



INTERNATIONAL  
CENTRE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES

Australian  
Aid 

# **Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence**

**Ranmini Vithanagama**



**Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of  
COVID-19: A Synthesis of Quantitative and  
Qualitative Evidence**

**Ranmini Vithanagama**

**International Centre for Ethnic Studies**

**2024**

Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

© 2024 International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES)

2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka

E-mail : admin@ices.lk

URL : www.ices.lk

First Published - 2024

ISBN: 978-624-5502-31-8

This publication is based on research supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Australian Government. 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



Printed by:

Horizon Printing (Pvt) Ltd.

1616/6, Hatharaman Handiya,

Malabe Road, Kottawa,

Pannipitiya.



# **Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence**

**by**

**Ranmini Vithanagama\***

---

\* Ranmini Vithanagama is a Senior Researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies.



## ***Acknowledgements***

This research study was made possible by the financial support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Australian Government. This report presents a synthesis of findings from the qualitative and quantitative research studies that were carried out separately. The quantitative and qualitative research reports, along with a comprehensive literature survey, several case studies and policy briefs, are published separately.

This synthesis report is an outcome of the collective effort of a passionate, dedicated and hardworking team of researchers at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) and benefitted from the support and guidance of many individuals. I thank Dr. Mario Gomez, the Executive Director at ICES, for his guidance, leadership and support throughout this project. At the early stages of the study, Dr. Ramani Gunatilaka helped us formulate the conceptual and operational framework of vulnerability. Her constructive feedback on preliminary versions of the quantitative questionnaire was instrumental in refining and improving its effectiveness. Nadine Vanniasinkam and Viyanga Gunesekara developed the interview guide for the in-depth interviews and led the qualitative data collection.

Both data collection instruments were evaluated by ethical clearance committees appointed for this research study. I gratefully acknowledge the constructive comments that further strengthened both data collection instruments. The quantitative data collection process was conducted efficiently and seamlessly by Prof. Sunethra Perera (Professor of Demography, University of Colombo) and Prof. Kopalapillai Amirthalingam (Professor of Economics, University of Colombo). We also thank the enumerators and the data entry team who were passionate about and committed to the data collection process, despite having to navigate the intersecting challenges of the economic crisis and the pandemic. In-depth interviews were conducted by Anuja Moses, Bandula Thrimawithana, Saranya Subramaniam, Pewardhani Menike, Thangaiya Jeyapriya and Sansa Ismail. We thank Saranya Subramaniam for helping with the translation of transcripts of interviews in local languages into English and the initial data decoding process. Despite the challenges on the ground, both qualitative and quantitative research teams ensured the data was delivered on time.

I also extend my gratitude to the reviewers of earlier drafts of our quantitative and qualitative research papers, namely Dr Nisha Arunatilake (Director of Research, Institute of Policy Studies), Dr Ramani Gunatilaka (Economist and Independent Consultant), Nadine Vanniasinkam and Viyanga Gunasekera. Their insightful comments and constructive feedback were instrumental in strengthening the quality of analysis in both reports.

We extend our thanks to all the staff at the ICES for their assistance in administrative, financial, IT and library services. The usual disclaimers apply, with respect to errors and omissions and the views expressed.

# Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	v
<i>Abstract</i> .....	ix
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>2. Methods</b> .....	5
<b>3. A synthesis of findings</b> .....	10
<b>4. Reimagining vulnerability in the light of COVID-19</b> .....	26
<b>5. Policy reflections</b> .....	28
<b>Appendix</b> .....	31
<b>References</b> .....	33





## ***Abstract***

The pandemic's devastating socioeconomic impacts have held a mirror to our society, illuminated pre-existing fault lines across economies, and compelled us to question our understanding of what it means to be vulnerable. Our study was designed in line with this perspective, and to explore sources of household economic vulnerability to the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis in Sri Lanka. The overall study collected and analysed quantitative data from a random sample of 4,000 households and 72-in depth interviews from respondents in nine and six districts respectively. This report synthesises the findings of the quantitative and qualitative studies that were undertaken and published separately.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings concur that not many households had contracted the COVID-19 virus. The incidence of virus-induced hospitalisations was even lower, and casualties were very few. But, the expressions of psychosocial stress due to enduring economic uncertainties and isolation from social distancing measures was pervasive. The economic crisis had aggravated these impacts, as reflected in respondents' perceptions of uncertainty about the future in both studies.

The impact of the pandemic on households was predominantly channelled through labour markets. Households reliant on informal jobs were therefore significantly more vulnerable to income insecurity. The impacts of the economic crisis were channelled through the commodities market via price hikes and shortages of food and other essential goods. Our quantitative analysis shows that vulnerability to food insecurity was higher among households with lower incomes and those without quasi-assets. However, in the context of our quantitative findings, we posit that vulnerability to food insecurity was a more significant issue during the economic crisis than the pandemic. The poorest households with unfavourable pre-existing conditions at the outset were affected by economic vulnerability and food insecurity both during the pandemic and the economic crisis. While we observed that asset-based coping strategies or reliance on social networks for financial assistance was more common during the pandemic, the uptake of detrimental and extreme measures had increased during the economic crisis. Such behaviours were more pronounced among households already grappling with pre-existing drivers of vulnerability.

In the light of our findings, we call for a more holistic approach to vulnerability within policy realms, and for vulnerability to be meaningfully integrated into the broader macroeconomic development agenda. Driving sustainable and inclusive economic growth that can foster entrepreneurship, drive investment and create decent jobs is critical in this regard. Expanding the formal sector and updating existing labour laws would also promote a pro-poor economic environment. We also call for stronger and more updated education policies and pedagogy, better financial inclusion and literacy, and further improvements to the newly designed Aswesuma social protection programme. We also highlight the importance of strengthening climate action, improving emergency response mechanisms and existing policies on disaster-preparedness using the rich lessons the pandemic and the economic crisis have afforded us.

# 1. Introduction

This research study was conceptualised during the pandemic, inspired by a renewed global interest in the issue of vulnerability among development practitioners, policy makers, industry leaders, environmental advocates, civil society organisations and the research community. The growing consensus on the need to reimagine vulnerability, design a new normal, and not return to ‘business as usual’ gave us a strong impetus to design a large mixed-methods study that delved into experiences of household vulnerability in Sri Lanka during the pandemic, and to explore reasons underpinning potential heterogeneities in such vulnerabilities. While the design of the study was underway, the economic crisis began unfolding, which compelled us to extend our focus on its impacts as well for the completeness of our study and the relevance of its findings. This synthesis paper consolidates the findings of the quantitative and qualitative components of the broader study, which have been published separately.

## Context

The COVID-19 pandemic, quite apart from its devastating effects on human life and health, has also been an economic crisis, the effects of which have not only set the clock back on many years of progress in global poverty alleviation (Alkire et al., 2021), but may likely reverberate for years to come, potentially jeopardising the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals set for 2030 (Gurara et al., 2020; Tateno and Zoundi, 2021). According to International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates, the pandemic would have cost the global economy over USD 12.5 trillion by 2024 (Reuters, 2022). The global economy contracted 3.2 percent as over 90 percent of countries saw their output levels decline, and about 97 million were rendered newly poor by the pandemic in 2020 (World Bank, 2022b). Across the richest and poorest countries, the burden of the pandemic’s impacts was disproportionately higher on already vulnerable individuals and groups (Ibid).

In Sri Lanka, the pandemic broke out in three waves in 2020 and 2021. The government managed the first wave effectively, both in terms of controlling the spread of the virus and supporting individuals that were affected by the safety protocols (Amaratunga et al., 2020; World Bank, 2021). However, during the second

and third waves, there was a rapid surge in the number of cases, hospitalisations and deaths, underpinned by a complex interplay of more aggressive virus mutations, inadequacies in available healthcare resources, and the government's reluctance to impose lockdowns (Amaratunga et al., 2020; Weerasekera & Hewage, 2021; Fowsar et al., 2022; Katella, 2023; Rannan-Eliya et al., n.d.). As of mid-January, 2024, a little less than nine months after the pandemic was officially declared over, the total number of confirmed cases and fatalities stood at 672,734 and 16,893 respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Although Sri Lanka, along with the rest of the world, rebounded in the first half of 2021, as vaccination drives helped gradually bring the pandemic under control, this growth was short-lived. Sri Lanka's largest economic crisis started unravelling towards mid-2021, triggered by proximate challenges from the pandemic and the 2019 Easter Attacks, but owing to deep-rooted structural economic weaknesses as well as many years of imprudent policy decisions, responses, and actions. From a modest growth of 3.5 percent in 2021 from a low base in 2020, Sri Lanka's economy declined 7.8 percent in 2022 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka [CBSL], 2023)).<sup>2</sup>

The combined effects of the pandemic and the economic crisis led to an increase in Sri Lanka's poverty headcount ratio<sup>3</sup> from 11.3 percent in 2019 to 25 percent in 2022 (World Bank, 2023). More recent estimates from LIRNEasia (2023) suggest that about 4 million have been made newly poor between 2019 and 2023. Overall inequalities as well as vulnerability to income shocks have increased between 2020 and 2022 (Walker et al., 2023). The exacerbation of income poverty is reflected in non-income statistics as well. For example, there has been a deterioration in child and maternal health indicators, both at the national and district level (Family Health Bureau, 2024), pointing to potential adverse impacts of household food insecurity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Data as of 15 January 2024. See updated statistics on World Meter available at <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/sri-lanka/>

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, George et al., 2022; Ramakumar, 2022; World Bank, 2022a, for a detailed discussion of Sri Lanka's recent economic crisis.

<sup>3</sup> The proportion of individuals living below the poverty line of USD 3.65 per capita based on 2017 purchasing power parity.



## Motivation

In the light of the pandemic experience, The Lancet (2020) poses the important question of what it is to be vulnerable, as who is at risk of becoming vulnerable depends on measures adopted to contain and contract external shocks. Furthermore, the unique attributes of the ‘new poor’<sup>4</sup>, compared to the ‘old poor’<sup>5</sup> (refer to Nguyen et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2020; Atanda and Cojocar, 2021) not only raise questions about the sustainability of current poverty alleviation strategies, but also highlight the naiveté of traditional definitions and classifications of poverty. Importantly, the widening and deepening of poverty and heightened vulnerability have illuminated that conventional definitions of non-poor may not accurately reflect the economic realities faced by people worldwide. Moreover, the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on individuals already grappling with various vulnerability traits underscores how pre-existing disparities in the distribution of economic gains have exacerbated their economic hardships.

Thus, despite its devastating impacts, the pandemic presented to the world a small window of opportunity to reimagine vulnerability, brainstorm a new normal and to build back better. We were inspired by the collective congruence towards this goal, as reflected in the large quantity of literature spawned in a short period of time, and decided to undertake a systematic investigation into the issue of pandemic-induced vulnerability in Sri Lanka. We anticipate our findings would contribute to the growing body of literature on the topic and strengthen evidence from the Global South and South Asia. In retrospect, we believe that our findings could be even more pertinent in the aftermath of Sri Lanka’s economic crisis which has opened up space to question and reassess conventional wisdom.

## Research questions

In line with our overarching objective of exploring household experiences of vulnerability during the pandemic, we devised several research questions that were investigated in the quantitative and qualitative studies. In order to provide

---

<sup>4</sup> Individuals were not poor at the outbreak of the pandemic, but fell below the poverty line during the pandemic.

<sup>5</sup> Individuals who were already living below the poverty line at the beginning of the pandemic.

a clearer framework for presenting the synthesised findings later, here are the condensed research questions:

1. What were the health, economic, social and psychological impacts of the pandemic on households? How did intersectional vulnerabilities and gendered impacts manifest?
2. How were the impacts of the economic crisis similar to or different from the impacts of the pandemic?
3. What were the coping mechanisms households adopted to mitigate the health, economic, social and psychological impacts of the pandemic? What coping strategies were employed during the economic crisis?
4. What was the role of social capital, institutional support and social protection programmes in mitigating the impacts of the pandemic and the economic crisis?
5. How has the pandemic and the economic crisis affected the subjective-well-being of respondents?
6. What are the predictors of household vulnerability to income and food insecurity?

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: in the next section, we provide an overview of the methodology followed in the quantitative and qualitative components of the overall study. We briefly discuss the concept of vulnerability, the bedrock of our study, and outline our data collection methodology, with a brief background on the process of developing data collection tools, our sampling methods and the analytical procedures followed. In Section 3, we bring together the findings of the quantitative and qualitative studies into a synthesised discussion, unpacking the household experiences of the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis, and the drivers of the nuances in how households have responded to the diverse impacts of the shocks. In Section 4, we reflect on the concept of vulnerability in the light of our findings, and outline some policy reflections in Section 5.

## **2. Methods**

### **Defining vulnerability**

Vulnerability is an expansive and dynamic concept that eludes a universally accepted definition (Zhang et al., 2020). Intrinsically, it refers to the risk of having to experience a negative outcome stemming from an exogenous event beyond one's control. Thus, vulnerability is made up of an external side comprising an external risk or stress that an individual or household faces, and an internal side of defencelessness or the inability to cope with the shock without damaging losses (Chambers, 1989). In social sciences, vulnerability is often discussed in relation to the risk of falling into poverty or facing adverse economic outcomes. Thus, by construct, vulnerability is a continuous and forward-looking state (Alwang et al., 2001) and therefore unobserved and tricky to decipher.

The lack of an unambiguous definition, coupled with its latent nature, makes vulnerability much less amenable to quantification compared to ex-post measures of welfare such as poverty or nutrition, which can be measured externally through income, expenditure or anthropometric measures. Thus, operationalising vulnerability in quantitative assessments is a challenging task, both in terms of identifying what factors can proxy the concept and establishing thresholds demarcating the point beyond which a person or household is vulnerable to poverty or adverse economic outcomes. Unlike in quantitative empirics, which require a precise definition of vulnerability for analysis, qualitative research methods allow for greater flexibility to explore the concept.

In the quantitative research study, we refrain from using traditional measures such as income or expenditure-related variables to proxy vulnerability. Instead, we use responses to perceptual questions about income and food consumption to proxy vulnerability to income and non-income deprivation (Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative [OPHI] and United National Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). Specifically, we proxied vulnerability to income insecurity using the following perceptual statements: (i) income is lower now compared to two years ago; (ii) income is not enough to get to the end of the month; (iii) cannot manage with current income; (iv) the respondent is worried about job losses; and

(v) the respondent is worried about income loss in the future. Vulnerability to food insecurity was captured using the following perceptual statements about the quality and frequency of food consumption: (i) households could not afford to eat protein at least once a day, (ii) households cut portion sizes regularly due to financial constraints in the past six months, (iii) households skipped meals regularly due to financial constraints in the past six months, and (iv) households perceived they regularly could not afford to eat a balanced meal in the past six months.

We take on a more expansive and exploratory approach to vulnerability in our qualitative research study and look at it from the respondents' perspective, rather than imposing our preconceived notions on it (Chambers, 1989). We probed into the economic and social experiences of the respondents prior to, in the midst of, and in the aftermath of the pandemic to explore drivers of vulnerability, through increased exposure and sensitivity to and/or reduced adaptive capacity. In doing so, we attempted not just to examine the immediate effects of the external shocks, but also to unpack how pre-existing conditions had contributed to their experiences navigating the shock impacts.

## **Tools**

As mentioned earlier, we used a mixed methods approach to our data collection and analysis. The quantitative data was collected using a household survey questionnaire which comprised several schedules on household composition and demographics, income, expenditure, assets and debt, perceptions and experiences of the pandemic and the economic crisis, as well as possible coping strategies used by and safety nets availed to households. A semi-structured interview guide was used for the qualitative data collection. It included questions about the impact of the pandemic and the economic crisis on households and respondents in relation to their livelihoods, hobbies and pastimes, travel and household activities and subjective well-being. We also probed into safety nets and protection measures that were available to respondents during the pandemic. Both data collection instruments underwent several rounds of revisions and were vetted for ethical implications by an ethical clearance committee appointed for this project.

## Sampling

The quantitative research component collected primary data using a household survey questionnaire from a random sample of 4,000 households from nine districts, one from each province. We selected Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Jaffna, Ampara, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Badulla and Ratnapura districts because they had the highest confirmed cases of COVID hospitalisations in each province as of June 2022 (Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health, 2022). We used sample weights from the 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (Department of Census and Statistics [DCS], 2022) as a guide to decide the proportion of households to be allocated to each district (See Appendix Table 1 for sampling proportions). The sampling frame was a list of all roads in the nine districts published by the Road Development Authority by road classification<sup>6</sup>. In each district, we allocated 50 percent of our sample to main roads and the remainder to secondary and minor roads. Once the stretches of roads were selected at random, we conducted our survey by travelling along these selected roads, covering distances of between 1 and 1.5 kilometres along each road. Our starting point was approximately 1 kilometre from where the road began. We selected households located on either side of these roads, as well as those situated on private roads branching-off from the four road categories. From the starting point, every other household meeting our criteria for the respondent<sup>7</sup> was interviewed.<sup>8</sup> A final sample of 3,914 households, excluding those with missing and inaccurate data, was submitted for analysis.

The qualitative component of the study conducted in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 72 respondents selected from six districts, namely Colombo, Kurunegala, Matara, Badulla, Trincomalee and Kilinochchi. These districts are, respectively, among the worst, moderately and the least affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as reflected in the number of reported confirmed cases as of June 2022. Respondents were selected based on their demographic, economic, household and spatial characteristics as well as their livelihoods and the economic sectors they

---

<sup>6</sup> Road categories A and B are main roads and C and D comprise secondary and minor roads.

<sup>7</sup> The respondent is the principal female of the household. She is either the head of the household or the wife or primary female relative of the head of the household. Age range: 18-70.

<sup>8</sup> Due to COVID and challenges of the economic crisis, we were unable to use approaches that would have strengthened the randomisation of the sample, such as applying a longer sample interval and covering stretches longer than 1.5 km, or following the right-hand rule for sample selection.



were engaged in. A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted per district (See Appendix Table 2 for sample overview).

## **Analytical approach**

We carried out a descriptive statistics analysis and regression analysis with our household survey data. The descriptive statistics analysis delineated patterns in respondents' experiences of and perceptions about the pandemic, their subjective well-being, and changes in household income and expenditure including essential expenses such as food, healthcare, education and housing. Next, we implemented several regression analytical procedures such as logistic, ordered logistic, and ordinary least squares (OLS) models to look for relational patterns between outcome variables denoting household vulnerability to income and food insecurity and the predictor variables, which were chosen based on a review of extant literature on the topic. Broadly, our predictor variables comprised the demographic and educational characteristics of the head of the household, labour market characteristics of the household, characteristics of the household members, household assets, debt, access to social capital and spatial characteristics.

In the qualitative study, we followed a thematic approach to data analysis. We examined the reasons for the ways in which households experienced the impacts of the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis and their responses to the impacts, both real and perceived. We applied an intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1989) across the data coding process to unpack differences in impacts and potential variations depending on respondents' own and their household characteristics.

## **Limitations**

A few limitations of the quantitative and qualitative research components that the reader must keep in mind are as follows: first, both studies cover only a few districts, although the pandemic and the economic crisis affected all parts of the country. Drivers of vulnerability among people in other districts could have been different to what we found in our household survey data and in-depth interviews. Moreover, the selection of districts for this research study as a whole was informed by the severity of the health impact of the pandemic, proxied by the number of hospitalisations and confirmed cases across the country. However, the subsequent

economic crisis might have had different impacts spatially. Secondly, pre-existing socioeconomic weaknesses were not part of our research-site selection criteria, although such conditions may have played a deterministic role in the impacts of the shocks on households. Instead, we only looked at COVID hospitalisations and confirmed cases in guiding our district selection. Thirdly, the scope of vulnerability examined in this research study is by and large limited to the possible impacts of the pandemic (and the economic crisis). Our analysis does not focus on other potential external stressors such as climate change, government policy changes (such as the ban on chemical fertiliser, although the qualitative data allowed us to examine this briefly), natural disasters or external geopolitical tensions, although they may have also played a role in influencing household socioeconomic vulnerability.

A few limitations specific to the quantitative research study are outlined next. First, our household survey data collection process was significantly challenged by both the pandemic as well as fuel shortages. The resultant mobility restrictions may have led to some biases in sample selection as we only covered a relatively smaller stretch of the total road length of the randomly selected roads. Secondly, our econometric analysis examines vulnerability to income and food insecurity using responses to perspectival questions. Typically, vulnerability is a forward-looking concept. However, we do not attempt to forecast the types of households that are vulnerable to income or food insecurity in the future. Instead, we only attempt to understand the characteristics of households that have been vulnerable to income and food insecurity, based on our definitions of what these variables constitute. Thirdly, we also do not make causal linkages between household characteristics and their vulnerability to income and food insecurity. Finally, in this particular research study, we have not looked at other essential expenses related to health and education which may also provide useful insights into household vulnerability.

In the qualitative study, although we have considered an array of employment types and economic sectors for respondent selection, there may have been other employment arrangements that were significantly impacted by the pandemic which we did not include. Next, although I conducted the data analysis, I was not involved in conducting the actual interviews. The loss of context, therefore, might have resulted in a limited understanding of the participants' use of nuance and idioms in local languages, as well as their emotions. Finally, as is typically the case with any qualitative analysis, the findings emerging from the study are context specific.

### **3. A synthesis of findings**

#### **The pandemic: health impact**

*Both quantitative and qualitative findings consistently show a low incidence of households contracting the virus.* Thankfully, COVID-induced hospitalisations were few, and only a very small handful of households had experienced COVID-related deaths. The qualitative research study offers some insights into the underlying reasons that are likely to have contributed to these encouraging statistics. Although there was a heightened fear of contracting the virus at the outset, most respondents managed to proactively respond to the situation as more information became available to them. Most respondents appear to have followed the safety guidelines issued by the government, especially in the first wave of the pandemic, and also to have actively sought to bolster their immunity using home-based remedies, better nutrition and stronger health-seeking behaviour. Most respondents had also obtained the recommended vaccines, although there were concerns about their effectiveness in creating immunity against the virus as well as potential side-effects.

*However, among those who had either contracted the virus themselves, or had household members who contracted it, the emotional impact was remarkably pronounced.* In our in-depth interviews we came across a number of respondents who were afraid of passing on the virus to family members, especially small children, the elderly and those with compromised health conditions. Many respondents also spoke of the fear of being sent away for quarantine, loneliness and isolation, and a sense of discrimination from within the community. Feelings of anxiety about being separated from children, and guilt over being unable to take care of household activities were particularly prevalent among women.

*Overall, the pandemic and its prevention protocols have led to detrimental effects on respondents' psychosocial well-being.* The findings from the qualitative study indicate that the sudden and drastic change in the way of life was a significant adjustment for most respondents. Findings from the qualitative study show many respondents struggled with the collapse of spatial boundaries due to lockdowns and curfews, albeit in different ways. We found that more men than women experienced stress related to job and income losses, and felt restless within the confines of home.

While many respondents experienced loneliness as they were unable to meet with relatives or attend family functions, this sentiment was stronger among a handful of respondents who were unable to attend important life events such as weddings and funerals of close relatives. Several women, especially those who were caring for small children or who were in quarantine during the pandemic, expressed feeling overwhelmed as they struggled to manage household responsibilities without the help of relatives. This sentiment was stronger especially among women whose close family lived away.

While the handful of respondents with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in our qualitative sample was used to living isolated lives in general, mobility restrictions further cut down their limited social interactions and access to pastimes. They were also concerned about the possibility of their identities being exposed to their communities while attempting to secure food supplies or seek job opportunities, as this would jeopardise their personal safety. Elderly respondents living alone and the only person with a disability in the qualitative sample expressed feelings of loneliness and a sense of abandonment, as they felt isolated from the rest of the community.

*Coping measures to deal with the pandemic-induced psychosocial stress were generally positive, although we observed some detrimental behaviours among men and children.* Many respondents, particularly women, resorted to religious and spiritual practices to find solace and to navigate pervasive uncertainty. Several women connected with relatives and friends on the phone, and took up hobbies such as reading, home gardening or watching TV, while a handful of them learned new skills. Many respondents also enjoyed spending time with family at home during lockdowns. However, we observed that, in many cases, men's engagement with children was conspicuously limited to recreational activities such as playing, drawing or watching TV.

*Women often bore the brunt of maladaptive practices adopted by men and children, especially if they lived in extended families with in-laws.* A few men coped with their distress through maladaptive practices such as watching television for long periods, excessive alcohol consumption, going out in violation of social distancing guidelines and endangering the health of household members, or aggression towards female household members, particularly wives, in the form of

verbal abuse, and in one case, physical abuse. We also noted that vulnerability to verbal and emotional abuse was higher among women who lived in extended families with in-laws. Women's increased vulnerability to domestic violence during the pandemic is confirmed in the quantitative analysis. For example, as many as 40 percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the pandemic had increased gender-based violence. Children coped with the isolation predominantly through excessive engagement with phones, video games, computers or TV, making it particularly daunting for parents, especially mothers, to discipline them to sit through online classes. Several women also expressed fears about the risk of small children consuming dangerous or age-inappropriate content online.

## **The pandemic: economic impact**

Both quantitative and qualitative studies show that the economic impact of the pandemic was mainly transmitted via the labour market. The economic impact is predominantly revealed through income reductions. Close to half of the households in our quantitative sample had experienced a decline in income, while about a third reported stagnant incomes over 2020-2022. A similar pattern holds for the qualitative sample too, with most households having experienced income losses, some being unaffected by a change in income, and a small handful managing to increase their incomes during the pandemic. Both research studies indicate that agricultural and non-agricultural incomes had declined, compared to wages, which, for the most part, had remained unchanged.

The incidence of job losses is comparatively much less. About 6 percent of the households in our quantitative sample had experienced job losses during 2020-2022. However, as we found in our qualitative analysis, the loss of permanent jobs was quite rare. Most respondents who had lost their jobs were employed in temporary or casual work as informal sector workers. Several respondents engaged in self-employment or own account work were temporarily out of work, until they reconfigured their livelihoods in tandem with COVID health guidelines.

*Households relying on incomes from casual or temporary jobs or jobs in the informal sector were at a higher risk of economic vulnerability compared to those who depended on formal sector permanent jobs, during the pandemic.* Quantitative and qualitative findings show that the sector and tenure of employment are key

predictors of job and income security and, by extension, household economic vulnerability. In the quantitative analysis, we found that increased reliance on temporary and casual jobs, compared to permanent employment, made it more likely that a household was vulnerable to income insecurity. We also observed that the risk of income vulnerability was significantly reduced for government and private sector employees, compared to those who were self-employed.

These findings are corroborated in the qualitative analysis. For example, none of the respondents employed in government jobs or other formal sector jobs that could be performed remotely faced a risk of losing jobs or incomes. In contrast, most of the informal sector workers in our sample, such as daily-paid manual labourers, domestic aids, casual and temporary employees, had lost work due to the pandemic. Although the loss of work was temporary, as they managed to navigate travel restrictions to seek work after the first few months of the pandemic, the declines in income among such individuals were more permanent.

*Unique business opportunities the pandemic presented benefitted a handful of households.* In our qualitative study, we came across a few examples where respondents quickly adapted to the unique business conditions during the pandemic and managed to earn more income. We observed that close to a quarter of the households experienced an increase in non-agricultural income between 2020 and 2022. As the economy was at a standstill during the economic crisis with very limited business prospects, we reasonably argue that the income gains reported by most of the households in 2020-2022 may be attributed to business opportunities that emerged during the pandemic.

*Vulnerability to economic impacts was higher among households with children, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and the elderly.* Both quantitative and qualitative studies agree that household demographics play a role in shaping the intensity of the economic impact of the pandemic. The quantitative analysis finds evidence in favour of a positive correlation between vulnerability to income insecurity and an increase in the number of children in the household as well as the presence of PWDs requiring extra medical attention. The qualitative study provides a few detailed examples to elucidate this relationship. In our interviews we observed that, in households with children, especially babies and toddlers, PWDs or elderly parents, working adults were discouraged from going out to work or seek

employment. This precaution was taken to avoid the risk of bringing home the virus and compromising the health of vulnerable family members. Furthermore, we observed that the presence of children made it harder for parents to cut corners, especially on basic necessities such as food, clothing and education, making it more difficult for households with children to get through the month on a reduced income. We also encountered cases where husbands who were the only income earners of the household had to forego work to take care of children because their wives required longer periods of recovery from the virus. The only PWD in our qualitative sample had no income and was not physically able to engage in a livelihood during the pandemic, placing her in a precarious economic situation. She had to rely entirely on the government, children and neighbours for support.

The quantitative study did not find that households headed by women were more vulnerable to income insecurity than those headed by men. Even in the qualitative interviews, we did not come across compelling evidence that the economic impact of the pandemic was greater for households headed by women. Although women heading their households discussed apprehensions about economic vulnerability during the pandemic, other concerns about safety, security and daunting prospects of adapting to and managing a hitherto unknown way of living without male support also featured prominently in their accounts.

*Passive income has obviated some of the economic impact of job losses and/or losses of earned income on households.* Both quantitative and qualitative findings agree that unearned income has helped cushion some of the negative economic impacts of the pandemic. The quantitative analysis showed that households receiving a pension income, rental income and remittances from abroad were less prone to income insecurity compared to households without access to such income. Furthermore, our qualitative analysis yielded strong evidence about the efficacy of social security payments such as Samurdhi, Elders' Pay and chronic kidney disease (CKD) pay in enabling recipients to manage household expenses during the pandemic.

*This unearned income served as a vital lifeline for those whose incomes had declined or dried up during the pandemic, while it was an effective additional income for households with a stable income.* The qualitative interviews shed light on why these income sources were critical buffers against the shocks triggered by



the pandemic. As the pandemic sent economic shockwaves through households via its labour market impacts, the necessity of having access to incomes insulated from these adverse effects became paramount. As discussed earlier, wages from formal, permanent jobs, and incomes from livelihoods that could easily adapt to remote work were resistant to the pandemic's disruptions. Unearned income was the only other income category that had largely remained resilient to the pandemic's disruptions. While unearned income alone may not have been sufficient to finance all household needs, it nonetheless remained reliable and predictable. Pensions and remittances from abroad were a useful additional income source for large households living in extended families. For a handful of the poorest and most vulnerable households in our sample, social security payments received from the government constituted the only source of income for a few months during the pandemic.

## **The pandemic: impact on children's education**

*The shift to online education has led to a decline in the quality of delivery and exacerbated inequalities in access to education for poorer households.* Both quantitative and qualitative studies concur that the shift to online education has resulted in a decline in the quality of education delivery. The qualitative analysis demonstrated that the role of disciplining children to sit through online classes shifted from teachers to parents, predominantly mothers, thereby adding to women's unpaid care burden during the pandemic. Several women also spoke of children losing interest in education and wanting to give up studies to pursue employment opportunities.

In addition, the non-availability or inadequacy of laptops, tablets or smartphones, internet and data connectivity issues, interruptions to electricity supply challenged participation in online classes, especially for children in poorer households. We noted in the qualitative analysis that in a few extreme situations, children could not participate in online classes at all or for prolonged periods of time, as parents could not afford to buy electronic devices that would enable children to participate in online classes. The lack of adequate physical space and privacy was an additional challenge children from the estate sector line houses had to grapple with. Increased internet and electricity bills added to difficulties in financing household expenditure among the poorest households.

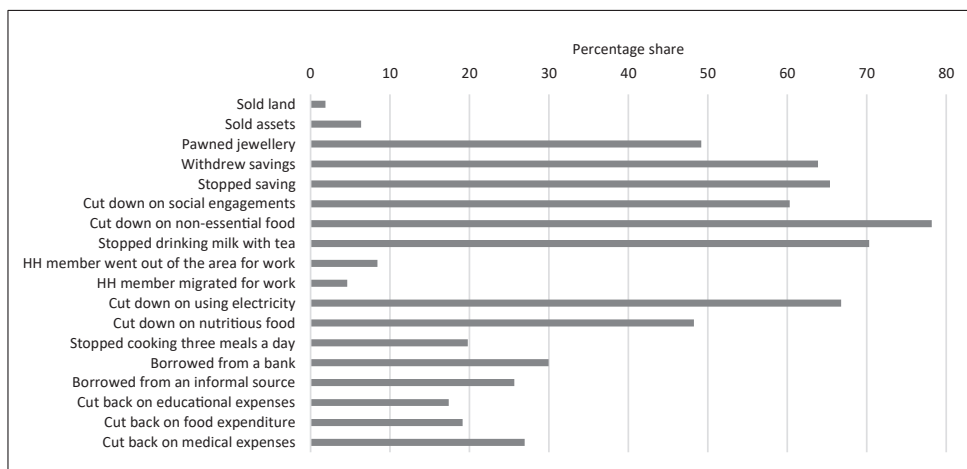


## **The pandemic: coping with economic impacts**

*Unearned income, access to assets and social capital played a deterministic role in the type of coping strategies households adopted to finance the income gap during the pandemic.* Both qualitative and quantitative findings reveal that many households had resorted to coping mechanisms during the pandemic to compensate for the income shortfalls they experienced. We found in the qualitative study that a number of households took up asset-based coping strategies, mainly withdrawing savings and pawning jewellery, or received help from friends and relatives abroad, and in a few cases, elsewhere in Sri Lanka. Several respondents who were employed in domestic and casual labour benefitted from financial assistance extended by their employers during the pandemic. We also came across a handful of examples where employers had provided financial support to their former employees.

In the qualitative analysis, we observed that for several respondents, withdrawing savings was a more acceptable option than pawning jewellery, a pattern that is vaguely mirrored in the quantitative data, in that a relatively higher proportion of households had withdrawn savings than pawned jewellery (Figure 1). Harmful coping strategies such as cutting down on essential expenses, borrowing from neighbours, relatives or worse, money lenders, and reducing food consumption were less common during the pandemic, although a handful of the poorest households were driven to such extreme measures during the pandemic. The poorest households had to eat food that was freely available or skip meals because they had no income.

*Figure 1: Proportion of households adopting coping strategies*



Source: KLIE Household Survey (2022)

## **Emergency responses, social protection measures and safety nets**

*Although the government's proactive measures to curtail the spread of the virus was well received, the abruptness of the responses left households with little lead time and no guidance to adjust to a new way of life.* In our qualitative analysis, we clearly observed that most of the respondents were appreciative of how the government handled the pandemic situation during the first wave and were empathetic of the learning curve that the government itself was on. However, the abruptness with which lockdowns, mobility restrictions and curfews were implemented made it difficult for households, especially those with small children, to secure necessary supplies, businesses to properly store their inventory, and shops to sell their perishable goods. Mixed and contradictory messages relayed by health authorities and the military also led to confusion and, in some instances, mistrust.

*The vaccination drive was well received, but respondents were critical of the government's failure to provide relevant information about the vaccine.* Our qualitative data shows that many respondents found the vaccination drive to be well organised. Many of them received timely information about when and where

the vaccination clinics would take place in their villages. Many respondents had obtained the recommended doses. However, several respondents pointed out that health officials were unwilling to provide pertinent information about the vaccine, such as potential side-effects and after-effects or the vaccine's contents, which led to mistrust and the spread of misinformation about its potential adverse effects.

*Some emergency responses to the pandemic were inconsistent with human rights principles.* We found in the qualitative study that the government's decision to make vaccinations compulsory in order for people to be allowed access to most places left many respondents disempowered and pushed to obtain the vaccines. Many respondents were disconcerted especially because the government failed to provide adequate information about the vaccines that would allow for them to make informed decisions. Several respondents also pointed out the insensitivity to religious values and beliefs in the government's sweeping decision to cremate the remains of COVID-induced casualties.

*The government's financial and in-kind assistance appears to have been reasonably targeted and recipients of this support had benefited significantly from it.* Both quantitative and qualitative findings concur that, by and large, the government's cash transfers and in-kind assistance had reached deserving and the most vulnerable households. In fact, the government emerged as the most benevolent safety net for respondents during the pandemic in both our samples, surpassing other organisations and family/relatives by a significant margin. In the qualitative analysis, we observed that these cash transfers constituted the only source of income for a handful of households for 2-3 months during the pandemic. The distribution of dry rations was beneficial to households that received them, and especially practical for households in quarantine. However, in the qualitative analysis, we came across several criticisms about the standardised nature of cash grants and in-kind support, including not taking into account, at the very least, household sizes, poor targeting and favouritism.

## **The economic crisis: impacts**

*Unlike the pandemic, the impacts of the economic crisis were transmitted through the commodities market, resulting in far more pervasive adverse effects.* Findings from both analyses agree that the adverse impacts of the economic crisis were

experienced almost universally. There was consensus among respondents from both qualitative and quantitative samples that the increase in the cost of living and shortages of essential commodities such as food, medicine, gas and fuel during the economic crisis caused far more household economic distress than the pandemic. In fact, in our household survey, most respondents identified 2022 as the most difficult year for their households. In contrast, only a little over a tenth considered 2020 to be the most challenging year. Both studies confirm that the vast majority of the households struggled to get to the end of the month with their incomes, irrespective of their income levels.

*The reduced purchasing power affected all households, but households with pre-existing vulnerability traits appear to have been disproportionately affected.* Both qualitative and quantitative studies confirm that households could no longer afford to purchase the kind of food they had bought prior to or even during the pandemic. Both studies also agree that in most households, expenditure on essential and non-essential food, medicine and healthcare, clothing, transportation and education had risen. Furthermore, in the qualitative study, several respondents noted that the shortages of medicine had aggravated personal vulnerabilities, while gas and fuel shortages had added to the drudgery of household chores. A few respondents also discussed the strain tariff hikes in water and electricity bills had put on the household economic situation, especially among those with small children and the elderly. Importantly, both quantitative and qualitative studies consistently demonstrate that households grappling with pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as income and asset poverty, disability, poor labour market outcomes, low educational attainments, and weak social capital faced significantly greater challenges than households not burdened by such vulnerabilities.

*Vulnerability to food insecurity was noticeably higher among households with unfavourable pre-existing socioeconomic traits.* Findings from the quantitative and qualitative studies are in congruence regarding the greater precarity vulnerable households were placed in concerning food security. In our quantitative analysis, we found that household income was the single most important predictor of a household's vulnerability to food insecurity, followed closely by quasi-asset ownership, mainly jewellery. The tenure and sector of job matter too, in that households relying on income from permanent jobs in the government or the private sector were less likely to become vulnerable to food insecurity, compared to

households that earn income from temporary or casual jobs in the informal sector. Numerous examples from our qualitative study confirm these quantitative findings. We encountered several households that lived on less food, freely available food, or did not eat at all; in some instances, parents cut down on or gave up meals in order to be able to afford to feed children. It is important to note that nearly all of these households were already poor before the economic crisis and drew income from informal and precarious forms of work such as casual labourers, daily maids, small-scale fishers, petty traders or subsistence self-employment.

*Shortages of inputs, increased cost of inputs and reduced purchasing power further jeopardised informal sector livelihoods.* Although the erosion of the real value of money had a widespread impact on the purchasing power of incomes, in the qualitative study, we observed that households with wage incomes were comparatively better off because they relied on predictable incomes received at regular intervals. In contrast, households that relied on agricultural or non-agricultural incomes faced the double jeopardy of an increased cost of living and reduced or volatile incomes. For example, the sharp surge in agrochemicals, fertiliser and seed costs had significantly increased the initial investment cost for some farmers, making farming an unfeasible, or at least a risky, livelihood. The non-availability and sharp increase in the price of fuel had brought the livelihoods of trishaw drivers to a standstill. In addition, sharp price increases, along with a decline in purchasing power, resulted in reduced incomes for businesses selling non-essential goods and services. For example, shop owners who sell beauty products and cosmetics, salon owners and beauticians, and bookshops selling school supplies saw their sales drop significantly. Casual labourers and daily maids found it hard to secure work as people could not afford to pay for their services. Even food-based businesses were adversely affected as people had cut down on their essential expenses.

## **The economic crisis: coping mechanisms**

*The uptake of negative coping strategies was rampant during the economic crisis.* Findings from both quantitative and qualitative studies confirm that, not only had more households taken up some measures to cope with the increased cost of living, such measures were more extreme and detrimental among vulnerable households. In the quantitative study, we noted that most households had cut

down on non-essential food like chocolates and biscuits, and reduced the intake of milk with sugar (Figure 1). Many households in both samples had also cut down on transportation and recreational expenditure, and reduced electricity consumption. In our qualitative analysis, we observed that such austere behaviours were prevalent during the economic crisis, unlike during the pandemic, when asset-based coping strategies were more prominent, as was reliance on social capital for financial assistance.

By the time the pandemic hit, households had most likely depleted savings, already pawned jewellery and exhausted help from social networks, which would reasonably explain why many households had to take up more extreme measures to manage household expenses. Cutting down on food consumption, expenditure on food, education and medical requirements, and resorting to informal borrowings are all distress-induced coping mechanisms with long-term implications on a household's human capital endowment and economic situation. In the qualitative analysis, we found elaborate examples of respondents resorting to extreme and detrimental adaptation measures. In addition to reducing the number of meals a day, several households had resorted to radically cutting down on food intake, stopping the use electrical devices, and even selling assets such as refrigerators and computers to meet household expenses. A few households had fallen into debt traps, constantly borrowing from friends, relatives and informal lenders to finance expenses and repaying them once they had received an income. Several households have also had to resort to cutting down on children's educational expenses. An example of an extreme adaptation measure related to education reported from the estate sector was children dropping out of school to search for work in Colombo. In the quantitative analysis, we noted that only a small proportion of households had taken up outmigration for work as a coping strategy, underscoring the limited labour market opportunities that were available to households.

### **Divergent vulnerabilities: layered impacts, gendered experiences and other intersecting challenges**

*The idiosyncratic shocks spawned by the pandemic created especially unfavourable outcomes for those who were affected by them. It is clear that the experiences of the pandemic's impacts – in relation to virus contractions, psychosocial impacts and economic ramifications – were heterogeneous across*

households, as evidenced in our quantitative and qualitative findings. Not all virus contractions had escalated into hospitalisations and an even fewer number has resulted in deaths. By and large, our quantitative findings do not indicate that the virus contractions or hospitalisations were a strong determinant of household vulnerability to income or food insecurity. Nonetheless, we find that idiosyncratic economic shocks from the pandemic, such as job losses, have had a significant detrimental effect on household income security.

A more nuanced picture emerges from the qualitative study. We observed multiple challenges respondents faced when they or household members had contracted the virus. The loss of income for households in quarantine was especially detrimental to those that were already economically vulnerable. We also observed that respondents who contracted the virus were affected by feelings of uncertainty, fear, isolation and discrimination. One poignant example from our qualitative sample clearly depicts the extent of vulnerability unleashed by the pandemic. The COVID-induced death of a husband, who was the primary bread winner of the household, led to significant income and non-income deprivations in the household. The widow had to take up multiple extreme measures of cutting down on food, transportation expenses, educational expenses for the child, and the use of electricity, while grappling with the death of the husband. Her grief was compounded by the fact that his remains were cremated, contravening the Muslim tradition. This is a powerful example of how the confluence of health and economic impacts of the pandemic might lead to long-term household economic destitution.

*Pre-existing conditions played a deterministic role in how the economic shocks unravelled in households and how they responded to the impacts.* Both quantitative and qualitative studies have clearly shown that household income, human capital endowment, labour market achievements and asset ownership were important determinants of how a household was affected by the pandemic and the measures taken to mitigate and adapt. Although we did not delve too deeply into it, the recovery is also most likely shaped by a combination of these factors. In both studies, we observed that higher educational outcomes often lead to formal sector, permanent employment with protection from labour laws, or other skilled work that can be adapted to online platforms and scaled to meet pandemic-induced conditions. Such jobs are also likely to create enough income to promote asset creation and strengthen social networks, which in turn can act as buffers against



socioeconomic impacts of external shocks. Individuals with high labour market achievements were also likely to live in Colombo or suburban areas, or in urban areas in other districts, with better infrastructure, services, connectivity and access to markets which can further catalyse their overall well-being.

Both quantitative and qualitative studies show that, in contrast, households with low and sporadic income were also usually characterised by poor labour market outcomes, low educational outcomes, asset poverty, weak social capital and other non-income deprivations. Systemic challenges such as persistent discrimination against certain groups of individuals (such as persons with disabilities, persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and ethnoreligious minorities) can exacerbate unfavourable economic conditions in households. Maladaptive behaviours, such as gender-based violence and alcoholism, also emerged as drivers of unfavourable pre-existing conditions in a handful of households within the qualitative sample.

Both quantitative and qualitative studies confirm that households with unfavourable pre-existing conditions were more vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic and economic crisis. The qualitative analysis further elaborates that households that were left worse-off during the pandemic, were thrust further into vulnerability during the economic crisis.

*Intersecting drivers of vulnerability also contributed to the heterogeneity of the impacts of the pandemic and economic shocks.* Although both qualitative and quantitative studies concur that the financial affluence of a household was a significant predictor of its experiences of economic vulnerability in the face of external shocks, we observe that the more intangible and individualistic experiences of vulnerability were shaped by complex social and cultural factors. For example, we found in the quantitative analysis that the pandemic was by and large a gendered experience. Most women agreed that, overall, the pandemic was worse for women than for men, and that it increased their unpaid care burden. Many women also thought that the pandemic catalysed more gender-based violence. Moreover, although a sizeable proportion of women agreed that women had opportunities to work from home, much fewer women believed the pandemic had created economic opportunities for women. These observations are by and large substantiated in the qualitative study.



The qualitative study also demonstrated that the pandemic experience was particularly harsh on individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, whose safety was constantly at risk of being compromised as they were forced to go out into the community in search of work. Loss of jobs and income, difficulties in finding new work, a lack of acceptance within their own families and circles of relatives, and living away from home further complicated their economic vulnerabilities. The experiences of the only PWD in our sample paints an evocative picture of the multiple vulnerabilities she had been grappling with. These encompassed a lack of income, physical impairments that hindered her ability to engage in any income-earning activity, often inadequate or non-existent nutrition, and constant reliance on children and neighbours for food and financial support and the *Grama Nildhari* for social security income.

*In summary, the pandemic may have caused temporary vulnerabilities through its impact on the labour market, but the ensuing economic crisis extended these vulnerabilities, and unfavourable pre-existing conditions may have transformed them into more enduring challenges.* The polycrises Sri Lanka experienced, with the 2019 Easter Attacks, the pandemic in 2020-2021, and the subsequent economic crisis created an exceptionally challenging economic landscape for households to navigate. However, the qualitative findings clearly showcase that many households that were living a life close to their perception of a good life were significantly diverted from it at the time of the data collection. The nuances in the difficulties households experienced during the pandemic had morphed into exacerbating challenges during the economic crisis.

We have already established that, while almost all households struggled during the economic crisis, the severity of challenges was still divergent. Both qualitative and quantitative findings agree that many respondents were worried about their future and their children's future. However, reflecting on findings from both studies, especially the qualitative analysis which produced more nuanced insights, we posit that the poorest households at the outset of the pandemic were left significantly worse off during the economic crisis. Next, households that could manage with their incomes before the pandemic also found themselves struggling to make ends meet during the economic crisis. We surmise that these are the types of households that had likely sold assets, withdrawn savings deposits and fixed deposits, and even

pawned jewellery to make ends meet. Financially well-off households also likely faced a deterioration in their economic conditions, but their asset endowment may help them recover more quickly than other households. Thus, we argue that the ability of a household to bounce back on its own from transient vulnerabilities that the pandemic had catalysed (and which the economic crisis exacerbated) is dependent on the pre-existing socioeconomic characteristics of a household. Without such resilience, households might linger longer in poor and vulnerable conditions, or worse, risk being pushed further into chronic poverty.

## 4. Reimagining vulnerability in the light of COVID-19

The seismic shockwaves the pandemic sent through global economies have shone a bright light on the weaknesses in economic growth models, governance, and structural and institutional frameworks the world over. Its sobering socioeconomic impacts have urged us to introspect on, challenge and re-examine conventional ideologies and assumptions underpinning existing socioeconomic systems. Our research study was aimed at using this brief window of opportunity to explore predictors of household vulnerability to the pandemic (and the subsequent economic crisis) and to generate findings that can contribute to the discourse on reimagining vulnerability.

Our findings highlight the inherently ambivalent, relative and context-specific nature of vulnerability. While the transmission of impacts of both the pandemic and the economic crisis was largely influenced by policy responses to address them<sup>9</sup>, how these covariate shocks manifested idiosyncratic shocks at the household level has been predominantly determined by a household's pre-existing attributes, very broadly, its economic status, labour market strategies, demographics and composition, and capital endowment. At the individual level, gender, age, health and impairment conditions, sexual orientation and gender identity, and employment or livelihood strategy have shaped experiences of socioeconomic vulnerability. Households with unfavourable attributes have been more vulnerable to income and food insecurity due to the shocks of the pandemic and the economic crisis. Similarly, at the individual level, persons with more vulnerable attributes bore a greater burden of the impacts of the shocks. Moreover, these pre-existing attributes have influenced the type of coping strategies available to individuals and households. In the absence of financial assets and social networks that could support them financially, households were compelled to resort to negative and detrimental coping strategies, some with long-term adverse implications.

Thus, our findings underscore the importance of taking on a more holistic approach to the understanding of vulnerability. It is not experienced in a vacuum, nor is it an isolated and abrupt outcome emerging from a shock, although it is spotlighted

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, decisions to impose lockdowns and mobility restrictions in the context of the pandemic, and to limit imports, tighten monetary policy, free float the rupee, increase electricity tariffs, prices of gas and petrol to contain the economic crisis.

during and in the immediate aftermath of a shock. While proximate issues such as, in this case, mobility restrictions or sharp increases in the prices of essential goods and services, may generate transient unfavourable economic outcomes for households, how these short-term challenges morph into long-term adversities is a function of a household's pre-existing socioeconomic characteristics. Thus, vulnerability is a continual and ongoing dynamic process shaped by a complex array of structural and systemic factors that create differential opportunities for individuals and households to develop human capital, succeed in the labour market, and build assets and social capital.

Our findings demonstrate that vulnerability lingers closely behind poverty. While we can measure whether individuals are poor or not, it is much harder to quantify if they are vulnerable or not. Not all non-poor are equally non-poor. Therefore, traditional classifications and thresholds of poverty need to be reassessed in the light of potential income and multidimensional vulnerabilities that individuals and households grapple with.

Moreover, our findings confirm the plethora of evidence globally that failing to address drivers of economic and other forms of vulnerability makes it much more difficult to keep individuals and households from sliding (back) into (deeper) poverty when a shock disrupts the normal social order. Therefore, the imperative to address vulnerability extends beyond isolated policies focused on social protection and safety nets for the poorest households. It must be seamlessly integrated into national poverty reduction strategies, transcending conventional interventions that are narrowly aimed at poverty alleviation.

However, embracing vulnerability as a fundamental component of comprehensive poverty reduction strategies underscores the importance of a sustainable, equitable and inclusive macroeconomic development agenda. Such an integrated framework can foster a robust and effective platform for addressing both structural and systemic fault lines that discriminate against various groups and individuals and proximate challenges through generous safety nets and stronger shock response mechanisms. Furthermore, a better stewardship of nature, greater focus on human well-being and a rights-based approach to development are critical values for creating enduring solutions that enhance human resilience to shocks (Hedding et al., 2020; Erdelen & Richardson, 2021).

## **5. Policy reflections**

In conclusion, we outline a few policy considerations based on our findings and reflections on vulnerability. First, we recognise that economic growth is a necessary, but insufficient condition for alleviating poverty and reducing household economic vulnerabilities. Therefore, achieving and sustaining a rate of economic growth that can effectively support poverty reduction is a fundamental pre-requisite for addressing poverty and vulnerability. Yet, economic growth cannot effectively lift people out of poverty and keep them out if the gains are not distributed equitably and if sectors that create decent jobs and livelihood opportunities do not expand. Sri Lanka's recent economic growth has exemplified these challenges. Not only has the economy failed to register strong growth since 2010-11, it has also experienced widening inequalities; moreover, expanding sectors has not led to significant job creation.

Promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth requires strong geographic connectivity and integration with local, regional and international markets. Strong, reliable and robust physical and digital infrastructure is fundamental to enhancing such inter- and intra-country integration. Local businesses, including micro, small and medium enterprises require better financial inclusion, access to markets, information technology, and supportive government policies to thrive and contribute effectively to economic growth and employment generation. Furthermore, consistent long-term policy direction, political stability and a clear separation of political and economic agendas are vital for fostering investor confidence, both locally and internationally, and in turn spurring economic development.

Growing the formal economy is also integral to promoting inclusive and sustainable development, as well as for creating decent jobs. Not only should economic growth drive jobs, more such opportunities should be created in the formal sector in order for the domestic labour force to effectively benefit from the expansion in the economy. A formal economy gives visibility to the labour force, safeguards their rights, and offers job security, while the government benefits from increased tax revenue and greater transparency and accountability in business operations. Informal business entities must be incentivised to transition into the formal economy through friendly and supportive policies, simpler regulations, inclusive finances and capacity building.

Revisions to Sri Lanka's labour laws in the light of evolving labour market conditions and business modalities are also critical to expanding the formal economy. The employment landscape is rapidly changing with increasing opportunities for remote work, part-time or flexible work, and other types of unique arrangements. However, Sri Lanka's labour laws, while well-intended and biased in favour of employees, continues to remain outdated and even hold women back from seeking jobs that involve night shifts or factories. A careful review of labour laws to reasonably safeguard all types of employment, instead of remaining excessively protective of only certain types of employment, and to accommodate new and emerging types of employment arrangements is particularly important in the modern-day gig and talent economies.

We also underscore the importance of upgrading educational policies, pedagogy and methodology in line with the gradual shift to hybrid modalities of education, following the outbreak of the pandemic. Clearly, such a system would worsen inequalities in access to and the quality of education in the absence of proper infrastructure. Moreover, measures to close the digital divide, enhance computer literacy and IT skills among educators and parents, strengthen cyber security, and equip schools, universities and vocational training centres with relevant infrastructure are critical at a bare minimum if the country is to explore hybrid education modalities.

Moreover, we point out that the education system has to be enhanced not only to upgrade the quality and relevance of its existing pedagogy, but also to proactively address the emerging educational requirements of the youth and future generations. In particular, the vocational education sector should be empowered to keep abreast of the evolving landscape of business, technology and market dynamics to help produce a skilled labour force. We also highlight the importance of expanding the regional outreach of vocational and technical training, especially in rural and estate sectors. Importantly, traditional milestone examinations such as GCE Ordinary Level and Advanced Level must not be designed to exclude students from further education, but should be made connecting nodes for alternative educational or skills development pathways.

While we recognise the improvements in the proposed new Aswesuma welfare scheme over its predecessor *Samurdhi*, we recommend that further ancillary measures to help households graduating from the welfare programme stay out

of poverty in the long-run should be made available. Packaging this programme with strategies to raise awareness among recipients on additional topics such as climate change, health and nutrition, gender equality, ethnoreligious coexistence and human rights, including those of persons with disabilities and those with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, will enhance the overall impact and inclusivity of the programme.

Strengthening overall financial literacy among the general public is important to promote economic empowerment. Modules that teach money management, budgeting, and asset-building should be introduced into the school curricular, while adult financial literacy programmes should also be developed and rolled out through various grassroots level organisations. Such a programme as part of the *Aswesuma* welfare mechanism will be particularly helpful for vulnerable households to build a financial buffer for a rainy day. Simultaneously, the formal financial system of the country should be capacitated to develop lending models that can bypass collateral requirements and other stringent borrowing criteria to benefit more individuals, households and businesses. In addition, the formal financial sector must be empowered to build the entrepreneur community in Sri Lanka through skills building programmes.

The pandemic experience also highlights the importance of strengthening Sri Lanka's climate change agenda. Concerted efforts to explore sustainable energy sources and leverage international expertise as well as private-public partnerships to invest in alternative energy sources are important. Better use of climate-smart technology and inputs in agriculture is also imperative.

The overall emergency-response policy framework needs further strengthening too. Policy responses to external shocks should not come at a debilitating cost to the general public. A multi-agency approach is critical to inculcate holistic response mechanisms and actions that take into account the impacts on different types of livelihood activities, different religious and cultural values and norms, as well as people's psychosocial well-being. Strong communication strategies and improved access to and right to information are vital for garnering the general public's support for emergency responses at times of crisis. Existing policies and action plans can be strengthened through the lessons from the pandemic and economic crisis experiences.

## Appendix

*Table 1: Sample weights and distribution of the household survey*

	<b>COVID hospitalisations</b>	<b>HIES weight</b>	<b>Reassigned weights</b>
Colombo	139,532	9%	21%
Kandy	22,199	6%	13%
Galle	45,686	6%	13%
Jaffna	12,329	3%	8%
Ampara	14,073	4%	8%
Kurunegala	31,504	6%	14%
Anuradhapura	15,057	3%	7%
Badulla	14,633	4%	8%
Ratnapura	23,702	4%	9%

Source: Epidemiology Unit, 2022; DCS, 2022; Author

*Table 2: Summary overview of respondents*

	<b>Skilled emp.</b>	<b>Agri. livelihoods</b>	<b>Self-emp./ Small business</b>	<b>Temp./ Casual labour</b>	<b>Migrant workers</b>	<b>Unemp. / Inactive</b>
<i>Colombo</i>						
Male	1	0	1	2	0	1
Female	2	0	1	1	0	2
Transgender	0	0	0	1	0	0
<i>Badulla</i>						
Male	1	3	2	0	0	0
Female	2	2	1	1	0	0
<i>Matara</i>						
Male	2	2	1	1	0	0
Female	3	0	1	1	0	1
<i>Kilinochchi</i>						
Male	2	2	1	1	0	0
Female	2	1	1	1	0	1



<i>Trincomalee</i>						
Male	0	2	1	1	1	0
Female	2	0	1	2	1	0
Transgender	0	0	0	1	0	0
<i>Kurunegala</i>						
Male	1	2	1	2	0	0
Female	2	1	1	2	0	0

Source: Author

## References

- Alkire, S., Nogales, R., Quinn, N. N., & Suppa, N. (2021). Global multidimensional poverty and COVID-19: A decade of progress at risk? *Social Science & Medicine*, 291, 114457. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114457>
- Alwang, J., Siegel, P. B., & Jorgensen, S. L. (2001). *Vulnerability: A view from different disciplines* (23304; Social Protection Discussion Paper Series No. 0115). The World Bank. <https://ideas.repec.org//p/wbk/hdnspu/23304.html>
- Amaratunga, D., Fernando, N., Haigh, R., & Jayasinghe, N. (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, 100133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2020.100133>
- Atanda, K., & Cojocar, A. (2021, March 31). Shocks and vulnerability to poverty in middle-income countries. *World Bank Blogs*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/shocks-and-vulnerability-poverty-middle-income-countries>
- Central Bank of Sri Lanka [CBSL]. (2023). *Annual Report 2022*. CBSL. <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/en/publications/economic-and-financial-reports/annual-reports/annual-report-2022>
- Chambers, R. (1989). Editorial Introduction: Vulnerability, Coping and Policy. *IDS Bulletin*, 20(2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.1989.mp20002001.x>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–167.
- Department of Census and Statistics [DCS]. (2022). *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2019—Final Report*. DCS. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/IncomeAndExpenditure/StaticInformation/HouseholdIncomeandExpenditureSurvey2019FinalReport>
- Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health. (2022). *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)—Situation Report: 01.06.2022-10.00am*. Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health. [https://www.epid.gov.lk/storage/post/pdfs/en\\_63fc8f66cb234\\_sitrep-sl-en-01-06\\_10\\_22.pdf](https://www.epid.gov.lk/storage/post/pdfs/en_63fc8f66cb234_sitrep-sl-en-01-06_10_22.pdf)
- Family Health Bureau. (2024). *Summary Report: Nutrition Report 2023*. Family Health Bureau, Ministry of Health. <https://fhb.health.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Nutrition-Month-2023-Report-English.pdf>

- Fowsar, M. A. M., Raja, N. K. K., & Rameez, M. A. M. (2022). COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis Management in Sri Lanka. Slipping away from Success. In D. Briesen, N. Thi Thuy Trang, & P. Quang Minh (Eds.), *Times of Uncertainty: National Policies and International Relations under COVID-19 in Southeast-Asia and Beyond* (1st ed., Vol. 2, pp. 401–422). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748927495>
- George, A. H., George, A. S., & Baskar, T. (2022). Sri Lanka's economic crisis: A brief overview. *Partners Universal International Research Journal*, 1(2), 9–19. <https://doi.org/DOI:10.5281/zenodo.6726553>
- Gurara, D., Fabrizio, S., & Wiegand. (2020, August 27). COVID-19: Without Help, Low-Income Developing Countries Risk a Lost Decade. *IMF Blog*. <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2020/08/27/blog-covid-19-without-help-low-income-developing-countries-risk-a-lost-decade>
- Katella, K. (2023, February 3). Omicron, Delta, Alpha, and More: What To Know About the Coronavirus Variants. *Yale Medicine*. <https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/covid-19-variants-of-concern-omicron>
- LIRNEasia. (2023, June 7). *Social Safety Nets and the State of Poverty in Sri Lanka*. <https://lirneasia.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/LIRNEasia-Social-Safety-Nets-and-the-State-of-Poverty-in-Sri-Lanka-4.pdf>
- Nguyen, M. C., Yoshida, N., Wu, H., & Narayan, A. (2020). *Profiles of the new poor due to the COVID-19 pandemic*. World Bank. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/767501596721696943-0090022020/original/ProfilesofthenewpoorduetotheCOVID19pandemic.pdf>
- Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative [OPHI] and United National Development Programme [UNDP]. (2023). *Understanding Multidimensional Vulnerabilities: Impact on People of Sri Lanka—A Policy Report Based on the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index derived from UNDP's National Citizen Survey 2022-2023*. UNDP. [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-10/undp\\_multidimensional\\_vulnerability\\_report\\_sri\\_lanka.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-10/undp_multidimensional_vulnerability_report_sri_lanka.pdf)
- Ramakumar, R. (2022, April 25). *Why Sri Lanka is facing one of its worst economic crises*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/04/sri-lanka-worst-economic-crisis/>

- Rannan-Eliya, R., Wijemunige, N., Perera, S., Samarage, S., Dalpatadu, S., Ghaffoor, A., Nirmani, D., Wisidagama, N., Amarasinghe, S., Fonseka, S., Senadeera, A., Hakmanag, N. M., Kumara, N., Sivagnanam, I., Mullen, L., Guha, M., Tanugi-Carresse, A. C., & Nuzzo, J. (n.d.). *COVID-19 RESPONSE AND MAINTENANCE OF ESSENTIAL HEALTH SERVICES IN SRI LANKA*. Exemplars in Global Health. <https://www.exemplars.health/emerging-topics/ecr/sri-lanka>
- Reuters. (2022, January 20). *IMF sees cost of COVID pandemic rising beyond \$12.5 trillion estimate*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/imf-sees-cost-covid-pandemic-rising-beyond-125-trillion-estimate-2022-01-20/>
- Sánchez, R., Melissa, K., & Karimi, A. M. (2020). *Social protection in Sri Lanka: An analysis of the social, economic and political effectiveness of the Samurdhi program* [MPRA Paper No. 102558]. Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW). <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/102558/>
- Tateno, Y., & Zoundi, Z. (2021). *Estimating the Short-term Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Poverty in Asia-Pacific LDCs* [Technical Note]. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2021-03/Technical%20note\\_Estimating%20COVID%20impact%20on%20poverty%20in%20APLDCs\\_final.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2021-03/Technical%20note_Estimating%20COVID%20impact%20on%20poverty%20in%20APLDCs_final.pdf)
- The Lancet. (2020). Redefining vulnerability in the era of COVID-19. *Lancet*, 395 (10230)(1089), 1089. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30757-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30757-1)
- Walker, R. A., Abeygunawardana, K., Weditha, N., & Lakhtakia, S. (2023). *Sri Lanka Development Update—Mobilizing Tax Revenue for a Brighter Future* [Text/HTML]. World Bank Group. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099807010022320004/IDUoe8do983c05238044150a6a60b6949boe03d5>
- Weerasekera, H., & Hewage, K. (2021). *Fiscal Implications of Vaccinating Sri Lanka Against COVID-19* [Policy Discussion Brief]. Institute of Policy Studies. <https://www.ips.lk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FISCAL-IMPLICATIONS-OF-VACCINATING-SRI-LANKA-AGAINST-COVID-19.pdf>
- World Bank. (2021). *Sri Lanka Development Update 2021: Economic and Poverty Impact of COVID-19*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/35833>
- World Bank. (2022a). *Sri Lanka Development Update—Protecting the Poor and Vulnerable in a Time of Crisis*. World Bank. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/6c87e47ca3f08a4b13e67f79aec8fa3b-0310062022/sri-lanka-development-update-protecting-the-poor-and-vulnerable-in-a-time-of-crisis>

World Bank. (2022b). *World Development Report 2022: Finance for an Equitable Recovery*. The World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2022>

World Bank. (2023). *Poverty & Equity Brief—South Asia: Sri Lanka*. World Bank. [https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext\\_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global\\_POVEQ\\_LKA.pdf](https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global_POVEQ_LKA.pdf)

Zhang, H., Zhao, Y., & Pedersen, J. (2020). Capital assets framework for analysing household vulnerability during disaster. *Disasters*, 44(4), 687–707. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12393>





# Reimagining Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

**Ranmini Vithanagama**

This report synthesises the findings from separate quantitative and qualitative studies undertaken to examine the impacts of the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis in Sri Lanka on household socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The primary data collected for the research study included a household survey dataset gathered from a random sample of 4,000 households across nine districts and 72 in-depth interviews from six districts.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings concur that the pandemic had a significant negative socioeconomic impact on many households through a complex and overlapping interplay of proximate and pre-existing challenges. The extent and severity of the pandemic's negative impacts were by and large determined by a household's labour market strategies. Jobs and livelihoods in the informal sector were at a higher risk of being affected by the pandemic. The economic crisis led to more severe and widespread consequences among households. Many households were pushed to take up adverse coping mechanisms, with discernible gendered disadvantages. Both shocks had a significantly negative impact on respondents' subjective well-being. Overall, the pandemic and especially the economic crisis have disproportionately affected households already facing unfavourable pre-existing monetary and non-monetary conditions.

Based on our findings, we emphasise the need to perceive vulnerability as a persistent condition, rather than a fleeting event, that requires long-term interventions over short-term remedies. We highlight the importance of promoting inclusive economic growth that can create decent jobs, promote regional development and encourage entrepreneurship. To minimise the adverse effects on citizens in the midst of chaos, there is a need for more proactive, cohesive and well-planned emergency responses. We also call for more comprehensive and benevolent but time-bound social protection measures to empower the poor and vulnerable.



INTERNATIONAL  
CENTRE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES

**Australian  
Aid** 

ISBN: 978-624-5502-31-8



Printed by Horizon Printing (Pvt) Ltd.