

FORUM

Twin Tragedies: The Impacts of COVID-19 and Economic Crisis on Returnee Migrant Women Workers in the Tea Plantation Sector of Sri Lanka

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This article examines women returnee migrant workers' experience in the tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current economic crisis. In Sri Lanka, the pandemic has worsened the already dire economic situation of women returnee migrant workers, yet there is no study focusing on this group of women. Based on in-depth interviews with ten Sri Lankan women returnee migrant workers who were previously tea pickers in tea estates, this research shows how women returnee migrant workers' experience economic reintegration in the COVID-19 era and how gender-discriminatory economic policies at the local and global levels play a role in these women workers' livelihoods and reintegration process. Further, the paper utilizes intersectionality to understand the diverse experiences of returnee migrant women's economic security.

Studies on gender and migration and intersectionality are growing (Bastia 2014; Amelina and Lutz 2019). This article builds from the theoretical discussions on gender, migration, and intersectionality to understand how certain forms of disadvantages intersect and how women experience these disadvantages within the context of return and during the process of negotiating their livelihoods. It derives data from in-depth interviews with ten returnee women migrant workers.

The tea plantation sector is key to the national economy and provides jobs for millions of Sri Lankans, especially women (Chandrabose and Sivapragasam 2011). Despite its contribution to the economy, the Sri Lankan economy remains impacted by protracted economic, social, and political issues (Fazeeha and Lund 2009). Poverty, unemployment, gender-based violence, women's oppression, low wages, healthcare, housing, and education are some pressing concerns raised by researchers (Chandrabose and Sivapragasam 2011; Bass 2019; Luna and Whetstone 2022). Many tea plantation workers found themselves entangled in a web of socio-economic problems resulting from the structural changes and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. As a result of these economic challenges, many women turned into breadwinners and migrated mainly to the Middle East in search of employment. Research shows that most Sri Lankan women migrants work in care and domestic sectors in Middle Eastern countries (Chandrabose and Sivapragasam 2011). According to the

information technology division of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, low-skilled women migrants have increased from 81,499 in 2018 to 124,091 in 2022.

With global pandemic lockdowns and shutdowns, many migrant workers—especially women who had been working in the Middle East—returned to Sri Lanka at the peak of COVID 19, at the same time, the country was struggling with a severe economic crisis. Here is the story of a woman migrant returnee who lost her foreign job during the pandemic and faced job rejection from her previous employer (tea estate management).

I went to Kuwait as the income from my job was not enough to feed out family. I was forced to return due to Corona. Now, I cannot go back to my previous job in the estate, as the management refuses to take me back. They have taken a few young women who returned from the Middle East as casual workers. (A woman returnee migrant worker, age 54)

The above story indicates the precarity and intersectional risks for returnee migrant workers. This finding resonates with Anderson and Eskandari's contribution to this forum, which found that women working in precarious sectors are more likely to be unemployed during the pandemic. The types of work returnee women were seeking were insecure, low-paid, lack social benefits, and were risky in terms of physical and mental health. Returnee women often sought reemployment at tea estates they had previously worked at before moving away, yet very few migrant returnee women were employed as casual workers in the same tea estates where they worked as permanent workers previously. Women migrant returnees who got jobs in tea estates shared that after their return, they faced discrimination in terms of benefits compared to what they received when they worked as permanent workers. The tea plantation companies had already taken measures to curtail welfare, enforce premature retirement, and cut down the labor force, as measures connected to privatization. The above quote supports feminist scholars' argument on how the privatization of the plantation sector has detrimental impacts on the plantation workers, who are predominantly women (Chandrabose and Sivapragasam 2011).

Among the ten research participants, three women shared that they approached their friends to help them find work in the care sector and were awaiting responses. However, due to the economic crisis, many women care workers were laid off (Luna and Whetstone 2022). Another woman returnee said she was seeking other channels to migrate again. Among the interviewed, six women said they had returned voluntarily as they did not have access to healthcare facilities during the pandemic. Four of the returnees were forced to return empty-handed by their employers, as the labor recruitment system (Kafala system) in these countries provides no compensation for premature returns. All interviewees narrated that their family members also lost their jobs due to the pandemic and the economic crisis. Most of their male family members were working in Colombo or other cities in the fields of construction and food, which were severely affected by both the pandemic and the economic crisis. The condition at home worsened these women's situation. With the rise of food prices, housing costs, medical costs, and children's school fees—women's families (mostly husbands) who managed household finances could barely save the remittances sent by their wives. Women returnees had no funds to start up even small businesses. It is also important to note that migrant women hardly get the opportunity to learn new skills while working abroad and face extreme challenges to enter job markets upon their return.

Three of the returnee migrants shared they pawned their jewelry to make ends meet and pay for their daily expenses:

I do not know how long I can go like this. I bought some jewellery as dowry for my daughters. But now, my immediate need is to feed my family. I had been in Kuwait for 5 years. But all my savings are spent on meeting our daily needs. With the economic

hardship, most women who were working as housemaids in Colombo have also returned...I do not know what would be the future for me. (A woman returnee migrant worker, age 50)

Although the pandemic and economic crisis affected the whole country, prejudiced practices such as dowry (bride's families are forced to offer the bridegroom's family cash, jewelery, and other goods as a condition for marriage) continued even during the pandemic economic crisis. The Dowry system put extra financial pressure on families where households were forced to drain all savings and created uncertainty. The dowry system hits women returnees' families especially hard because of job insecurity and poverty.

It is pertinent to note that the plantation sector has been identified as a vulnerable, poor, and marginalized sector in the country historically. Research shows that returnee women are trying to find employment for other family members to cover the income loss as most of them could not go back to their previous employments. In addition, women reported that they have already started home gardening and raising poultry to supplement their income. They also depend on charities by local donors and NGOs. In their contribution to this forum, Kollie et al. also document how women in Liberia made similar adaptations during the pandemic. However, despite all these risk mitigation mechanisms, women are more likely to shoulder the responsibilities of financially supporting their families as single earners in their families. In the absence of opportunities for work within the estates, and as a result of the combined impacts of the pandemic and economic insecurity, women may choose to opt for unsafe (re)migration and engage in socially unacceptable employment outside the estates.

This research contributes to the empirical findings on the impacts of the pandemic and the economic crisis on returnee women migrant workers from the tea plantation workers of Sri Lanka. The article underlines that the pandemic and the current economic crisis have amplified the pre-existing vulnerabilities of the women, causing their situation to worsen. It also documents the gendered nature of the global and local employment systems and structural inequalities that work against migrant women re-produce vulnerability and reshape their livelihoods and reintegration process. Further, it unveils that the country's current political and economic situation is in the process of adding new precarities to the lives of returnee migrant women in Sri Lanka. The findings of this research imply that there is a need for an urgent policy intervention as well as a re-thinking of the dimension of return in the context of migrant workers and economic reintegration in the COVID-19 era. Implementing a feminist financing scheme to address women's economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis is one such policy solution. This scheme will also support the reduction of structural economic inequalities that the pandemic has widened and help create inclusive economic reintegration of returnees' migrant women workers in the post-COVID-19 context in Sri Lanka. Future research is needed to explore the vulnerable and risky coping mechanisms adopted by returnee migrant women workers in their attempts to respond to the impacts of the pandemic and economic crisis.

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