



INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES



**Reimagining Vulnerability in the
Light of COVID-19:
A Review of the Literature
(2020-2021)**

Nadine Vanniasinkam

**Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of
COVID-19:
A Review of the Literature (2020-2021)**

Nadine Vanniasinkam

**International Centre for Ethnic Studies
2023**

Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Review of the Literature
(2020-2021)

@ 2023 International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES)

2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka

E-mail : admin@ices.lk

URL : www.ices.lk

All rights reserved.

ISBN: : 978-624-5502-23-3

This publication is based on research funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Copyright to this publication belongs to the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). Any part of this book may be reproduced with due acknowledgement to the author and publisher. The interpretations and conclusions expressed in the study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the ICES or the donor.



INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES



Cover: Canvas painting by Karen Silve - Vulnerability and Strength 2018, 2019

Printed by:

Horizon Printing (Pvt) Ltd.

1616/6, Hatharaman Handiya,

Malabe Road, Kottawa,

Pannipitiya.

**Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of
COVID-19:
A Review of the Literature (2020-2021)**

by

Nadine Vanniasinkam*

* **Nadine Vanniasinkam** is currently reading for a PhD in Anthropology at the Australian National University and was a senior researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies at the time this review was completed.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Mario Gomez, Dr. Ramani Gunatilaka, Dr. Ranmini Vithanagama and Ms. Viyanga Gunasekera for their valuable feedback on this literature review. I also wish to thank Ms. Lara Wijesuriya for her assistance with an annotated bibliography of literature on Sri Lanka, and my colleagues at ICES for their support and encouragement.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Understanding vulnerability.....	4
2.1. Economic approaches to vulnerability	6
2.2. Sociological approaches to vulnerability	7
2.3. Problematising the concept of vulnerability	8
3. The pandemic and vulnerability in Sri Lanka	9
3.1. The context	9
3.2. Groups/sectors made (more) vulnerable by the pandemic	11
4. Pandemic governance and vulnerability in Sri Lanka	19
4.1. Economic and welfare policies	23
5. Conclusion	25
References	26

1. Introduction

Epidemics, pandemics, wars and natural disasters hold mirrors up to society and the state, revealing not only deeply entrenched inequalities and different forms of repression, but also human resilience to cope, innovate and persist in disruptive times. For the first time since the Spanish Flu health crisis a century ago, SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 caught the entire world by surprise, crippling the ‘normal’ and impinging on socio-economic fabrics.

This paper attempts to understand the social, economic and political impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sri Lanka by reviewing research published between early 2020 and end 2021. It mainly focuses on the nuances of vulnerability as a category that could have broadened in scope due to the pandemic, and individual, community and state approaches to contain and mitigate vulnerability. These insights will be framed by comparative literature from the region and beyond. The aim of the review is to support a quantitative and qualitative study of a large sample of respondents from different parts of the country to understand the different types and levels of vulnerability experienced during the pandemic.

At the time of writing this review, between late 2021 and early 2022, the context in Sri Lanka shifted, with the advancement of the economic and political crises adding to the economic and psychosocial burdens and taking precedence over people’s concerns. The pandemic is only one intersecting factor among many influencing the current crisis. While the context has intensified, it is nevertheless, pertinent to understand the unique barriers, challenges and opportunities experienced by various social groups in the country during the pandemic period (which can be located between March 2020 and December 2021 in Sri Lanka) and scrutinise the management of the pandemic by governments and civil society for future policy and preparedness. Thus, this paper, while acknowledging that the context in Sri Lanka has changed, takes a retrospective approach.

The pandemic has had grave impacts on developing and poor countries and has disproportionately affected structurally vulnerable populations (Gamlin et. al. 2021) such as women, children, LGBTIQ+, female heads of households, the urban poor, racial minorities, refugees and stateless persons, daily wage earners, persons with disabilities, the aged, migrant workers, informal sector workers and sex workers. It has also resulted in a dramatic loss of livelihood and income globally,

potentially thrusting an additional 71 to 100 million people into extreme poverty (World Bank, 2020a). In South Asia alone, the World Bank (2021a) estimated that 48 to 59 million persons were likely to become or remain poor in 2021.

Women were particularly affected by the pandemic, especially women heading their households who had to bear the brunt of the pandemic and its control protocols, due to loss of income and difficulties in securing food (UN Women, 2021). Basing their argument on a survey with gender disaggregated data involving 112 countries, Kabeer, Yazawi and Rodgers (2021) reveal that, while more men were infected and even more succumbed to COVID-19 than women, “Women’s relatively high representation in sectors hardest hit by lockdown orders has translated into larger declines in employment for women than men in numerous countries” (1). Furthermore, women are largely represented in essential service work on the frontlines, such as in the health sector and social services (ILO, 2020a). Thus, they were vulnerable to the health and social risks involved at various levels.

The pandemic also affected a segment of society who were well off before the crisis, resulting in them becoming the new poor, owing to a loss of business and income due to the pandemic. The Lancet (2020) points out that globally, individuals who were not considered vulnerable at the beginning of the pandemic have become vulnerable as a consequence of this crisis. These include individuals working in the tourism sector, apparel sector, small and medium businesses, as well as those in import and export related businesses. Many of the ‘new’ poor are likely to be from already poor regions (Hadad-Zervos, 2020). Many who considered themselves to be financially stable are likely to find themselves struggling to build back businesses in the context of an economic downturn.

The pandemic had a drastic effect on Sri Lankan society and the country’s economy. A survey conducted by UNICEF in 2021 covering over 2,000 households across Sri Lanka showed that close to 40 percent of respondents had lost all income and a further 32 percent had lost some income due to the lockdowns. Many of those who had lost all income were daily wage workers. Sri Lanka had previously been making good progress in reducing poverty and improving living standards, with the poverty rate improving to 11 percent in 2016 from 16.2 percent in 2012/13 (World Bank, 2021b). However, the Department of Census and Statistics (2022) of Sri Lanka estimates a rise of the poverty level in Sri Lanka to 14.3 percent in 2021 from 3.2 percent in 2019 as a result of COVID-19.

The literature on Sri Lanka also shows that urban populations were the most vulnerable during the pandemic. The urban poor, the disabled, elderly, LGBTIQ+ and sex workers were identified as the most vulnerable in the Colombo District (Women and Media Collective, 2020). Sarvodaya (2021) identified vulnerable communities such as beneficiaries of care homes, non-affluent communities in urban settlements, daily wage workers, the differently abled, conflict affected, women-headed households, micro-entrepreneurs, children of non-affluent groups and patients with chronic diseases.

In the light of the global and national impact of the pandemic, the aim of this review is to understand the concept of vulnerability and what it means to Sri Lanka in the context of the pandemic. The review commences with an exploration of the different conceptual approaches to vulnerability. It then moves on to identify and understand the challenges faced by different vulnerable groups in Sri Lanka and how the governance of the pandemic may have mitigated or exacerbated vulnerabilities. The review concludes with identifying gaps in research and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Understanding vulnerability

The focus on vulnerability in the context of a pandemic is intentional. The impact of the pandemic on communities can be approached through various lenses, i.e., social justice, human rights, social inclusion, to name a few. Vulnerability was chosen as a reference point not only due to its popular use in disaster management literature and by development and humanitarian sectors, but also because of its scope which encompasses human agency within the social, economic, political and environmental spheres in the face of an external shock.

“Vulnerability” is defined and measured differently by the many disciplines concerned with it, such as economics, sociology, anthropology, disaster management, environmental studies and health sciences. However, in general, among the social sciences, it relates to “different components of risk, household responses to risk and welfare outcomes” (Alwang et.al. 2001, 2).

Kabeer (2014, 2) defines vulnerability as “a dynamic, multidimensional concept that relates to the choices people can exercise and the capabilities they can draw on in the face of shocks and stresses,” such as environmental hazards, climate change, famine, natural disasters, wars and epidemics. Rather than signifying susceptibility to harm, weakness, dependency, passivity, incapability and powerlessness (Cunniff Gilson, 2016), vulnerability is considered (mostly within feminist and sociological literature) as a threat to an individual’s or a community’s basic capabilities (Kabeer, 2014). These conceptualisations borrow heavily from the concept of capabilities, introduced by Amartya Sen, and call for a departure from a purely economic perspective of good living and poverty, arguing instead that it is important to focus on an individual’s ability to achieve agency, freedom and wellbeing (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Building on Sen’s subjective approach, Nussbaum (2001) notes that it is the role of the state to secure the capabilities of a person by “producing good, internal readiness to act” among individuals (internal capabilities) and to “prepare the material and institutional environment so that people are actually able to function” (combined capabilities) (235) and respond to external shocks.

Therefore, vulnerability is measured against an individual’s, household’s or community’s ability to mitigate economic and social losses as a result of external risks or shocks. This ability or resilience is dependent both on internal capabilities,

such as assets, savings, education and social networks, as well as sociocultural norms and policies and social protection measures implemented by the state. The nature of the shock (i.e., environmental /health-related / natural disaster / man-made disaster) also impacts differentially on vulnerability and resilience.

Vulnerability = Risk/Shock/Hazard – Coping/Capabilities/Resilience

(Adapted from Alwang et. al., 2001)

Different disciplines operationalise these variables differently. However, Alwang et. al. (2001) note that the predominant understanding is that “vulnerability is a useful (and measurable) concept only if it is defined as vulnerability to a measurable loss (the metric) below a minimum level (the benchmark). Without the use of a benchmark, the term “vulnerability” becomes too imprecise for practical use” (29). Traditionally, economists have focused primarily on a poverty line or minimum consumption levels and have defined vulnerability as “a high probability of becoming poor or poorer “n” periods ahead” (Holzmann et. al., 2003, 10). In more recent times, theoretical and empirical developments have led to looking beyond consumption and taking a holistic approach to view poverty as multidimensional. This approach assesses poverty at the individual level against three primary dimensions of poverty – health, education and living standards – each of which are further broken down into various indicators. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, developed by the UNDP and Oxford University, identifies individuals as poor if s/he is deprived of more than three of ten weighted indicators. This is a more comprehensive measure that takes into account an individual’s performance across a range of dimensions and thus has better predictive value for vulnerability and provides insights for prescriptive policy (Abraham and Kumar, 2008).

Vulnerability is mostly approached as a probability *ex ante* in order to propose risk management strategies to minimise it. It can also be approached *ex post* to identify weaknesses in existing risk management policies and strategies. The former approach is forward looking and vulnerability is viewed not as static, but “as an ongoing state comprised of several components” (Alwang et. al., 2001, 18).

From a quantitative approach, vulnerability can be measured at individual, household, community and national levels. However, these four levels are in fact interconnected and impact on each other’s vulnerability, and these interconnections are often best unpacked and probed through sociological approaches. A combination

of economic and social approaches to vulnerability, therefore, can provide a clearer picture of the impact of an external shock or risk on different subsets of society.

2.1 Economic approaches to vulnerability

Naude et. al. (2009) categorise economic approaches to vulnerability as microeconomic and macroeconomic. The former defines vulnerability as “the risk of households falling into or remaining in poverty owing either to idiosyncratic hazards (because of the characteristics of the individual household) or to covariate/aggregate hazards (external to the household)” and the latter viewing vulnerability as “the risk that a “system” (such as a country) will be adversely affected by a shock ... [which] can include natural hazards or macroeconomic shocks” (2). Most of these approaches examine vulnerability in relation to employment, sustainable livelihoods, food security and assets, and use poverty as an indicator of vulnerability and the poverty line as the benchmark. Poverty is approached either as chronic or transitory, the latter presenting poverty as a more dynamic process where people move in and out of poverty due to various household and exogenous factors (Alwang et. al., 2001, 7).

Approaches to vulnerability reflect the mandates of the organisations that conduct them. The International Labour Organization (ILO) focuses on vulnerable employment which consists primarily of own account workers and contributing family workers. It defines vulnerable employment as “characterised by inadequate earnings, low productivity and difficult conditions of work that undermine workers’ fundamental rights.” Groups involved in such employment “are less likely to have formal work arrangements, and are therefore more likely to lack decent working conditions, adequate social security and ‘voice’ through effective representation by trade unions and similar organizations” (ILO 2010, 18).

The World Bank studies vulnerability based on a loose definition approaching it “not as *ex ante*, but as *ex post* risk of consumption poverty, malnutrition, low educational or health outcomes ... The approach starts with an investigation of the sources of vulnerability (prevalent and or catastrophic [and more recently covariate and idiosyncratic] risks and shocks), contrasts these with the available risk management instruments [and coping strategies], and finally identifies gaps in the access to, and efficiency of such instruments. This information may then be used to identify best practice interventions to address a particular risk, and

for the costing, prioritisation, sequencing and monitoring of these interventions” (Holzmann et. al., 2003, 10-11; World Bank, 2019). While this definition suits the study of macroeconomic outcomes/implications of vulnerability, it does not seem to support an inquiry into sociopolitical factors that impinge on individual capabilities and the lack of and/or inequalities in access and rights to risk management instruments.

2.2 Sociological approaches to vulnerability

Poverty alone cannot adequately define the extent of an individual’s or community’s vulnerability. The fields of sociology and anthropology allow for a broader approach to vulnerability and include factors that are often not captured by metric income and consumption measures (Alwang et. al., 2001). Furthermore, they emphasise social vulnerabilities and extend “the definition of assets beyond the physical and financial realms to include social capital and strength of household relations” (Putnam, 1993; Moser, 1998 cited in Alwang et. al., 2001) all of which intersect to result in vulnerability. Kabeer (2002), drawing from the South Asian experience, notes that poverty is not generally a result of unemployment, but of “the nature of the activities that poor and vulnerable groups engage in,” which is defined by social inequalities such as caste, gender and, increasingly, age (Kabeer, 2002, 591). These social factors, which also include ethnicity, religion and ability, mark certain communities, such as women, children, persons with disability, the aged, the LGBTIQ+ and ethno-religious minorities, as vulnerable but also experiencing different forms of vulnerability - such as gender-based violence - which may or may not be linked to poverty. Vulnerability, therefore, can also be defined as “the insecurity of the wellbeing of individuals, households, or communities in the face of a changing environment” (Moser and Holland 1998, 2).

The social aspect of vulnerability also figures in legal and human rights discourses and, in this case, ‘equality’ (not necessarily resilience) is considered its counterpoint. These disciplines approach vulnerability in relation to social justice as susceptibility to unequal treatment or bodily harm as a result of limitations (in the implementation) of principles such as ‘equality’ and ‘equal protection under the law’ (Fineman, 2019). The focus is on critiquing and ensuring an “enabling legal environment that protects and promotes human rights and gender equality, supports rights-based responses to health for all, including vulnerable and key populations, to leave no-one behind” (UNDP, n.d.). Here, the focus is on vulnerable

groups and the inadequacy or absence of policy and/or legal frameworks. The United Nations Development Program (n.d.) defines vulnerable populations as “populations that live in poverty without access to safe housing, water, sanitation and nutrition, and those who are stigmatised, discriminated against, marginalised by society and even criminalised in law, policy and practice. These populations may struggle to fulfil their human rights, including their rights to access health and social services. They live in environments of inequality where they are unable to thrive, feel safe and actively participate in all aspects of society.” This group includes those with “communicable diseases such as HIV, TB and malaria, and non-communicable diseases such as cancers and chronic respiratory illnesses” who are disproportionately affected.

2.3 Problematising the concept of vulnerability

The term ‘vulnerability’ and top-down approaches to the study of this concept have been criticised by feminist scholars for its perceived assumptions and connotations of patriarchal ideals of weakness, dependency and femininity (Cunniff-Gilson, 2016, 71). Butler (2020) notes that “the discourse of ‘vulnerable groups’ reproduces paternalistic power and gives authority to regulatory agencies with interests and constraints of their own.” Instead, vulnerability needs to be approached as a “shared human condition of bodily existence and relationality; vulnerability as a historically changing condition and unequally distributed to different populations; invulnerability as a fantasy of individual and collective subjects; vulnerability turned into a resource of political action rather than victimisation and as a resource in collective mobilising” (Abadia and Pulkkinen, 2020). Thus, the study of vulnerability also needs to involve scrutiny and questioning of the dynamics of power in relation to regulatory bodies, their laws and policies, and modes of implementation.

3. The pandemic and vulnerability in Sri Lanka

3.1 The context

SARS-CoV-2 was first detected in Wuhan city in the Hubei Province of China in December 2019 and its outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in January 2020. It was subsequently declared a pandemic in March 2020 (Amaratunge et. al., 2020). Sri Lanka was quick to respond to this declaration and imposed an island-wide lockdown on 16th March, 2020, introducing an “aggressive outbreak management programme” (Wijesekara et. al., 2021) when a cluster of infected navy personnel emerged. The lockdown was lifted only at the end of May 2020. However, district curfews and inter-provincial travel restrictions continued to be in operation. Imposition of island-wide lockdowns, travel restrictions and quarantine curfews helped the country minimise and contain the spread of the first wave of the virus. However, since then, Sri Lanka faced three more waves of the pandemic; after a respite of nearly four months, the country’s capital, Colombo, went into lockdown again on 29th October, 2020, with the resurgence of the virus among large clusters in the apparel sector, at the Peliyagoda fish market and in prisons. The detection of the prison cluster led to several protests by prisoners in different parts of the country culminating in a riot at the Mahara prison which left eight inmates dead and 71 injured (The Guardian, 2020). The Colombo lockdown was later extended to the entire Western Province and quarantine curfew was subsequently lifted on 26th November, 2020. However, several areas in Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara and Kurunegala districts remained isolated. Inter-provincial travel restrictions were imposed yet again in May 2021 following the Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations and lifted in August 2021. With the spread of the Delta variant, another nation-wide lockdown was imposed on August 20th, 2021 and this was lifted on 01st October, 2021, while inter-provincial travel restrictions remained in place until 31st October, 2021.¹ Since then, the country has been kept open with a focus on achieving full vaccination of the population. As of May 2022, 82 percent of the total population had received two doses of an authorised COVID-19 vaccine and 55 percent had received a booster dose (Presidential Secretariat, 2022).

¹ <https://global-monitoring.com/gm/page/events/epidemic-0002015.fTDtGCxti2qN.html?lang=en>

The pandemic hit Sri Lanka at a politically and economically sensitive time, nearly a year after the Easter Sunday bombings which frayed the already fragile fabric of ethnoreligious relations in the country and crippled tourism. Sri Lanka had elected a new president, Gotabaya Rajapakse, in November 2019 in the wake of the Easter Sunday Bombings which consolidated the rising mistrust in the Good Governance Coalition² caused by internal factionalism and corruption. The President had dissolved Parliament in early March 2020 (six months before Parliament's term was to end) to capitalise on conflict within the opposition and secure a majority (Kadirgamar, 2020). The parliamentary elections were later postponed twice due to the pandemic and finally held in August 2020 with the Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance, led by the President's brother Mahinda Rajapakse, enjoying a landslide victory. While the President's efficient management of the pandemic's initial stages could have contributed to this victory, the majoritarian and militarised politics of the President and his government, shaped the way in which the pandemic was managed (without parliamentary oversight), further exacerbating the climate of shrinking democratic space, intimidation of minorities and polarisation of ethno-religious communities that commenced after the end of the war in 2009. This is not something new to Sri Lanka, but a mere extension of how the country has been governed since independence (Peiris, 2021), with politicians manufacturing ethnic and/or religious tensions for electoral gain. Furthermore, the intermittent and prolonged interruptions to social, economic and cultural life over a period of two years, coupled with fear of infection, paranoia and adjustment to a new normal, took a toll on the country's economy and also had deep reverberations in home and family life. Gunatilaka and Chandrasiri (2022) highlight the fact that the impact of the pandemic was exacerbated by chronic macroeconomic underperformance since 2013 and more recent policy decisions, such as the agrochemical ban on agriculture, the management of the exchange rate, a highly accommodative monetary policy and the use of foreign exchange reserves to repay debt (viii). Thus, it is pertinent to examine how situations of emergency create new vulnerabilities while exacerbating and further entrenching existing patterns.

² The Good Governance Coalition was formed in 2015 between Maithripala Sirisena (SLFP) and Ranil Wickremasinghe (UNP), and went on to overthrow the Rajapakse Government in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015. The Coalition came into power on the minority vote and on the promise of constitutional reform and national reconciliation efforts. The Coalition's failure to deliver on campaign promises and conflict between its two leaders resulted in the weakening of the Coalition.

3.2 Groups/sectors made (more) vulnerable by the pandemic

What began as a health crisis soon evolved into a socioeconomic crisis, intensifying existing socio-economic challenges and vulnerabilities globally. In Sri Lanka, “high levels of unemployment, loss of job security and pay cuts resulted in anxiety and economic stress among the population of the country” (Amaratunge et.al., 2020, p. 46). The disruption of social life, education and increased care burdens of children and the elderly further intensified this stress.

Contraction in economies occurred globally due to the pandemic. For Sri Lanka, this contraction was also marked by the impact of the Easter Sunday bombings of 2019 which resulted in a decline in economic growth from 3.3 percent in 2018 to 2.3 percent in 2019 (KPMG, 2020). Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted -3.6 percent in 2020 and, despite projections that Sri Lanka’s economy would recover and grow by 3.3 percent in 2021 (World Bank, 2021) and 3.4 percent in 2022 (ADB, 2021), the economic crisis resulting from high fiscal deficits (not directly related to the pandemic) was projected to worsen [and had worsened] in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). Sectors most impacted by the pandemic included tourism, (which having already been bruised by the Easter Bombings, was gearing for recovery), apparel exports, retail (non-essential), and banking and finance (KPMG, 2020).

Consequentially, poverty in Sri Lanka increased by 2.5 percent to 11.7 percent in 2020 from 9.2 percent in 2019 (World Bank, 2021b). Though the World Bank (2021a) projected poverty levels to decline to 10.9 percent in 2021, it is still higher than the pre-pandemic context. Furthermore, the World Bank (2021a) forecasts that Sri Lanka’s “high debt burden, large refinancing needs, and weak external buffers will adversely affect growth and poverty reduction over the medium term. Despite increased policy rates and price controls imposed by the Government, inflationary pressure is expected to remain strong amid partial monetisation of the fiscal deficit, currency depreciation, and rising global commodity prices. Food insecurity could worsen and poverty reduction slow if food prices remain elevated and shortages continue.”

The pandemic could have resulted in higher levels of inequality than the pre-pandemic period, given that it was people from the lowest income households and marginalised groups who had been most affected, albeit with very different outcomes for men and women (Kabeer, Yazawi and Rodgers, 2021). Among these

affected were also the vulnerable non-poor or tomorrow's poor – “households above the poverty line, but whose livelihoods are so precarious that any downward mobility in the event of a crisis will push them into the poverty line” (Kabeer 2002, 591-592).

A review of the literature on the pandemic reveals the sectors and marginalised communities most impacted by the pandemic. Of the sectors, small and medium enterprises, the informal sector and health sector were hit the hardest, and among marginalised communities, women, children, the up-country Tamils, and persons with disabilities were underrepresented in local research on the pandemic.

There is no large-scale gender disaggregated data on the impact of COVID-19 on communities in Sri Lanka. However, global studies have shown that women faced significant challenges owing to their high representation in sectors that were impacted the most (Kabeer et. al., 2021): the informal sector, small and medium enterprises, and essential services which includes the health sector. In Sri Lanka, women comprise more than 67 percent of **health workers** involved in intimate care of patients. The pandemic witnessed an increase in this productive role causing the women to face a higher risk to their health (McLaren et. al, 2020). The increase in their productive roles also had an impact on their ability to perform their existing reproductive roles such as childcare and care for aged family members. Lockdowns, curfews and fears of the spread of COVID-19 denied women access to reproductive support such as daycare and domestic helpers, thus, increasing their care workload. The pandemic thus demonstrated the trend of additional burdens being imposed on women during times of crisis and disaster which is further reinforced by policy responses to crises which potentially impact their wellbeing. A case study of women health workers in Sri Lanka shows that “women, despite barriers to their mobility, endured travel between productive and reproductive work to ensure care of their children and elderly relatives” (McLaren et. al. 2020, 7).

Women also have a high representation in the apparel and estate sectors at 75 percent and 65 percent of female participation respectively (Weerakoon, 2021). However, there is no empirical data on the challenges faced by **women working in the apparel and estate sectors**, the two largest export earners, which were treated as essential services during lockdowns and curfews, and continued to sustain the economy during the pandemic. The apparel industry contributes 15% of Sri Lanka's total exports and provides more than 400,000 direct employment

opportunities (Kavindi et. al., 2021). Following a halt in operations during the first wave in March and April 2020, the industry resumed operations and continued to function during subsequent periods of lockdown. Despite the Government's edict that factories adopt strict health and safety measures, in reality "employers were flouting guidelines" (Human Rights Watch, 2021) putting their staff at risk of infection. The lack of authority of the Department of Labour to investigate COVID-19 related violations and the overburden of the public health sector responsible for monitoring compliance further aggravated this risk (Hewage and Pathirana, 2021). Furthermore, the global prevalence of the pandemic resulted in order cancellations and shortages of (imported) raw materials which hampered the manufacturing process and caused financial losses. To mitigate these losses, apparel companies imposed salary cuts from between 5 percent and 60 percent based on salary levels, reduced work hours and overtime (Kavindi et. al., 2021) The impacts of these measures on the wellbeing of factory employees are yet to be assessed.

One of the most affected populations were **children and youth** who not only faced disruptions to their education, but were also prevented from interacting and socialising with peers and educators, and engaging in extracurricular activities. Sri Lanka was quick to address this problem by resorting to online distance learning from primary to tertiary education. Educational programs such as Gurugedera (in Sinhala) and Gurukulam (in Tamil) were aired on Rupavahini, a state-owned television network, and several radio channels broadcast educational programmes as well. In addition, the Ministry of Education provided learning material for grades one to twelve through their e-learning platform E-thaksalava. Schools resorted to distance learning digital and social media platforms such as Zoom, Google and Microsoft meetings, Facebook Live and WhatsApp (Nawastheen and Perera, 2021). However, unequal access to internet facilities and smart mobile devices (in both urban and rural settings) resulted in gross inequalities in access to education, carrying the potential of impacting individual wellbeing and the future labour force and economy. According to the 2020 annual report of the Labour Force Survey, only 22.2 percent of households in the country owned a desktop or laptop, with 32.3 percent of the population being computer literate and 50.1 percent having digital literacy. There is also an urban, rural and estate sector divide with those located in urban areas demonstrating the greatest and the estate sector the least access to a computer and digital literacy. Poor internet coverage in rural areas also meant that some students had to "climb elevated places" to access

internet services to participate in online classes (Krishnamohan and Sathiyasegar, 2021). Furthermore, parents' and caregivers' lack of knowledge on facilitating and supervising e-learning may also have impacted students' educational attainments. Research conducted by UNICEF (2021) shows that the pandemic interrupted the learning of over 434 million children in South Asia and that "69 percent of parents of primary school children in Sri Lanka reported that their children were learning less or a lot less." The study further underscored the special challenges faced by girls, children with disabilities and children from underprivileged households, who are also most likely to drop out of school. However, at the time of writing, statistics on school drop-outs due to the pandemic were not yet available.

The closure of schools due to the pandemic could also have had an impact on malnutrition in children. Jayawardena (2020) observes that more than 20% of children under the age of five years are underweight according to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of 2016 and the state implements daily school meal programs that provides important nutritional needs to around one million children from grades 1-5 in 80 percent of government schools. Closure of schools for over a year could have resulted in hunger and nutritional deficiencies among children from poor households.

The Up-country Tamils, one of the most marginalised communities in Sri Lanka who sustain the estate sector and also comprise a large portion of domestic workers in the country, were also absent in the research on the impact on the pandemic. This community faces perennial issues related to access to proper housing, health care and decent minimum wages. A 2017 World Bank study also identifies the estate sector as having the worst nutritional outcomes in the country, particularly poor maternal and child nutrition. There is a strong need to address the lack of data on the gendered socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on this community which lives in cramped and overcrowded living spaces with poor nutritional, health and sanitation facilities and which is plagued by alcoholism and gender-based violence. Yasmin Gunaratnam (2020) shows a glimpse of the struggles faced by this group:

"Our number one priority is our livelihood. Health is number two," Vani says. Why this way around? Because for the poor there are two pandemics. Vani believes that many domestic workers will die, not because of the coronavirus, but from the slow violence of food insecurity and starvation. Already they are skipping meals so there is more food to go around, and

several are sick with other health conditions like asthma. A consuming dread is whether they will still have jobs when the curfew is lifted (2).

Persons with disabilities is yet another important group which is seldom consulted and whose experiences and circumstances are not considered in policy design. As such, this demographic was also affected by the pandemic and faced additional challenges due to restrictions on mobility. Perera, Kandasamy and Soldatic (2020) observe that persons with disabilities who live in conditions of poverty and had low literacy levels (due to poor access to education) were the most affected and had limited access to public health information and information on regulations related to the pandemic also due to mental or sensory impairments. This made them more susceptible to contracting the virus and also put them at risk of violating curfew without their knowledge. Access to government officials over the phone and poor communication and coordination also meant that many faced delays or did not receive aid and government subsidies they were eligible for. Other intersecting factors, such as gender and ethnicity, also made women with disabilities from minority ethnic communities more vulnerable in their communities due to the Government's scapegoating of the Muslims in particular as spreaders of the virus and the involvement of the military in managing the COVID-19 response. The pandemic greatly affected the financial security of persons with disabilities as employment was affected due to lockdowns and restricted transport. Interruptions in transport further affected their ability to access their caregivers, obtain medical care and medication for pre-existing health conditions. Thus, persons with disabilities were at greater risk of contracting the virus, experiencing severe symptoms and facing higher mortality rates (Wanigasinghe, 2021). There is a need for empirical studies on the impact of the pandemic on persons with disabilities as well as the gendered vulnerabilities of women with disabilities particularly in relation to gender-based violence.

Another vulnerable population, particularly in the South Asian region, is **temporary migrant workers** to the Middle East and Gulf countries. This segment contributes significantly to their home countries' GDP. In 2019, 7.8 percent of Sri Lanka's GDP was from remittances from temporary labour migrants (World Bank, 2020c). As a result of the pandemic, these migrant workers were stranded abroad, sometimes without food or shelter in the face of loss of employment, wage cuts, cuts in benefits and bonuses, losses in savings and lack of access to affordable healthcare. Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021) found that, across

all skill levels (i.e. highly skilled, skilled and semi-skilled workers), pay cuts were the most common consequence of the pandemic. However, semi-skilled workers were the most affected and “faced difficulties in sending remittances to Sri Lanka, making debt repayments and paying for their food and other basic needs” (p.17). While some semi-skilled workers facing severe financial difficulty were forced to borrow money from their families in Sri Lanka to meet costs of returning to their home country, others resorted to borrowing from friends in the migrant country, seeking accommodation with lower rentals and cutting down on personal expenses (Ekanayake and Amirthalingam, 2021, p. 18). Weeraratne (2020) also notes that non-assimilation policies for migrants in the Gulf prevents temporary labour migrants from integrating fully into the social and cultural fabric of the host country and, in the context of COVID-19, “triggered the need for a large number of South Asian migrant workers to return to their countries of origin” (12). This policy of non-assimilation was further reflected in nationalist practices of private companies which opted to lay off migrants rather than natives (Weeraratne, 2020). The social, economic and gendered costs to temporary migrant workers, particularly low-skilled workers from Sri Lanka, due to the pandemic are yet to be fully assessed. Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021) also point to the psychological impact and trauma of uncertainty, fear and being away from family that needs to be studied in the light of the pandemic.

The **informal sector** was also impacted by the pandemic. In most South Asian countries, most economic activities occur in the informal sector rather than the formal sector and women comprise the majority of informal sector workers (ILO, 2020a). In Sri Lanka, informal work accounts for 70 percent of Sri Lanka’s entire workforce (World Bank, 2020b). However, more men (70 percent) than women (64 percent)³ engage in the informal sector due to women’s greater likelihood to be employed in the public sector and as unpaid family workers (ibid.). Given the unregulated and precarious nature of the informal sector, it is pertinent to examine the impact of the pandemic on the social security and social protection of informal sector workers, particularly in relation to occupational health and safety standards and unlawful dismissals. Within the informal sector, it is important to focus particularly on own account workers who comprise the bulk of the informal sector at 34.2 percent (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020), as well as domestic workers. The recent (unpublished) Labour Force Survey Annual Report

³ In an earlier study, Gunatilaka (2008) reports 69 percent of total employment in the informal sector comprising males and 61 percent females.

of 2020 recorded 80,000 persons working as domestic workers of whom 60,000 were women. Having no legal recognition as belonging to the formal workforce, domestic workers operate outside the framework and protection of labour laws (ILO, 2021). The pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities faced by this demographic. Globally, domestic worker unions have reported “violations of workers’ rights, from not being able to leave their employers’ homes to having their hours cancelled with no compensation” (Kabeer, Razavi and Rodgers, 2021, p.12). Similarly, the ILO (2021) reports job loss, “dramatic reduction of work hours and correspondingly lower wages,” confinement due to lockdowns and separation from families leading to mental and psychological challenges. However, there is no data on sexual violence, abuse and harassment of domestic workers during the pandemic. Furthermore, in the face of threats to a steady income (among others difficulties) of those belonging to the informal sector, it is important to look at operational challenges and access to finance as a result of the pandemic as well as coping strategies adopted by these vulnerable groups.

Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises straddle both the formal and informal sectors and can be classified as women-owned and managed businesses (WSMEs), men-owned and managed businesses (MSMEs) and joint small and medium enterprises (JSMEs). SMEs are an important part of the Sri Lankan economy and account for approximately 75 percent of all businesses, with more male-owned than female owned enterprises (IFS, 2020). SMEs contribute 52 percent of Sri Lanka’s GDP. However, they, particularly micro and small-sized enterprises, encounter challenges such as access to finance, low social protection, high cost of transactions and poor innovations (Perera, 2021a). These pre-existing challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic. “The most severely affected SMEs – both directly and indirectly – belong to the tourism value chain, apparel sector, footwear and leather sector, processed food industry, and handloom and handicraft industry” (Perera, 2021a). A rapid study on the impact of the pandemic on SMEs in Sri Lanka notes that the pandemic resulted in a decrease in demand for their products and/or services, and difficulties in meeting operating expenses, obtaining loans and transitioning to digital channels for marketing (IFS, 2020). The World Bank’s allocation of LKR15 billion to aid the SME sector, while benefiting medium-sized enterprises, seems not to have benefited smaller scale enterprises (Perera, 2021b). However, it has been noted that, amidst greater difficulty in obtaining loans from formal financial institutions, WSMEs laid off fewer employees. Instead, they opted for informal loan arrangements with friends, neighbours or relatives

to sustain their businesses (ibid.). It remains to be seen how these additional debt burdens impact the livelihood and wellbeing of SME owners and workers.

The analysis of the impact of the pandemic on Sri Lanka shows that there are particular groups, such as women, children, persons with disability, prisoners and informal sector and own account workers, who are intensely affected by crises and external shocks. Stiglitz (2020) observes that, “Some societies and economies have done a better job of enhancing the capacity to cope with shocks than others. The greatest vulnerabilities arise in societies that have allowed themselves to be exposed to large shocks, but have left large fractions of their populations without adequate mechanisms for coping.” Sri Lanka entered the pandemic with pre-existing challenges in relation to poverty, inequality and vulnerability. It is the role of the state and its public institutions to ensure that all members of all communities are served. It is, therefore, essential to examine the state’s management of the pandemic, its policies and provisions to identify gaps and challenges for the road ahead and ensure that all individuals and households deal with the shocks of the pandemic without risking their wellbeing or future prosperity (Kabeer, 2014).

4. Pandemic governance and vulnerability in Sri Lanka

The pandemic presented novel challenges for governments across the globe. In order to prevent the spread of the virus, nation-states responded by imposing lockdowns and curfews, closing borders, mandating testing and forcefully quarantining people. Such authoritarian restrictions of movement, while containing the spread of the virus in the short term, failed to take into account the capacity of many (already vulnerable) communities to observe the new hygiene practices, maintain social distance, quarantine and self-isolate. Thus, these preventive measures further entrenched socio-economic cleavages, where the rich and middle class were better able to “live within bubbles of protection” (Wahlberg et. al. 2021, 9) negotiating work from home and home-schooling. The continuation of the supply of essential services, largely provided by people in the lowest-paying jobs in the health sector, the plantation industry, factories, supermarkets, food processing centres, food delivery, garbage disposal and cleaning, exposed workers to the virus. The outbreak of the virus at the Peliyagoda fish market and garment factories in Sri Lanka exemplify these inequalities. Furthermore, the impracticality of social distancing of under-served communities living in densely populated areas such as housing schemes and shanty settlements meant that these communities were hotbeds for the virus. The outbreak of the virus in prisons in Sri Lanka which led to unrest among inmates over overcrowding resulting in a riot in the Mahara Prison in the Western Province that left eight dead and several injured is another example. The pandemic thus heightened pre-existing structural inequalities and vulnerabilities while also highlighting that the one-size-fits-all COVID-19 prevention strategy was not viable for several poor and underserved populations in the country.

In several parts of the world, the political context and climate of societal divisions informed the governance approach adopted to contain the spread of the virus. Carothers and O’Donahue (2020) underscore the potential for states to use the pandemic situation as an opportunity to bridge political and societal divides. However, the pandemic policies adopted in Sri Lanka (as well as India and South Africa among others) served to reinforce authoritarian governance and further polarise ethno-religious communities.

The political backdrop greatly influenced pandemic governance in Sri Lanka. When the pandemic struck in early 2020, Sri Lanka was gearing towards a significant parliamentary election, on the heels of a presidential election the previous year that

reinstated the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) controlled by the Rajapakses. The President, Gotabaya Rajapakse, won based on the loss of confidence in the previous President, Maithripala Sirisena, under whose office the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019 took place in the middle of a constitutional crisis that had emerged in the latter part of 2018. Amidst internal disputes over the leadership of the opposition that occurred afterwards, President Gotabaya Rajapakse dissolved Parliament in March 2020 and called for elections just before the country went into lockdown. The elections were postponed on account of the pandemic, resulting in significant decisions regarding the management of the pandemic being made without parliamentary oversight.

Kadirgamar (2020) observes that, despite “calls to reconvene Parliament and address the crisis with the opposition’s support, Parliament remain[ed] dissolved, and the ruling party ... sought to take sole credit for what Sri Lankans widely perceive as a successful response to [the first wave of] the pandemic.” The subsequently held parliamentary elections reinstated the Rajapakse family five years after they were defeated in the elections of 2015 and brought a new government into power. The management of the pandemic solely by the President, without formal oversight by the Parliament, for three months, resulted in several unconstitutional and ad hoc decisions reinforcing authoritarian rule. Fonseka and Ranasinghe (2021) state that, “Pandemic governance in Sri Lanka is characterised by opaque and militarised structures, selectively applied regulations, and the disregard for existing institutions, mechanisms, and expertise in responding to the public health crisis” (51). This militarised response to the pandemic mirrors the Rajapaksa Government’s means of concluding the war in 2009 and their governance thereafter which “undermines democratic space and reinforces a polarised political culture” (Kadirgamar, 2020). While the management of the pandemic involved the input of groups such as the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health and the Sri Lanka Medical Association, their activities were overseen by the Ministry of Defence, with key stakeholders being the State Intelligence Service, the Sri Lanka Army and the Police (Amaratunge et. al., 2020, 4). Two national committees were formed to manage the pandemic – The National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 (NOCPC) and a special task force to coordinate the provision of essential services and goods. These committees were headed by the military and the President’s brother, Basil Rajapakse, respectively. Members of civil society have pointed out their lack of representation in these committees and have questioned the legality and constitutionality of the President’s decision not to declare a state of emergency

and issue emergency regulations as per the Public Security Ordinance of 1947 and article 155 of the constitution or the Quarantine and Prevention of Disease Ordinance (Samararatne, 2020). Fonseka and Ranasinghe (2021) highlight existing legal and institutional frameworks, particularly the Disaster Management Act no. 13 of 2005 which provides for responses to a crisis of this nature by the National Council for Disaster Management which is mandated to formulate a disaster management plan to address a crisis. Instead, the President, in complete disregard of the capacities of existing civil administration, formed new task forces under the leadership of officials of the armed forces and issued a curfew in line with his militarised approach.

The President also used the opportunity created by the pandemic and the absence of a parliament to enhance his powers by passing the 20th amendment to the constitution. He also furthered his economic and political interests by passing the Colombo Port City Economic Commission Act and establishing the Presidential Task Force for Archeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province, which does not promote pluralism, in 2020 (Fonseka and Ranasinghe 2021). Curfews and lockdowns were also used for purposes other than containing the virus. Silva (2020) notes that the curfew was used as a pretext to make arrests of those among the Muslim community supposedly involved in the Easter Sunday attacks as well as to round up purported criminals. Furthermore, the pandemic served to justify surveillance of communities and collection of personal information by the military in collaboration with private mobile service companies under the pretext of contact tracing (Peiris, 2021). These practices interfered with pandemic prevention measures, threatening the public's compliance and could have led to withholding of health and travel information and voluntary testing. Conversely, they also furthered the normalisation of obedience to authority, state control over daily life and surveillance.

Consequentially, COVID-19 testing and quarantine services were largely established and run by the armed forces (Silva, 2020), who adopted a coercive and authoritarian approach to testing and quarantining, especially during the first year and a half of the pandemic. Quarantining was made mandatory and infected persons were transported to quarantine centres run by the armed forces. "In some instances, the entire communities were temporarily shifted to some quarantine centres situated far away during night time or early hours of the morning, giving no chance for the affected families to make prior arrangements for the visit." (Silva,

2020, 26). Often, families were separated and sent to different quarantine centres. Homes that were going through quarantine were also marked with a public notice pasted on the door and walls by health officials indicating that a quarantine was in process. The psychological impact of the social stigma of having being identified as COVID-19 positive and sent to a quarantine centre thereafter need to be assessed. At a more global level, Whalberg et. al (2021) draw attention to “the stigmatising power of infection” and the pandemic’s role in (re)kindling “scapegoating and conspiracy theories, rumour, blame and stigma” (11). In Sri Lanka, the Muslim community, which has been persecuted since the end of the war in 2009, was particularly vulnerable to scapegoating, blame and stigma during the pandemic. The context of the pandemic - the aftermath of “the Easter Sunday attacks by suspected Islamist terrorists in April 2019 and the total exclusion of Muslim politicians from the new government formed in December 2019, for the first time in the political history of post-independent Sri Lanka” (Silva, 2020, 24) - made the community vulnerable to scrutiny and scapegoating, particularly on social and mainstream media. Thus, despite the lack of reliable information, Muslims were overrepresented in the COVID-19 patients’ data resulting in surveillance and isolation of several Muslim villages in different parts of the country (Silva, 2020). Furthermore, the Government’s order to cremate those who had succumbed to the virus, despite WHO guidelines which permit either the burial or cremation of dead bodies of COVID-19 victims (Marsoof, 2022), had a direct impact on Muslim and Christian communities, whose religious beliefs require them to bury their dead. Apart from causing grave distress to these communities as a result of not being allowed to exercise their freedom to manifest their religion, the Supreme Court also dismissed without explanation petitions by the Muslim community against the cremation policy. However, in February 2021, almost a year later, the Government reversed its cremation policy to allow burial of victims of COVID-19 in the wake of a new United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution being tabled against Sri Lanka (Marsoof, 2022), but this entailed strict conditions.

Overall, irrespective of ethnoreligious affiliation, the psychological impact of not being able to engage in a period of grieving, organise a funeral and provide proper burial to a loved one, along with the added trauma of COVID-19 victims being buried in designated burial sites far away from family burial grounds, should not be ignored and need to be examined.

4.1 Economic and welfare policies

In addition to policies on containing the spread of the virus, the Presidential Task Force responsible for providing relief introduced several schemes to alleviate the economic burdens of the populace. Among these were the LKR5,000 allowance for low-income families and another LKR5,000 allowance for senior citizens, persons with disabilities and kidney patients, amounts that were grossly inadequate given the rising inflation and cost of living. Furthermore, the Government introduced a stimulus package of LKR50 million to provide loans to SMEs, which was also found to be inadequate to meet the needs of the country (Amaratunge et. al., 2020). The Government also partially waived off tax arrears of SMEs, relaxed payment terms and froze legal actions against defaulters. A six-month debt-repayment moratorium for industries affected by the pandemic (tourism, apparel, plantation, IT sector and SMEs) was also granted and later extended.

Amidst lockdowns and a standstill in businesses, an ad hoc tripartite taskforce on COVID-19 was also formed to address employment-related issues and the interests of workers during the pandemic. A unique intervention to protect employees emerged from discussions - a tripartite agreement between the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC), trade unions and the Ministry of Skills Development, Employment and Labour Relations in May 2020 to "call upon employers to pay wages for days worked based on the basic salary, while for any days not worked to either pay at the rate of 50 percent of the basic wage or Rs 14,500/ (whichever is higher)" (ILO 2020b). The agreement was applicable to all sectors and initially covered the period of March to June and was later extended to September 2020. "In addition to ensuring that full salaries would be paid for workers... this agreement represented a rare occasion where all stakeholders agreed on a fixed minimum wage at national level" (ILO, 2020b) and ensured that employees would not be retrenched and would continue to be employed. This agreement, however, applied to members of the task force and was subject to voluntary implementation by employers. It is also difficult to assess how far this agreement was useful for small business owners and their employees. Furthermore, while businesses may have been able to use existing reserves to retain and compensate their employees during the first six months of the pandemic, it is uncertain whether they would have been able to continue post-September 2020. Thus, while the tripartite agreement was a temporary solution to the unique conditions of the pandemic, it remains important

to devise more sustainable means of protecting employees and businesses during crises such as a pandemic.

The policy measures taken to address vulnerabilities during the pandemic were grossly inadequate in addressing the economic impact of the pandemic on communities and industries in the country. A survey on public opinion on the Government's response to COVID-19 conducted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives reveals that "52.7% of respondents [were] dissatisfied with the Government's efforts towards ensuring employment security. Out of this, 59.8% was from urban areas, while 50.5% was from rural areas. 67.8% of the respondents have experienced worsening financial situations, with a slightly higher percentage of rural respondents claiming so" (Lecamwasam, 2021, 94). According to the survey, government assistance benefited only 9.7 percent of the sample frequently and 28.5 percent occasionally. Coping strategies were largely at the individual level involving cutting down expenses, drawing from savings, purchasing items on credit, pawning jewellery, obtaining bank loans, borrowing money from lenders and receiving assistance from family and friends (ibid). The unique conditions of the pandemic also drew attention to the gap in Sri Lankan Labour Laws which "provide little or no room for flexible work arrangements such as flexible hours, part-time work and five-day work weeks" (Bakmiweva, 2021). This meant that 70 percent of the Sri Lankan workforce engaged in informal work were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic as the labour laws do not apply to own account workers and contributing family workers who make up a large proportion of informal workers.

In the absence of substantial support from the State and limitations in legal instruments, "community-based organisations such as libraries, Temple Trustee Boards, nongovernmental organisations, and charities provided timely support for distressed communities to meet basic needs such as food, medicine and agricultural inputs" (Subramaniam and Sivakumaran, 2020, 5). The sidelining of social workers in task forces and programmes geared towards assisting communities cope with the pandemic and the "extreme military intervention" (ibid, 7) also meant that their roles in assisting their communities were limited.

5. Conclusion

The pandemic struck Sri Lanka in 2020 at an economically and politically vulnerable period and, at the time of concluding this literature review in mid-2022, the economic and political crisis had taken precedence over the pandemic. Nevertheless, as the pandemic continues, it is still relevant to examine the impact of the pandemic and its governance on vulnerable populations in the country for future planning. The literature presented in this review reveals the challenges faced by several vulnerable populations in Sri Lanka as a result of the pandemic and its governance. However, not all vulnerable populations in Sri Lanka, such as the fishing community, persons with disabilities, artisans and artist communities, school-going children, migrant workers and the plantation sector, have been adequately represented in research on the impact of the pandemic. Furthermore, while the focus has largely been on economic vulnerability, the literature does not engage with psychosocial aspects or gendered vulnerabilities, such as gender-based violence, that were exacerbated or brought about by the pandemic. A gap in research also lies in understanding new vulnerabilities and new vulnerable groups (whether temporary or long-term) that emerged as a result of the pandemic, the coping mechanisms adopted at individual, industry or community levels and the long- or short-term consequences of these coping strategies on the vulnerability of these groups. Much of the research available on the pandemic in Sri Lanka takes a broad, sweeping approach and is based on quantitative and anecdotal evidence owing to the technological and structural challenges in conducting more focused, in-depth and large-scale qualitative studies during lockdowns. There is a need to generate more nuanced, sectorial, regional and gender disaggregated perspectives on the impact of the pandemic and its governance in Sri Lanka for future planning and decision-making. Considering these through the lens of vulnerability would require a mixed-methods approach that views poverty not only in relation to indicators and thresholds, but also through a sociological and gendered lens that investigates the role of power and inequalities in social capital that determine individuals' and communities' abilities to face and withstand exogenous shocks.

References

- Abadía, Mónica Cano and Tuija Pulkkinen. 2020. "Special Issue: 'Vulnerability' within Contemporary Feminist Politics and Theory." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23(2): 88–91. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.345>
- Abraham, Rosa A., and K. S. Kavi Kumar. "Multidimensional Poverty and Vulnerability." *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 47–48 (2012) 20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40277693>.
- Alwang, Jeffrey, Paul B Siegel, and Steen L Jorgensen. 2021. "Vulnerability: A View from Different Disciplines," Discussion paper no. 0115, The World Bank, 1-60.
- Amaratunga, Dilanthi, Nishara Fernando, Richard Haigh, and Naduni Jayasinghe. 2020. "The COVID-19 Outbreak in Sri Lanka: A Synoptic Analysis Focusing on Trends, Impacts, Risks and Science-Policy Interaction Processes." *Progress in Disaster Science* 8 (December): 100133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2020.100133>.
- Asian Development Bank. "Sri Lanka: Economy." Asian Development Bank: Sri Lanka. September 22, 2021. <https://www.adb.org/countries/sri-lanka/economy>.
- Attanayake, Chulanee. "Repatriating Migrants during COVID-19: Challenges for the Sri Lankan Government." National University of Singapore. June 6, 2020. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/repatriating-migrants-during-covid-19-challenges-for-the-sri-lankan-government/>
- Bakmiwewa, Yashoravi. 2021. Policy brief: "How to amend the Sri Lankan labour law to include flexible working arrangements?" Colombo: ILO.
- Butler, Judith. 2020. *The Force of Violence: An Ethno-Political Bind*. New York: Verso
- Carothers, Thomas and Andrew O'Donohue. 2020. "Polarization and the Pandemic." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed February 7, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/28/polarization-and-pandemic-pub-81638>.

Cunniff-Gilson, Erinn. 2016. "Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 (1): 71–98. <https://doi.org/10.1086/686753>.

Department of Census and Statistics. 2022. "Poverty Indicators - 2019." Colombo: Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Poverty/StatisticalInformation/PovertyIndicators-2019>

Department of Census and Statistics. 2020. "Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey: Annual Report 2020." Colombo: Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation." Colombo: Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/LabourForce/StatisticalInformation/AnnualReports/2020>

Ekanayake, Anoji, and Kopalapillai Amirthalingam. 2021. "The Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Sri Lankan Migrants in Qatar." *Comparative Migration Studies* 9 (1): 38. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00246-0>.

Fonseka, Bavani and Kushmila Ranasinghe. 2021. "Sri Lanka's accelerated democratic decay amidst the pandemic" In *Is the Cure Worse than the Disease? Reflections on Covid Governance in Sri Lanka* edited by Pradeep Peiris, pp. 29-60. CPA: Colombo.

Gamlin, Jennie, Jean Segata, Lina Berrio, Sahra Gibbon, and Francisco Ortega. 2021. "Centring a Critical Medical Anthropology of COVID-19 in Global Health Discourse." *BMJ Global Health* 6 (6): e006132. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-006132>.

Gunaratnam, Yasmin. "Reimagining the Frontline from Heaven's Edge." Goldsmiths Research Online, May 7, 2020. <https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/28432>

Hadad-Zervos, Faris. "Three Ways Sri Lanka Can Deal with COVID-19 Induced Poverty | Daily FT." October 17 2022. Accessed February 7, 2022. <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Three-ways-Sri-Lanka-can-deal-with-COVID-19-induced-poverty/4-707611>.

Higgins, Rylan, Emily Martin, and Maria D. Vesperi. 2020. "An Anthropology of the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Anthropology Now* 12 (1): 2–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2020.1760627>.

Holzmann, Robert, Lynne Sherburne-Benz and Emil Tesliuc. 2003. "Social Risk Management: The World Bank's Approach to Social Protection in a Globalizing World." Washington DC: The World Bank.

International Finance Corporation. 2020. "Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises." Accessed February 21, 2022.

https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/REGION_EXT_Content/IFC_External_Corporate_Site/South+Asia/Resources/acts+of+COVID19+on+Small+and+Medium+Sized+Enterprises+in+Sri+Lanka.

International Labour Organization (ILO). "Making Decent Work a reality for Domestic Workers" International Labour Organization. June 16 2021. https://www.ilo.org/colombo/info/pub/pr/WCMS_802493/lang--en/index.htm

---. 2020a. ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Fifth Edition. Geneva: ILO. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749399.pdf.

---. 2020b. "Tripartite Agreement Reached to Pro-rate Wages Based on Varied Levels of Deployment." International Labour Organization. May 8 2020, https://www.ilo.org/global/docs/WCMS_751871/lang--en/index.htm

---. 2010. *Global Employment Trends, January 2010*. Geneva: ILO https://www.ilo.org/empelm/pubs/WCMS_120471/lang--en/index.htm

Jayawardena, Prianka. 2020. "No School, No Meals: Sri Lanka's Battle against Child Malnutrition amidst COVID-19." *Talking Economics*. June 9, 2020. Accessed May 6, 2022. <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2020/06/09/no-school-no-meals-sri-lankas-battle-against-child-malnutrition-amidst-covid-19/>.

Kabeer, Naila, Shahra Razavi, and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers. 2021. "Feminist Economic Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Feminist Economics* 27 (1–2): 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2021.1876906>.

- Kabeer, Naila. 2014. Violence against Women as ‘Relational’ Vulnerability: Engendering the Sustainable Human Development Agenda. New York: UNDP Human Development Report Office.
- . 2002. “Safety Nets and Opportunity Ladders: Addressing Vulnerability and Enhancing Productivity in South Asia.” *Development Policy Review* 20 (5): 589–614. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7679.00191>.
- Kadirgamar, Ahilan. “Sri Lanka: Elections, Polarized Politics, and the Pandemic - Polarization and the Pandemic.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. April 28, 2020. Accessed February 7, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/28/sri-lanka-elections-polarized-politics-and-pandemic-pub-81649>.
- Kandasamy, Niro, Binendri Perera and Karen Soldatic. 2021. “Covid-19 from the margins: Gendered-Disability experiences from Sri Lanka.” *Disability and the Global South* 8(1): 1923-1934.
- KPMG Deal Advisory. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 on the Sri Lankan Economy. KPMG: Sri Lanka. Accessed February 10, 2022. <https://home.kpmg/lk/en/home/insights/2020/04/impact-on-covid-19-on-the-sri-lankan-economy.html>
- Krishnamohan, Thanabalasingam, and Kandasamy Sathiyasegar. 2021. “The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic Outbreak: Experiences of Sri Lanka.” *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications (IJSRP)* 11 (4): 460–68. <https://doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.11.04.2021.p11262>.
- Lancet, The. 2020. “Redefining Vulnerability in the Era of COVID-19.” *The Lancet* 395 (10230): 1089. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30757-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30757-1).
- Lecamwasam, O, Nipunika. 2021. “Lives or Livelihoods: The erosion of welfare in Sri Lanka’s Covid-19 response.” In *Is the Cure Worse than the Disease? Reflections on Covid Governance in Sri Lanka* edited by Pradeep Peiris, pp. 29-60. CPA: Colombo.
- Marsoof Althaf. 2022. “The Disposal of COVID-19 Dead Bodies: Impact of Sri Lanka’s Response on Fundamental Rights.” *Journal of Human Rights Practice*.13(3):669-689. doi: 10.1093/jhuman/huab030. PMID: 35432600; PMCID: PMC8992289.

McLaren, Helen Jaqueline, Karen Rosalind Wong, Kieu Nga Nguyen, and Komalee Nadeeka Damayanthi Mahamadachchi. 2020. "Covid-19 and Women's Triple Burden: Vignettes from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia." *Social Sciences* 9 (5): 87. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9050087>.

National Human Resources and Employment Policy. "Informal Employment: Context, Issues and Policies." Secretariat for Senior Ministers, Sri Lanka. n.d. Accessed February 21, 2022. http://www.nhrep.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=80&Itemid=59&lang=en.

Naude, Wim, Amelia U Santos-Paulino and Mark McGillivray. 2009. *Vulnerability in Developing Countries*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

Nawastheen, M.F. and S.A.S.K. Perera. 2021. "Students' Perceptions on Participating in Remote Learning Activities in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic." *Studies in Learning and Teaching*, Vol 2(3). 33-44.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven and Amartya Sen, eds. 2009. *The Quality of Life: A Study Prepared for the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) of the United Nations University*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative. "Global Multidimensional Poverty Index | OPHI." n.d. Accessed September 12, 2022. <https://ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/>.

Peiris, Pradeep, ed. 2021. *Is the Cure Worse than The Disease? Reflections on Covid Governance in Sri Lanka*. CPA: Colombo.

Perera, Minuri. 2021a. "Staying Afloat: The Impact of COVID-19 to Access to Credit for SMEs." CEPA Blog. Accessed February 21, 2022. <http://www.cepa.lk/blog/staying-afloat-the-impact-of-covid-19-to-access-to-credit-for-smes/>.

---. 2021b. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Access to Credit for SMEs." 2021. *Groundviews* (blog). November 1, 2021. <https://groundviews.org/2021/11/01/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-access-to-credit-for-smes/>.

Presidential Secretariat. 2022. “Vaccination Statistics” Official Website for Sri Lanka’s Response to Covid-19 (Coronavirus). Accessed May 5, 2022. <https://covid19.gov.lk/vaccination-statistics.html>.

Pricewaterhouse Coopers. 2020. COVID-19 Outbreak: Impact to Sri Lanka and Recommendations. PwC: Sri Lanka.

Samararatne, Dinesha. 2020. “Beyond Representation: Independent and International Institutions – Sri Lanka as a Case Study,” *Melbourne Forum on Constitution Building*. chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/3479596/MF20-Web4-SL-Samararatne-FINAL.pdf

Sen, Amartya. 2011. *The Idea of Justice*. Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge

Silva, Kalinga Tudor. 2020. *Identity, Infection and Fear: A Preliminary Analysis of Covid-19 Drivers and Responses in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: ICES.

Stiglitz, Joseph. 2020. “Broadening Our Thinking on Vulnerability | Human Development Reports.” n.d. Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://hdr.undp.org/en/content/broadening-our-thinking-vulnerability>.

The Guardian. 2020. “Sri Lanka Prisoners Killed in Riot over Coronavirus Conditions,” November 30, 2020, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/30/sri-lanka-prisoners-killed-in-riot-over-coronavirus-conditions>.

UN Women. “Supporting Female Heads of Households to Overcome COVID-19’s Economic Toll in Sri Lanka.” UN Women. February 26, 2021. Accessed February 7, 2022. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/2/feature-women-overcoming-covid-19-economic-toll-in-sri-lanka>.

United Nations Development Programme. “Vulnerable and Key Populations” United Nations Development Programme Capacity Development for Health. n.d. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://www.undp-capacitydevelopment-health.org/en/legal-and-policy/key-populations/>.

UNICEF. 2021. Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on households in Sri Lanka: A case study, in Undertaking rapid assessments in the COVID-19 context: Learning from UNICEF South Asia. Kathmandu: UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia: Kathmandu.

UNICEF. 2021. “Repeated School Closures Due to COVID-19 Leading to Learning Loss and Widening Inequities in South Asia, UNICEF Research Shows.” n.d. Accessed May 6, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/srilanka/press-releases/repeated-school-closures-due-covid-19-leading-learning-loss-and-widening-inequities>.

Wanigasinghe, Lakshika. 2021. “Talkingeconomics - Leave No One Behind: Building a Disability-Inclusive COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Sri Lanka.” n.d. Accessed May 12, 2022. <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2021/08/16/leave-no-one-behind-building-a-disability-inclusive-covid-19-recovery-plan-for-sri-lanka/>.

Weerakoon, Dushni. 2021. “Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the SGDs In Sri Lanka and the Potential for Regional Cooperation.” New Delhi: United Nations ESCAP.

Weeraratne, Bilesha. “Return and Reintegration without Assimilation: South Asian Migrant Workers in the Gulf during COVID-19,” ISAS Working Paper No. 327. June 18, 2020. <chromeextension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/327.pdf>

Whalberg, Ayo, Nancy J Burke and Lenore Manderson. 2021. “Introduction: stratified livability and pandemic effects” In *Viral Loads*. Edited by Lenore Manderson, Nancy J Burke and Ayo Whalberg. London: UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800080232>.

Wijesekara, N. W. a. N. Y., Nayomi Herath, K. a. L. C. Kodituwakku, H. D. B. Herath, Samitha Ginige, Thilanga Ruwanpathirana, Manjula Kariyawasam, et al. 2021. “Predictive Modelling for COVID-19 Outbreak Control: Lessons from the Navy Cluster in Sri Lanka.” *Military Medical Research* 8 (1): 31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40779-021-00325-4>.

World Bank, 2022. “Overview.” World Bank. Accessed May 5, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka/overview>.

World Bank. 2021a. “Sri Lanka Projected to Grow by 3.3 Percent Amidst Uncertainties.” Oct 7 2021. Text/HTML. World Bank. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://doi.org/10/06/sri-lanka-projected-to-grow-by-3-3-percent-amidst-uncertainties-shifting-gears-to-services-led-growth-can-help-build-bac>.

World Bank. 2021b. *Sri Lanka Poverty Update: Background Report to Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/36456>.

World Bank. 2020a. *Global Economic Prospects, June 2020*. The World Bank: Washington DC.

World Bank. 2020b. *Informality, Job Quality, and Welfare in Sri Lanka*. The World Bank: Washington, DC. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34399>

World Bank. 2020c. “COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens.” Brief. Washington, DC: The World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/33634>.

World Bank Group. 2019. *Somali Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment: Findings from Wave 2 of the Somali High Frequency Survey*. Washington DC: The World Bank.

World Bank Group. 2017. “Multisectoral Nutrition Assessment in Sri Lanka’s Estate Sector.” Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/26328>.

Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Review of the Literature (2020-2021)

Nadine Vanniasinkam

This report delves into the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sri Lanka, shedding light on the dynamics of vulnerability and resilience that emerged during this unprecedented crisis. Spanning the period from March 2020 to December 2021, the study reviews research published during this time frame, offering an understanding of how the pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities and forms of repression within Sri Lankan society. Through an exploration of individual, community, and state responses to vulnerability, this report captures the challenges faced and the human resilience that surfaced in the face of disruption. Drawing on comparative literature from the region and beyond, this analysis sets the stage for a quantitative and qualitative examination of vulnerability experiences among a diverse sample of respondents across the country.

This report serves as a resource to understand the barriers, opportunities, and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. It underscores the enduring relevance of dissecting the pandemic's impact on society, highlighting not only the vulnerabilities exposed but also the resilience and innovation that emerged amidst adversity.

Nadine Vanniasinkam is currently reading for a PhD in Anthropology at the Australian National University and was a senior researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies at the time this review was completed.



INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES



Printed by Horizon Printing (Pvt) Ltd.