels of over 90% (The World Bank 2021), it was not prepared to shift to a fully remote-mode educational model.¹⁰ A series of pitfalls, such as lack of adaptation of the education curriculum to respond to the mental health needs of children during prolonged curfews, inability to utilize creative and interactive teaching methods or truly harness the power of technology in education, has resulted in children's education being compromised for the greater cause of preserving the education structure, even though it is somewhat outdated.¹¹

In Sri Lanka, only 37% have access to the internet. The difference between male and female mobile ownership is 17% and the gap in internet use rises to 34%. For every woman who has internet access men are 1.5 times more likely to have internet access in a country where women make up 52% of the population. This disadvantage is likely highest among women in rural populations. This is due to the existing gap of at least 23% between urban and rural users of the internet. The access gap doubles when considering social networking sites (Lirneasia 2018). Internet access is likely to have increased from 2018 to now, however, gender disparities are likely to persist because of structural and cultural barriers to entry, access, and equal enjoyment of such benefits.

⁹ Another survey titled "COVID-19 Impact on Key Populations, People Living with HIV and Global Fund Sub-Recipient Organizations in Sri Lanka" by CARE Consortium showed that of the 329 respondents 76.8% had experienced verbal abuse during the first lockdown in Sri Lanka.

¹⁰ Sri Lanka's school system, notably praiseworthy in the 1950s, had been either rivaled or surpassed by the 1970s by schooling levels in Latin America, East Asia, and the Middle East/North Africa (Aturupane and Deolalikar 2021).

¹¹ Founder and Artistic Director of Stages Theatre Group, Ruwanthi de Chickera aptly described the pandemic in a webinar as "a slow-motion never-ending car crash" leaving children and educators in shock. In such a crisis, her primary critique was that "instead of looking after the children, we look after the bus" (2021).

The gap in access to quality education in a safe environment is nowhere more evident than in the online schooling realities of young girls as observed by community members. Women heads of households (WHH) from war-affected districts have expressed routine disappointment and frustration as systemic inequalities, sexual harassment, and lack of peer support affect their children's education (Viluthu 2021). Child abuse has been a key feature of girls' experience with online education even prior to the pandemic (UNICEF, 2017). Furthermore, youth activists, from war-affected areas expressed that online education has led to officials turning a blind eye to child pregnancies and child marriages at the community level. Where normally school principals and teachers would have played the role of community interlocutors helping to locate children under such threats, the online space isolates the child in a way that is ideal for predators. Failures of key institutions responsible for the protection of children, even before the pandemic, have been a key contention in protection efforts and in punishing perpetrators (Fonseka 2021).

Though one of Sri Lanka's SDG 5 targets is to "enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular, information and communication technology to promote empowerment of women," (UNDP 2021) the government has struggled to win over educators for this cause. In addition to limited capacities for online education, low salaries, strikes, and underspending in education have resulted in affecting children's education in the country. At the time of writing this paper, teachers were continuing their decades-long demand to the end of "unsolved salary anomalies" (Jayasinghe 2021). Early education has fallen through the cracks and the burden of educating children has fallen right back on parents and guardians. This has given rise to difficult choices being made by parents when allocating time to educate the children and providing them with necessary resources for early education whilst earning a livelihood. (Viluthu 2021).¹² Women have become the primary breadwinner, parent, and caregiver as well as teacher for their children, as seen among conflict-affected women heads of households (WHHs).¹³

Even before the pandemic, social media has been far from an idyllic space for women. The platforms have done little to regulate the "clear pattern of speech" that is "sexist, or objectified, harassed or otherwise targeted women and members of the LGBT community" (Centre for Policy Alternatives et. al., 2018).¹⁴ The confluence of ethnic and gender-based violence has meant it has grown into a dangerous place for women from ethnic minorities. Hate speech and incitement to violence directed at Muslims took a sinister undertone of toxic masculinity when it involved women from those communities. This, at a time when discriminatory policy based on unscientific evidence was used to prevent Muslim burials of COVID-19 victims (Human Rights Watch 2021) resulted in an alienation that may transcend generations. As explained eloquently by a young woman journalist, "(t)o live as a Muslim in Sri Lanka in recent years is

¹² Young girls expressed that when devices had to be shared to access classes, parents have had to choose which child gets the device. Often the girl child, or the younger child, the child not doing a main national exam, would be denied the device. This has affected education and family relationships. In such circumstances, right to education is in jeopardy for these children (Viluthu 2021).

¹³ It is estimated that roughly one in five households in Sri Lanka is a WHH, and at times in provinces like the East, it is higher than the national average. UN estimates that just the North and East combined have 89,000 conflict-affected widows (UN Women 2014). However, structural support from authorities in doing remote work or education has been scant. Thus, rural, indigenous, and conflict affected women and women from minority communities are overlooked.

¹⁴ Dangerous trends of violence towards women involved doxing and/or non-consensual sharing of images/videos as users increased on social media networking sites.

to exist in a state of disbelief and heartache. To die as a Muslim in Sri Lanka today is to die knowing that your country has so little regard for you. To die in a home where you are not seen as equal and where you are told in so many different ways that you do not belong. This is also a type of loss” (Ismail, 2021).

Political Participation and Representation of Women

Regarding the political involvement of women in Sri Lanka, the biggest challenges remain in terms of political participation and the obstruction of avenues for women to enter politics or represent themselves. The current levels of political participation and representation of women in the country exacerbate this continued dilemma. The current parliament has a female representation that is just around 5%, with a considerable portion of them representing the government (Sri Lanka Elections Commission 2021). Here, the nationalist tendencies that complement the established patriarchal structures contribute to the stalling of women empowerment and gender equity in the country as policy aiding the progression of such matters is impacted.¹⁵ For example, the authority and leverage of female policymakers is challenged by male-dominated task forces, decisions are taken on party identity lines, and inadequate attention is paid to gender concerns in the pandemic response. It is unfortunate that the current government that holds a two-thirds majority in the house does not show the resolve towards the much-needed gender-responsive policies and legislative changes, or will to draw on bipartisan support to improve gender equality.

Instances of physical violence against women in politics and sexualized slander are also common (Abhayasingha 2021). Apart from serving political objectives, such acts have contributed to discouraging women from engaging in active politics and have been used as a tool to discourage political participation. SDG 5 Indicator Progress Reports consistently show Sri Lanka’s female representation as either stagnating or deteriorating due to such impediments, with little or no action taken to meet the targets.¹⁶

The pandemic helped create conditions to disrupt the gender equality agenda championed by activists and organizations.¹⁷ Such disruptions to ongoing policy and advocacy work have discouraged or distanced women from taking part in empowerment initiatives. They prioritize household work and sustaining livelihoods over political participation. Furthermore, the government has curtailed space for civic activism, protest, dissent and political participation under the guise of COVID-19 preventive measures. Here, a number of women activists along with women’s rights organizations were targeted, with their activities obstructed under the

¹⁵ As an exception, Sri Lanka had a female health minister during much of its pandemic response, with a female state minister (who is also a specialist doctor) playing a crucial role. A considerable portion of Sri Lanka’s health workers are women, with a key portion of the political authority that directly dealt with pandemic response including top health officials and researchers being females.

¹⁶ The rectification of matters in relation to the rights of women and the progression of gender equality that were affected due to Covid-19 has seen minimal progress since policy responses do not include a broad gender dimension.

¹⁷ The government response to the crisis along with measures such as lockdowns, limitations on public gatherings, and public activity, contributed to removing the traditional spaces that the civil society and political actors operated from. This led to the suspension of policy and advocacy work of civil society organizations and opposition politicians.

guise of pandemic prevention (Ganguly 2021).¹⁸ Unique to Sri Lanka, the authorities have practiced the use of forcible quarantine as a means of punishment for protestors in an arbitrary manner without a just legal cause (Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka 2021). This has indirectly discouraged the public, including women from taking part in peaceful demonstrations.

The current trends of militarization have gone hand in hand with increased surveillance and the use of state intelligence services (Civicus 2020). Owing to past relations between the state and civil society, such surveillance deters activists and researchers, including women based in former conflict zones, from advocacy work or highlighting rights violations.¹⁹ Repression has been furthered with the expansion of the powers of the National Secretariat for Non-Governmental Organizations that operates under the Ministry of Defense. The Secretariat has issued directives to register NGOs, reveal their sources of funding, and made project activities contingent on prior approval (Ministry of Defense 2021). Such strict interventions and monitoring of activities could hamper advocacy work and the independence of campaigns for rights. Furthermore, amendments to the Voluntary Social Services Organizations (Registration & Supervision) Act are in the process of being drafted to restrict civil society activity and the formation of organizations to campaign for the rights of the marginalized, including women (Bandara 2021).

Challenges to political participation and advocacy work have the potential to exacerbate issues for women living in former conflict areas and those from the marginalized communities. This is particularly true for groups such as WHHs, ex-combatants, and other marginalized groups who are vulnerable to abuse from state and private entities. The curtailment of space for activism and advocacy during COVID-19, coupled with the lack of political representation and participation has removed access to the limited number of support networks such victim groups had (Devapura 2021). While COVID-19 has disrupted civil society advocacy work in support of such marginalized women, government welfare systems have been lagging in provision of gender-specific health relief. The lack of representation and opportunity for political participation and to campaign for such gender-specific issues have left marginalized women further victimized and disadvantaged, with the pandemic worsening their situation. The advent of the pandemic combined with existing weaknesses to expose key flaws in women's political participation and related advocacy work. The reversal of gender gains has highlighted the gap between the actions of women's rights movements and state policy. Vulnerabilities further increased as progressive decisions were undone in the wake of political change and pandemic-related action.

Reversal of gender gains warrants action from a range of actors such as CSOs, women politicians, academics, and women's rights advocates to work both with the government and with external factors such as international organizations, donor states and rights bodies and ensure compliance with international standards. Cooperation and deliberations with state actors could result in gender-sensitive policies to better women's participation in politics. It could

¹⁸ A tendency to use unjustified force on protestors have been documented in news media in relation to the conduct of the police to detain protestors and disperse gatherings (World Socialist Website 2020).

¹⁹ The obstructions range from unwarranted harassment to seek private information, to the pestering of research staff. Questions on intelligence gathering ethics and the misuse of gathered intelligence for personal purposes were also observed.

help rekindle past state approaches such as introduction of a mandatory women's quota across public representative bodies. Activists, CSOs, and other like-minded forces should actively seek to establish spaces for dialogue and opportunities to increase women's political participation and representation.²⁰ This could be furthered with capacity building and lobbying. Given Sri Lanka's checkered past in relation to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, such measures would be critical in stemming the reversal of gender-related progress triggered and exacerbated by the pandemic.

Women and Economy, Employment, and Labor

Ground-level interviews, advocacy work, and the monitoring of impacts on gender empowerment have made it evident that though COVID-19 has had a negative impact across the world on all of humankind, it has affected specific genders in specific ways (United Nations 2020).

It is evident that women are facing the brunt of economic and social issues owing to structural disadvantage and the lack of support networks (UNICEF 2020). This is true of the undoing of the economic, employment, and labor progress of women due to the pandemic as well. Such reversals occurred throughout professions and activities with women assuming traditional unpaid domestic work during the lockdown. Such domestic chores increased as women assumed teaching roles due to homeschooling and the extensive need for manual labor.²¹ As the pandemic precipitated the reinforcement of traditional roles of women as homemakers and caregivers, it led to the risk of such women being trapped in unpaid care and work essentially taking them out of the job market.

This dilemma has been further worsened by the preference shown in the labor market to retain male workers and recruit men for new positions, thus contributing to an increase in female unemployment rates in Sri Lanka, which stood at 8.5% in 2020 (Department of Census and Statistics 2020). Such dynamics are reflected in the female-to-male labor force participation rate, which stood at 45.5% and is decreasing (United Nations 2021). It could be inferred that because of the pandemic, the ratio will further decrease in the foreseeable future unless specific policy action is taken to retain and increase women in the labor force.

As the pandemic continues and economic conditions worsen, the opportunity to recover from its adverse impacts shrinks. Though this phenomenon affects every Sri Lankan, it is often the women who become victims of its knock-on effects. This was illustrated to the authors during interviews with grassroots level activists who identified rural women taking on labor jobs with long hours thus sacrificing family life and their children's needs.

Structural weaknesses in the economy, along with the interruption of global and local production and trade activity, foreign exchange crisis, the risk of debt default, and post-Easter attack shocks to the tourism industry created an environment inimical for livelihoods

²⁰ The Women Parliamentarians' Caucus has been vocal in highlighting the gendered impacts of Covid-19, along with social and political challenges Sri Lanka faces. The body of women parliamentarians presents the unique opportunity to expand advocacy work within the legislature and seek partnerships with other bodies such as provincial councils.

²¹ Household work is carried out through physically exhausting and demanding manual labor that is time consuming. This makes it impossible for the women to devote time for other activities of their preference and puts a strain on women's health (The United Nations 2020).

(Thowfeek 2021). This overall downward trend in the economy has been worsened by lockdowns, government financial mismanagement, and controversial policies that have affected the cost of living in the country and at the same time threatened viability of certain industries (Clarisa Diaz 2021). These occurrences have drastically reduced financial security, particularly of women who are seen as disposable in situations of redundancies and austerity measures by businesses. The loss of income along with the rise in the cost of living and the continued lockdowns have created a potent combination to severely disadvantage Sri Lankan women thus pushing them further towards financial hardship and exploitation.

A majority (57.4% as of 2019) of employed Sri Lankan women are in the informal sector (Department of Census and Statistics 2019) where poor working conditions, low wages, and exploitation pre-dated the pandemic. (International Labor Organization 2020). Women engaged in the informal sector lost jobs at a faster rate than others owing to lockdowns and cost-cutting measures that employers introduced (Madgavkar et al. 2021). At the same time, women who were engaged in several other occupations were dragged into the informal sector or part-time work owing to redundancies or choosing employment in the informal sector as a means of balancing time between household responsibilities and paid work (Devapura and Madanayake 2021). This highlighted the lack of job security women across all professions experienced with very few exceptions. Global statistics show female job loss rates to be at least 1.8 times higher than their male counterparts (Madgavkar et al. 2021). A focus on COVID-19 impact on the informal sector has highlighted the lack of regulated employment safeguards and social protection mechanisms. The arbitrary laying-off criteria, preference to retain male employees and the exploitation of financially vulnerable women were left unchecked by the state. The nature of the lockdowns and economic downturn has meant that in the absence of legal safeguards and protection mechanisms, women were adversely affected during employment as well as after being categorized redundant (Knox-Vydmanov and da Cunha 2020). There is a possibility that such women could disappear from the employment market altogether.

A significant portion of Sri Lankan women are self-employed and engage in food production, garment and ornament manufacturing, and poultry rearing. They comprise 24.8% of individuals engaged in the SME sector (Ministry of Industry and Commerce 2019). Poor economic and market conditions along with the pandemic caused deterioration in the business environment for small-scale and entrepreneur-led businesses. Such unfavorable conditions led to the closure of women-led businesses, as there was no support structure to rescue or help maintain business viability. Most female SME owners lost their savings and small business capital.

Limited financial relief as well as limited concessions were offered through banks and finance organizations in the form of concessions for debt repayment. In most cases, such organizations ignored government directives to support women-led businesses with the result that such businesses fell prey to predatory microfinance organizations.²² As some of these microfinance schemes were outside the purview of established regulatory apparatuses, women were harassed by microfinance institutions and organized money-lending groups and left vulnerable to sexual bribery and exploitation. Repeated calls to the government to reign in such activity and regulate

²² WHHs and persons with disabilities who take on self-employment to balance livelihood with domestic work or due to the lack of mobility were left without support networks to defend themselves from unethical moneylenders and unfavorable market conditions. Such instances were prevalent in former conflict areas (Sirinivasan 2021).

such unethical lending groups and institutions went unheard. In the absence of any legal or regulatory backing even the small measures taken to provide relief to such women proved ineffective. As a result of hostile market conditions, the pandemic, and indebtedness, the dependence of women and women business owners on microfinance schemes grew exponentially during and after the pandemic.²³

Another community affected by the pandemic and the loss of employment was the migrant workers, especially women migrant workers. The loss of employment, the inability to return to Sri Lanka owing to border closures, slow-moving government repatriation plans, and scams at quarantine centers further victimized such women. The cessation of remittances and the loss of employment eroded the financial independence of female migrant workers. The inability to sustain previous levels of expenses and financially support households became a further burden (International Labor Organization 2020). This eroded the household incomes of many lower and middle-class families who were dependent on family members working overseas (International Labor Organization 2020). The cessation of the remittances by migrant workers, amounting to \$6.7 billion before the pandemic, (Weeraratne 2020) further contributed to the worsening foreign exchange crisis in Sri Lanka. The ongoing economic crisis created grounds for more women to migrate to undertake jobs in exploitative industries, further putting them at risk while a majority of the returning female migrant workers have been left unemployed or pushed into the informal employment market.

The disruptions in global supply chains and goods production affected Sri Lanka as well. The garment industry was particularly affected by the closure of production lines and the lack of supply orders (Bolonne 2021). Women were adversely impacted as over 80% of the total apparel sector workers are women (Madurawala 2017). With continued lockdowns turning unviable, the government allowed garment factories to reopen without much oversight and COVID-19 protocols.²⁴ The incident of a female apparel worker testing positive for COVID-19 and the subsequent finding that the factory management had not taken adequate precautions to control the viral cluster from growing, highlighted the poor human resource management of such factories and worker exploitation to meet production targets despite health risks (Bolonne 2021). In addition, the potential revocation of the GSP+ concessions by the European Union owing to violations of civil liberties and human rights (Wijesinghe and Munasinghe 2021) was threatening to worsen the situation that would have a trickle-down effect on apparel sector workers and their families.

²³ In an interview with Rochelle Fox, a female SME owner who operates a garment factory business, highlighted her plight. She stated, “As a small scale business we used all our available funds with the expectation of the said (trading) season as previous years. Unfortunately, with the COVID lockdowns and closure of imports and exports, we had to bear the loss, as we were unable to buy proper fabric or accessories to complete the orders. Hence buyers stop purchasing, a hold on all orders given, investment on private labels was blocked, etc. On top of that, we had our overhead expenses such as salaries, utility bills, rents, loans, leases to pay. The hardest part during this period was when we did not get our payments from the buyers and we all worked on 45 to 60 days credit. We roll our funds as more or less as others do, if not we cannot be in the market currently. Now that the country is open again, we have to borrow money or get loans to restart our business. Which may take time to get back to normal, or which we may never be able to come out of the never ending debt trap” (2021).

²⁴ Workers were forced to work in cramped factories without adequate ventilation and poor working conditions that led to an outbreak of the virus during the second wave. Most apparel workers including women were unable to return home during the lockdown and faced accommodation issues owing to the inability to pay rent or afford essentials.

In interviews held with regional activists and community-based organizations (CBO), it was revealed how women who were in professions outside the frame of law (such as sex workers) lost all income during the pandemic due to associated health risks the profession brings. The fact that such individuals were unable to return home or support their families due to the loss of income led to further exploitation of both the individual and their families who were already at the margins of society. The added burden of legal prosecution, the high possibility of COVID-19 infection, and the stigma around the profession have left women sex workers further victimized without help or support. In some reported cases, such women were left without adequate supplies or money to support or feed their families, needing urgent assistance from CSOs.²⁵ Interviews with welfare workers at the village level showed how apart from women already engaging in such professions, vulnerable women were driven into professions such as illegal alcohol production.²⁶

In terms of solutions, the provision of financial aid has proved to be unsustainable owing to the recurrence of the virus and the worsening of Sri Lanka's economic situation. Such economic woes and dwindling spaces for individuals to prosper are further threatened by chronic corruption that exists at multiple levels. The introduction of arbitrary policies such as the ban on the use of chemical fertilizer has brought in many uncertainties in relation to the adequate supply of food. This has endangered life and livelihood of rural women engaged in agriculture and the informal food production sector.

All issues discussed above warrant the implementation of a gender equitable economic recovery plan that acknowledges the impact of the pandemic on women. Ensuring that opportunities and resources are open to all who need to access them should form the basis of such recovery measures. Policy safeguards should be put in place to ensure that women who are already systematically disadvantaged in the labor market are not further marginalized or exploited when seeking employment. Apart from removing barriers to entry, such recovery measures should take action to retain the women remaining in employment without sacrificing their career development and progression to maintain a family life.

Measures such as paid maternity and care leave, abolishing discrepancies in pay, and including women in key decision-making roles to support a gendered approach to administration and policy are some of the methods that could complement an equitable recovery plan. Social entrepreneurship and finance schemes to fund women-led enterprises and replace predatory finance organizations could encourage more women to take on entrepreneurial activities whilst protecting them from exploitation (MacLeod 2021). Due to the longevity of the pandemic and the burden it places on the state to offer financial assistance, the government could initiate the practice of collective business models that target women at the village or regional levels.²⁷

²⁵ In an interview carried out with a regional activist from Puttlam, it was revealed how female sex workers were left without income and were deserted without adequate accommodation, food and essentials. The activist revealed that despite the waves of the pandemic receding, such professions have been unable to recover due to the nature of work and economic difficulties have exacerbated for families (2021).

²⁶ T. Ranaweera, a women's development officer from Anuradhapura district identified the dynamics of a vicious circle where women are thrown into illegal alcohol production to sustain themselves. This has worsened the impacts of the pandemic on rural women since the rise in alcoholism and expenses on alcohol, are associated with SGBV which affects rural women more severely (2021).

²⁷ CBOs practice a range of financial support methods to benefit their members. Financial aid is provided through funds that are redistributed to members, while not being exploitatively profit-oriented. Not-for-profit

Here, the practice of finance schemes and social entrepreneurship initiatives through community-level networks and CSO/Government collaborations could benefit groups such as WHHs who are vulnerable and often marginalized. Such participatory business models could improve the financial conditions of women whilst building their skills and capacity to engage in businesses independently, ensuring greater participation in the economy.

While financial concessions and aid play a vital role in supporting women during emergencies, such measures should be boosted by capacity-building and resilience-building approaches to improve skills that help women adapt to external economic shocks in the long run. Capacity-building measures should include technological literacy amongst women to ensure resilience when engaging in trading that extends beyond Sri Lanka's borders. Capacity building for grassroots-level women's organizations on how to advocate and lobby for law, policy, and structural reforms is seen as necessary to allow for deeper penetration of resilience-building measures. Such measures could expand recipient knowledge on innovation, utilization of technology and the internet,²⁸ financial management, and even civic issues such as human rights and applicable laws. The lack of professional skills is a contributing factor that drives women into the informal sector than seek better and alternative sources of income generation. Experts have suggested strengthening of the informal and service-based sectors through capacity-building measures and the proliferation of digital technologies that are complemented by policy reforms as ways to bypass the adverse effects of the pandemic (Daily Mirror 2021). This could add to the current national policies focused on promoting indigenous industries and increasing domestic production to achieve sustainability by overcoming COVID-19-related logistical challenges while opening markets beyond Sri Lanka's borders. Such measures would act as contingency plans for future disaster management.

Conclusion

Systemic shocks often unsettle gender balances and the prevailing status quo. Such circumstances offer opportunities to either succumb to or subvert existing patriarchal structures and oppression. In Sri Lanka, women's increased burden of care, vulnerability to violence, inability to enjoy digital outcomes, and over representation in poor or volatile sectors of the economy have been compounded by the lack of political resolve and inadequate representation in policymaking and labor markets. Along with challenges to the welfare and well-being of women, the pandemic has enabled an environment for such inequalities to sustain themselves. Systemic inequalities impacted how women faced the pandemic from its inception. Here, existing weaknesses further victimized women directly and indirectly, while pandemic-induced problems led to the multiplication of existing and the creation of newer vulnerabilities.

The bleak reality during the pandemic offers fresh insights into the gains and obstacles to the gender agenda even as we ask difficult questions regarding it. Questions such as have global movements for gender equality really resulted in progress? Or are they piecemeal gains that are likely to disappear at the first sign of crisis? Furthermore, if this is the case with a crisis that has a 'date of expiry', what does it mean for other long-term crises such as global warming?

organizations and state-backed schemes working in this regard have adopted their methods of providing micro-loans mirroring government-backed schemes such as *Samurdhi* (United Nations ESCAP 2021).

²⁸ A 2018 UNICEF study revealed that Sri Lanka's digital divide exists through gender, geographical location and poverty basis. Online access between genders varied significantly where only 33% of girls aged 11-18 years had access compared to nearly 68% of boys from the same age group (Atukorala et al. 2021).

To facilitate rapid learning as we go, the fostering of critical and vocal communities, grounded in experiences that prioritize diversity and inclusion as core tenets is much needed. Democratic freedoms must be guarded for this community of grassroots experts, politicians, and local leaders to speak truth to power and help reimagine a new world order.

In Sri Lanka, the problem stands at the very core of human belief and interaction. As the CEDAW Committee review on Sri Lanka observed, “the Committee remains concerned at the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory stereotypes that condone a culture of impunity for acts of sexual and gender based violence” (2017). These attitudes underpin practices such as limited access to justice, lack of dignity for survivors, and lack of adequate efforts for victim protection and support. Burgeoning digital access and a world that craves new values, as it languishes under a pandemic, are small openings to push for changes in the workplace, in cultural traditions, and for balance in home-making responsibilities. A dramatic shift in social perspectives backed by policies is warranted to view women as important agents of development via empowering entrepreneurship, employment, and political representation.

The need for expansive and resilient social protection systems to repair the pandemic-induced damages to women’s empowerment in the country is well documented. If left unaddressed, an increasing number of women would be out of labor market bringing in multigenerational repercussions. While Sri Lanka has maintained near equal access to education and healthcare for men and women, such equalities do not translate to equal representation or engagement at policy-making or economic level, and overall well-being. The persistence of patriarchal attitudes pushes women back to traditional roles, shunning them from opportunities. Sri Lanka’s growing number of WHHs (with ever-evolving underlying causes) and the percentage of females in the population strengthen the argument for women’s leadership in society. Capacity building and increasing resilience of women to meet future challenges—pandemic, climate change, religious radicalization, and conflict—could provide Sri Lanka with an opportunity to learn from its mistakes and attain its development ambitions. Ultimately, any COVID-19 recovery plan must have a gendered dimension incorporating targets set by SGD 5 to eliminate discrimination, violence, and labor exploitation while enhancing political participation, access to healthcare, and access to technology, all of which have been negatively affected by COVID-19.

Significant challenges to attaining gender equality and social inclusion exist. However, the strength and resilience of Sri Lanka’s female population to withstand, survive, and thrive in conditions that challenge their very existence leaves hope for a more gender-equal future. It is to Sri Lanka’s own benefit that such systemic flaws are addressed and the lives of the women who have adapted and survived in times of conflict and pandemic, are improved to enrich and nurture the country’s social capital and attain inclusive prosperity.

Epilogue

Subsequent to the finalization of this paper, significant changes occurred in the political, social and economic landscape in Sri Lanka. The initial months of the year 2022 saw Sri Lankans going through unprecedented economic hardships stemming from post-pandemic economic shocks, armed conflict in Eastern Europe and the gross mismanagement of the Sri Lankan economy. The shortages in basic necessities such as food, medicine, fuel including liquid petroleum gas for cooking not only inconvenienced the Sri Lankan public but also resulted in

some casualties. With politicians and policymakers doing little or less to counter the adverse economic effects while continuing down a path of certain doom, public displeasure outpoured in the form of mass protests.

The “Aragalaya” or Struggle as the mass protests became known found expression across multiple urban centers of the country (Team Watchdog 2022). Of particular significance are the large scale participation of teachers and medical communities in these campaigns. Even as anti-protest violence mounted on 9th of May, nurses came out on the streets in large numbers to defend and uphold civic rights for dissent and non-violent civil disobedience. Youth groups from Student Unions and political parties lead parallel protests, creating a multi structured leadership for the people’s movement. The protests resulted in regime change as the former president and prime minister of the country and members of the Rajapaksa family resigned from the positions. This peaceful transition of power as a result of public protest is unprecedented in the country. However, there was a follow-up crackdown on peaceful protestors through the security apparatus under the guidance of the incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who took power without popular mandate. This too is a first for Sri Lanka as the President is normally elected by a direct popular vote by citizens.

Social infrastructure and protection were part of the basic demands of the protesters, which are core needs of women. However, even during the protests, specific women politicians were vilified on social media, and according to observers resulted in gender related hate speech going up to 65% of all hate speech on public pages in those months (Hashtag Generation 2022). It is evident that this rise of women’s democratic struggle for freedom and equality, will be met with an equal ferocity, if not more, of violence. Women in Sri Lanka, however, continue to organize, protest and rise, and give hope for change.

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