



Reimagining vulnerability in the light of COVID-19: Reflections on gendered impacts of the pandemic (and the economic crisis)

The pandemic was a gendered crisis, affecting women disproportionately in productive and domestic spheres. According to the International Labour Organization proportionately more women (4.2 percent) than men (3 percent) lost jobs due to the pandemic. Furthermore, female-owned businesses have faced more challenges than male-owned businesses due to the pandemic (Torres et al., 2023).

At home, women bore the brunt of the extra amount of care burden created by the pandemic (Corsi & Ilkkaracan, 2022). Moreover, the pandemic catalysed a substantial increase in violence against women, especially at the hands of intimate partners (Sediri et al., 2020). Women, especially those who were pregnant, postpartum, heads of households, or victims of intimate partner violence, were at a high risk of facing mental health problems during this time (Almeida et al., 2020; Bau et al., 2022).

STUDY

The seismic socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic that shocked the world illuminated the fragility of our socioeconomic structures and systems, leading to a growing consensus of not returning to business as usual. Importantly, widening and deepening poverty and inequalities worldwide sparked a critical discussion on reimagining vulnerability, giving us the impetus to design this study within the context of Sri Lanka. The economic crisis that followed on the heels of the pandemic further justified the undertaking of this research study.

The overall study took on a mixed methods approach to data collection, and surveyed a random sample of 4,000 households in nine

districts¹ and conducted in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 72 respondents from six districts². We examined this primary data to explore the impacts of the pandemic and the economic crisis on households and the various socioeconomic vulnerabilities that they were grappling with due to these shocks. We also investigated possible reasons for heterogeneities in these impacts to parse characteristics of households at a higher risk of vulnerability in the event of a disruption to normal social order.

This policy brief shares findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research components about the gender implications of the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis (Vithanagama, 2024; Vithanagama and Gunatilaka, 2024). We anticipate our findings will inform relevant policy, projects and programmes of state and non-state actors.

FINDINGS

The pandemic was a gendered experience, predominantly in the domestic sphere. Both our quantitative and qualitative findings confirm that the pandemic was experienced differently by women and men. In fact, close to half of respondents in our quantitative sample agreed that, overall, the pandemic had a more negative impact on women than on men. However, we observed that these gendered differences were more pronounced at home than in the labour market. Although more men than women had experienced job losses, this was because more men than women were in the labour market prior to the pandemic. While both women and men grappled with the fear of contracting the virus, the disorientation from the collapse of spatial outlines, and the risk of economic uncertainty, there


were distinct gendered patterns in their coping strategies with these issues.

Women's care burden increased during the pandemic for a variety of reasons. Our quantitative findings show that about 67 percent of the surveyed women agreed that the pandemic increased women's care work at home. The qualitative analysis illustrates a number of ways in which the pandemic exacerbated women's unpaid care work:

- *Uptake of precautionary hygienic behaviours:* During the pandemic, many households implemented home-based remedies, including eating home-cooked food, to mitigate the risk of contracting the virus. The burden of this extra precautionary workload, including boiling water multiple times a day for steam inhalation, preparing herbal drinks and Ayurvedic solutions, cleaning and disinfecting homes, and washing groceries, was almost exclusively borne by women. The increased precautionary care for family members with vulnerable health conditions such as the elderly, infirm, and small children was also disproportionately borne by women.
- *Increased domestic chores during lockdowns:* The lockdowns resulted in increased time spent at home by more household members, which naturally led to more cooking, cleaning and washing for women. Women who had support from extended family living nearby or domestic helpers in performing these chores were unable to access such help due to mobility restrictions. Notably, even though men were at home, many of them either helped minimally, sporadically or did not help at all with household chores, underscoring how societal expectations of men and women have shaped their behaviours.
- *Online schooling:* The transition to online education increased women's childcare responsibilities. Mothers, especially those with

1 Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Jaffna, Ampara, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Badulla and Ratnapura which had the highest confirmed COVID hospitalisations in each of the nine provinces, as of June, 2022.

2 Colombo, Kurunegala, Matara, Badulla, Trincomalee and Kilinochchi which had the highest, moderate and least numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases as of June 2022.



small children, were particularly burdened with the task of disciplining them to sit through virtual classes. Furthermore, controlling children's screen time in the absence of other social interactions that a traditional classroom offers was a challenge that fell more heavily on mothers than fathers.


Both men and women experienced a decline in psychosocial well-being due to the pandemic, but the impact on women was more complex. The qualitative study highlighted the pervasive negative impact on mental health caused by the pandemic and its preemptive measures. Yet, there were several examples illustrating how the underlying sources of these emotional vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms were uniquely gendered. Fears about income losses and economic uncertainties emerged strongly in the narrative accounts of male respondents in the study. While these sentiments were also observed among women, such anxieties were also layered with their roles as caregivers. More women than men also grappled with fears of passing on the virus to small children, guilt over falling sick and being unable to care for family members, anxiety of being separated from children during quarantine, fear for the safety of elderly parents, and isolation due to difficulty meeting with extended family and relatives or leaving the house. The increased care burden also contributed to aggravating the emotional toll of the pandemic on women.

Maladaptive practices among men added to women's vulnerability during the pandemic. In the qualitative study, we noted that most respondents had turned to religious and spiritual coping mechanisms to deal with the pervading uncertainties during the pandemic. However, we observed that several men had adopted maladaptive coping strategies, further exacerbating women's situation at home during the pandemic. Some men resorted to emotional, verbal and in rare instances, physical abuse of female household members, especially

intimate partners. Women who were living with in-laws were especially vulnerable to emotional and verbal abuse. The use of alcohol also contributed to domestic tensions. In a few instances, men violated the social distancing guidelines to visit friends and neighbors, thereby putting at risk the health of household members, which further exacerbated women's vulnerability.

Gendered labour market impacts were not pronounced in our studies. We did not find compelling evidence from the qualitative analysis that the labor market impact for women and men were markedly different. Instead, we observed rather similar impacts on both women and men, depending on the type of job or livelihood strategy they were engaged in. The quantitative data showed that roughly equal amounts of respondents either agreed or disagreed with the view that the pandemic caused more job losses for women than men, broadly substantiating the qualitative findings. We also did not discern significant economic opportunities that opened up for women due to the pandemic, although there were a few examples of women taking up home-based livelihoods during the pandemic. The quantitative study echoed similar patterns. For example, we observed that although about half of the respondents recognized that the pandemic created opportunities for women to work from home, only about a quarter of the respondents considered that the pandemic created opportunities for women to earn incomes.

Intersecting vulnerabilities further diversified gendered experiences of the pandemic. Both quantitative and qualitative studies confirm that experiences of vulnerability during the pandemic were shaped by a number of characteristics at the individual and household level. In the quantitative analysis, we observed that households headed by women tend to earn less income than those headed by men. We also found that income is a key deterministic variable for food security. Thus, women heading their households, compared to



women living in households headed by men, may have experienced vulnerability more intensely during the pandemic. The qualitative findings concur. Women heading their households considered themselves more vulnerable navigating the uncertain terrain that the pandemic created. They missed the sense of security a male head of household would have provided during the pandemic. Poverty was also a key driver shaping the pandemic's gendered experiences. Women in households with pre-existing unfavorable socioeconomic conditions faced more financial and emotional challenges in coping with the challenges of the pandemic. The economic uncertainties were much more pronounced in these households, which had a negative impact on women's well-being as they struggled to feed and clothe children, support children's online education, and sometimes faced domestic violence from a partner also stressed out from the situation. We also observed that factors such as disability, old age, the presence of babies and young children, elderly parents (especially in-laws), and the area of residence have influenced women's socioeconomic and psychosocial vulnerability during the pandemic.

The economic crisis pushed many households to adopt negative coping measures, with detrimental gendered effects. The sharp increase in the cost of living during the economic crisis had a far more widespread negative impact on households than the pandemic and rendered households that were already affected by the pandemic worse off. The uptake of negative coping strategies to make ends meet was much more rampant during the economic crisis, the majority of which had significant implications for women's physical and emotional well-being. For example, the quantitative analysis revealed that in about 41 percent of the households surveyed, the respondent herself has cut down on portion sizes of meals because of financial constraints. This share was particularly high at lower income levels, underscoring the intersectional

gendered vulnerabilities of the economic crisis. The qualitative analysis provides poignant examples of women giving up nutritious food, cutting down on their portion sizes, and foregoing meals altogether amidst household economic distress. The reduced use of electricity amidst tariff hikes increased the drudgery of women's domestic chores. In the most severe cases, women without any income had sold their assets and fallen into debt traps, which could lead to long-term economic challenges.

Persons with non-binary gender identities faced vulnerabilities as they feared for their safety. The qualitative analysis found that the implications of the social distancing measures and the economic crisis were particularly harsh for individuals with diverse gender identities. The handful of such individuals in our qualitative study were either already alienated from their families or were living alone away from their families, thus already used to living in isolation long before the pandemic. The lockdowns further reduced their already limited opportunities for social interactions. Securing food, groceries and other essentials, and looking for income-earning opportunities during the pandemic and the economic crisis were particularly difficult for persons with non-binary gender identities, as they feared for their personal safety if their identities were revealed to members in their communities.

A few examples of positive gender outcomes point out how chaotic times might reset traditional norms. The qualitative analysis highlighted a few but encouraging examples where traditional gender norms were challenged during the pandemic. There were several examples of men who gained perspective on women's role at home, shared household chores with their wives, and learned to cook. A few positive examples about women also emerged from the analysis. Several women found time to engage in their hobbies, a few learned new skills, and a handful of them started a new livelihood activity during the pandemic.

POLICY REFLECTIONS

Gender must feature as a cross-cutting issue in addressing external shocks. The pandemic and the economic crisis have contributed to the plethora of evidence that any aberration from normal social order tends to create more unfavourable outcomes for women. Thus, gender needs to be discussed and incorporated within all policy realms that work on prevention, mitigation, and adaptation measures in relation to external shocks. Importantly, gender must thematically be weaved more strongly into other relevant policy documents. Moreover, the institutional framework should address gender issues through collaborative efforts, rather than placing the burden solely on the subject ministry.

Policy-implementation gap on gender issues must be closed to reduce gendered inequities. Although Sri Lanka has many policy documents to strengthen gender responsiveness and inclusion, many of these policy actions face challenges in implementation due to issues such as enforceability and institutional capacity. Developing an accountability mechanism is imperative to ensure the implementation of transformative gender policy measures on the ground. Additionally, enhancing institutional capacity on gender is essential for the continuity of gender responsive actions.

Revisions or repealing of discriminatory laws is long-due. Revisions to labour laws overly protective of women's employment are important to create a more conducive environment for women's employment. Discriminatory provisions in customary laws on women's land ownership should be repealed to meaningfully promote women's access to land. Provisions in the legal code criminalising behaviours of non-binary individuals must be repealed as these provisions overtly support the discriminations of sexual minorities.

Promoting women's economic empowerment is crucial for building their resilience against external shocks. Driving economic growth that generates decent and socially desirable opportunities for women is crucial for promoting female labour force participation in Sri Lanka. Measures to close gender gaps in access to finance, digital literacy, transportation, and leadership opportunities are also imperative for advancing women's economic empowerment and creating transformational benefits for women.

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