

From ‘Frying Pan to Fire’: Unprecedented Challenges of Covid-19 on Blind People in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has shattered all wakes of people’s lives in most countries in diverse proportions. Sri Lanka being no exception, has experienced the spread in early March 2020 and later in September in the same year. Since then, the Government has implemented a wide range of far-reaching health measures and several other social restrictions with the view to combating the spread of the disease. Among the badly challenged fractions of the population due to pandemic was the people with disabilities. It is known that the persons with visually impairments and blindness represent the majority of this vulnerable community. The impact of the pandemic on the blind people are mostly untouched. Purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges of COVID-19 experienced by the blind people in the light of their social and economic life. A qualitative case study approach was adopted for data collection. Thirty-six blind persons representing of diverse livelihood activities, selected through purposive sampling method were interviewed. The interview transcriptions were initially examined through word cloud and subjected to thematic analysis for examining changes to social and economic activities. Results highlight that owing to COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, blind people have been severally disturbed in several aspects, some of which are unique to this community. The key challenges identified are related to mobility and transportation, acquisition of daily needs,

disturbed social interactions, income earning opportunities, and information and communication. The precautionary measures implemented on COVID-19 pandemic has brought about disturbances that are relatively severer for the blind people on moving forwards with their day-to-day life activities, than the sighted people. The decision makers dealing with pandemic situations should take into consideration of inclusive policies.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic. Challenges to Disabled, Visually Impaired and Blind

1. INTRODUCTION

All nations including Sri Lanka, have been severely hit due to Covid-19 pandemic. Emerging virus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) was first reported in humans in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and subsequently a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (World Health Organization, April 2020). This disease outbreak of Covid-19 has been hastily spreading across continents breaking borders, resulting in an unprecedented challenge to the economies, public health, and societies. Sri Lanka is no exception. The pandemic has lasted more than a year by now and WHO asserts that people will have to live with this pandemic, under a ‘new normal’ till a vaccine is discovered.

The effects of COVID-19 pandemic and the associated distraction to people's lives, cut across all communities, irrespective of their social and economic standing and the physiological and psychological differences.

People with disabilities in particular are more prone to the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic response. Census of 2012 estimated that 8.7% of Sri Lanka's population above the age of five live with some form of disability, and out of which about 996,939 people are visually impaired or blind (DCS 2012). It has been observed that a number of studies in different parts of the world have been undertaken to examine the problems encountered by disabled communities in general and by the visually disabled in particular. However, the empirical studies on this issue in low- and middle-income countries are observed to be very little, and thus this paper aims to bridge this knowledge gap.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Consequences of Pandemic to the Blind People

The prevalence of people with visually impaired and blindness is a major public health challenge worldwide. It is estimated to 285 million people being visually impaired of which about 39 million people are totally blind (Pascolini & Mariotti, 2012). As per WHO, a higher prevalence of visually disabilities is found in low and middle-income countries.

The challenges to persons with visual disabilities during pandemic could impact their personal, mobility, psychological, social and economic concerns. While this pandemic has affected all communities in many respects, the vulnerable individuals, such as disabled have been very badly hit putting them at extreme risk in morbidity and mortality (Armitage & Nellums, 2020).

Out of five sensory modalities (i.e., Visual, Auditory, Gustatory, Olfactory and Tactile/haptic memory), the visual modality has been mostly researched and is the dominant sense

(Pascolini & Mariotti, 2012). The blind people depend exclusively on four other senses, sans visual, for information gathering, mobility and day-to-day activities. With the 'social distancing' and 'wearing face mask', the blind people compelled to manage to their activities without gustatory, olfactory and tactile sense modalities.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, traveling and transport facilities are either very limited or none in some places. Thus, those who rely on public or shared transport prevents from accessing daily needs on groceries and medicines (Cochran, 2020; Brucker & Henly, 2019). Particularly, disable people desire traveling, not only for seeking food and other services, but also to entertain leisure, recreation activities and social interactions (Mattson, et al., 2010; Páez & Farber, 2012). In contrast, owing to Covid-19 pandemic people with disabilities are pushed towards social exclusion and that can lead to deteriorate the mental and physical health conditions of disable people (Berg-Weger & Morley, 2020; Repke & Ipsen, 2020).

Disable people living in cities, compared to others may have four times of chance of getting ill or die during the Covid-19 response, not due to their vulnerability, but the absence of disability inclusive urban health policies and practices are largely affected (Pineda & Corburn, 2020). Visually disable people, amongst other disabilities have high chance of contacting Covid-19 due to many factors; inherently depending on someone's assistance for daily activities and understanding the environment with touch and tactile senses; poor access to information on disease transmission and preventive measures particularly for rural poor; difficulty in handling and wearing face mask, no or lack of disability access to hand washing are some of which (Senjam, 2020). Moreover, poor access to services, particular the health care services further aggravate the disable conditions and overall health outcomes (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Senjam, 2020).

Poor or no access to transport impedes the disable people seeking and continuing employment (Loprest & Maag, 2001). Disable

people particularly in developing countries rely on self-employment of the informal sector (UN, 2018). A survey conducted in three areas – Polpithigama, and Jaffna Divisional Secretariat, and Hambantota District—too reinforced that visually disable people is mostly engaging in self-employment. However, these livelihood activities are limited only to meagre trades such as lottery tickets selling, carpet weaving, incense sticks selling (Bandara, et al., 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

Case study approach has been adopted as the main qualitative methodology and 36 persons (i.e., severely blind and totally blind) represented the case participants. The target population is blind persons in Sri Lanka above 18 years. Data collection was based on in-depth interviews using a pre-tested semi-structured interview protocol. The participants were purposively selected to represent a cross section of the society. Taking into consideration the sensitivity of the data collection exercise, a researcher who himself is blind has been involved with the data collection process and the consent of participants were obtained on individual basis.

The interviews were conducted during July – August 2020, and the proceedings were transcribed and translated into English. The transcripts were subjected to a word cloud analysis and applied advanced natural language processing tools to produce bigram and trigram visualization. Using pattern matching and thematic analysis technique the transcriptions were closely examined to derive key challenges.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Profile of Respondents

Thirty-six visually disabled persons comprising of 22 totally blind and 14 severely blind individuals including six females, from different geographical locations in Sri Lanka between the ages of 18 and 62 years were the case study subjects. Out of these individuals 13 were married, and one was divorced and other were unmarried. The occupation of these subjects varies and included public servants and government teachers, graduate job seekers, self-

employed person such as incense stick sellers, lottery ticket sellers, people attending to home based small businesses, unemployed and housewives. It is worth noting that the respondents also consisted three community leaders (i.e., presidents of societies dedicated to blind persons).

4.2. Socio Economic Situation of Blind Persons

The blind people in Sri Lanka have been experiencing many social and economic downturns even before the Covid-19 pandemic. The Chairman of the National Federation for the Blind, spoke about the life of Blind persons, thus:

“... Our organization is one of the largest societies with over 2,500 members. Opportunities for education of blind people is very limited. Only a very little number of blind people has opportunities to access to higher education. Opportunities for government jobs with lower education is very limited, a very few works in private companies. Those who are willing to work are mostly self-employed; selling lottery tickets, incense sticks etc. In this sense most of our people are economically very poor. They live in dependency manner, and some are begging in public places.”

The statement of the President of Sri Lanka Association Self employers with visual impairment also confirmed this situation. These findings highlight underprivileged socio-economic conditions such as poor access to education, lack of employment opportunities and poverty ridden family conditions. Loprest & Maag (2001) stated that no or very little transport opportunities reduces seeking and continuing jobs by blind people. Further, the recent study in certain areas in Sri Lanka also confirmed the above scenario (Bandara, et al., 2020).

4.3. Challenges Imposed by Covid-19

Apart from the prevailed vulnerable conditions, the pandemic pushes these people to a further deprived situation. This situation is discussed under five key areas identified through word cloud (Figure 1) and other analyses. They are related to challenges on mobility and transportation, acquisition of daily needs, income

earning opportunities information and Communication, and social interactions.

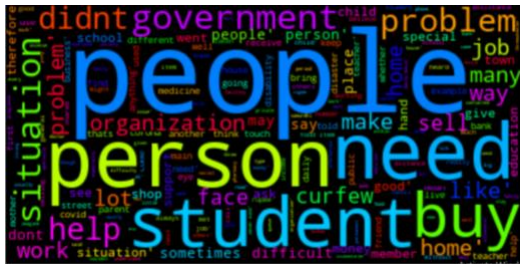


Figure 1. Word Cloud Visualization Interview Proceedings

4.4. Challenges to Mobility and Transportation

In addition to the white cane, the support of a sighted person is always required for the blind people to move around. With the introduction of Covid-19 health measures, they are inevitably required to maintain physical distance, wear face mask, no hand holding is allowed. These measures place them in difficulty where they are deprived of usual means of understanding the environment, travelling and mobility. These challenges are confirmed by the Chairman of the National Federation for the Blind, thus:

“It is difficult to travel on roads with white cane alone and wearing face masks. We always need people around us to assist us. Usual practice is when we go somewhere or get into a bus, someone around us hold our hands and direct us to move around. But these practices go against Covid-19 health regulations, and such situation pushes us to be further cornered or isolated. Since we recognize the environment by touch feel and smell, now we are badly in trouble. No one comes near us for support.”

This observation has been reinforced by the following narration of a teacher:

“We both—my husband and I—are totally blind, and we hold hands together, depending on each other when walking. However, social distancing rule prevents us from doing so. We travel therefore individually using the white cane. This sudden detachment of us generates many issues on us”.

“I recently went to a bank on my own alone with no support from a sighted person. When I was standing in queue someone came close to me ignoring the distance rule. I suddenly asked him to keep way from me. Then only he told me he is a blind person. With that experience, I realized we, the blind people are at serious risk particularly when we go out for our day-to-day activities where no touch and smell can be experienced or guided us”.

“My colleague teachers as well as my students, holding the elbow, take me to the places where I want to go. I cannot imagine how I should interact with them in future. They may be scared to get close to us due to fear of Corona-19 virus”.

Another teacher said that they normally use public transport but during the Covid-19 period they have to use a three-wheeler and it is costly. Several other respondents confirmed the difficulty in mobility and transport. Cochran (2020) very strongly emphasized that limited transport poses difficulties in accessing personal care, employment, and social interactions.

The practice of blind persons is to go to shops and boutiques nearby for buying household utensils and food items while for medicines and other requirements they go to nearby towns using public transport. Acquiring such basic needs also become a challenge during this situation that is substantiated by the following responses.

“Both myself and my wife are blind. We have to depend on the delivery vans and trucks for food stuff and other things. However, it was even hard for me to get a loaf of bread from a choon-paan three-wheeler. I could not catch this Choon-Pann man because by the time I slowly walk up to the road, he flies away. Other day’s people were there to help us, but not now” (a Teacher from Chilaw).

“I used to go to Hambantota or Matara town to get my raw material. Now most places are locked down I have no way of going by bus to these places and get my raw material” (A blind incense sticks producer and seller in Siyanetugama Village in Hambantota)

“When we go to shops to buy potatoes, onions, and dry fish etc. we touch these things and also

smell them to understand the quality. With this Covid-19 problem we are not allowed to do so and have to accept anything given to us” (A lady from Siyanethugama).

It can be seen that the blind persons are severely challenged in comparison to sighted individuals when it comes to obtaining food items, raw material for small business and other household needs. This finding is in conformity with past research.

4.5. Challenges to Livelihood Opportunities

Taking into consideration that most visually disabled persons belong to low-income category, and are self-employed, they are badly disturbed economically. However, the people working in the state sector and as government teachers are somewhat safer. A principal of a special needs school in Monaragala said:

“However, many blind people are facing the problem of unemployment. I talk to these people a lot. They have to face a big problem to make money for living. There is no one to look into these problems. Although some people are getting small some as a disability allowance, there are many who do not get any support.”

4.6. Information and Communication Related Challenges

The blind persons are facing many problems related to receiving information. Access to information for disable people is very limited, particularly during a pandemic situation (Cochran, 2020; Senjam, 2020). All the Covid-19 related written announcements and information are targeted for sighted persons. No visual disability friendly materials are available.

One blind lady from Galle said:

“I used to visit Karapitiya hospital regularly and get my medicines. This time I could not go due to Covid-19 and sent my prescription book through a neighbor to OPD. Doctors have written something in the book and sent along some tablets. This time I was confused because the shape of one tablet is different. How can I read what doctor has written?”

Another respondent said:

“I was told that in banks and shops etc. some marks are written on the ground to indicate the places that people must stand keeping the meter distance. We cannot see them and therefore we go all over.”

“That day I was in Kandy town, walking as usual. I suddenly realize that people are rushing as if there is some emergency. I had no idea, and there was no one to ask. Everyone seemed busy...after some time only I got to know that curfew is going to be imposed suddenly. Those who use mobile phones got SMS messages. but I had no way to get such information in that way.”

These narrations bring about the need for presenting information in disability friendly manner. Further, information related to emergency lockdowns would cause many hardships to the blind people.

4.7. Challenges Related to Disturbed Social Interactions

Most issues related to social interaction of blind persons triggered due to Covid-19 pandemic appear to be quite similar to that of sighted persons. However, the impact of such issues as loneliness and isolation may be severe for the blind people.

A secondary school student studying in a leading school in Colombo who is severally blind said:

“I do not find any major difference between being in the class and online mode of learning. But I know many of my blind friends are distressed being confined to their homes, and they get angry easily.”

Another teacher from Anurdgapura narrated his story of feeling loneliness, thus:

“I live in a separate small house close to my sister’s home. On weekends, my sister brings in my meals to my place. With this Covid-19 problem, no one comes to visit me, even my sister who brings my meals just leave the plate in the veranda and go back quickly. I am alone and very lonely, do not know what to do. The only social contact is getting a phone call one in a while from friends.”

5. CONCLUSIONS

While the Covid-19 pandemic poses challenges to all communities, the persons with blind and other form of disabilities are badly disturbed. These unprecedented challenges for the blind people are brought about due to some health measures including wearing mask, and maintaining social distancing. These processes hamper them from experiencing the surrounding environment through smell, taste, and touch. Even their usual limited earning opportunities are disrupted. As such, the policy makers should take into consideration the specific requirements of disable communities in formulating Covid-19 response measures. Further, certain special support arrangement needs to be provided for coping the pandemic down-turn for such vulnerable communities.

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