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POLICYINSIGHTS

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STRENGTHENING RESILIENT AND GENDER-SENSITIVE PANDEMIC POLICY RESPONSES: INSIGHTS FROM SRI LANKA'S APPAREL INDUSTRY

1. Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic severely impacted global health systems, especially in resource-limited low- and middle-income countries. Sri Lanka was no exception, facing significant challenges in delivering essential healthcare services during the crisis. In response, the Sri Lankan government implemented various policy measures to protect public health while stabilising the economy. However, how gender-sensitive and effective were these COVID-19 policy responses on public health issues faced by garment sector workers? The Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) answers this question in a recent study on improving the pandemic policy responses to reduce adverse health effects on women workers in the export-oriented apparel industry of Sri Lanka. The study uses qualitative phenomenological research design to examine policy formation and implementation gaps, shedding light on key challenges and lessons learned. The findings aim to guide policymakers in developing more inclusive and resilient crisis management strategies for the future.

2. Apparel Industry in Sri Lanka

With a long history in apparel manufacturing, Sri Lanka expanded notably into the global market following the introduction of market-oriented liberal economic policies in the late 1970s. Since then, the apparel industry has become a key contributor to the Sri Lankan economy, serving as a major foreign exchange earner and a significant source of employment, particularly for women. The industry has been female-dominated since its inception, with women consistently making up over 80% of the workforce.¹ By 2018, approximately 300,000 women were employed in the sector.²

Box 1: Gender Perspectives in Policy Responses

Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that society considers appropriate for men and women at a given time. These gender roles are socially constructed and learned through socialisation processes.³ Gender is also a broader concept than sex, which refers to the biological and physical characteristics that distinguish males and females.⁴ Gender and health crises, such as pandemics, are inextricably interlinked to the extent that gender becomes a crucial factor in shaping health systems and their capacity to face pandemics. It influences individual susceptibility to health risks and their experience within healthcare systems.⁵ Gender inequality remains a widespread barrier to achieving health equity worldwide.⁶ Health promotion policies have largely overlooked gender inequities, yet these have the potential to drive meaningful change if gender equity is to be prioritised.⁷ However, evidence indicates that pandemic response policies often overlook gender inequities, leading to disproportionate disadvantages for women.⁸ This highlights the importance of having gender-transformative policies, which aim to create long-term, structural change by addressing the root causes of gender inequality. Gender transformative policies aim to remove barriers like unequal roles and rights, ensuring that all genders, including minorities, are valued equally and that disadvantaged groups have fairer opportunities.⁹ Gender-transformative health policies can help ensure that health systems effectively serve marginalised populations, even during pandemics.¹⁰

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the real-life experiences of people involved in Sri Lanka's pandemic policy decisions (i.e., qualitative phenomenological research design). To gather insights, we conducted twenty in-depth interviews with key government officials who shaped and implemented policies. Additionally, we conducted separate interviews with a representative from the Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka (JAFFSL) and a representative from a trade union.

The research followed two main steps:

1. Understanding whether the policies formulated in response to the pandemic were gender sensitive - We examined whether the pandemic response policies were gender-sensitive by analysing recognition and acceptance of gender issues, women's participation in decision-making, and how the government formulated policies. Using Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework, a widely used public policy analysis tool, we explored whether these concerns were prioritised, the solutions that were considered, and how political factors shaped decision-making.¹¹ This approach helped assess whether/how gender concerns were effectively integrated into the policy response.
2. Evaluating policy effectiveness - We assessed how well the policies worked by inquiring key stakeholders about their experiences. The evaluation focused on whether the policies were fair, practical, and widely accepted and included input from different groups. To better understand why some policies were more effective than others, we used Campbell's institutional approach, which looks at how existing government structures and decision-making processes shape policy outcomes.¹²

4. Key Findings

4.1 Policy Formulation

The Military-led Pandemic Response Mechanism in Sri Lanka: The National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO) was established in March 2020 with a broader mandate to coordinate preventive and management measures and ensure that healthcare and other essential services were effectively mobilised. Led by the Chief

of Defence and Commander of the Army, NOCPCO served as the central umbrella organisation, overseeing all preventive, control, quarantine, and pandemic-related operations across the country. The NOCPCO functioned as the national body for spearheading the management of COVID-19 impacts to provide essential health care and public services to the community, along with the three task forces appointed by the President. These mechanisms functioned as a multi-stakeholder effort, broadly focusing on four Lines of Operations (LOOs): Military, Police, Intelligence LOO, Medical and Health care LOO, Psychological Support LOO, and Economic Stability and Community Well-being LOO.

Strong Female Representation in Policy Formation, but Limited Evidence of their Active Engagement:

The high level of female participation in policy formulation (exceeding 50%) was framed as a positive step toward gender inclusivity. However, the lack of active engagement in decision-making was not widely acknowledged as a problem within the policy-making bodies. This gap in problem recognition contributed to a lack of targeted solutions for ensuring women's meaningful participation beyond symbolic representation.

"At that time, quarantine centres were primarily managed by the armed forces, and it was unclear how decisions were made. Women's involvement in decision-making was minimal, especially in the early stages, with no evident gender-sensitive approach. Decisions appeared to be ad hoc, focusing solely on designating quarantine centres for those infected." (Interviewee 01, Decision maker category)

At that time, there was no structured mechanism to ensure that women's voices influenced decisions. The focus was mainly on numerical representation rather than women's decision-making power. Without formalised processes to incorporate female perspectives into policymaking, gender-transformative policies remained limited in scope and impact.

The political environment had a strong impact on policy decisions during the pandemic. Although Sri Lanka had already shown commitments to gender inclusivity, decision-making remained controlled by military-led, male-dominated networks. As a result, women were included in policymaking but had little in terms of real influence over policy direction.

4.2 Policy Effectiveness

While Pandemic Policy Responses were Primarily Seen as Effective, Specific Concerns Remained:

Sri Lanka's pandemic policy responses were perceived mainly as effective, though specific concerns remained. A key factor behind this success was multi-stakeholder coordination among various Ministries and Departments, facilitating efficient policy formulation and implementation. However, concerns were raised about military-led initiatives, which led to militarisation of the government's response. While no significant overall equity concerns were identified, certain vulnerable groups—such as female-headed households and female workers in the informal sector—were disproportionately affected. Limited resources exacerbated equity issues, particularly threatening the income security of female workers. Additionally, rural communities faced greater disadvantages due to poor access to healthcare facilities and technological devices, which limited their ability to adapt to pandemic-related challenges.

Lack of Understanding of Gendered Vulnerabilities Faced by Female Apparel Workers during COVID-19 Hindered the Policy Effectiveness:

The effectiveness of Sri Lanka's pandemic response policies was undermined by a lack of understanding of gendered vulnerabilities within the export-oriented apparel industry. Adhering to government health and safety protocols became increasingly difficult for those working in the export-oriented apparel industry due to unsanitary living conditions in accommodation facilities. These locations often lacked safety, security, access to clean water, and proper sanitation, which posed serious threats to the health and well-being of female workers and heightened their exposure to contagion risks. Additionally, there was a rise in social stigma surrounding female workers in the apparel sector, as they were unjustly portrayed as virus carriers.

“When they (women who worked in the apparel industry) went home, the family asked them not to go to work because they were all in fear of catching the disease. They were cornered by the villagers; they would be like a “garment kella” coming with corona, and then she would spread that to the whole village.” (Interviewee 16, Trade union category)

One of the significant shortcomings of the response from government authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic was the lack of gender-sensitive quarantine

centres. These centres should have addressed women's medical, nutritional, hygienic, and safety needs. Moreover, the increased caregiving responsibilities resulting from school closures, compounded by the absence of standardised childcare facilities, took a toll on the well-being of female workers and exacerbated their already declining health conditions. The failure to consider these gender-specific burdens in policy design and implementation reduced the overall effectiveness of Sri Lanka's pandemic response in protecting female workers in the apparel sector.

Resource Constraints Hindered Efficient and Gender-sensitive Policy Responses:

Limited technical capacity to face a pandemic hindered policy responses in terms of combatting the COVID-19 crisis as Sri Lanka was not equipped with adequate laboratory and testing facilities to cater to the healthcare needs of the nation in the hour of need. Further, the government faced financial constraints regarding testing and purchasing masks and personal protective equipment (PPE). Moreover, even though the government promoted remote work during the lockdown, a dearth of technological devices to support remote work was a barrier to achieve its purpose. Moreover, remote work was not feasible in sectors like apparel, where physical presence is essential for ensuring uninterrupted production.

Lack of a National Strategic Plan for Pandemic Preparedness and Response Weakened Policy Effectiveness:

Many key informants highlighted the need for a national strategic plan for preparedness and response to minimise adverse impacts and enhance resilience against future pandemics. According to key informants, Sri Lanka's policy effectiveness could have been significantly improved with a well-structured national pandemic preparedness and response plan.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Policy Formulation

Strengthening the Active Engagement of Females in Policy Formulation: Empowering women in decision-making requires creating opportunities for leadership development through various measures. To move beyond symbolic representation, a comprehensive strategy should integrate gender socialisation, career advancement, fair remuneration, work-life balance, and mentorship.¹³ These measures will help equip women with the skills, support, and confidence needed to take on leadership roles and actively contribute to decision-making processes. This, in turn, will enhance the development of gender-sensitive policies at the national level. A strong political commitment is essential to ensuring that the voice of women influences policies aimed at addressing gender inequality.

5.2 Policy Effectiveness

Promote Gender-sensitive Policy Responses: The pandemic highlighted opportunities to implement gender-transformative strategies, revealing structural gaps and equity concerns that disproportionately affect women. Addressing these challenges requires systemic gender-sensitive reforms supported by evidence-based policymaking. Government responses must be inclusive, ensuring that women's specific challenges are considered in policy formulation and implementation. A gender-responsive approach can help address or mitigate the difficulties faced by women during a pandemic. For instance, such an approach would guarantee safe and quality accommodation for female workers and provide gender-sensitive infrastructure and services, such as quarantine centres and standardised care facilities, to ease their burden.¹⁴

Invest in Pandemic Preparedness: Our findings reveal that resource constraint was a major factor behind the inefficiencies in Sri Lanka's pandemic policy responses. While the nature and severity of the next pandemic remain uncertain, lessons learnt from COVID-19 must be leveraged to build a more resilient response system. Strengthening technical capacity,

healthcare infrastructure-including laboratory and testing facilities- establishing dedicated quarantine centres for apparel sector workers within export processing zones, and improving digital accessibility are important measures for effective crisis management. Establishing sustainable funding mechanisms will help address financial constraints, ensuring the continuous availability of essential supplies and uninterrupted healthcare services. Although fiscal limitations may pose challenges, allocating resources for pandemic preparedness should be prioritised as part of a long-term national strategy. Such an approach will contribute to a more resilient and gender-sensitive policy framework, better equipping Sri Lanka for future crises.

Formulate a National Strategic Plan for Pandemic Preparedness and Response: The COVID-19 crisis has underscored the importance of a comprehensive framework that includes preparedness and surveillance, rapid response and containment, economic and health impact mitigation, community engagement, and post-pandemic recovery. Strengthening government preparedness requires a well-coordinated, proactive approach, ensuring that future responses are more effective and inclusive. Importantly, such a plan must be gender-sensitive, addressing unique challenges of diverse groups.

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This policy insight was prepared by IPS researchers Sunimalee Madurawala (sunimalee@ips.lk) and Nethmi Gunasekara (nethmi@ips.lk) based on findings from the study carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, National Planning Department of Sri Lanka, and University of Ottawa, Canada on 'A participatory study on improving the pandemic policy responses to reduce adverse health effects on women workers in the export-oriented apparel industry of Sri Lanka'.

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