

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WOMEN WORKERS IN FREE TRADE ZONES AND GARMENT FACTORIES IN SRI LANKA



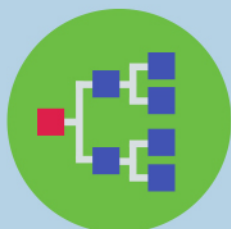
Overview

Women workers within Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones (FTZs) were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic through the loss of livelihoods, job insecurity, renewed stigma and discrimination, and increased labour exploitation. The pandemic also exposed systemic vulnerabilities of women workers in the country's FTZs and the need for the garment industry to address the poor working conditions and inadequate social welfare protections to safeguard the human rights of all employees.

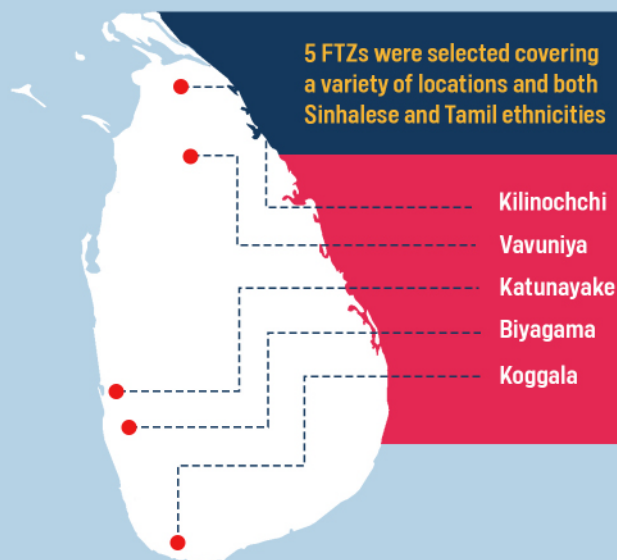
Research methodology



The study used an exploratory research methodology with qualitative research in focus. Researchers conducted key informant and focus group interviews to assess the impact of the pandemic.



A stratified sample was selected consisting of **180** women workers.

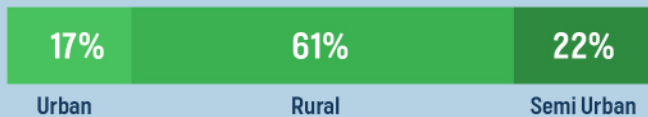


★ No job loss was reported in Kilinochchi and Vavuniya, reducing the total from 200 to 180.

Sample demographics

• Nature of residence

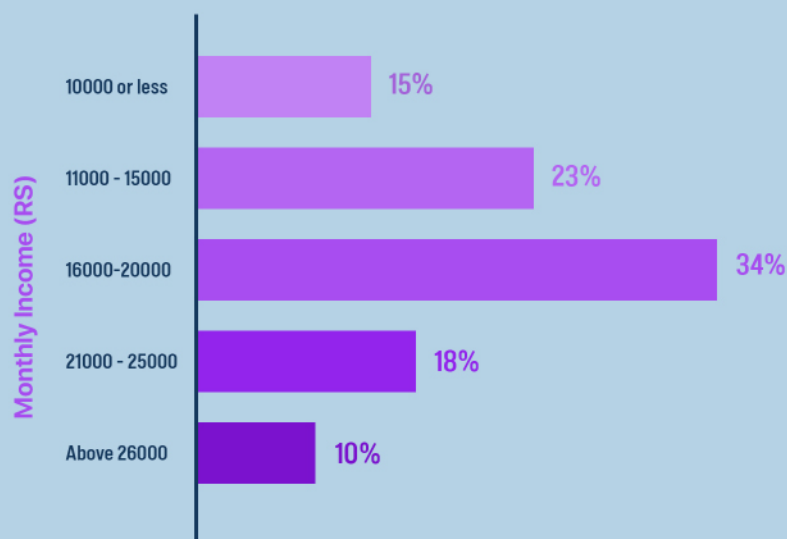
Location



Nature of the residence at present



• Financial status



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"We were so helpless, and our grievances were not heard by the authorities. The quick decisions taken by the management made us more vulnerable. The problem was not only related to not having work, but when we were called back, we had to work double-time because there was a shortage of labour since the management did not request all workers to report to work again"
(Focus group no 1, Koggala, personal communication, 2020).

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55% of the sample have loans to repay

* Source: Field data, 2020-2021

Findings



Women are disproportionately affected

Women FTZ workers occupy less skilled and technical roles therefore are more likely to be replaced and suffer job loss or changes to their role and job category.

Impact on employment status

Typical impacts include job loss, temporary suspension, reduced income, altered job role, job insecurity, changes in employment type to part-time or casual basis.



Impact on working conditions

Reductions in the workforce and increased production targets resulted in poorer working conditions, heightened workload, increased working hours, workplace exploitation and harassment, and subpar health and sanitation measures.



Personal impact

Women working in FTZs experienced financial adversity, greater stress and personal hardships. Those who continued to reside in FTZs faced forced home evictions, loneliness, and harassment.



Impact on families

Breadwinners' loss of income resulted in families falling into poverty and worsening family relations.



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"I had to go through so many difficulties as I received only half of my salary. But I had all the responsibilities of taking care of myself and my family. Sometimes, when I paid the boarding fee and spent money on food I had almost nothing left, however, I had to manage all my family needs with the remaining amount as I am the only person providing for them" (Focus group no 1, Koggala, personal communication, 2020).

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Social impact

An apparel factory being at the epicentre of the second wave resulted in garment workers being treated as disease vectors and led to the re-emergence of stigma and discrimination of FTZ workers. The stigma was worsened by the media and state institutions.



Impact on business and human rights

Most businesses failed to implement emergency labour protection interventions. The pandemic led to the escalation of human rights abuses: poor working conditions, poor production relations, and inadequate severance payments.

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"On some days we didn't even have a glass of water because we were overloaded with work. On top of that, supervisors had something to complain about all the time. It was so stressful to work in the factory". (Focus group no 1, Vavuniya, personal communication, 2020).

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Recommendations to safeguard the human rights of women FTZ workers

1. Ensure protection of employee rights and fair and just treatment of workers

The Ministry of Labour should ensure that all industries uphold ILO labour treaties, expedite labour tribunals, establish an independent body for the remediation of FTZ worker grievances, and enhance legal protection of all worker categories.

2. Improve employee welfare

The Government and other relevant Ministries should establish a national coordination mechanisms and monitoring committees, to ensure the development and implementation of factory welfare mechanisms (e.g.: decent hours, severance payments and compensation), especially during economic crises.

3. Establish healthy and safe work environments at the workplace

Businesses need to improve health and sanitation measures (e.g.: provision of work breaks, changing rooms, masks, sanitizers etc.) across all industries.

4. Address systemic stigma faced by FTZ workers

Trade unions, civil society organizations and other relevant institutions need to increase public awareness on issues faced by women FTZ workers through public forums, discussions, and sensitization sessions for media and the general public.

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“Some of our colleagues couldn't send their children to school. Teachers had openly asked not to bring children in if the mother is a garment worker. Another worker's husband lost his job as a three-wheeler driver due to the stigma faced. The owner of the three-wheeler had asked him not to come to work”. (Focus group no. 2, Koggala, personal communication, 2020).

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