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A nightmare in a 'darker' world: persons with blindness under the Sri Lanka's COVID-19 shutdown

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all wakes of lives in many countries including Sri Lanka, an island nation in the South Asian region. Among severely hit community groups due to COVID-19 have been the persons with visual impairment and blindness, who represent the majority of disabled people. Taking into consideration that the persons with disabilities generally fall into poverty-stricken cluster of the population and Sri Lanka has been passing turbulent times even prior to COVID-19, this paper argues that the people with visual impairment and blindness have been pushed from bad to worse, due to the shocks of COVID-19 strike.

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Introduction

All nations, including Sri Lanka, have been working hard on mitigating the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic and taking emergency measures to overcome the emerging setbacks. The disease has been spread over 200 nations with over one hundred two million people infected, recording a death toll exceeding two million as of January 2021 (World Health Organization 2020). The pandemic has lasted more than one year by now with the fear of striking a second or third wave. Among severely affected due to this pandemic are the people with disabilities in most countries, including Iran (Jalali et al. 2020), China (Qi and Hu 2020) and Romania (Safta-Zecheria 2020).

Sri Lanka, an island nation with a population of 21.68 million (2018 estimates) in the South Asian region has also been under siege. Census of 2012 estimated that 8.7% of Sri Lankan population above the age of five live with some form of disability, out of which 996,939 are visually impaired or blind

(DCS 2012). This is a substantial fraction of the island's population. A 44-year-old Chinese woman tourist was the first confirmed COVID-19 patient in the country, reported in January 2020. Disruption to day-to-day living and economic activities of all including people with disabilities, which lasted for over a period of one year by now, has been unprecedented. This brief article is based on early data of a large study, and is aimed at uncovering the specific challenges encountered by the people with visual impairment and blindness and their implications, due to COVID-19 pandemic situation, alongside serious economic downturn in Sri Lanka.

Consequences of COVID-19 and economic challenges

As a nation, Sri Lanka has been critically challenged in several standpoints due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The health issues are eminent but the worst hit might be the already ailing economy of the country. An eminent business personality who won the title 'Icon of Public Sector Leadership' by Business World International, opened; '*... The logic is that we are impacted on all revenue earning sectors - tourism, exports and foreign remittances. In last week, the currency has depreciated to Sri Lanka Rupees (LKR) 187 on the US \$ and the stock market declined to 2009 levels. As a country already lagging behind the region at a 2.6% GDP growth and household income declining by a negative 7.4% in the 4th quarter of 2019, COVID-19 is certainly a severe threat to the economy*' (Athukorala 2020). Thus, the economic problems facing Sri Lanka today, may not be merely attributed to COVID-19 pandemic, but rather have been aggravated by it.

In addition to strict health measures introduced by the Government, including maintaining social distancing and wearing face masks, several stringent restrictions were imposed. They include, establishment of a high powered 'COVID-19 Task Force' headed by the acting Chief of Defence and the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army for overall coordination, strict travel bans to foreign countries, closing down of all ports and airports, regional wise and Island wide curfews. A 24h curfew prevailed in the three commercial districts for weeks in the Western Province. (Price Waterhouse Coopers 2020).

Sri Lankan Government made a monthly payment of LKR 5000/- each for the months of April and May 2020 to the households 'below poverty level', as an immediate relief measure to ease the financial burden due to COVID-19 shutdown (Health Promotion Bureau 2020). Invariably, most families having members with disabilities received this payment. Person with disabilities is also entitled to a regular monthly 'disability allowance' of LKR 5000/= paid thorough Ministry of Social Empowerment. However, such money inflows to a poor family with persons with disabilities would be barely sufficient for minimum elementary living, if they do not have alternative income sources.

Challenges to persons with visual impairments and blindness

The challenges to persons with blindness and visual impairments are diverse and could impact their personal, mobility, psychological, social and economic concerns. This is mainly because the environment is set up for those with visual sensory modality (i.e. seeing) for receiving information and exploring the environment. The blind people cope with this challenge by exhausting other four sensory modalities, namely, auditory (hearing), gustatory (taste), olfactory (smell) and tactile/haptic memory (touch) (Hutmacher 2019; Rupini and Nandagopal 2015). It can be seen that with the introduction of COVID-19 health measures of maintaining physical distancing and wearing the face mask, the blind people are further constrained with not being able to experience the environment through taste, smell and touch.

One senior blind teacher from Sothern Sri Lanka reiterated the problems associated with the implementation of COVID-19 related health measures, thus:

we mostly depend on smell, touch and taste for finding things, move around and carry out all our activities. (for example) When we are to get down by bus near a hospital, we sense it through 'medicine smell' and ask someone to ring the bell. We decide on the quality of 'dry fish' or 'onions' (i.e. most food items) by smell and touch. ... Even while travel around, people help us by holding our hands.... We do not have support like guide dogs in developed countries...with these COVID restrictions we became really helpless....

Many disabled people in Sri Lanka experience poverty. Further, the inability for the persons with visual impairments to secure a decent employment may contribute much to this unfavourable situation. These problems are mainly attributed to physical, social and attitudinal barriers rather than the capacity of the disabled person. The following narration of a blind chairman of a large charity dedicated for the persons with visual impairments and blindness, depicts the factual situation of hardships experienced by this community.

... Our organisation is the largest society with over 1,500 members. Only a very little number of visually impaired people go to the University.On average a maximum of 25 to 30 persons may be going to Universities in a year. Few go up to AL (i.e. GCE Advanced Level) and another small number up to OL (i.e. GCE Ordinary Level). That is also very limited. All others are poorly educated. No government jobs are available for persons even with OL or AL. Private sector is the only option. Even then, this COVID-19 has put everyone in trouble. Even our company has curtailed all bonus payments.

There is another problem. Some blind persons do not prefer to do a job in private companies. They say that about LKR. 10,000 to 15,000 salary is insufficient. But, I always encourage them to get into some decent occupation. I have seen that most of our people resort to some form of self-employment. This number may be over 60-70% of our blind population...I must tell you that they are not running 'true' self-employment enterprises. They mostly depend on sympathy of others. Indirectly, they plead from others. Few sell

lottery tickets. Some sell books or things like incense sticks in crowded streets, trains, busses or near temples and churches. Most, maybe all, are pleading money from others. Although not counted, there are many blind persons go around with a begging bowl. Sri Lankan people are very religious and believe in accumulating merit by giving to poor and disabled. If they have some money in their pocket, they are ready to donate some money to such 'needy' persons. To my understanding, these 'beggars' get a reasonable average income. Now, to answer your question about how we are affected... I would say that all these so called 'self-employed' persons are now in serious trouble. They do not get any income at all these days... due to travel restrictions and curfew. But, I see that when everyone is in trouble economically, our people will be pushed from bad to worse.

Another employed graduate teacher from North Central Province of Sri Lanka spoke about the psychological challenges he encountered during COVID-19 shutdown; *'Since I get a monthly salary I am ok with money. But other days I meet people and my sister brings in food for me. Now no one come to see me. Even my sister leaves my plate near the doorstep and vanish. Although I can understand the reaction of others, I am 'locked down' in my room.... whole day.no one understands my loneliness...'*

Given above are only three excerpts of the interview transcripts, with visually disabled persons. It is evident that they are severely challenged economically, socially and psychologically due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Concluding remarks

It can be concluded that the persons with visual impairments and blindness encounter many unseen challenges, of which some are unique to social and cultural norms of Sri Lanka. In particular, the problems of so called self-employed who makes a living with 'selling small items' depending heavily on sympathy of buyers are frequently seen in local streets. These issues clearly map with the factors of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health –ICF – (World Health Organization 2001) framework. This is a comprehensive model that has been developed with the aim of describing and organising information on functioning and disability of people. It provides a standard way of examining the activities and functioning of disabled people, both at individual level, and the interactions with society and the environment. As Jalali et al. (2020) highlights, since 'poverty and disability are two sides of the same coin all over the world'; other issues may be similar to other countries. In Sri Lanka too, disabled persons who are under privileged and somewhat socially side-lined even under normal conditions. Hence, they are inevitably further hampered in situations like COVID-19 pandemic. The policymakers must give due prominence to groups like people with disabilities when addressing disaster recovery and rehabilitation programmes; the ground level workers must be trained to work with them in an empathetic and reassuring manner. These findings opens up a vast area for further research which would contribute much towards

empowering people with disabilities, in particular, those with visual impairment and blindness.

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