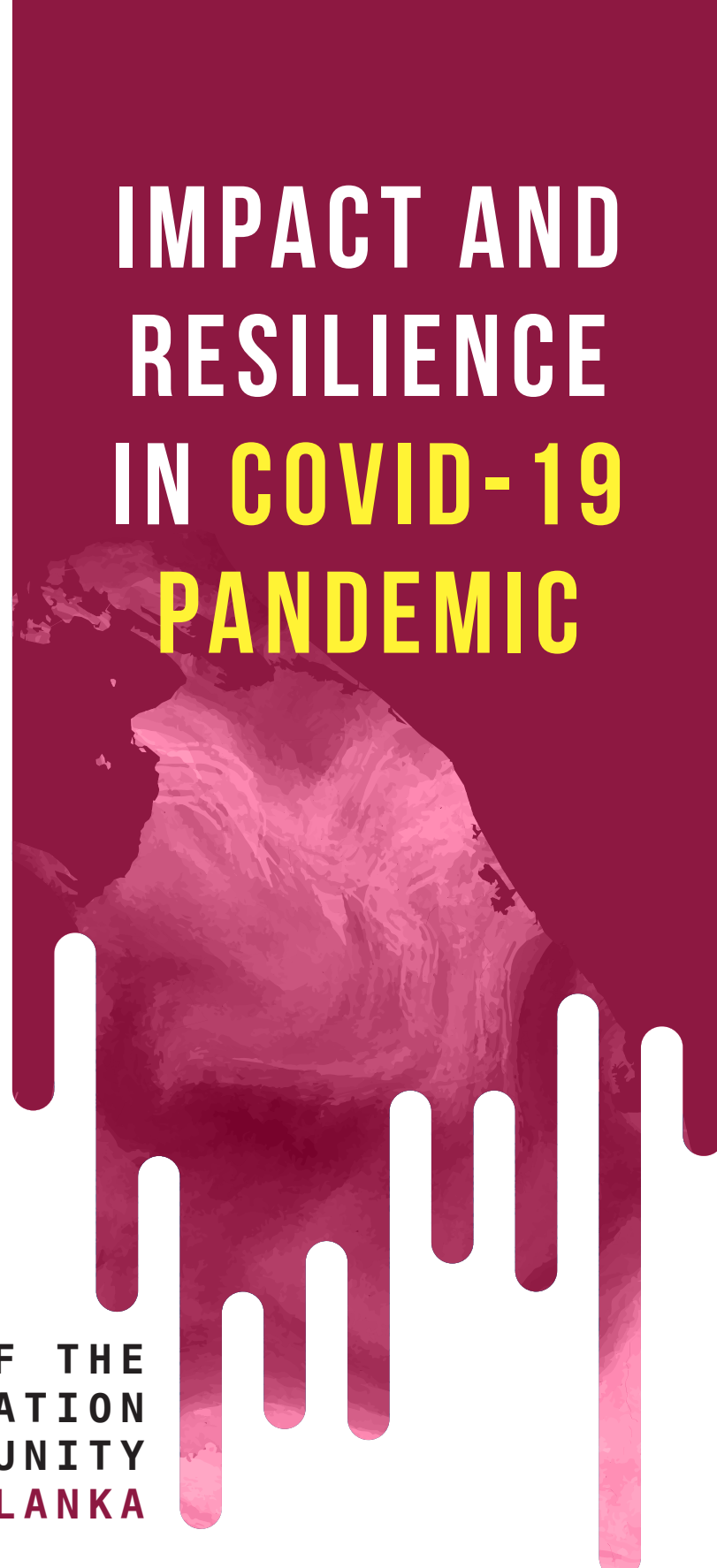


# IMPACT AND RESILIENCE IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC



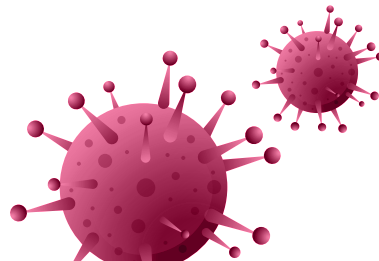
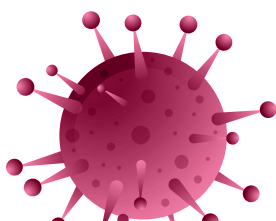
A STUDY OF THE  
PLANTATION  
COMMUNITY  
IN SRI LANKA



Asia Dalit Rights Forum



THE INCLUSIVITY  
PROJECT





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COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA



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THE INCLUSIVITY  
PROJECT



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## **ABOUT ASIA DALIT RIGHTS FORUM**

Asia Dalit Rights Forum (ADRF) is a platform of Dalits, and those working with Dalits in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka committed to the empowerment and emancipation of communities subjected to descent and work-based (caste-based) discrimination and violence (DWD&V). ADRF aims at addressing violations of the rights and entitlements of these communities, in particular their women and children, in the respective countries as well as worldwide. It focuses on supporting all the communities subjected to DWD&V and systemic discrimination in any part of the world in their noble aspirations and courageous struggles to establish an inclusive society that is marked by equity and equality, dignity and self-governance, justice, and freedom. ADRF is committed to collaborating with all national, regional, and international agencies- civil society organisations and human rights agencies, UN bodies, and state institutions espousing the cause of eliminating DWD and building an inclusive, peaceful and egalitarian society in Asia and elsewhere in the world.

## **ABOUT HUMAN DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION**

Human Development Organization (HDO) was established to create a platform through which communities can voice their concerns regarding issues and legislation that directly affect their welfare. It has also started playing a role in national and international dialogues concerning minority rights. Connecting the development experience at a local level to enrich debates on at a national and international levels deserves further reinforcement. A key role of HDO is to provide a critical voice to minorities and vulnerable communities when their rights or interests are being violated.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Who are the DWD communities in Sri Lanka?

The Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD) prevails in various parts of Sri Lanka. There are various work and decent based discriminated groups and social structures in the country. They could be identified as subjected to multiple forms of Discrimination or apathy, based on either work or decent. Such Discrimination Based on Work and Descent (DWD) groups scattered over many geographical areas could be found to have been engaged in various kinds of jobs. These groups include hill-country plantation workers, their descendants, urban sanitary workers, daily-wage workers, domestic aids, shoemakers, barbers and drum (Parai) beaters. They could also be found to have been discriminated based on caste. Such caste discriminations are also found both within and outside the discriminated groups.

This study focuses on the DWD / the hill-coun-

try tea plantation community. More than 90 per cent of the plantation workers/people are Indian Tamil origin. Plantation workers as history have engaged in the coffee, tea and rubber plantations, subjected to various kinds of work-based social and economic Discrimination. When originally, the British imperialist brought them from South India, who had experienced caste-based discriminations prevalent there (Chandrabose 2003, Bhanjee 1999). However, the Discrimination based on work and descent followed them in with their migration. In this context, the plantation workers of Sri Lanka are considered work and decent based discriminated minority ethnic group in this study.

The plantation sector<sup>1</sup> in Sri Lanka, it has played an important role in its contribution to the national economy, labour and foreign exchange earnings from its inception in the 1860s. In terms of tea, a major plantation crop, Sri Lanka is the fourth tea producer([www.worldsdAtlas.com](http://www.worldsdAtlas.com)) and second exporter ([www.krishijagran.com](http://www.krishijagran.com)), renowned for its famous 'Ceylon Tea'. In 2019, Sri Lanka produced approximately 300.1 million Kgs of tea and exported more than 292.6 million K.gs.

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<sup>1</sup>The Terms of the Plantation Sector and Estate Sector are used interchangeably in this study

*This study focuses on the DWD / the hill-country tea plantation community. More than 90 per cent of the plantation workers/people are Indian Tamil origin.*



Meanwhile, the revenue of Rs. 240.6 billion realized from tea exports from January to December 2019 ([www.teasrilanka.org](http://www.teasrilanka.org)). In the same year, tea exports accounted for approximately 6.5 % of Sri Lanka's exports by value ([www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org)). Currently, around 5 per cent of Sri Lankans (nearly 1 million) are directly or indirectly dependent on the sector ([www.echelon.lk](http://www.echelon.lk)).

## Key challenges for DWD communities

Although Covid19 prevailed all over the country, it should be noted that the plantation community/workers were not extensively affected in

the 1st wave; however, it became a serious issue among the plantation community members in the 2nd wave. They mostly faced the after-effects of Covid 19, some of which are as follows;

- Information: Limited health information reached them.
- Limited accessibility to state services, like health services
- Prevalent food shortage
- Limited opportunities for daily wage employment outside of the plantations
- Limited income or cash in hand
- Limited support: Lack of coordination in getting government's Covid19 relief support & food stops.
- Lack of information in the Tamil Language
- These were, but few, of the (various), challenges the plantation people faced.



# DATA ON EXTENT OF COVID-19 ON DWD COMMUNITIES

## General information on the COVID19 in Sri Lanka

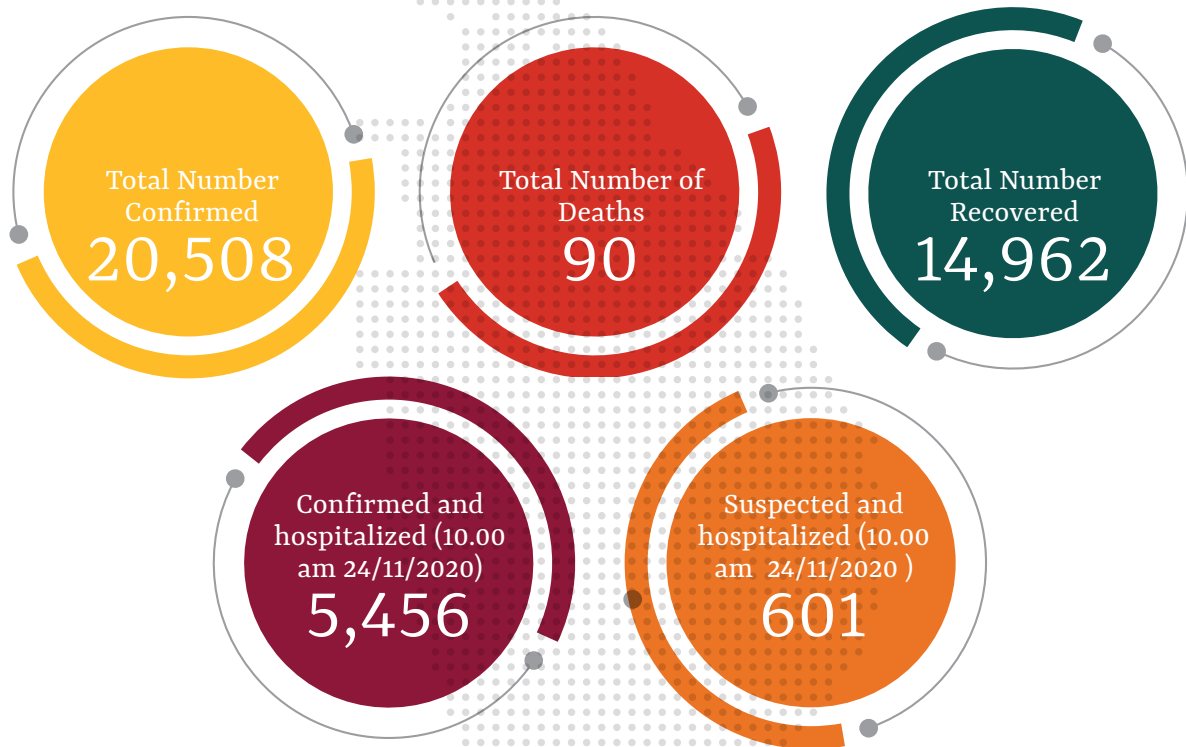
The COVID-19 disease has reached a pandemic state. The World Health Organization has issued guidelines for handling the problem from both biomedical and psychological perspectives. Coronavirus affects mental health in a terrible volume and intensity all over the world, and at the same time, it affected Sri Lanka. In reality, as per the psychological view, we don't think there is a single human being who is not feeling some degree of stress or anxiety. The intensity and impact may have differed from person to person. We are living in uncertain times on the globe. The onsets of the new Covid-19 and its fast-tracked extensions have led it to be declared a global pandemic by the WHO and highlighted how fragile the health services are and how helpless and most vulnerable people are around the world. Pandemics affect different population groups in different ways, exacerbating the

inequalities that already exist in society. In Sri Lanka, this health emergency has led the government to prevent the spread of this disease. These measures range from quarantine declarations, airport closures, social isolation, imposing a curfew, strengthening health systems & services, and information dissemination, seeking to protect the entire population. Sri Lanka, using global WHO guidance documents, implemented a Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan. The country is rising to the challenge to prevent, detect, and respond to Covid-19. Containment of Covid-19 is feasible and remains the top priority in Sri Lanka. With early, containment measures, countries can slow or stop transmission and save lives. Curfews remain in effect throughout the country with changes announced on short notice.

According to the COVID-19 situation report on 24th November 2020, the total number of persons confirmed are 20,508 and reported 90



COVID-19 - SITUATION REPORT SRI LANKA



(Ministry of Health & Indigenous Medical Services, 24/11/2020)

deaths while the first death was reported on 28th March 2020. With the new cases, total confirmed COVID-19 cases in the island have risen to 20,508 since March this year. Some 601 individuals are currently under investigation in hospitals with 5,456 active cases.

Sri Lanka is battling for a resurgence from the COVID-19 pandemic, with a new cluster emerged in September from an apparel industry. The continued cases are past 14,000 – this may be largest yet on the island. The number of COVID-19 positive cases detected at the Brandix Garment Industry in Minuwangoda, Gampaha, and Fish Market, in Pehiliyagoda, Colombo rose to more than twenty thousand, with increased new patients identified, the National Operating Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19 (NOCPOC) said (Daily News Papers: Virakesari, Daily News, Lan-

ka Deepa). Aggressive testing of the employees direct contacts has subsequently confirmed the spread of the disease within the factory. Authorities are yet to determine where the supervisor contracted the virus. The number of confirmed cases from the Brandix cluster appears to be multiplying as testing continues. In the meantime, the positive cases have been identified in the other areas of almost all the 21 Districts.

However, in certain sectors, high levels of poverty and marginalization, present an additional challenge, since large population segments live under conditions of extreme vulnerability. These population includes Plantation people, IDPs, Women in the agriculture sector, fisherfolk, urban workers, farmers, children, Informal sector workers, street sellers, etc. These conditions translate into high hunger, malnutrition,



inaccessibility to health, services, precarious infrastructure and low visibility. The pandemics exposed the vulnerability of health situation of these communities. Therefore, it is important to differentiate and characterize the vulnerabilities that affect the marginalized population the most to better focus efforts on the pandemic's containment and control. Nervousness, fears of contamination, constant reassurance-seeking behaviours, panic attacks, sleep disturbance, excessive worry and feelings of helplessness, probability of an economic slowdown, potential job losses, financial burden, uncertainty about future possibilities, fears of running out of food and necessities etc., are some major triggering factors to depression and anxiety and further worsening depression may lead to severe mental health issues and suicidal thoughts.

### DWD communities/ Details of Plantation Community Affected by the Covid19

There is no disaggregated data of the plantation community members with Covid 19 affected or dead. This makes it impossible to access DWD community persons' statistics either affected and quarantined or deceased from Covid 19. However, media reports, confirmed that none of

*The total sample selected is 50 individuals from 8 Estates of 3 districts ( Kandy, Nuwara Eliya & Kegalle). 3 FGD conducted in 3 districts. Only 5 participants invited to each FGD with the consideration of health status of Covid 19, maintain social distance, wearing face masks and washing hands.*

the plantation community DWD died from Corona. However, there are several Corona cases identified/spread in the plantation areas, particularly in the Nuwara Eliya district. Some of them were identified having worked in the garment industries and related to the fish market, from the plantations. According to the field study, 30 per cent of the respondents mentioned a number of persons suspected or identified with Covid 19 positive.

#### STATUS IN NUWARA ELIYA DISTRICT (AS PER NEWS PAPERS)

Affected persons/positive	60
Self Quarantined persons	517
Institutional Quarantined	NA
Deaths	--
Recovered	NA

## Education situation of the Children

Plantation children receive their primary education in the plantation schools and the secondary education in the nearby towns. Schools had been completely closed for almost 6 to 7 months during the corona pandemic period, and as a result, all children lost educational opportunity. As per the government's plan, education through online-distance methods was introduced after the sudden closure of schools in the middle of March 2020. Educational information was mostly transmitted through Smartphone – Whatsapp and the students were advised to copy them and follow – up. As far as the plantation people

are concerned, the reality that not every parent, due to poverty, could afford smartphones. At the same time, there is limited accessibility to a web connection. Under the circumstance, the plantation children had to be with a limited educational opportunity available. The field survey indicated that 46.5 per cent of the children did not have the facilities to access online- distance education and internet facilities. Parents forced to buy a loan or gold pawn mortgage to purchase smartphones to their children. They also confronted complications, the internet connection, the uninterrupted electricity facility and the re-load/top-up data packages. According to Monica Vincent (2020), the shift to online – distance learning, received diverse responses augmenting the already existing socio-economic inequalities rooted in the state's educational framework, including those living on tea plantations.

According to the Community Volunteers of Human Development Organization, during the COVID19 period, the plantation children, unable to enjoy their various rights and freedom, were mentally affected. Consequently, their educational activities, sports and much other freedom were retarded. During, discussions it transpired that in a situation where, the families had to be confined into overcrowded “Line” houses, (as the plantations are themselves densely populated) there were incidents of girl children getting sexually harassed, Monica Vincent refers as ‘their situation is further compounded by the lack of a suitable learning environment as families including children reside in line-houses’.



## CASE STUDIES - 01

Mrs. Sarojadevi (37) is living in Mausawa Estate in the Kandy District. Mausawa was a tea Estate many years back. Today, it is in an abandoned estate due to mal-administration, lack of maintenance, land fragmentation and political interference. However, Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB), a state agency has taken the responsibility of maintaining the estate. The workers in the estate which is under above agency are not provided proper employment opportunity, nor are paid the daily wage regularly; moreover, the people in the estate do not get satisfactory welfare facilities.

It is in this background that Mrs. Sarojadevi lives with her husband and five children (3 female and 2 male). They live in the 'Line' house built during the period of British ownership of the estate. Her husband, a daily paid worker, earns roughly Rs.1000. per day. But work is not available on all 7 days of the week. However, the needs of the 7 members were fulfilled with this daily income.

About this time, COVID-19 pandemic spread island wide. In the 3rd week of March, 2020 all sectors of the country were locked down followed by enforcement of curfew. Referring to how they lived during this period, Sarojadevi states: "our estate people were talking about the deadly disease, ie Coronavirus. I thought that with the curfew lifted in a day or two everything would be alright. As schools had been closed, my four schooling children and my last son attending pre-schooling, and my

last daughter, were at home. I had Rs. 2000. given to me by my husband (which was his two days earning). we had been left with a little food stuff. The lock down which was expected not to last two or three days, extended beyond one week".

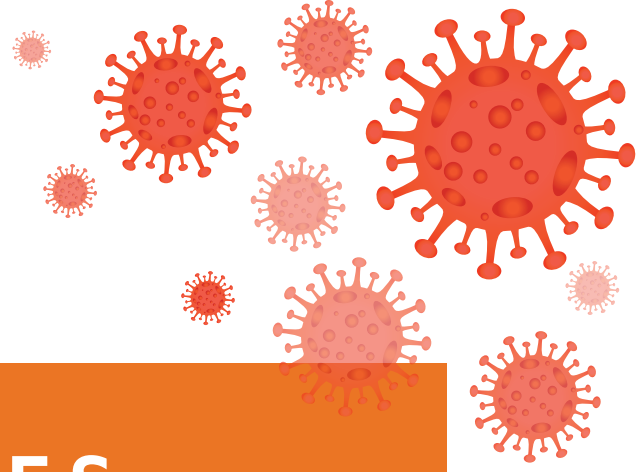
Lives of many people continued as a struggle. As a result of COVID-19 based discrimination for food, on the one hand as one to find a meal for even one time and on the other, under threat and fear of the deadly Corona pandemic. Particularly, many daily paid workers like Saroja's husband lost employment and livelihood. Minor self-employment prospects such as poultry, preparing and selling snacks and food processing were affected. She further stated: "in keeping poultry and eggs which I collect, I feed my children with and sell the surplus to nearby school teachers and thus earned a meagre income. With the closure of school my humble egg business was affected." Right to livelihood of women like Sarojadevi became a major question among the community members.

Incidents of children confined to homes due to COVID-19 impact becoming mentally affected, and their losing interest in studies have been revealed at various instances. In this background, explaining the situation of her home she states: "keeping the 5 children confined to home proved extremely difficult. The reason for this is that - all Line Rooms next to ours are closest and space of each line room is approximately 10'x12', Seven persons being crammed into this small room is

a big problem indeed. My children crying and weeping for want of food put me to pain of mind”.

Continuing, Sarojadevi stated “although the curfew and lock-down were on during the COVID-19 period, the males on the estate were under influence of liquor. No one knew where they got it from. I thought it was illicit brew. My husband, habitually drunk daily took to violence at home at various instances and harassed me. I feel that my children were greatly affected due to such problems at home. There were also instances of my hus-

band beating children when they asked for food”. Further she added as “in the months of May/ June lessons were given to children through website. We did not have Smartphone. Therefore, the children could not avail themselves of the lessons transmitted by teachers. This affected the children’s education fully. We had already been handicapped by poverty to give proper education to children. COVID-19 increased our poverty and aggravated the standard of our life”. This kind of COVID-19 based discrimination gradually increasing in the community.



# SYSTEMIC ISSUES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DWD COMMUNITIES

## Basic livelihood needs

Main occupation of the plantation workers is their work on the plantation. At the same time, over 50% of them are working outside the plantations as daily wage workers and in other urban/rural menial jobs. Particularly, the young men and women work as labor in shops, hotels, restaurants, catering and street vendors in the main cities such as Colombo. Men also work in building construction sites and women in garment factories, shops, markets, and small industries.

On the whole, all of them lost their livelihood and employment opportunities during the Covid19 period. Plantation workers, particularly women workers, were offered tea plucking or rubber latex tapping or factory work on and off in the plantations. But, the rest lost their livelihood. The curfew and lockdown pushed those in the plantation and those working outside alike into

a food crisis daily. According to the field study, 32 per cent of youths employed in cities completely lost their employment. Particularly, those workers in the towns stated they had to starve due to catering and hotels' closure. They also noted that 44 per cent of daily wage earners also lost their employment due to the lockdown. On the other hand, because of income loss from daily work, they could not buy daily consumptions. According to Mrs Ramaletchumy of Greatvalley Estate (Group Leader of Women's Solidarity Front), "Coronavirus disease further aggravated this condition especially much the plantation management/companies have not invested in social welfare measures almost from the initial stages. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that even the government gives little or no thought to ensuring that the plantation companies abide by the laws, necessitating such facilities.



## Psychological issues/needs

Some of the women and girls noted that not only women and girls but generally among all, there was a sense of fear and panic. It was also noted that many had been subject to a mental trauma due to lack of awareness about Corona pandemic, its impact and at the same time keeping away from family members being quarantined etc.

## Gender conflict issues

It was also reported that as all, including children and family members had to be confined to homes, and there were gender or domestic violence incidents. It was reported that many males on the estate had taken to illicit liquor brewing and many males, after consuming it engaged in

violence and even sexual violence and wife-beating. The field study indicated that 20 per cent of women and girls faced domestic or gender-based violence during the lockdown period.

Young men and women employed in main cities like Colombo returned to their houses in the plantations during the Corona period. Similarly, the young men and women employed in the nearby cities, (who usually travelled to and from home) too had to remain shut inside the houses, as their workplaces were closed due to lockdown. Thus, the situation appeared to be ripe for those indulging in sexual abuse and sexual violence against women. According to participants at, FGD and the interviewees, informed that among the plantation DWD communities, there were unwanted pregnancies, young pregnancies and early pregnancies. There was also information that school girls had become pregnant unexpect-



edly. They also informed that the affected girl was forced to marry the person responsible for sexual abuse. According to the same source, some girls were compelled to undergo illegal abortion locally.

Hence, as far as the plantation people are concerned, it is noteworthy that Covid19, was not simply a deadly disease but one that created various social, economic, human rights, and psychological problems. As the pharmacies too had been closed due to lockdown, the families or the young men or women unable to buy the temporary (emergency contraceptive pills or condoms) contraceptives or pregnancy preventive devices, and that too had contributed to the helplessness of the people concerned. The fact that most of the plantations are far away and remote from the urban areas, they had either little or limited access to health services or advice.

The participants of FGD, also informed that the young women who returned from Cities like Colombo (internal migrants) to plantations, unable to go out due to lockdown, faced a situation of having to put up with pregnancy. Many of them, having lost their jobs, have returned to the plantations. Most affected are girls and women, who on return, have to depend on their parents. Participants presented case studies of young girls in such unwanted pregnancy or young pregnancy, facing violence at home, have also been couples (who returned to plantations) entering into the marital bond.

*among the plantation DWD communities, there were unwanted pregnancies, young pregnancies and early pregnancies*



#### CASE STUDIES - 02

“Deadly COVID-19 has affected the lives of many. During the pandemic period, I lost myself to the situation and entered into a teen marriage. Now, with the COVID-19 at present, I come to my senses to know life as to what it should be” stated R. Megavani (20) (Name has been changed).

She is living on Great-valley Estate of Kandy District. Until about 20 years back this was a prosperous tea estate providing employment

to about 500 workers. It had a tea factory and majority of the resident workers were of oppressed sections of Indian origin. They have been subjected to various forms of discriminations based on work.

Megavani comes from such a background. Her parents were workers on the estate. Now this estate, since coming under JEDB management, remains as a semi closed down one due to mal-administration, lack of field

maintenance, total absence of welfare facilities to workers and political interference. Due to tea crop failure, the whole estate is in a state of jungle. Production has failed. With about 50 to 60 working, only 3 days' work is provided per week. Due to this, Megavani's family is under the stranglehold of poverty. As her parents did not have any income, she was compelled to give up her GCE. A/L (Grade 12+) study in order to work in a shop in Colombo city. She lived there in a most unhygienic condition of a rented house. She had to fulfil her daily food need with her meagre salary. It was when the COVID-19 spread: all sectors in the country were locked down followed by curfew. The shop where Megavani worked was closed. With no means or facility to stay in Colombo, she lost her employment and livelihood, and returned to the estate amidst various difficulties. During her stay in the estate with parents, she forged a connection with a man whom she had known already. They had been meeting each other in

spite of the lockdown. During the curfew one night she went to that boy's house.

He had been a liquor and drug addict, and created problems and violence after liquor. Megavani's parents confused not knowing the daughter's whereabouts were in distress. And, when they came to know that she was staying with a boy, they made a complaint to the police. Due to legal snag, the police complaint failed to work. On the one hand, Megavani's parents are in agony due to loss of their daughter, and at the same time, Megavani subjected to daily beating, domestic violence and sexual harassment by a habitual drunk husband, finds herself unable to meet the day-to-day home needs.

The erroneous decision she took during the COVID-19 period or the circumstance that forced her into such decision, has put her into an unending misery of gender-based violence of COVID-19 (GBVC).

## Social and Communication Issues

It was also stated that many women who went to main cities, such as Colombo as internal migrant workers and parents or partners in the plantations, were mentally affected due to loneliness. They stated that telephones, especially WhatsApp, Social Media, etc., were of great help to maintain contact with relatives or friends in distant places under such circumstances. However, they regretted the connections remained disconnected in the absence of cash or facility to reload/top-up. This environment created discon-

nection and communication barriers between/among women/girls and their family members.

## Impact on Livelihood-Employment of DWD communities

As far as the plantation workers' livelihood is concerned, they work for a daily wage in the plantation or outside sectors. Since all trade sectors, value chains, and service offices had been closed during the Covid 19 period, those in the trades' income had been affected. Salaries were paid to government servants at least belatedly. Due to



pressure brought to bear on the management, either full or half salaries were paid to those in the private sectors or temporary loans given. The plantation workers as the daily wage paid, (Paid as they worked) were under compulsion to turn

up for work. Women plucking tea stated they took to plucking. According to the workers and the media, although the government-enforced curfew and lockdown, the plantations, as run by companies, did not abide by such regulations.

### CASE STUDIES - 03

Ranjana (15) (Name has been changed), a girl student, lived on Strathspy Estate in the Nuwara Eliya district with her parents. This estate in the middle of tea fields is a high yielding tea estate. It has a labour population of around 1000, most of whom are of Indian decent (origin). With the spread of Covid19 schools were closed and girl children like Ranjana came to be confined to homes with their families comprising old aged persons. This situation put many of them / children to mental stress. The grandparents of Ranjana lived in another Line house on the same estate but little away from Ranjana's house. Ranjana made frequent night visits to the grandparents in order, both, to avoid being lonely and to help the grandparents. At the same time as the people's movement had been limited during the COVID-19 period, Ranjana had to stay at her grandparents' house.

An Auto driver who had observed Ranjana's nightly visits, started following her which soon developed into his conversation with Ranjana. As there was little movement of people due to COVID-19 lockdown and curfew, no-body took notice of it. One day Ranjana who had gone to her grandparents where the grandfather was ill had not returned for a very long time. Anxious of it, the parents went to the grandparent's house to search for Ranjana. In the meantime, they had seen

Ranjana come out of the Auto driver's house. When they asked Ranjana about it, she told them that the driver had induced her into sex (sexually abused). The matter was complained to the police. A woman police officer after investigation arrested the person concerned and, in the meantime, Ranjana was admitted to the hospital for medical check-ups.

According to information, the Auto driver in question was released by the police after 2 days. Ranjana had been taken to another place. It is apparent from this that COVID-19 which has been generally problematic to people, has created specifically SRH and Sexual problems to women and girl children as "Coronavirus based sexual violence". During the period in question, families, women and children had been isolated under the circumstances of lockdown and curfew. They were kept out of contact, and, on the one hand, such isolation gave rise to psychological and security problems. At the same time, it created limitations for children and women to access their right to have their fundamental and family control needs. Although, such instances have been socially concealed, their after-effects could be seen to have had adverse consequences. Such problems have been numerous in remote and distant plantation and rural areas.

## Impact of State Efforts: Containment and Mitigation measures

Security and health sectors were actively engaged in Covid 19 preventive and people protection activities. Media, in coordination with the Department of Health, conducted health safety awareness programmes. CSOs as well conducted awareness-raising activities. Local NGOs and INGOs provided relief goods, food packets etc for the isolated families in the rural and plantation areas. Organizations like HDO Sri Lanka provided PPE items, food items and home garden facilities to the plantation community and the health authorities. The Government grant of Rs.5,000.00 was limited to Samurdhi (Poverty Elimination Scheme) recipient families. Only a few of the plantation workers are Samurdhi beneficiaries.

Due to various reasons, this scheme does not reach most of the deserving plantation workers, according to media personnel and politicians. It is apparent; therefore, that support schemes do not fully reach the community concerned.

At the same time, the government grant of Rs.5,000 was made available to families below the poverty line, namely: non Samurdhi benefit recipients, those not receiving Old age subsidy, Physically Handicapped subsidy. However, according to the interviewees, most of those of plantation youths, working in main cities such as Colombo and who returned to estates during the Covid 19 period, or those who reside and work outside (male and/or female youth) did not receive the grants due to the absence of identification or personal registration information of them. According to the field data, 30 per cent of the youth did not receive any social benefits.



*Only a few of the plantation workers are Samurdhi beneficiaries. Due to various reasons, this scheme does not reach most of the deserving plantation workers, according to media personnel and politicians.*

Although awareness programmes on prevention against Covid 19, including curtailing the spread were conducted through media (wearing masks, maintaining social distance, washing hands etc.) The plantation workers – male or female workers working during the Covid 19 period, were seen without masks. It should be noted that in

the plantation sector, the social distance was not at all maintained. 67% (HI&ES, 2018) of the plantation workers still live in the Line Rooms constructed during the British Colonial period. The space between one Line house and another is hardly 0.3 Meter.

#### CASE STUDIES - 04

Thamilmaran Jesmin (16) is from Upcot area of Maskeliya in the Nuwara Eliya District. She is a GEC (O/L) student of a well-known Maskeliya School. Her Father is a daily paid labour in building construction side. Mother Asha is a plantation worker in Alton Estate, Upcot, as tea estate worker for last 20 years, Alton has approximately 350 worker families. The family of Jesmin lives in a 10x12 feet line room which was built around English plantation company period.

Jesmin, a bright student, had passed the grade 5 scholarship test with higher marks. Moreover, she came 1st in the class in examinations every year. She had been prepared for GCE (O/L) test enthusiastically collecting many question papers. At this time, the deadly COVID-19 spread all over the country; areas where the symptoms appeared were locked down and country wide curfew was enforced. Due to this, both public and private enterprises were closed. As schools too were closed, the educational activities came to be drastically stopped, putting the students' education into jeopardy. Jesmin's educational activities too were suspended, and her preparation for GCE (O/L) test interrupted.

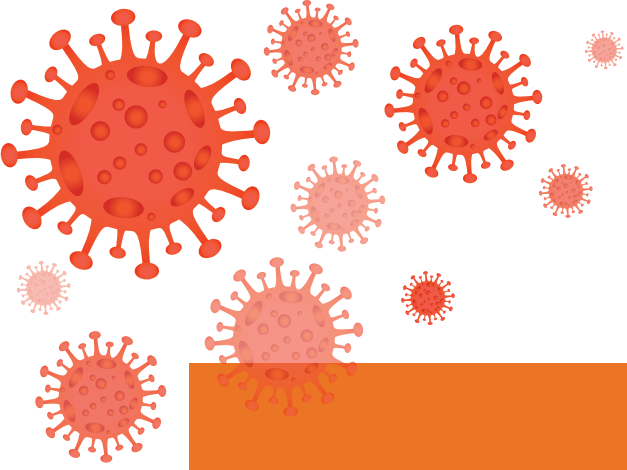
She prepared herself as best as she could using the question papers she had. However,

she became sad, like other hundreds of students not knowing whom to approach to have her doubts cleared. Even to contact the class teacher, she did not have the telephone facility.

It was at this juncture that, considering the ill effect on the educational future of the students resulting from the school closure, the electronically media teaching was introduced.

Many teachers encouraged students by sending question papers through web/social media and particularly WhatsApp. Jesmin, on the other hand, was worried about not having the telephone facility and her inability to ask her poor parents to buy her a smartphone. She was also worried that, in the event of school opening, she would not be able to cope up with the studies, since she had no access to lessons taught through media.

She is also worried that while on the one hand, her poor parents suffer to see that she studies well, COVID-19 on the other hand, has turned the lives of many like herself, upside down, they became Coronavirus excluded. She is in eternal grief about her future. Nevertheless, she continues with her study activities with some hope.



# FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION FACED BY DWD COMMUNITIES

## Access of the Services from State and Relief Agencies

As already mentioned, there are many obstacles to the plantation community accessing the state services. According to the administrative system of Sri Lanka, the people have to approach the Divisional Secretariats ( a District Secretariat/ Government Agent consist of several Divisional Secretariats, based on several factors like population, geography, transportation) to have the matters attended to at the rural level. But there are many obstacles to the plantation community availing themselves of such services. These have been a feature continuing from the colonial era. The plantation administration or plantation health or plantation education has been vested in the plantation management away from the national stream. The plantation education was brought under the purview of the government (nationalization) after 1972s. But the health and

other welfare services of the plantation workers have not been fully absorbed into the national stream. In this background plantation, community/workers, because they are plantation workers and Indian descent (origin), continue to be a DWD community.

## Access to livelihood

Also whether they are plantation workers, or daily wage workers or returned from cities like Colombo or menial workers who returned to the plantation during the Covid 19 pandemic period, all of them or a vast majority of them had been confronted with food problem daily or starvation most of the time. Vast tracts of land in the plantations are under tea, rubber or coconut cultivation. The wage of a worker there is Rs. 750 per day. This is the lowest pay compared to their counterparts' daily wages at the national level or in other sectors. Management of some plantations, in the meantime, allow the workers to utilize the small blocks of uncultivated lands in the



*The plantation administration or plantation health or plantation education has been vested in the plantation management away from the national stream. community/workers, because they are plantation workers and Indian descent (origin), continue to be a DWD community.*

respective neighbourhood for livelihood activities such as home gardening or to keep goats or cows. However, it is noteworthy that most of the plantations have banned such activities denying the workers the opportunity to get additional income or have livelihood enhanced.

The young men and women in the plantations who returned to the plantations with lost employment and place to stay in main cities could not properly access the self-quarantine facilities. At the same time, such facilities were not available on the plantations too. Even those who had to be quarantined had to live in the same Line room with others (A-Line House is 10' x 12' size on average), as mentioned by interviewees. The young men and women who so returned to

the plantation had to stay inside the plantation for two months at a stretch. They took the initiative to cultivate short crops or vegetables or home gardening, helping them meet their day to day needs. However, the workers inhabiting the plantations are a landless community. Hence they made an effort to clear the uncultivated plots of land to grow vegetables. This created conflicts between plantation management and the youth. There were incidents of management not willing to give away lands for such activities, seeking police intervention. This situation, coupled with the pandemic spread, the plantation community's landlessness, the demand for the same, etc., created the necessity for the workers to have their self needs fulfilled and their livelihood situation addressed.



CASE STUDIES - 05

“COVID-19 has brought various forms of hardship and distress into the lives of people. Particularly, it has given many bitter experiences to children, young women and women like me. Today I have been exposed to various forms of physical and mental distress. As to how I could get over them is a question” says Mrs. Puspha (Name has been changed), 28 years of age and married, she lives on a large tea estate situated 1.5 KMs from Upcot area of Maskeliya in the Nuwara Eliya district. With many divisions this is a large-scale tea producing estate.



Puspha is an estate worker whose parents too had been workers. They live in one of the Line houses built during the British period. Puspha came into family life with a man when she was 18 years old. she gave birth to a son who is now 10 years old. The family lives off the income it earns from estate work. She now lives with another male, after she separated from her husband last year due to a family dispute. Her eldest son lives with the grandparents, and now she has a second son.

The country had been locked down and curfew declared due to COVID-19 pandemic. Puspha felt that she was pregnant, and she was scared by this fact when she was having an infant child. She considered the pregnancy unwanted. She consulted a local midwife, who advised her to register herself for regular medical check-up and clinical visits. Puspha, thinking that others knowing it would be a problem to her, avoided meeting the midwife. As the country continued to be under lock-down due to COVID-19, she decided to go in for an abortion. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, abortion is illegal, except on medical grounds. According to the sources, hence, she approached a medical person / practitioner through a broker (middle man) for abortion secretly.

It was said that the abortion was done, and that now she is suffering from its after-effects. Due to ill health, she has lost physical capacity to work and is in hardship. COVID-19 which became worldwide, is a challenge not only to the health and medical sector; rather it has become a threat to everybody – young or old. Women, girl children and young men of the oppressed sections of the community are the most affected. Their livelihood and employment have been jeopardized. As far as the women are concerned, their sexual and reproductive health rights have become controversial, and as far as the plantations are concerned, un-wanted pregnancy, teen age pregnancy and early pregnancy remain a hidden factor.

*In the context of sudden outbreak of Corona pandemic, European and American countries, limited the CSO activities to their countries. Therefore, the funding available from such CSOs to CSOs in countries like Sri Lanka too became limited.*



## **Civil Society Response: Mitigation measures**

During the Covid19 period with curfew and lockdown in force, there have been limited CSO activities. They had limited opportunity to meet people, create awareness, provide them with the necessary relief or for the CSOs to act in a network or lobby or advocate on the issues faced by

the community. However, it is noteworthy that few NGOs or trade unions and religious organizations were involved in awareness-raising and relief providing activities.

As far as the CSOs were concerned, given the sudden outbreak of Covid19, they were in a perplexing situation where taking forward a planned action; finding necessary resources; utilizing the manpower and ensuring their safety and security. In the context of sudden outbreak of Corona

pandemic, European and American countries, limited the CSO activities to their countries. Therefore, the funding available from such CSOs to CSOs in countries like Sri Lanka too became limited. As a result, the Sri Lanka NGOs had to limit their activities to a bare minimum. However, it could be stated that the situation created by Covid19 helped to expand the modern technological contacts. Although most INGOs, Sri Lankan NGOs and Movements using web, zoom, WhatsApp, and Skype for discussions could be identified as progressive, it could not be said to have expanded the grass-root people's participation or made any favourable impact on them.

## Recommendations

- Awareness: Awareness to be created among the plantation community on the prevention of COVID 19 and its impact on the people's health and social and economic life.
- Right to livelihood: State and the Plan-

tation Companies should ensure the livelihood of the workers, their families and the plantation community members through employment and related facilities

- Work and income: Sustainable income of the youths and workers to be ensured by determining living wage to the plantation workers and the community-based employment for the youths.
- Plantation Health system: Plantation health structure/system should be integrated into the national health system to access the plantation community's public health services.
- Rights of women and girls: Rights of the women and girls should be protected, specifically to prevent violence against women and girls.
- State and plantation companies: special masseurs to be taken to the self-quarantine of individuals in plantations.
- Plantation companies should be followed by national COVID 19 protection rules/ regulations and methodologies.



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