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Pandemic, Lockdown and Modern Slavery among Sri Lanka's Global Assembly Line Workers

By Sandya Hewamanne¹

Abstract

This article explores how the COVID-19 pandemic and the lock down had increased global assembly line workers' vulnerability to several forms of modern slavery. It focuses on two groups of women workers associated with global production in Sri Lanka. First, the daily-hired workers in the Katunayake and Biyagama Free Trade Zones (FTZ) and second the former global factory workers now settled in villages and operating as home subcontractors.

The COVID-19 forced lockdown caused factory shutdowns and curtailed production, leaving FTZ workers with no work and income. The global lockdown has clearly affected both groups, despite their differing work and life cycle positioning. Yet their shared experience of losing hard won decision-making powers along with their income make it crucial to investigate their lockdown experiences together. In doing so, this paper argues that the pandemic and the lock down had increased marginalized women's vulnerability to several forms of modern slavery, and that the state outsourcing it's responsibility in providing livelihood security and labor rights to corporate sector has resulted in certain invisibilities that aid such vulnerability. The paper calls for developing contingency livelihood safety mechanisms and contends that any such plans must take into account gendered insecurities given that women's income is closely intertwined with decision making abilities, social status and physical safety.

Keywords: Modern Slavery, Sri Lanka, COVID-19 Pandemic, Daily-hired workers, Home subcontractors, Feminist methodology

Introduction

We did choose part time work on our own. It paid well and I liked the freedom. Corona (and related economic fallout) made me realize how precarious my livelihood was. I haven't had work for 63 days and had to be in line to get some food handouts.... never thought I would fall this low. Mayanthi, Former daily-hired worker (June 2020)

You know how well I was managing my workshop. So, I didn't think twice before getting micro loans to buy the tuk tuk, the motor bike, and even spending money on house construction and family celebrations. Now there are no orders and no income. But the creditors have not gone away. They come and ask for monthly payments at all times and

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all places. So embarrassing... I feel like ending this useless life. Aruni, a home workshop owner/worker (August 2020)

This article explores how the COVID-19 pandemic and the lock down had increased global assembly line workers' vulnerability to several forms of modern slavery. It focuses on two groups of women workers associated with global production in Sri Lanka. First, the daily-hired workers in the Katunayake and Biyagama FTZs, who just a year ago bragged about not being tethered to factories and therefore are freer than regular factory employees (Dabindu 2017; Hewamanne 2020a, 2021). The COVID-19 forced lockdown, however, have shuttered factories or drastically curtailed production, leaving these women with no work and income.

The second group represents former global factory workers now settled in villages who astutely used their FTZ savings to become successful entrepreneurs and, in some cases, even village civic leaders. Operating as home subcontractors (the bottom most level), they too were mainly connected to global production networks via the cascading system of global subcontracting (Hewamanne 2020). The global lockdown and dearth of factory orders have affected them too. Both groups were thriving economically and many among them built houses and bought motorcycles and three wheelers. Some even invested in varied enterprises. The lockdown has clearly affected both groups, despite their differing work and life cycle positioning. Yet their shared experience of losing hard won decision-making powers along with global production associated income make it crucial to investigate their pandemic experiences together. In doing so, this paper argues that the pandemic and the lock down had increased marginalized women's vulnerability to several forms of modern slavery, and that the state outsourcing it's responsibility of providing livelihood security and labor rights, to corporate sector has resulted in certain invisibilities that aid such vulnerability. The paper calls for developing contingency livelihood safety mechanisms and contends that any such plans must take into account gendered insecurities given that women's income is closely intertwined with decision making abilities, social status and physical safety.

Global Production and Women Workers

Western investors and multi-national corporations took full advantage of the structural adjustment policies that the World Bank initiated for debt-ridden developing countries, by establishing factories in tariff free export-oriented production zones. Utilizing third world labor at very low salaries, these corporations sought to minimize production costs to the lowest possible. Countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Mexico, Honduras, and China establish demarcated zones for transnational manufacturing of garments electronics, toys, rubber products and medical equipment. Manufacturing jobs in these global assembly lines provided much needed wages for unemployed youth even as reports of labor and human rights abuses within factories raised concerns among global consumers. The global assembly lines are gendered in structure, with women doing assembly line work, and men in managerial positions. The focus on women was based on patriarchal stereotypes of women being nimble fingered, docile and supplementary earners--as opposed to men who are considered the family's main bread winners. Notwithstanding reports of labor exploitation, bad work conditions, and industrial disasters, global factories in the global south continue to operate with varied levels of compliance to international labor codes.

Free Trade Zone

The first Sri Lankan FTZ was established in 1978 in Katunayake, a town about 35 kilometers from Colombo and home to the island's premier international airport, after a newly elected government began pursuing structural adjustment programs. Unemployed rural women filled the newly created assembly line jobs, characterized by rigorous schedules, poor work conditions, and minimal wages. As in other transnational factories around the world, Katunayake factories demand maximum output for minimal wages in exploitative working conditions and practice a distinctively late capitalist form of gendered working relations. In 2020, over 40 years after the first FTZ was established, basic worker salary was Rs. 14,000 (about US\$ 80) per month, although women could earn about Rs. 25,000 by working overtime. About 45,000 rural women from economically and socially marginalized groups work as machine operators in the Katunayake FTZ's 92 factories and a similar number work for subcontracting factories located around the zone. Biyagama also has close to 30,000 workers within the zone while subcontracting outfits in the surrounding area employ a further 20,000 workers. Most are unmarried, young, and well-educated, often with 10-12 years of schooling (Hewamanne 2016).

There are few state or factory-run hostels. Thus, the women who migrate from rural areas rent hastily built rooms from area residents. The difficult work and living conditions are compounded by the sexual harassment workers face on city streets and the shop floor (Hewamanne 2012; 2016). Furthermore, intense anxieties about their mobility create an image of FTZ workers as loose women who can be easily deceived into sexual relationships (See "Emergency Contraceptives are our Saviors," *JWS* current issue for more context). At the same time, living with other young women in an urban-area, women undergo social, cultural, emotional, and cognitive changes. For instance, they acquire global knowledge flows and the intense socialization process in factories and boarding houses encourage them to dress, behave, think, and desire in new ways.

Global Production Networks and Varied Workers

When transnational production started in Sri Lanka, all workers belonged to regular work forces of FTZ factories. The regular work force management was done under strict bilaterally agreed BOI (Board of Investment-Sri Lanka) rules. While the work conditions were harsh, they still had well defined rules and regulations as to work hours, over time, sick leave, and accident compensation. Most of these regulations, while unsatisfactory, were followed and there were channels to complain to BOI and call labor tribunals. Most importantly, the regular workers had benefits such as company EPF (Employees Provident Fund), ETF (Employees Trust Fund) contributions and stipulated gratuity payments at the end of their work tenure (Hewamanne 2008; 2016; 2018).

Daily-Hired Workers

Several dynamics, however, have seen major changes in the last 10 years. For instance, recently many garment factories have experienced labor shortages especially at the machine operator level (Madurawala 2018). At the same time, the increasing use of 'just in time production' strategies within current global production networks (Barrientos 2013) have put tremendous pressure on FTZ factories to hire workers daily to supplement their regular workforce at short notice, resulting in the increased use of labor contractors to procure, monitor, and maintain worker groups. The 'garments without guilt' initiative that sought to brand Sri Lankan apparel production ethical (Saxena 2014; Goger 2013) is another factor contributing to the rise of labor contractors.

The ethical codes required meeting certain standards with regard to the regular workforce, which caused factories to rely more on casual workers. Dabindu (2017) reports that factories now encourage casual labor to the extent of asking regular workers to quit and re-enter as daily-hired laborers. Such moves allow management to simultaneously address labor shortages and satisfy ethical codes, without jeopardizing profit margins.

By 2015, daily-hiring of workers has become quite common, and they were generally called “man-power workers.” The practice gets conspicuously played out daily at the entrance to the Katunayake FTZ where women gather under a banyan tree and wait for contractors to sign them up. Dabindu (2017: 26) notes that most such workers prefer ‘man-power work’ to being part of the regular work force. The workers I interviewed said they preferred daily hired labor through man-power agencies. The flexibility to work on the days they choose and not having to stress over meeting targets on a daily basis were the two main reasons given. Many of these women had previously worked as full-time employees, so they were well qualified to compare the pros and cons associated with manpower work. “When I was working full time I was like a cow tethered to a pole—cannot attend a wedding, go to a temple, or even go to the doctors without getting scolded and having my salary cut,” one worker said (Hewamanne 2020a). They all noted that they get paid more per day than full-time workers. As noted above, full time workers received EPF and ETF savings when they left the factory; but man-power workers appear to value the higher daily pay, than the lump sum given to full time workers when they leave work.

A number of women said the daily wage and factory’s reputation were important when deciding where to work. Some were adamant that they would not work for certain factories, while others said they usually waited to see if their preferred factories were hiring before signing on to work for others. Factories too had favorites among the workers, because the more familiar a worker was with a factory, the more efficient she was going to be. Thus, some women managed to develop feelings of self-esteem and identity notwithstanding lacking permanent employment. While these women are freer and enjoyed the time that they had to hang out with friends, and visit family, this freedom came with a price—insecure work, hidden exploitation, and loss of benefits.

Dabindu (2017) notes that while full time workers wanted to leave in five to six years of work to obtain their FTZ savings, most man-power workers want to keep working indefinitely. The man-power option allows women to remain in the FTZ area, and also avoid having to marry soon after leaving work in order to obtain their EPF/ETF savings (because women who do not present a marriage certificate within three months of leaving only qualify to collect EPF and ETF savings when they reach 55 years of age, except in the case of severe illness). Thus man-power work allows women the agency to live their life without being dictated to by BOI stipulations and factory regulations. Many man-power workers engaged in other income generating activities that ranged from dress making, catering and even part time sex work. Although the BOI chairman made headlines in 2015 by claiming that he would ban manpower agents (Berenger 2015), such a policy is still to be implemented. Several factory managers and BOI officials claimed in 2017 that banning man-power work is not feasible as it is a preferred form of work, and that even university students now engage in it to finance their education (Dabindu 2017).

Man-power work allows women to refuse being enslaved by factory production regimes. In some ways, manpower workers are more agentic compared to regular FTZ workers. However, it is important to consider the context in which women come to prefer man-power work. Global factory work is characterized by stressful, backbreaking, target-oriented production leading to forced overtime and weekend work. Thus, extant factory labor regimes drive the desire for man-

power work. Ultimately, such exploitative labor regimes ensure the continuing success of ‘race to the bottom.’ The pandemic put this situation in perspective for man-power workers.

Home Workers

Village women migrate to urban areas to work in global factories for many reasons including economic necessity and quest for social independence. The most commonly mentioned reason to move away from their familiar surroundings to engage in exploitative factory work, however, is the FTZ savings or what workers call ‘FTZ dowry.’ This is the combined lump sum of their EPF and ETF savings and the factory gratuity for years of service. Many have persevered amidst difficult working and living conditions hoping to secure this lump sum when leaving work after 5-6 years. Many use the money for income generating activities after they get married. When factories closed due to the pandemic, regular workers especially were concerned about losing or seeing reductions in this lump sum. Hence why one woman exclaimed, “such bad karma! The one good thing that ever happened to poor women is now lost due to this accursed Corona.”

Although global assembly line work is structured to exploit and discard gendered labor in the global south, FTZ work, which combines savings, migration and independent living, quite unexpectedly initiate a process of social and gender norm changes in rural Sri Lanka (Hewamanne 2017,2018,2019, 2020a). Although the home workshops, more often than not, link former workers to the cascading system of subcontracting that characterize global production networks, the success of their operations afforded women social standing and community leadership. The pandemic and the lockdown led to unraveling of global production networks, effectively ending the subcontracts that these home workers’ incomes depended on. In fact, this situation painfully brought home the precariousness of their livelihoods to them.

Pandemic Creating Havoc

Sri Lanka reported its first local COVID-19 case in late February 2020. The country went into full lockdown on March 19th and island-wide curfew was imposed until early June. While lockdown and curfew prevented the virus spreading, the abrupt declaration of curfew affected thousands of FTZ workers adversely. The factories shut down without paying workers for the month of March while the cancellation of public transport services made it difficult for many to return to their village homes. Workers who were stranded in boarding houses with little to no money lacked food and other necessities. Within two weeks measures were taken to send the workers home, although many, especially the daily-hired workers, decided to stay in their boarding houses with the hope that the factories would open any day (Fazlulhaq 2020).

Workers soon found out that these immediate concerns were the least of their worries. Between March to May 30th Sri Lanka’s apparel exports fell 50% against the same period of the previous year. This was a loss of close to \$680 million. According to the Sri Lanka Apparel Exporters Association Chairman Rehan Lakhany, apparel industry will lose estimated \$2 billion by March 2021 as opposed to 5.6 billion earned in 2019 (Sri Lanka Brief 2020). By April, apparel industry was facing losses over \$1.5 billion and swiftly appealed to the government for support in re-opening factories and to pay salaries, and rent (Financial Times, 2020). Tuli Cooray, the Secretary General of the Joint Apparel association Forum (JAAF) claimed in June 2020, that no orders are forthcoming for the Fall season (Jayasinghe 2020). Thus, the forecasted decline for the sector was 40% by August 2020 (De Silva 2020a). By October, overall exports to US alone fell by 22.15%, while exports to European Union fell by 21.36% (De Silva 2020b). The same bleak future

loomed for all other countries that depended on global assembly line work for most of their export income. When COVID-19 struck, stores closed across North America and Europe. Western brands canceled orders worth billions of dollars, leaving shipments of clothing with no takers. Hundreds of factories closed across Asia, including Vietnam, China and Bangladesh. Millions of garment workers in Asia, a vast majority of them women, have been suspended or laid off depriving them of \$6 billion in wages (Nilson 2020).

As the global production chain continues to unravel due to the pandemic, closed shops in Europe and North America translate into more and more closed factories in the global South (Nilson and Terazono 2020). In the West, JC Penney, and Neiman Marcus have filed for bankruptcy protection in recent months. The chain reaction could cause 20% to 30% of companies along the value chain—from brands to wholesalers and department stores—to close down affecting numerous job levels across the industry. Many factory owners in the global south are finding it difficult to recover payments from major brands and retailers who demanded deep discounts for goods that were already in production or ready for shipment (Nilson and Terazono 2020). More significantly, the factories are anxious about not having a pipeline of new orders and the prospect of western companies “near-shoring” production (Mandhana and Myo 2020)². Although there are no payments or new orders, the factories have to pay rent and utilities making it difficult to stay afloat. As a result, factories are closing indefinitely, leading to massive loss of employment. For example, at least 110 garment factories closed between January-September in Cambodia alone, leaving over 55,000 workers unemployed (Clean Clothes Campaign 2020). Thus, the pandemic is endangering livelihoods associated with global production networks, which while not satisfactory, provided rural women in these countries with expendable income, and socially empowering opportunities.

By June 2020, a false sense of safety spread across Sri Lanka, due to not finding any cases within communities. As such the FTZ factories and subcontracting outfits were allowed to resume work at 50% capacity subjected to strict rules of distancing and sanitization. Workers, especially the daily hired workers who remained in the area, jumped at the opportunity to work. According to office of the regional Medical Officer of Gampaha and NGO staff, by August the factories have become dangerously lackadaisical about safety measures. This led to the second wave of pandemic, centering at a large garment factory in Minuwangoda, The Brandix. The overall numbers stemming from the Brandix/Minuwangoda and the Paliyagoda fish market clusters have grown to 47,000 by January 8, 2021. This outbreak, in the beginning, added to the already existing stigma of global factory work. It was later revealed that some Indian workers were not properly quarantined before being allowed to work alongside the local workers; again, showing how little the management cared for the health and safety of its workforce. As I write in January 2021, Colombo and Gampaha districts are still under partial lockdown, and inter district travel is severely restricted. In the FTZ area four large factories had to be completely shut down due to infections, while several others reported large numbers of patients. Public Health Inspectors (PHI) with the help of the military hauled women workers who were suspected contacts of infected persons to quarantine centers in far-away places with no warning. Others who remained in the boarding houses experienced their neighbors treating them with contempt and fear (Perera 2020). Due to conflicting views on the patient zero of this cluster, all workers were made to feel like ‘criminals.’ “These women are being treated like criminals and ‘lepers’” lamented Chamila Thushari, an NGO leader (2020a). Interestingly, the earlier anxieties about moral deregulation that came together with

² Near Shoring” is a term used for strategic moving of production lines to markets such as producing in Turkey, Eastern Europe and North Africa for European markets and Mexico for North American markets.

trade deregulation also centered on controlling migrating women bodies and movements. Fears of contamination has always centered on the intersections of race and class (Preston and Firth 2020). The fears and anxieties of the pandemic in Sri Lanka also seemed to be expressed as further ostracization of already stigmatized and marginalized communities; the poor Muslims in congested living circumstances in the first wave, and the garment workers (predominantly poor women) in the second wave.

After a brief discussion on methods, I will discuss how the pandemic and lockdown conditions affected both groups of workers, and how all this has led to increased vulnerability to modern slavery.

Methods

My articles and books are normally based on ethnographic research, including participant observations and in-depth interviews, conducted at the research sites. Just as livelihoods have been adversely affected by the pandemic, the research projects have also suffered setbacks. Universities have prohibited face to face research. Traveling for research, even on private basis, has been next to impossible due to airport closures and quarantine requirements. As such, this paper is based on quite different sources to above mentioned research methods. I call these contingency plan research methods. Such contingency methods follow feminist methodological approach in highlighting the particular COVID-19 related difficulties of marginalized communities that cannot be captured by or deliberately ignored within traditional methodologies. Thus, the contingency methods I used focused on gathering women's experiences that could then be juxtapose with NGO, government and media narratives.

The data is acquired via Whatsapp, zoom, skype and phone interviews I conducted with 6 daily-hired workers, 11 home workers, 3 NGO officials and one factory manager. Most of the crucial data was acquired through a zoom focus group in which ten workers and two NGO staff members joined in from three locations. I have considered the ethical issues carefully, and together with the two NGO staff members and two women workers decided what questions to discuss during the focus group zoom chat. Workers were informed of the research, and oral consent was obtained before the discussion. They were cautioned not to share any information that they do not want others to know, and a private telephone number was provided in case they wanted to talk to the researcher in private. Few workers, however, shared information that could be considered sensitive despite my requests to share privately. They assured that they are sharing the information willingly. All workers wanted to be called back via phone or Whatsapp and followed most of the themes in detail via these calls. Pseudonyms have been used in place of workers' names, and their village and factory names, to protect their privacy.

This data is juxtaposed with newspaper, research blog and social media sources on the pandemic and its effects on precarious workers to comment on intertwining economic and social empowerment, precarious livelihoods and contingency plans.

Precarious Work; Precarious Social Gains

As discussed above, the pandemic created havoc for global factory workers at many levels. Most workers found it prudent to go to their villages when the pandemic broke out, the curfew started, and factories shut down in March 2020. After struggling through a sudden cessation of public transportation, the workers made use of the police organized special buses to reach their

villages. At this time, it was considered that villages were safer than the urban, congested areas surrounding the FTZ. Except for one or two (non-confirmed) large factories, others did not provide any support for the workers. When I started communicating with the workers in May, most have started feeling as if they have been stripped of whatever social status and decision-making powers they earned within their family and kinship networks alongside the now non-existent salaries.

As Malkanthi, a married garment worker said, “The first few days everything was good, and I was happy with getting a break too. But soon we felt food anxiety as one needed much money to collect food items for a month. That’s when the jibes started. First the mother-in-law, but soon my husband too. He started being angry and yelling at me for the slightest thing. I was told to start cultivating food in the backyard rather than waiting till food fell on my lap, and many other daily slights.” Three other workers reported that their in-laws (2) and in one case a male sibling pressuring them to go back to Katunayake area to grab any garment job that may be still there, even while the women themselves felt it was too dangerous to travel and stay in congested boarding houses. Nilmini said that her family members almost daily reported to her that the X or Y factory had started production; subtly indicating that she should perhaps go back.

Their plight seems to pale in comparison to several others who reported physical abuse as well. None of those were directly connected to them not having a salary, but the women felt that their spouses have lost a substantial portion of respect they had for their wives, and was thus very quick to verbally abuse and, when alcohol was involved, to escalate simple arguments to physical violence. They also reported that when the men apologized later, they shared how scared and anxious they were about their financial futures and asked the women to have patience with them. These particular women, as well as others who witnessed or heard about the events, were quick to see the irony of these excuses. As Malsha further elaborated, “Gamini and I used to criticize wife-abusers together, and he used to say ‘we are not the only ones stressed, angry and poor; women are too. So how can men think those things are an excuse to yell at and beat their wives.’ Yet, he fell to the same level as soon as I lost my salary.” While this speaks volumes about certain local and social class specific notions of masculinity, it is also important to note how FTZ employment, however exploitatively structured, afforded female workers more respect and dignity within conjugal relationships while elevating attitudes about women within the kinship unit. The above examples show how such social gains can be as precarious as the women’s global factory work.

Several workers also reported some slights from local communities. In April and May, the government distributed Rs. 5000 each to families through government welfare officers. Inefficient, unplanned distribution resulted in long lines and angry crowds at these distribution offices, eventually leading to verbal and physical altercations. A worker reported how some women verbally abused her by saying that she should not be given this money as she has a job in the FTZ and also because she supplements that with sex work in Colombo. “They were angry and frustrated and they took that on me. After this incident, I couldn’t wait to come back to the FTZ, and I left the village as soon as the travel restrictions lifted,” Rohinie elaborated. Although some families welcomed their FTZ worker loved ones back to villages, the extreme economic anxieties and survival struggle engendered by the pandemic seeped into everyday social interactions making almost all workers who were left without salaries feel as if they have lost the social status and decision making powers they have gained through wage work.

Pandemic and Modern Slavery

As in other global factories throughout the world, Katunayake FTZ factories too are characterized by target oriented, fast paced work conditions that seek to exploit women's labor for the least possible remuneration (Ong 1991; Mills 1999, 2018; Pun 2005; Saxena 2014). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies were thought to address most of the earlier reported exploitative conditions. However, the practical application of CSR policies and ethical garment production regulations have been critiqued as more a dressing up of deeply exploitative structures than changing them for better (Ruwanpura 2011; Goger 2014; Hewamanne 2017). The Modern Slavery Act of 2015 was intended to eradicate forced labor from global supply chains. Yet, it has been shown that the way the compliance requirements were perceived, interpreted and put into practice at the local level, especially in Sri Lanka, the act ended up instituting yet another surveillance apparatus on factory workers (Hewamanne 2020b). Thus, the pandemic happened upon an already exploitative global production scenario. Pandemic interrupted the global production chains leading to massive loss of precarious job opportunities for women in the Global South. It is, therefore, crucial to explore how the pandemic impacted the vulnerability to modern slavery among female global factory workers.

Daily hired workers

According to NGO officials, the workers who remained in their boarding houses during the curfew and lockdown were overwhelmingly the ones who opted for part time work through manpower agencies. The reason was, that unlike the workers in a factory's regular work force, they did not have hopes of returning to a factory when they re-opened. As many did, they also believed that the pandemic would be eradicated soon, and they wanted to grab the first opportunities to work as the factories re-opened. The quote at the beginning of this paper showed that these hopes were quickly dashed. Workers who remained in the FTZ area had to resort to standing in line for charity handouts from different organizations. They also suffered extreme anxieties as they could not send money back home to families suffering economic hardships. The indignity of being charity recipients, and the anxieties about families back home have made these women consider any work under any condition.

Mayanthi felt lucky to have found part-time work at a converted subcontracting outfit, which started producing masks for the local market in May 2020. She found work difficult and not well paid. She also missed certain facilities she enjoyed at large factories such as free meals, and locker facilities. She knew the workers were paid just above half the minimum wage per day but felt extremely lucky to be one of the 20 workers who were hired. Another worker found a job as a temperature-taker at a grocery store for few weeks. Others went without work for months until the factories opened at 50% capacity in June 2020. Workers felt fortunate to be called back to work during the reduced capacity production. They were paid Rs. 14,000 the minimum monthly wage, but did not receive overtime pay, incentives, or bonuses as they normally did (Christopher 2020). NGO officials and workers reported of some women resorting to sex work even while knowing of the elevated risk during the pandemic. The first few months of lockdown, the police and the military were strict in enforcing lockdown rules and thus subcontracting outfits, which are the usual culprits of modern slavery, reportedly ceased operations. But the very same situation resulted in a substantial number of women workers who were hungry for any paid work under any circumstances. Some NGO officers reported that workers are agreeing to work full time for half the salary to somehow make ends meet. This situation highlights disaster capitalism at work, with wealthy factory owners and corporations using the workers' desperation to their advantage.

De Silva (2020) reported that the Hydramani factory in Vaunia did not give a day off for Deepavali, an important Hindu religious festival, to its predominantly Tamil workforce. Normally, this festival day was a holiday for global assembly line workers. Workers of the same factory had complained that they are routinely asked to work till 1.30 in the morning. Chamila Thushari of Dabindu collective, an NGO in Katunayake, claimed that workers who have to pay boarding rent, for food and medicine are desperate and work under any condition to earn some money (Wickramasinghe 2020). According to NGO officials, the reports and statistics of how many women were compelled to work under horrific work conditions and low pay will be revealed as the pandemic fears gradually eased.

Daily-hired workers also had to fight for work with a new group of workers who used to be members of regular work forces. When Rohinie came back to Katunayake hoping to work at her factory, she found herself to be among the unlucky 50% of the regular work force. She then started waiting to be hired daily. After waiting few weeks and only getting to work couple of days she went back to the village and started working as a vegetable picker/packer for very little money. “Normally the farm owners treat workers o.k. But now they know we are desperate. So, they have become highly demanding and resorted to taunting us saying ‘they will throw us to the road,’ if we do not work ourselves to death. These farm jobs are available only for few weeks; so, we all just kept our mouths shut and worked like cows for a pittance,” Rohinie said during a phone conversation. Although Rohinie was paid, when the second wave interrupted the vegetable transportation, several farm owners reportedly refused to pay weekly salaries to the pickers. Rohinie and several others recounted stories of farmers, grocery store owners and other providers of scarce jobs in the villages demanding sexual favors from certain women on the threat of firing them if they do not comply.

Home workers

Former workers who now operate home workshops to subcontract for global production networks experienced the pandemic and lockdown effects through a different cascading form. As western companies stopped payments to local factories, and shipments got cancelled, the local factories (within and outside the FTZs) found it difficult to operate. The cancellation of orders meant that the large FTZ factories did not have anything to subcontract, thus making middle level subcontractors defunct. Home workers subcontract from these middle level subcontractors and thus in turn found themselves without work. The home workers I interviewed shared that this was the first time they felt how precarious their livelihoods were. As Aruni noted, they were getting regular orders and felt safe that these orders would keep coming. With the recent proliferation of micro credit providing financial institutions in the rural areas, almost all home workers found it easy to obtain small loans to buy merchandise. With the profits from their home workshops they were steadily paying back the loans and high interests monthly. When their monthly income ceased, they found themselves in difficult positions. Some of these women had husbands with stable jobs and land. While such women fared well, others had husbands who themselves were engaged in precarious jobs or worked alongside their wives in home workshops. The latter group of women found their laboriously built contented lives rapidly disintegrating.

Although the government declared a six months moratorium on small loan repayment and financing installments in April 2020, it was later discovered that this was only enforceable when the financial institution is registered under the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. Most of the smaller finance companies that operated in rural areas did not come under the purview of the Central Bank and thus doubled down on the hapless villagers for monthly payments. These companies had local

agents, and they continued to harass using locally effective strategies such as public shaming. Aruni and Gayathri both expressed their extreme frustration at these agents' harassment using another common linguistic strategy by mentioning self-harm. "I feel like committing suicide, when I see the loan-collector coming," Gayathri said. Aruni was zooming with me and whispered that she was hiding in the kitchen talking to me. "Because if the collector comes, he will shout at me for paying the internet providers, without paying him. Not only that outsider, but my own husband berated me and said I needed to cut down on everything. He said, 'you got the loans; and YOU must pay back.' Look, how unfair! Yes, I bought a washing machine. But is it only my clothes that get washed?" she said.

In these circumstances, home workers are also thinking of taking up work under any condition. Although the trajectories are somewhat different, they too are vulnerable to modern slavery in the months to come. Both the NGO officials, and the interviewed workers agreed that the reason there were no known attempts (by November 2020) at trafficking women on shady work promises was the strict lockdown regulations that caused many shady work opportunities (such as massage parlors; domestic work) to temporarily disappear. By August, the island relaxed its lockdown regulations and some of these precarious, urban job opportunities started reappearing. The second wave again interrupted this regrouping and there are, at the moment, very few shady opportunities available. Moreover, home workers generally are more stably entrenched in the rural social lives, and only a handful considered leaving their village homes for work in Colombo. While successfully engaged in entrepreneurial activities they ensured harmonious co-existence with family and community members and continued to build supportive social networks (Hewamanne 2020). These social networks, and their previous family and community-oriented activities, mitigate some of the adverse effects of the financial downturn. However, some have taken up farming and domestic work under exploitative conditions to earn at least their monthly loan repayments. Within these jobs they are vulnerable to labor exploitation as well as demands of sexual favors. Workers also noted that the loan collectors have made passes at them saying, 'there are other ways to pay back, if they are interested.' Several also reported knowing of women who may have succumbed to these demands. Obviously, the pandemic, curfew and the lock-down have increased these hard-working women's vulnerability to modern slavery.

Where is the State?

When the Brandix cluster appeared in October 2020, the media and the general public criticized garment workers in demeaning ways, blaming their supposedly bad behavior for the outbreak (Thushari 2020a). It was first reported that the patient zero of the second wave was from this factory, although within few days that was disputed. It was soon revealed that the symptoms were present among substantial numbers of Brandix workers at least two weeks before the first positive case was discovered. According to this first diagnosed worker, when she complained, the factory health center gave her pills for gastritis and sent her back to work. Others who were showing symptoms were also haphazardly diagnosed as suffering from common colds and were ordered to keep working. In the context of job scarcity, none of the sickly workers felt it was safe to refuse working, lest they would be replaced by the hoards of women who were waiting outside the FTZ gates to be hired on a daily basis.

This scenario demonstrates the complete disregard for worker welfare, and oft reported inhumane conditions where sickly workers are forced to work at the threat of losing their jobs (Hewamanne 2006; 2008). This situation highlights how the pandemic had increased the

vulnerability to modern slavery in numerous ways. Brandix is a well-reputed company with many branches throughout the island. Reports of blatant disregard for government health regulations (masking, distancing, and sanitizing rules) and enforcing draconian working conditions to finish large orders at Brandix underline the human cost of ‘just in time production’ demands of contemporary global production. Such everyday inhumane work conditions would have continued, but for the risk the Brandix cluster posed for the outside community via workers’ societal contacts and use of public transportation. Four other factories had to shut down their operations while a number of cases were identified within workers’ boarding houses. The government responded by arbitrarily deciding which boarding houses to be isolated, and which groups of workers to be bused to quarantine centers in faraway places. The disorganized efforts to contain the spread added to already existing stressors and deprivations among workers (Thushari 2020b).

All this leads to an inevitable question: where is the state in all this? Until the Brandix cluster appeared, the Sri Lankan government managed the pandemic well. The numbers of infected were low and in August, and in September no cases of local infections were found. The country became relaxed, although strict regulations were still in place. This large cluster appearing in a garment factory is thus not a coincident, but a manifestation of extreme exploitation that goes unchecked when the workers are marginalized twice over as poor and women. If Brandix has these conditions, considering its well-publicized CSR policies, one shudders to think what workers may be going through in less-reputed, urban subcontracting outfits. How could a state allow this to happen? It happens when states subcontract some of its sovereign authority to private corporations and wait for CSR policies to ensure the rights of its citizenry. In such situations, the state is simultaneously weak and powerful. Powerful as the main source of rights, justice and law enforcement; weak because these powers are partially outsourced. Especially when there are no checks to ensure that the private corporations properly carry out the duties of providing protection and welfare, calamities such as Brandix COVID-19 cluster happen.

Conditions forcing people to work while suffering from COVID-19 symptoms also point toward the lack of contingency plans to protect precarious workers in neoliberal economies. The sudden closure of factories, difficulties of reaching their villages in the beginning, and the chaos of distributing the Rs. 5000 government hand out, clearly demonstrated the unpreparedness of government agencies and lack of policy with regard to disaster management. Moreover, the government’s approach so far had been gender blind. Although the UN response checker (2020) notes Sri Lanka as having initiated one gender-based COVID response program, it is difficult to find information of that project. Both UNWOMEN (2020) and UNICEF (2020) note the importance of gender-based responses to pandemic. Some common recommendations are to strengthen livelihoods of most affected and at-risk women, increasing such women’s leadership and voice in the COVID-19 response, and supporting positive social norms to prevent and mitigate violence against women. UNICEF notes, maintaining core health and education services for women and girls, care for caregivers, using existing women’s rights networks to support connectivity, and ensuring gender data are available, analyzed and actionable.

Poor countries like Sri Lanka are overwhelmed by the sheer economic fallout of lockdown. In Sri Lanka, policies, and laws are formulated centrally without any concerns toward intersectional inequalities. Even with successful vaccination programs, the pandemic does not seem to go away in the foreseeable future. Thus, it will be crucial for Sri Lankan government to develop gender sensitive COVID-19 responses.

This paper argues that the pandemic and the lock down had increased marginalized women’s vulnerability to several forms of modern slavery, and that the state and the corporate

sector collusion resulted in certain invisibilities that aid this increased vulnerability. The paper thus calls for urgent development of contingency livelihood safety mechanisms and contend that any such plans must take into account gendered insecurities, given how women's income is closely intertwined with decision making abilities, social status and physical safety.

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