DECEMBER 2025

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND URBAN INFRASTRUCTURES OF **CARE IN COLOMBO**

IROMI PERERA | MEGHAL PERERA

COLOMBO URBAN LAB

CENTRE FOR A SMART FUTURE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Urban working class households have faced the brunt of Sri Lanka's polycrisis. Since 2020 these households have been impacted by unprecedented shocks that have led to reduced nutrition, worsening health, learning loss, increased household debt and asset loss, and an overall increase in time poverty. These burdens have also been gendered, as women have played a crucial role in helping their families respond to shocks, from foregoing time and labour saving devices to conserve electricity after tariff hikes, to taking on additional income generating activities to meet rapidly increasing expenses. Furthermore, Sri Lanka's social protection systems have proved inadequate, particularly as targeted cash transfers such as Aswesuma failed to account for the nature of urban poverty, leading to the exclusion of vulnerable urban poor households.

Women spend more time on unpaid carework, including child care, housework and participating in voluntary and community work, and have greater time poverty than their male counterparts. Unpaid care work limits female labour force participation, particularly due to lack of child care options. This report explores care burdens faced by working mothers in low income communities in Colombo, seeking to understand how they balance work and child care responsibilities. It also examines how social protection can be better suited to meet the different dynamics and needs that these women face within their households, places of work and beyond. Research methodology included qualitative interviews with 45 working mothers, focus group discussions and design-based workshops on social protection with communities, with 171 participants validating report findings and recommendations.

Key findings

A majority of respondents worked in the informal sector. A majority of jobs held by respondents involved performing traditional gender roles such as cleaning, cooking, serving food and tea, sewing, nursing, washing clothes, and looking after small children. Other feminised jobs include those working in the beauty, retail and garment sectors. Those in the formal workforce, particularly in the state sector, tended to be performing clerical work. A majority of respondents worked in the informal sector with no legal protections or benefits. 22% of respondents received retirement benefits such as EPF/ETF or pensions. Only a third of respondents could take paid leave.

Women often selected or left jobs based on child care arrangements and the compatibility of work with child care. Mothers of children with disabilities carried exceptionally heavy physical, emotional and financial burdens, often leaving the workforce entirely.

Respondents with no child care opted for part-time work that aligned with their child's schooling or started a home-based business. Their income was low and unpredictable as a result. The most common source of child care for working mothers were their own mothers, who were the most trusted source of child care. However, this had implications for the health of aging women entrusted to take care of their grandchildren, and many respondents had no child care options when their mothers fell ill. Respondents also relied on older children, especially daughters, to watch younger children which came at the cost of education and employment opportunities. Relatives and neighbours also provided child care, but no husband was the sole source of child care, even when unemployed. Households in settlements were also able to leave their

children at home alone, benefiting from close-knit communities and the passive surveillance and supervision provided by neighbours. Relocated high-rise communities faced weakened support networks and greater child care insecurity.

While use of formal day cares was extremely low, respondents identified private profit-oriented day cares and subsidised faith-based day cares as the two main options. Those who used day cares had done so often as a last resort, lacking any other child care alternatives. Reticence to use day cares was driven by concerns around safety and emotional well-being of children, affordability and quality of day cares, and the belief that mothers were responsible for the upbringing of their children.

Apart from paid work, women had to also perform other unpaid carework including cooking, housework, laundry, accompanying children to school, tuition and other activities, and supervising children's homework. As such, many women sacrificed sleep and rest. Some respondents also left employment when it interfered with domestic responsibilities. Women working night shifts described moral judgment, apprehension around safety, and physical exhaustion, as domestic responsibilities continued despite night-time work. Night work was not seen as a form of empowerment, but a means of trading sleep for income.

Recommendations

Strengthening Sri Lanka's urban infrastructures of care requires sustained investment, community-centred design, and a transformative social protection approach. Moreover, it requires viewing social protection as a constellation of interventions rather than a single targeted intervention. If implemented in parallel and incrementally over time these recommendations would reduce burdens on families, enable long term gains in livelihood, health, education and strengthen a fraught social contract. It would also enable women to improve their quality of life by reducing their time poverty, gain time for rest and leisure and be economically active through means of their own choosing.

Ensuring well-resourced care infrastructures in the city
Day cares and creches should be located in communities, employ and train staff from the communities and be able to extend hours for women to work a full day. These facilities should be safe, affordable with appropriate infrastructure. They should be supervised and monitored by a regulatory body. There is also a need for care infrastructure that caters specifically to children with disabilities. Establishing and expanding afterschool programmes for adolescents would not only afford mothers the option of full-time work, but also enhance the skills and abilities of adolescents in communities that are vulnerable to substance abuse. Some mothers said their preference was for the after-school programmes to be held at the school itself, as then they would not have to worry about transporting the child from school to another location. School was also a trusted place where they did not have to worry about their children. Safety and worries around the increase in drugs and drug use in their communities over the last few years was constantly highlighted.

Strengthening laws to safeguard domestic workers

Legal protections for domestic workers, including minimum wages, mandatory paid leave, maternity benefits, contracts, and inclusion in social security schemes, are essential to ensure they receive the same rights and safeguards as formal-sector workers. We recommend that along with advocating for and strengthening such laws for domestic workers, there is also a need for parallel awareness raising on dignified work and a living wage, in order to normalise the idea of considering domestic workers (and any other informal workers that provide services to households and businesses) as those entitled to the same rights and safeguards as those in the formal sector. That a large group contributing to Sri Lanka's economy and care economy could work all their life (and their work enabling their employers to be a part of the labour force), and be at a "retirement age" with no savings and no retirement benefits is an extremely unjust economic model.

Expanding school meal programmes

Expanding school meal programmes beyond Grade 5 would improve nutrition, reduce time poverty that burdens working mothers and offer income-generating opportunities for mothers that align with their children's school day. School meal programmes also serve as an opportunity for job creation for mothers, offering a steady source of income generation that is compatible with child care. It also offers an opportunity to upscale home-based catering businesses that struggle to compete in saturated markets and have limited profitability.

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's polycrisis and transformative social protection

Sri Lankan households faced unprecedented shocks from 2020 due to the country's polycrisis. While some have adjusted and recovered from this period as the economy has improved, Colombo Urban Lab's ongoing research with Colombo's working class communities and the informal sector in the city shows that the impacts of the shocks have left a lasting impact. From learning loss, asset loss, worsening nutrition and health, to increases in time poverty, - and reduced quality of life these households and communities continue to be impacted by the polycrisis even with Sri Lanka's steady economic indicators and the absence of queues.

Our work in Colombo has highlighted that the burden of the crises was gendered. From adjusting to increasing electricity tariffs by turning off time saving equipment like washing machines and rice cookers and doing those tasks by hand, to compromising of quality and quantity of their own nutritional intake (as well as their families') when prices soared, to taking on additional or new income generating activities in order to make ends meet, time poverty of women in these households has increased significantly. There was also an increase in care work of elderly, children and household members with chronic health conditions and disabilities by women due to crumbling of traditional networks of support and state services. The increased costs of health care and medicines often meant that households, particularly women, reduced taking essential medicines or often just stopped - which had dire impacts on life expectancy and quality of life. They continue to shoulder much of the burden as household debt and high expenses persist. What was clear during the crisis period was that the country's social protection system was extremely inadequate to support families and sectors in need. Existing social protection systems were not only underfunded, but also lacked information, were too fragmented, lacked coordination between institutions and were not robust or dynamic enough to understand structural issues or capture the different ways in which people can be vulnerable or need support (Perera, 2025). For Sri Lanka's social protection approach to be transformative it must center social equity, and have policies that relate to power imbalances in society that encourage, create and sustain vulnerabilities. (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). In Stephen Devereux and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler's seminal work on social protection, they distinguished between social protection measures like targeted cash transfers and insurance schemes as 'economic protection' and not necessarily social protection and noted that "if the need for social protection is defined in the narrow "safety net" sense, as mechanisms for smoothing consumption in response to declining or fluctuating incomes, then the focus of interventions will logically be on targeted income or consumption transfers to affected individuals."

Working class households and the informal sector are diverse and dynamic. In response, social protection should be seen as a constellation of investments and interventions operating in parallel and incrementally. The last few years have been an important reminder that impacts on households due to the compounding crises stemming from global shocks, austerity measures and fiscal adjustments cannot be cushioned by one or even a handful of welfare measures. Having a cash transfer during the economic crisis was important, but it only allowed people to meet basic needs and did not address nutrition, learning loss or livelihood support. Colombo Urban Lab research during this period showed that most Aswesuma payments were used for utility payments, particularly electricity as it increased by more than 75% during the crisis period. Targeted schemes imagine poverty and vulnerability presenting itself in a particular way and

assume the deprivation or absence of certain factors such as permanent housing or high levels of education as adequate indicators. However, even those with assets can still be in need of a safety net, and depriving people of social protection during a crisis because they have achieved certain development milestones is a deprivation of their socio-economic rights. (Perera, 2025)

The precariousness of livelihoods and lack of labour protection for informal sector work, has compounded vulnerabilities to crises. Worsening health and nutrition will impact the labour power of working class households, many of whom lack other productive assets, particularly in the absence of social protection during crisis, illness, disability, accidents and old age.

While Sri Lankan social protection policies historically have been economic protection focussed (i.e cash transfers, food stamps, rations), the National Social Protection Policy of 2024 advocates for a universal life cycle approach, and "highlights the need for affordable, accessible social care" (National Social Protection Policy, 2024, pg.4). The National Social Protection Strategy released in October 2025 aspires to reach beyond economic protection, and if implemented well with adequate resources, including funds and political will, could be a strong support system for Sri Lankans in the long term. Specific to this research, the strategic objectives for the Social Care pillar resonated quite strongly in two of its objectives - Strengthen the role of informal caregivers through financial, psychological, and institutional support mechanisms and Expand community-based care networks leveraging local government officers and volunteers for last-mile outreach.

Working mothers and urban infrastructures of care in Colombo

This research focuses on urban infrastructures of care, one element of the constellation of social protection, which refers to specific aspects of the urban environment that support or impede a care giver's work. Urban women from low-income households are more likely to be employed in the informal sector, have precarious incomes, lack formal workplace protections and benefits such as maternity leave or retirement benefits. Furthermore, their unpaid care work from domestic chores and child care cannot be outsourced as it is for their middle class counterparts as they often lack the income to do so. This research explored the lives of working mothers in working class settlements in Colombo, with work being defined as any income -generating activity. We examined how and why women choose and abandon child care options, how they adjust at home and at work when care burdens are complicated by shocks and how their wellbeing is affected by balancing carework and with paid work.

Two principles guided our research -
One, that investment in care and unpaid care work should be done because it is a human right that deserves collective support and public funding, not only because it enables women to participate in the labour force. Care is essential and critical to life that even while unpaid, under-resourced and undervalued - the work still continues, unlike any other form of labour in the world.

Two, investment in care not only benefits women including their overall mental and physical well being, but it directly benefits their children, families and community to also live healthy and dignified lives. Our economic, social and cultural rights are indivisible - they rise or fall together.

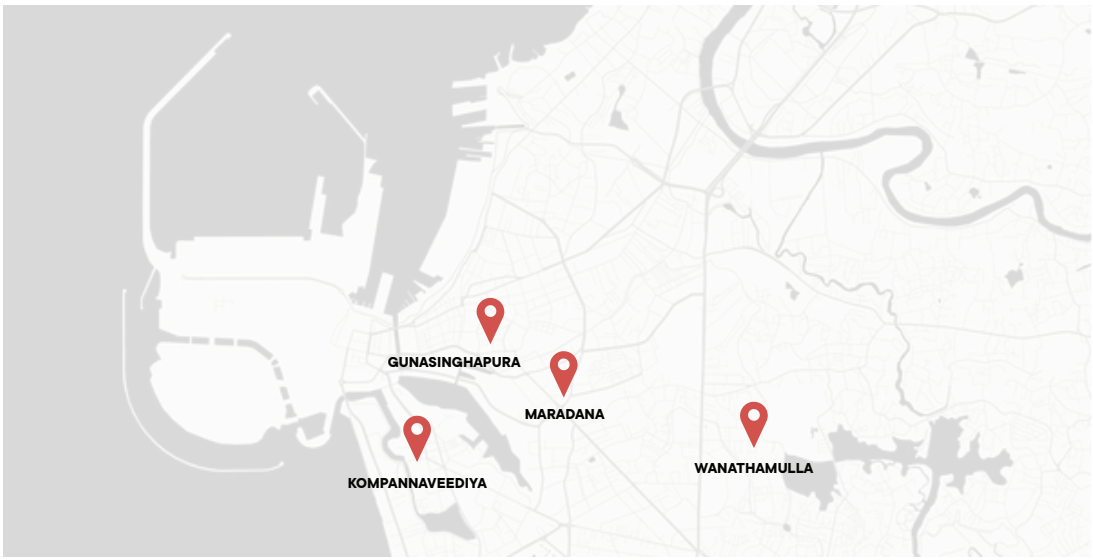

Figure 01: Locations of the field sites

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is the state of labour, women and care in the world and Sri Lanka?

According to UNICEF, gaining access to affordable, quality child care is crucial to securing a "triple dividend" of young children's development, women's economic empowerment, and economic growth (Samman and Lombardi 2019). Despite this, child care remains highly gendered, undervalued, and largely unpaid. Care work - and child care in particular - remains highly feminized, regardless of whether it is paid or unpaid work. In 2023, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that globally, 708 million women remained out of the labour force due to unpaid care responsibilities, compared to 40 million men, reinforcing gender inequality in the workplace (ILO 2024). This gender disparity is heightened in the Asia Pacific region, where women spend on average 4 hours and 22 minutes per day on unpaid care work, compared to 1 hour and 4 minutes for men (ILO 2018).

The persistent gender gap in care work disproportionately affects women's labour market outcomes, particularly female labour force participation (FLFP); previous studies indicate that mothers of children under 6 are most vulnerable to unemployment and most likely to leave the labour force, losing around 1 hour of paid work per week as a result (Carillo 2024; Chopra and Zambelli 2017). Women are also more likely to be self-employed, undertake seasonal jobs, or work in the informal sector to accommodate unpaid care work, reducing their ability to participate in social welfare programs such as social security and pensions schemes (ILO 2018). Unpaid care work further entrenches existing gender and societal norms of care work as the women's domain, reinforcing the "male breadwinner" family model. This gendered division of reproductive labour reduces women's earning potential and career mobility while increasing their time poverty relative to men (ILO 2018).

Research indicates that having access to affordable child care institutions and caregiving services can improve FLFP outcomes, but globally, investment in child care remains low (Halim et al 2021). Notably, there is little to no child care support for children aged 0-2 years old, leading to mothers almost entirely shouldering the burden of childcare during this period (Asian Development Bank 2023). The quality and working conditions of the paid care work sector is also low, with many care workers lacking specialised training in early childhood development, and adequate resources (ADB 2023; Samman and Lombardi 2019). Affordability remains a chief barrier to accessing child care, with only 45% of countries worldwide offering tuition free pre -primary education (Samman and Lombardi 2019). High out-of-pocket costs prevent low-income families in particular from accessing child care services, deterring mothers from entering the workforce or forcing them to take their children to work where possible, endangering child development outcomes.

Workplace policies and practices continue to influence gender-based inequalities in child care. 57% of the global population lives in countries where women receive an average of five more months of parental leave compared to men (ILO 2025). Moreover, employer - backed child care support, such as creches or daycares remains underfunded, despite empirical evidence documenting the positive impact of such support on female employee retention, especially in low-income countries (IFC 2024).

Despite high educational outcomes for women, female labour force participation (FLFP) in Sri Lanka has been on a decline over the past decade, falling from 35.9% in 2016 to 31.3% in 2023 (Department of

Statitics 2023). In urban areas, female LFP remains lower than the average - in 2023, just 28.9% of urban women participated in the labour force. In Colombo district, this figure increases slightly to 33.3%. (Department of Statistics 2023). According to the 2023 Annual Labour Survey, 71.7% or 6.4 million women remained economically inactive in Sri Lanka, with 57.2% attributing household responsibilities as the reason for their inactivity (Department of Statistics 2023). In October 2024, the World Bank raised concerns about the country's FLFP dropping to the lowest in a decade (29.6%), but also framed increasing women's participation in the labour force as a means of unlocking untapped potential to power inclusive economic growth (World Bank, 2024). Closing the gender gap in labour force participation is presented as another road to recovery.

According to Gunewardena (2024), Sri Lankan women face a 'double burden' of balancing work and family responsibilities, often at the cost of their economic independence and career mobility. Child care, particularly for children under the age of five, has become an increasing barrier to entering the workforce; the World Bank reports that women with young children are 7.4% less likely to join the labour force compared to women without young children, and 6.2% less likely to participate in urban areas (World Bank 2020). Child care responsibilities can also act as a barrier to re-entry into the workforce. The most significant obstacle was the lack of support for child care, cited by 42.5% of the women who were unemployed but were interested to engage in paid work (Women and Media Collective, 2025). Samarakoon and Mayadunne (2018) note that regardless of education, income levels and marriage status, care of children below age of 10 is the main reason for women exiting the work force. Another study conducted with previously employed urban women in the Western Province revealed that 40% of women left their job due to marriage or parenting responsibilities, with many sharing that the decision to leave was made by their spouse (Verité Research 2022).

Traditional gender roles are widely entrenched and internalised by women, even in urbanising parts of the country. For instance, in a survey of households in the Western Province, more than four fifths of both men and women agreed that the wife's main responsibility was to manage household affairs and look after children, while at least two thirds of both men and women agreed that in a household it was the man who was mainly responsible for earning income (Gunatilaka, 2016).

Sri Lankan women are more time poor compared to men as a result of caregiving and child care responsibilities. A 2017 Time Use Survey documented the gap in hours spent on child care between Sri Lankan women, who spend 5 hours and 36 minutes a day in unpaid domestic and caregiving activities, compared to just 1 hour and 20 minutes per day for men (Department of Statistics 2017). Women are more likely to engage in household tasks including cooking, cleaning and shopping, care work for household members, and community service activities. Women spent 3.4 hours per day on care work activities, including feeding, cleaning, physical care, providing medical care, instructing, teaching, talking with and reading to children, playing, meetings and arrangements with schools and child care service providers, while their male counterparts spent 1.9 hours in a day. A time-use survey across 7 districts conducted by Women and Media Collective (2025) suggests that the time women spend on child care is much higher, with over 6 hours a day spent on taking care of their children, and an additional 51 minutes spent on helping children with schoolwork.

Notably, care work responsibilities are undertaken regardless of a woman's LFP or economic activity; 90% of women reported engaging in unpaid domestic services activities regardless of their labour market status, compared to 56% of men (Department of Statistics 2017). However, Ranatunge and Dunusingha (2021) note that women in urban households are most likely to be time-poor; working women spend more time on employment activities and domestic activities compared to working men, spending on average 4 more hours on non-System of National Accounts activities (including child care) than employed men. They attribute this to persisting societal expectations on women to perform domestic work regardless of their employment status, and rising costs of living that force women to seek paid employment. Gunewardena (2024) notes that the time women spend on unpaid care labour limits their opportunities to explore paid employment, educational qualifications, and participation in leisure time or civil life.

When women choose employment, they are often restricted to certain sectors or forced to take on work that is badly paid and poorly protected. A majority of employed women work in the informal sector, comprising 60.3% of total female employment (Department of Statistics 2023). The ILO notes that of those employed in the formal sector, women predominate in health and education sectors, as well as professional services such as banking and secretarial work (Ranaraja and Hassendeen 2016). However, recent trends suggest a shift away from permanent, full-time employment for women towards temporary or casual work, self employment in micro-businesses, multiple part time jobs, or contract based work (Ranaraja and Hassendeen 2016). These jobs range from street vendors, day-wage labourers to home-based business owners and domestic workers without formal contracts. In contrast to the global trend, Sri Lankan women are less likely to be working informally compared to men, but remain overrepresented as unpaid family workers and domestic workers. Women in the informal sector are particularly vulnerable to exploitation as they fall outside the scope of most labour laws and social protection frameworks. Notably, women informally employed as domestic workers in Sri Lanka are not covered by national social security frameworks or labour laws governing work conditions and salary requirements. As De Silva (2019) documents, while domestic workers are primarily sought out for infant and child care services, they are expected to contribute to numerous other household tasks like cooking and cleaning without established contracts outlining their responsibilities, resulting in overwork and exploitation.

In line with the global trend, Sri Lankan women's labour outcomes - including the type of occupation, hours worked, and location - are more likely to be shaped by care work responsibilities compared to men. Notably, the jobs and occupations Sri Lanka women participate in mirror broader regional trends in South Asia, where gendered norms delineate "women's work" from "men's work" (World Bank 2022). Women are often found in service oriented sectors where they perform caregiving responsibilities for payment, such as nursing or domestic work, and are discouraged from taking on work that would affect household responsibilities, such as night shifts or taking long commutes for work (World Bank 2022). Social norms surrounding "acceptable work" for women can limit their access to financial capital, and reduce household investment in female human capital, impeding access to higher education and undermining women's career mobility and autonomy. A significant proportion of working women are not covered by labour legislation, and those who are covered, ironically find regulations a constraining force against their LFP. Moreover, existing legislation reinforces care work as a female responsibility, implicitly placing the burden of housework and child care duties on women. Conversely, there are no paternity leave or paid parental leave regulations governing the private sector in Sri Lanka, and a paltry three days of leave for fathers in

the public sector, signalling the underlying presumption of care work as a woman's obligation. There is limited literature on how female professionals navigate motherhood and employment in Sri Lanka. Nayakaratne and Perera (2024) offer insight into the emotional distress of professionals returning from maternity leave, while Menezes (2018) documents the difficulties faced by female engineers in balancing unpaid care work while working in a male dominated environment. Kumaranatunge (2023) explores how female entrepreneurs reorient their businesses around their identity as mothers in a study of 'mumpreneurs.' Such insights contribute to understanding the constant struggle between work and motherhood for women in Sri Lanka. However, there is an absence on how low-income working mothers, particularly those in the informal and private sector, navigate childcare, unpaid care work and paid work in their everyday lives.

A key concern for working women is the lack of child care infrastructure or external support systems to alleviate childcare responsibilities of working mothers. In Sri Lanka, families use several childcare options, including formal services (e.g. daycares or crèches, pre-schools), informal care networks (e.g. extended family members, relatives or friends), or private nannies (Arunatilaka et al 2023). Whilst informal care arrangements are most common, research suggests that this model of home-based childcare is diminishing (Warnasuriya et al 2020). Moussié (2017) highlights the necessity of childcare infrastructure for urban women, particularly those who are informally employed, including street vendors and outdoor workers, who must otherwise resort to taking their children to work, or leaving them with other caregivers (often young or elderly women).

Moreover, research indicates that traditional childcare support systems from groups such as elderly family members are disintegrating, particularly for urban mothers. As Warnasuriya et al (2020) notes, in Sri Lanka's rapidly aging society, elderly household members become a care burden for younger caregivers, adding to their childcare responsibilities. As childcare responsibility shifts from the extended family to the nuclear family, Sri Lankan women face the burden of increasing caregiving responsibilities. The World Bank reports a rising negative association between the presence of elderly household members and female mothers' LFP since 2009, attributing it as a factor limiting urban female LFP in particular (Sethi et al, 2020).

Using formal child care in the form of daycares and creches is not a common social norm in Sri Lanka. In one study, the most common reason for not using a daycare was that the mother or another family member was able to take care of the child (Women and Media Collective, 2025). Moreover, while Colombo district had more daycare facilities, 90.5% of these were privately run, indicating that accessibility is an issue. The study showed that there was more demand and social acceptance of using early childhood education facilities such as preschools and Montessori schools. The primary motivation behind using them was related to the quality of education offered. (Women and Media Collective, 2025)

The estate sector has historically relied on child care outside the home, as given the high rate of female labour force participation in the estate sector, work-based child care was adopted out of necessity. Historically, these rudimentary facilities usually consisted of a space where the workers' children would be taken care of by a retired worker. After the privatization of plantations in 1992, child care took the form of Child Development Centers (CDCs) which were under the Plantation Human Development Trust (PHDT), a tripartite organization consisting of the government, regional plantation companies, and plantation trade

unions to implement social development programs in estate communities. CDCs are primarily for children of tea estate workers and are free of charge for children under six years. They are staffed by estate management who are trained in early childhood care and education by the PHDT. While they integrate child care and preschool, there are large discrepancies in the quality of these centers (Warnasuriya 2020). CDCs have been reported to have limited facilities and even basic infrastructure such as running water. There has also been a deterioration in financing of these facilities as many creches have closed due to lack of funds and others are poorly maintained (Udayanga, 2024). Many estates no longer provide nutritional supplementation to children and have reduced nursing breaks as well, in violation of the Maternity Benefits Ordinance (Martin, 2020). Moreover, social exclusion of the Malaiyaha community affects the implementation of early childhood education policies, which do not reflect the needs of the community (Udayanga, 2023).

Affordability remains a major barrier to accessing childcare support for poorer mothers or those living in rural and sub-urban areas. In Sri Lanka, pre-school education is not provided by the State, and 70.8% of preschools and 78% of daycare centres are privately operated and require fees payment, reducing accessibility (World Bank 2020). A recent push for employer provided daycare services has helped reduce the accessibility gap for employees, but is often limited to large corporations such as Brandix and MAS Holdings, who find it cost-effective to provide in-house care facilities (IFC 2018). This excludes women working in SMEs, or those informally employed in part-time or contract based work. Quality and regulation concerns further disincentivize women from using formal child care services. According to a 2010 National Survey on Early Childhood Development Centres, numerous daycares suffered from operational constraints including insufficient space, inadequate resources and a lack of learning materials like books for children (Children's Secretariat 2010). Furthermore, the Survey found that 18% of child caregivers did not have a General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O Level) qualification, and 43% lacked specialized training (Warnasuriya et al 2020). While the government has since introduced more training programs for early childhood caregivers and regulations for daycare centres (e.g. 2024 National Policy on Child Daycare Facilities in Sri Lanka), oversight and monitoring concerns remain.

Sri Lanka's child care policy landscape

Sri Lanka's legal framework recognises the State's duty toward children, and is also signatory to significant international frameworks on the rights of children, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990. Subsequently, the Government of Sri Lanka introduced the Charter on the Rights of the Child in 1992. The Sri Lankan Constitution also notes in the Directive Principles of State Policy that "The state shall promote with special care the interests of children and youth, to ensure their full development, physical, mental, moral, religious and social, and to protect them from exploitation and discrimination" (Chapter VI, Article 27[13]).

Policies that govern child care in Sri Lanka at the national level include the Policy Framework and National Plan of Action to Address Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (2016-2020), National Policy for Alternative Care of Children in Sri Lanka (2019), National Child Protection Policy (2019), National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development (2018) as well as National Guidelines for Child Day Care Centres in 2017, with a drafted 2024 update pending Cabinet approval. Sri Lanka adopts a multi-sectoral approach to child care governance; consequently, child care falls under the purview of numerous ministries at the national level, including the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, Ministry of Education and Ministry of

Health (Warnasuriya et al 2020). The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), National Secretariat for Early Childhood Development (NSECD) and Department for Probation and Child care Services (DPCS) responsible for researching, formulating, enforcing and implementing child care regulations and facilities across the country. The NSECD's role is to formulate policies and regulations on Early Child Development (ECD), particularly around childcare institutions such as day cares, while the NCPA functions as an authority with multiple functions including institutional monitoring, psychosocial services, legal and law enforcement services, hotlines, special police unit etc. Provincial Councils can also pass legislation for the management and supervision of preschools under Article 154G(1) of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (1987), with six of the nine provinces (North Central, North Western, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva, and Western) establishing guidelines and standards for early childhood care and education centres (e.g. day cares) and pre-schools (Warnasuriya et al 2020). The Colombo Municipal Council's Public Assistance Department operates 3 creches and 13 pre-schools in Colombo, and provides supplementary funding to 27 pre-schools (Colombo Municipal Council 2025).

Despite these institutional frameworks, child care infrastructure is largely operated under the private sector. According to the latest census conducted on care facilities in 2016, there are 1209 day care centers serving 23365 children island-wide. A majority of these centers are situated in the districts of Colombo (189) and Kurunegala (200) (NCPA 2024). The 2016 ECD census estimated around 70.8% of child care facilities were privately operated, with 6.5% of centers run by religious entities, and 3% by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, the cost of private ECD centres - including direct costs, like fees, and indirect costs, such as transportation, stationary and clothing - is a significant barrier for parents enrolling their children. Moreover, recent events including the COVID-19 pandemic and 2021 economic crisis have further exacerbated these financial challenges (Navaratna 2023). The 2016 ECD census noted that nearly 44% of children were not enrolled in ECD centres, largely due to low accessibility of publicly-funded ECD centres and high costs of private sector centres. The NCPA further notes the need for a variety of ECD centres to accommodate different age-groups and requirements of mothers, including centre-based, home-based and workplace-based child care centres (NCPA 2024). In a handful of sectors, off-site and on-site child care services such as breastfeeding rooms, creches and daycare facilities for pre-primary aged children are available. However employer provided child care still leaves many women, especially those working in the informal sector, without necessary support. The NCPA also cautions the use of home-based child care centres, which often lack regulatory oversight and qualified staff (NCPA 2024).

METHODOLOGY

From June to November 2025, the Colombo Urban Lab team engaged directly with almost 200 people to understand and analyse urban infrastructures of care in the city, and what aspects of Sri Lanka's social protection should be strengthened in order to support urban working class communities. Our mixed methods approach included qualitative interviews with working mothers, focus group discussions and workshops designed using human centered design methods to meaningfully understand and co-create pathways for stronger social protection in Sri Lanka.

Six key informant interviews: We conducted 6 key informant interviews with local government officials and individuals working in child care in different capacities to inform the questionnaire and our overall research framing.

Forty five household interviews: The Colombo Urban Lab team conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with working mothers from 4 sites in Maradana, Gunasinghapura, Kompannaveediya and Wanathamulla from June 2025 - September 2025. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to ensure representation of different child care arrangements, types of employment and ethnicities. While sites were selected because of the presence of low-income settlements and high-rise apartments in the area, income was not included in the sampling criteria and as a result 22% of respondents cannot be considered 'low-income households' as they earned above the Anker Living Wage Reference for Urban Sri Lanka in 2025. Different strategies were employed at each site to gain insights into the specific child care demands working mothers faced and solutions they used.

- Maradana- Sampling was conducted to get a mix of mothers who used a preschool in the area and mothers who did not.
- Wanathamulla- Community members recruited participants from one high-rise complex, to get a sense of how relocation, a different built environment and its impact on care networks affected child care arrangements.
- Kompannaveediya and Gunasinghapura- Community leaders recruited participants who were engaged in employment outside the house, with an oversampling of domestic workers.

Three focus group discussions: We conducted 3 focus group discussions with 37 participants including 15 mothers of children with disabilities. The remaining 22 participants were those who part of the household interviews. Findings from the research were presented to the participants along with broader analysis and recommendations, and their views and own recommendations were taken into account in the final analysis and recommendations of this report.

Five validation and awareness raising workshops: We held a validation workshop with 20 community leaders representing settlements and high-rise apartments from across Colombo city. As they work most closely with their communities and are key decision makers, we presented our key findings and recommendations to them, and refined the final output based on their feedback. In November 2025, we conducted four workshops on social protection for 85 participants Panchikawatta, Wanathamulla and Mattakkuliya where we also sought their views and validation on the key recommendations in this report. The participants were residents in these areas and were mostly women, across different age groups. These

workshops were specifically focussed on creating awareness among the communities regarding transformative social protection concepts, and understanding that they are meant to be more than cash transfer programmes, and how they can be applied to the life cycle of working class people.

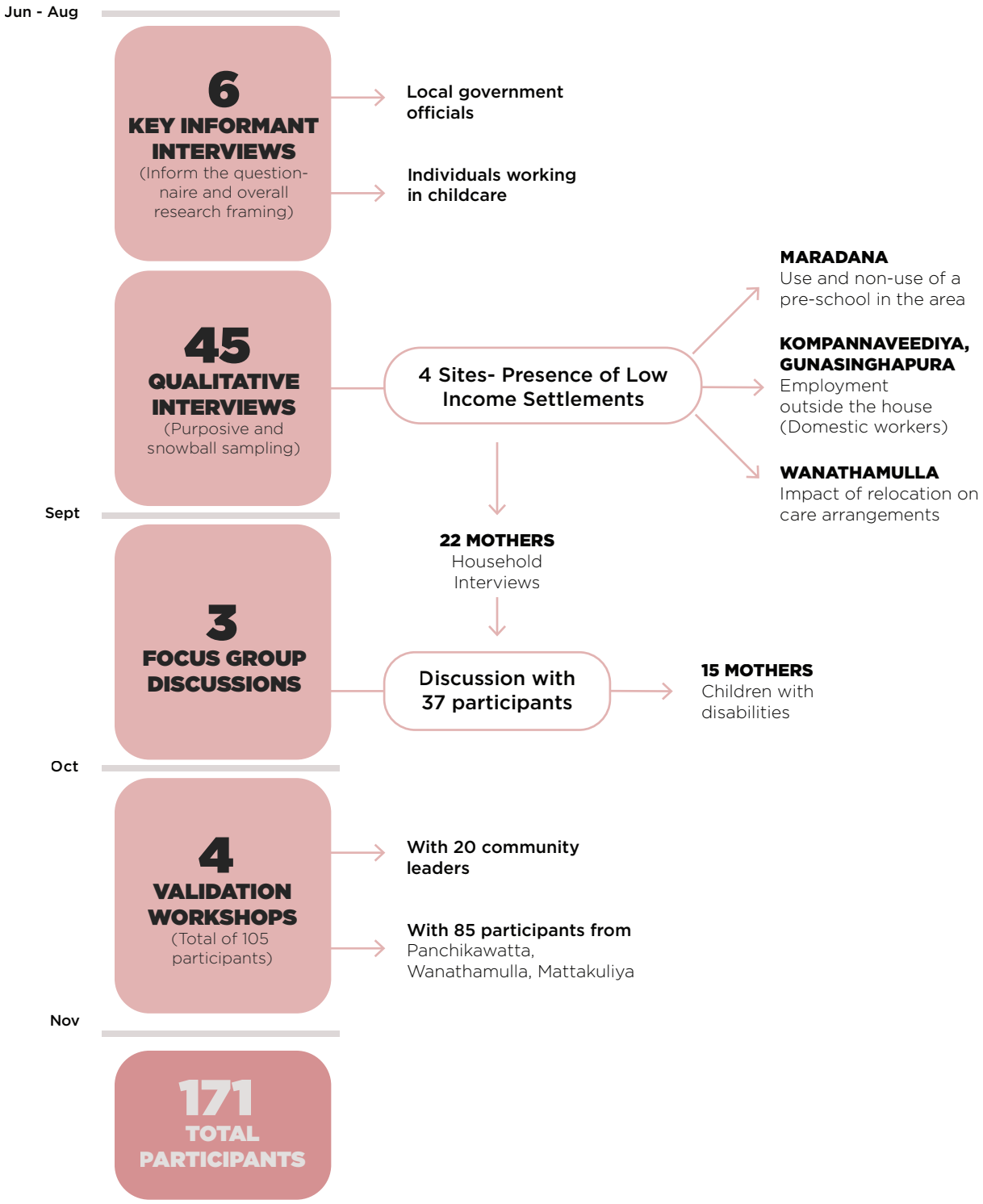

Figure 02: Description of the methodology

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the analysis from the findings and a series of recommendations for strengthening social protection measures in Sri Lanka, with a focus on urban infrastructures of care and working mothers. If implemented in parallel and incrementally over time these recommendations would reduce burdens on families, enable long term gains in livelihood, health, education and strengthen a fraught social contract. It would also enable women to improve their quality of life by reducing their time poverty, gain time for rest and leisure and be economically active through means of their own choosing. At our social protection workshops we reiterated that social protection was a right, and not charity - and that people in the household were able to go to school, go to work, be productive and healthy citizens because the women at home (whether or not they worked) enabled it through their unpaid care work.

In his statement at the Second World Summit for Social Development in November 2025, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, noted that in 2023, a record 54 developing countries allocated 10% or more of government revenue to paying off the interest on their debt, and 3.3 billion people live in countries that spend more on interest payments than on either education or health (De Schutter, 2025).

According to key figures in the 2026 budget, Sri Lanka's estimated total revenue for the year 2026 is LKR 5,305 billion, and out of the estimated expenditure, LKR 4,495 billion has been allocated for debt servicing in 2026 - over 80% of estimated revenue (EconomyNext, 2025). Before the devastation and destruction caused by Cyclone Ditwah in November 2025, Sri Lanka's priority continued to be meeting the milestones of the IMF programme, spending towards infrastructure and development programmes as debt servicing means that countries have to show economic growth. Commitment to investing more on social protection - including infrastructures of care - remained inadequate and under-prioritised even in light of the National Social Protection Policy. The 2026 budget allocated LKR 837 billion for social protection, out of which LKR 231 billion was allocated for the Aswesuma cash transfer programme and LKR 0.35 billion for development of day care centres. LKR 557 million was further allocated for the construction, continuation and expansion of day care centres for children with disabilities, including those with autism, and an additional LKR 500 million was earmarked for the establishment of new day care centres for children with disabilities.

However, as our research on the impacts of Sri Lanka's polycrisis since 2020, and social protection more broadly has shown that unless we invest in the economic, social and cultural rights of citizens, it will be difficult to achieve a just and equitable recovery. We must build sustainable systems along the way, and for this we have to start incrementally and learn from the lessons of the past systems. It also requires us to think of social protection as a constellation of programmes, where they build on or complement, meeting different needs of the country while also delivering transformative change. Social protection in Sri Lanka must be universal, as people can be vulnerable and precarious in different ways at different periods in their lives. This is ever more so urgent in the aftermath of the cyclone and floods, where existing vulnerabilities were exacerbated and amplified by the impact. Even those whose houses were not directly affected, were impacted in other ways by the inability to go to work, impacts on livelihood, impacts on food environment etc.

Care is also intrinsically linked to housing justice and climate justice, and we have formulated the recommendations with those intersectionalities accounted for. However, underpinning all this is the need to address patriarchal gender and social norms that continue to place care responsibilities on women. In interviews and discussions many iterations of "only a mother can look after their children properly" "my husband doesn't like sending our child to a creche or day care" "why should our child be looked after by someone else when they can be looked after at home" were noted. Even with the most progressive laws, policies and infrastructures, women would continue to be faced with the same inequities and lack of opportunities unless gender norms particularly around motherhood and care are addressed.

These recommendations are based on our primary research outlined in the methodology above, and have been co-created and validated with working class communities and working mothers themselves from low-income settlements in Colombo. Detailed findings can be found in the following chapter.

In Colombo's working class communities, one income alone does not suffice with many getting further pushed into informality and taking on a second job or starting a small business to make ends meet. Working mothers find it hard to enter the formal work force or have a regular schedule in their informal jobs - whether it is a daily wage job or a home based business - because of their care duties. For those without support such as a family member who can look after younger children, it is often impossible to do full time or regular work. They juggle dropping and picking children up from school, looking after them once home, and on days when schools suddenly close (for example due to heat stress or weather-related issues) they are unable to go to work at all. Women tend to take on low paying or exploitative work with flexible hours and closer to home as a result. This is why precarious work like working for manpower agencies are more appealing for women in the informal sector, even without the benefits and labour protections.

Our three key recommendations include:

1. Investing in and improving Sri Lanka's policies regarding care infrastructures
2. Strengthening laws to safeguard domestic workers
3. Universal school meal programmes

Recommendation 1: Investing in and improving Sri Lanka's policies regarding care infrastructures

Creches and day cares

Our research indicates low usage and access to creches and day cares, and an absence of after-school programmes for older children. Mothers who do access pre-schools are able to engage in some form of informal work (either as domestic workers working in the mornings or a home-based business) during the morning hours when their children are at home. Trust, affordability, distance to home and workplace, gender norms all play a role in whether families avail of these infrastructures.

Privately run pre-schools in communities also functioned as a day care in some cases. However, while performing valuable support to the working mothers, these pre-schools tend to be underfunded and under-resourced (dependent on 'fees' as low as LKR 500 - 1000 a month that many were unable to pay), and found it difficult to get state support as they did not meet certain thresholds to register or qualify as a pre-school. This included a minimum number of children (20) or play items like slides and swings. These

valuable infrastructures are mostly housed in temples or community centres and are a lifeline for parents but are totally dependent on the goodwill and resourcefulness of those in charge.

Care infrastructures in the city should be expanded and well resourced. These centers should be located in communities, employ and train staff from the communities and be able to extend hours for women to work a full day. Safety and security of the children were of paramount importance in choosing to send or not send a child to such a center, and as such ensuring staff are trained and trustworthy is essential. In addition, clean bathrooms, suitable spaces for children to sleep and play are essential. Furthermore, these centers should be supervised and monitored by a regulatory body.

After school programmes

Day cares and creches are often positioned as care solutions, because they enable working mothers with small children to join the labour force. However this ignores the unique vulnerabilities faced by adolescents living in low-income urban areas. While adolescent children were often left alone, some mothers were wary, citing fears of substance abuse for their sons and sexual violence for their daughters. Security concerns were particularly noted by mothers in high-rise apartments, who identified that the proliferation of drugs in the high-rise was a serious safety concern for their children, and that they were afraid of their older children getting addicted. Lalani*, a preschool teacher, noted that the drug problem was now affecting younger teenagers and identified the 14-16 age group as the most vulnerable and in need of interventions. A majority of adolescent boys preferred to leave school after O/Levels, after which they were often unemployed or working as three wheeler drivers.

After school programmes, particularly for older children, were welcomed by communities as a way of enabling mothers to work a full day, but also as a way of exposing them to new skills and culture - like computer classes or dancing classes - in addition to support in doing their homework. Art and performance based spaces, as well as sports facilities with after care facilities are important spaces to consider. Some mothers said their preference was for the after-school programmes to be held at the school itself, as then they would not have to worry about transporting the child from school to another location. School was also a trusted place where they did not have to worry about their children. Safety and worries around the increase in drugs and drug use in their communities over the last few years was constantly highlighted. Case study 1 also illustrates a successful community based after-school programme where elements of trust, affordability, security, meaningful engagement of children across different ages proved to be a success in its functioning.

Care infrastructures for children with disabilities

The lack of care infrastructures for children and adults with disabilities was a key gap highlighted in our interviews with mothers with children with disabilities. As we note in the next chapter, for women whose children were severely ill or disabled, the intensity of the care burden was also much greater, as they navigated their child's additional needs. In many cases, women were compelled to leave the workforce and their life revolved around caring for their children, and most were only able to do small-scale home businesses such as spice packeting or catering.

Physically, the work of caring for children with disabilities was strenuous, with parents noting challenges at every stage of the child's development. Moreover, the care burden continued as their children aged into

*All the names have been anonymised

adults. The mothers noted that while their adult children were able to eat by themselves, things like going to the toilet and showering were still things that they needed help with. In addition, adult-children with disabilities were now physically harder to manage, particularly for aging women.

Creches and day cares in the formal sector

One key reason women did not seek employment in the formal sector, and often engaged in informal work was the flexibility it offered for their care work. Those interviewed who worked in the formal sector were those who had means of care (for example grandparents) that enabled them to work a full time job. But if the formal sector offered creches and day care facilities for all staff - particularly those contracted to do tea services, cleaning services - this would enable mothers to seek employment outside of informal sector options.

Caring for carers

Sri Lanka must also look at newer models of infrastructures of care being practiced in other parts of the world where the facilities extend to beyond just child care but are also spaces of leisure and rest for mothers, spaces where they can enrol in a class or course and build their capacity while their children were being looked after, spaces to connect with other adults and build community or even avail themselves of government services. In our interviews about how they spent their weekends or free time, the answers the women gave were still around activities very much connected to their children or families, and quite rarely something that they did for themselves. While our class biases would not allow us to think of these being as options for working class communities, in cities like Bogota in Colombia - the city is truly leading the way with their Bogota Care Blocks (see case study 2). Keeping communities meaningfully involved in the design and implementation of such policies is key.

Case study 1: Care for adolescents - After-school programme as care infrastructure

Shanthi teaches at a prominent boys school in Colombo, but has been giving tuition to children from wattes adjacent to her house since 2003. Lacking capacity in her house as the demand expanded, a few years ago she found a house in the watte with the help of her students to run classes. As the house flooded frequently and lacked space and facilities, she recently moved into a permanent two-storey building on the main road.

Moving to a better location has enabled her to expand classes and she now has 89 students enrolled, out of which 50 pay regularly, and she gives the space to three other teachers to conduct lessons and keeps a 10% commission as most tuition institutes do. The improved facilities have enabled her to attract more students from different parts of the city, and they cross-subsidise students from the watte who are often unable to pay her. Classes are run for all subjects from grades 1 - A/Levels.

Students from adjacent wattes often have unstable and insecure home environments. According to Shanthi, many students come from homes where mothers are the primary breadwinners as fathers are absent or unemployed. Some students live with their grandparents as their mothers are working abroad. Shanthi notes that mothers are extremely overburdened and children are often neglected as mothers are too exhausted and stressed to provide them the adequate care and attention they need.

However, wattes in this area have active women's cooperatives and many residents receive social assistance such as Samurdhi earlier and now Aswesuma, and can access women's banks for loans. In addition, they receive a lot of attention from local politicians, including free exercise books and stationary, which reduces the burden on parents as well as Shanthi. In addition, a majority of children attend prestigious schools as they are within the 1 kilometer radius. However, parents struggle with additional school expenses and children will not be able to participate in extracurricular activities as a result.

While the institute formally runs like any other tuition center, it functions more as community space for underprivileged youth. Children arrive after school at 2pm and often stay as late as 10pm because their mothers are working and their home environments are loud and unstable. Even when they do not have classes, students may drop in to escape family disputes or spend time with each other. 'It is difficult to send them home after classes - sometimes they ask me to do the class for longer because they don't want to go home.' The institute is like a second home for students from the watte, with some children even preferring to use the toilet at the institute than at their home. Shanthi has also introduced activities outside tuition. She decorates the classrooms for different festivals, and for children's day she had a movie screening and got down a popcorn machine for the children. She has also started taking them on outings across the city, noting that children come from families with no concept of leisure and that they have not even been to Viharamaha Devi Park although they live so close to it.

Shanthi also performs an important role in safeguarding children. She counsels older children, especially girls and has prevented them from dropping out from school and from falling into exploitative and unsafe situations. She also ensures that the tuition institute is a safe space - for example, the male teachers who use the space for tuition must teach their classes in an open room that can be surveilled by the road as well as by her.

Shanthi identified that finding a suitable location was the biggest barrier to setting up programmes like this. For instance, despite getting a reduced rent because of the nature of her enterprise, she still had to pay LKR 100,000 a month. While the location enabled her to attract other students who would finance this, and she was confident that she would break even eventually, she had taken out a loan to pay the rent.

In addition, this model was sustainable because of the time, effort and drive that Shanthi brought to it. She was not paid for her efforts at the tuition institute, and instead gave private individual classes and took on extra responsibilities at her school to gain extra income. Shanthi was driven by an ethos of social work and community service. She worked at the institute everyday, even on weekends and noted that she only took Poyas off because she also needed a holiday. During school holidays she never gave students more than a few days off from the institute. Given the immense personal effort involved in sustaining it, the replicability of a model like the institute is uncertain. Shanthi noted that it could be replicated with a small committed team that was not profit motivated.

However, a few key findings can prove useful for other afterschool programmes. Firstly, there is a demand for child care and community spaces to be used by younger adolescents. Secondly, parents are willing to send their children for tuition because it has been established as an educational need. Centering a care model around tuition also ensures that it is financially sustainable as parents are more willing to pay for

tuition than other expenses. It also opens up the possibility of cross-subsidising students through fee structures. Thirdly, teachers are highly respected and trusted in society, and this means that they are able to expand their mandate and purview into non-educational activities without backlash or reprimand from parents.

Tuition is also eroding free education which is in itself an important component of social protection. Leveraging the shadow education system to provide child care to low-income households is not a sustainable solution, particularly when the state should also be investing in youth and ensuring that extracurricular activities are part of free education instead of a perk for wealthier families. However, a learning that can be applied to other afterschool programmes is that an emphasis on education, particularly English classes can attract adolescents with their parents approval, and form the basis of a programme that can be expanded and improved after trust and acceptance with the community has been established. The key takeaway from this case study is not so much an argument that tuition should be expanded as care, but rather that sustained demand-driven engagements with the community will eventually form more multifaceted infrastructures of care and support.

Case study 2: Care blocks in Bogota, Colombia

Bogota offers a unique example of how the local government can operationalise efforts to support care work. Care Blocks were envisioned as a way of rethinking unpaid care work by Mayor Claudia López, the first woman to be elected mayor of the city. What is unique about this approach is that "it is not only about recognizing and redistributing care" as the mayor explained upon opening the first block, "but institutionalizing it to free up time and opportunities for caregivers. Care Blocks in Bogota are located in different parts of the city, designed to be within walking distance to those who access it, with free transport available to those who are not close by. Their infrastructure and services provide proximate and simultaneous care to caregivers and care receivers and follow a land-use planning model that integrates care and tactical urban planning with a gender perspective. Care blocks provided free caregiving to the elderly, children and persons with disabilities, freeing up time for caregivers. As a result, caregivers were not just able to go to work, but could also take classes or skills training, do laundry for free, go swimming and engage in other leisure activities. According to the City Government of Bogota, "between October 2020 and May 2023, Bogota inaugurated 19 Care Blocks and two Care Buses, which have provided more than 420,000 services since March 2021. They have trained more than 12,000 women in alliance with the National Training Service (SENA in Spanish) and supported more than 500 on their road to high school graduation. In addition, we have transformed the lives of more than 86,000 caregivers who, for the first time, have had the time and services to rest, exercise, and promote their own autonomy".

What makes these programmes actually transformative is that they are enshrined into law - the Care System in Bogota became city law in March of 2023, ensuring continuity, permanence, and expansion of the Care System in incoming Administrations.

Source: Moro 2024 and Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2022 and 2023

Case study 3: Worker Cooperative models in India

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was registered in 1972 as a trade union for women workers in the informal economy. It is both a union and a movement with 2.1 million members, organising women workers across 18 states in India. SEWA's members are manual labourers and service providers including agricultural workers, domestic workers, street vendors, home-based workers and small producers like artisans. Responding to women informal workers' pressing need for full-day child care, SEWA set up a child-care cooperative called Sangini, which runs 11 centres for SEWA members. These child care centres provide full-time care in Ahmedabad, India. They are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m on weekdays and cater for 350 children up to the age of six. Each centre has a maximum of 35 children and has two child care workers called balsevikas. The balsevikas come from the same community as the children and the women informal workers.The cooperative consists of shareholders, who are also its users, managers and owners – including child care workers and mothers. It runs democratically with an election every five years in which seven to nine board members are elected. The board members are all balsevikas working with the cooperative. The cooperative charges a nominal fee from the parents that, in turn, ensures that no extra financial burden is imposed on the family. The fees paid by the parents cover only one-third of the total expenses per child. The remaining operating costs are covered through community donations (i.e. food provisions), donor grants and government subsidies. The Sangini cooperative also provides child-care services for the employees of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The fees charged from the employees are higher than those in the 11 child- care centres for children of informal workers and the income generated from this helps cover some of the costs incurred in running the other centres.

Source: SEWA, 2022

Recommendation 2: Strengthening laws to safeguard domestic workers

Sri Lanka has a national minimum wage under the National Minimum Wage of Workers Act, No. 3 of 2016 that prohibits employers from paying their employees below this amount. It remained low at LKR 17,500 per month as per the passing of the National Minimum Wage of Workers (Amendment) Act No.48 of 2024 in September 2024 (Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment, 2024) and was increased to LKR 27,000 in 2025.

However these laws are applicable only to state and private sector workers and not enforceable for informal workers, including domestic workers. In our research we see a wide spectrum of daily wage amounts, particularly for domestic work. It ranged from LKR 1000 - 2000. Domestic workers also lack labour protections like maternity or sick leave, paid days off, retirement benefits - their daily or monthly income solely depends on them being able to come to work every day. This means that women are particularly vulnerable, having to juggle household and care work.

Transformative social protection measures for these workers could include strengthening the legal labour framework to set minimum wages, mandatory paid leave, maternity benefits, contracts between employer and worker to name a few. For over a decade, the Domestic Workers Union in Sri Lanka has demanded legal protection for domestic workers. They have advocated for the inclusion of domestic workers within the Wages Board ordinances, inclusion of domestic workers in the EPF/ ETF and enrollment of domestic workers in the minimum wage law and gratuity as key changes that need to be made. We further note that

the National Social Protection Strategy includes plans to strengthen and expand the Social Security Board (SSB) Schemes simplifying enrollment processes and expanding eligibility criteria to attract more self-employed and informal sector workers, including domestic workers. Further protections are also required for live-in domestic workers who are mostly from other parts of the country - and their right to days off, to leave the place of employment to see friends, to go to a religious place etc and not be confined solely to the house.

In our discussions with the communities, the enforceability of such laws and the power dynamics between workers and employers was highlighted. There was concern that employers might reduce the number of days they employed domestic workers if the "cost" increased if they had to provide these added benefits. They also raised concern about how domestic workers could tackle employers who did not adhere to these laws or policies, without risking their jobs.

We recommend that along with advocating for and strengthening such laws for domestic workers, there is also a need for parallel awareness raising on dignified work and a living wage, in order to normalise the idea of considering domestic workers (and any other informal workers that provide services to households and businesses) as those entitled to the same rights and safeguards as those in the formal sector. That a large group contributing to Sri Lanka's economy and care economy could work all their life (and their work enabling their employers to be a part of the labour force), and be at a "retirement age" with no savings and no retirement benefits is an extremely unjust economic model.

Recommendation 3: Universal school meal programmes

19 out of 45 respondents stated that at least one child received a free meal at their school. These children were either enrolled in a pre-school with such a programme or in primary school, as the programme is limited to grade 5 and below. Respondents who sent their child to a preschool with a free meal programme stated that this was one of the main reasons they enrolled their child in the preschool, particularly as parents could not afford nutritious ingredients such as fish, vegetables and fruit for their children. For example, Vaishnavi is an Aswesuma beneficiary and works at a tea packing factory, often taking on 24 hour shifts. However, her younger children both receive free meals which makes a huge difference to their financial situation. Because they work unpredictable shift hours, their children end up eating a lot of soya and dhal and rarely eat vegetables at home. The only fruit they eat is what they get at the school meal programme.

School meal programmes also saved working mothers time. One mother noted that she could wake up at 6.30am because she didn't need to cook for her daughter before sending her off to school. Moreover, previous research has shown that schools often set a menu for parents to follow when sending their children meals, which is usually time-consuming and expensive to prepare. (Colombo Urban Lab, 2023) Previous research has also shown that parents sometimes do not send their child to school when they are unable to adhere to this menu, out of fear of reprimand or shame. Many working mothers stated that they gave their older children money to buy something from the canteen because they worked full time. The school meal programme also ensures children eat healthy food without normalising mothers waking up at 4am to cook before a full day of work. The free meal at the preschool was supported by the CMC, with an allowance of LKR 100 for each child. Five different meals per week were sourced from a catering shop in

the neighbourhood and included chickpeas with eggs and carrots, noodles with eggs, rice mallum, fried sprats and dhal. The number of children receiving the meals was documented and photos of the food and children consuming the food had to be taken and sent to the CMC. CMC officials also visited to ensure the meal programme was carried out properly. Preschool teachers noted that this was the main reason some children attended the preschool, and noted that some children would even hide food to give to their mothers later on.

Several respondents suggested the free school meal programme be expanded to older grades, noting that it was adolescents who were constantly hungry and in need of more calories and nutrients. This was particularly so for adolescent girls who were often not able to meet micronutrient requirements.

School meal programmes also serve as an opportunity for job creation for mothers, offering a steady source of income generation that is compatible with child care. It also offers an opportunity to upscale home-based catering businesses that struggle to compete in saturated markets and have limited profitability.

Caterers for the school meal programme are selected through a tender process and a one year contract is signed. Anoma learned about the process through a friend in the zonal education office and after going to the tender process received two contracts for two schools. She conducts the business with her sister and another neighbour. They are paid LKR 110 per meal which works out to between LKR 200,000 - 300,000 a month. They are given a set menu for the protein but are free to choose the fruit and vegetables accordingly. An average menu includes: rice, dhal, protein, a vegetable, a leafy green and a piece of fruit. It is difficult to meet these requirements for LKR 110 a meal, given the fluctuating costs of fresh produce, gas and transportation, but after trial and error Anoma is able to earn about LKR 50,000 as profit. They send photos of every meal that is served to the Zonal education office on a Whatsapp group and the Principal, Vice Principal and Sectional Head of each school are also served once a week to ensure quality control.

School meal programmes also require servers as food needs to be served fairly and swiftly to children during the school day. Two respondents were employed as servers, earning between LKR 300 - 500 a day. They specifically took on this job because it was conducive to child care arrangements. Chamila noted “I go to work early in the morning and am home around noon. So I can pick up my children, take them to tuition classes. Otherwise I would have to figure out someone to take them to school because my husband and I would both be at work. That is why I go, even for such a small amount like LKR 300 a day. No one else would go work for such a small amount.” As serving was only for a few hours a day, Amina was able to do other part time work such as making sweets at a relatives house or take on sporadic cleaning jobs. Both respondents noted that the job was aligned with their children’s school holidays.

As such school meal programmes offer a source of income to mothers who were unable to engage in other kinds of employment due to lack of time, but also skills. The school environment also has associations of respectability, and as such this kind of work could be ideal for communities and contexts with traditional and rigid gender norms.

FINDINGS FROM OUR RESEARCH

Profile of the 45 working mothers

45 respondents between ages 27 and 56 were interviewed. The age of the youngest child was 3 months with the oldest being 17 years.

Table 01: Breakdown by ethnicity

Ethnicity	No.
Sinhala	24
Tamil	12
Muslim	9

Table 02: Relationship status

Status	No.
Married	37
Separated/Divorced	4
Widowed	3
Single	1

Table 03: Breakdown by household income

Monthly income LKR	No.
LKR24,999 and below	2
LKR25,000-49,999	12
LKR50,000-74,999	15
LKR75,000-99,999	2
LKR100,000-124,999	5
LKR125,000 and above	5
Uncertain	4
Total	45

Table 04: Education

Education level	No.
No O/levels	19
Completed O/levels	17
Completed A/levels	5
University degree or higher	3
NA	1

29 mothers had held employment previously in addition to their current job or income generating activity. These previous jobs tended to have more formal working conditions such as maternity leave and retirement benefits. Clerical work, garment sector, hospitality and retail were common sectors that women were employed in. Out of these 29, 10 stopped working after the birth of a child, while 6 stopped working after marriage. 2 stopped because of problems with child care, while 2 stopped due to their child falling ill. Marriage and childbirth were pivotal thresholds at which women left the workforce. Three women explicitly stated that their husbands told them to stop work. Women often had more formal employment before marriage and childbirth. Notably, out of the 29 women who were in previous employment, 16 received some kind of retirement benefit such as EPF/ETF or a pension. Two respondents had withdrawn their benefits upon leaving the workforce.

A majority of respondents worked outside the home and most worked in occupations categorised as elementary occupations. They usually performed work that was historically feminised, often referred to as pink collar jobs, which replicated unpaid care work. An evaluation of the tasks performed at work reveals an extension of traditional gender roles beyond the home as women were paid for cleaning, cooking, serving food and tea, sewing, nursing, folding and washing clothes, and looking after small children. Other feminised jobs include those working in the beauty, retail and garment sectors. Those in the formal workforce, particularly in the state sector tended to be performing clerical work, which is a well documented trend. (Gunatilaka, 2016)

11 women were self-employed, all except one running home-based businesses that usually involved catering or packeting spices and snacks. A majority of women were employed in the informal sector, but even employment in the formal sector did not necessarily translate to benefits such as leave and retirement benefits. For example, many women working at agencies providing cleaning or tea service did not receive formal benefits. Moreover, while many respondents were dependent on the state for income, they were not employed by the state. For example, a preschool teacher received an ‘allowance’ from the CMC but was not eligible for maternity leave. Instead she relied on the generosity of her supervisor who gave a month of paid leave.

Only one third of the respondents were able to take paid leave, and these were generally workers employed in the government and private sectors. Notably, some respondents said that despite technically having annual leave, they were discouraged from taking it and their salary was cut if they did. A

respondent who worked for a tea service at a private company noted that “We are supposed to have annual leave but I took three days off during Christmas and my salary was cut by LKR6000.” One member of the armed forces noted that she had to get a sick note from the army hospital to take leave, which meant that she rarely took sick leave. Only one domestic worker received sick leave. Only 10 respondents currently received retirement benefits such as a pension or EPF/ETF.

Working hours

While no standard categorisation of flexible or part-time work exists in Sri Lanka, the following categories are indicative of the different ways in which respondents structured their workday.

Type of employment	Number	Definition
Self employed	11	Self employed either running home-based business or outside the house but can choose hours.
Standard hours	14	Works standard hours that are closely aligned to 9-5 with little to no flexibility.
Part time	7	Works fewer than 35 hours a week. These hours are set and predictable
Split shift	5	Standard full time hours but with extended lunch break
Nonstandard hours	4	Predictable full time work outside normal working hours
On call / zero hours	3	No guaranteed work hours, work is usually outside normal working hours

Table 05: Typology of working arrangements

Standard hours

14 respondents worked standard hours that corresponded to the normal working day and worked for more than 35 hours a week. In these instances most women had little control over the workday apart from two respondents who had flexitime work arrangements where they were able to choose the starting and ending times of their work within a set of core working hours. They were also expected to be at work throughout their working day. The minimum salary was LKR 25,000. The average age of the youngest child of these respondents was 9. These respondents relied on a mix of child care options. In a majority of cases children were left alone or looked after by the respondent’s mother. One third of respondents working standard hours were the breadwinner of their family.

Non-standard hours

4 respondents worked non-standard hours, which meant that although they worked full time, their shifts were not aligned with the normal working day. In some cases this was a result of the nature of the work, as both respondents employed as cooks worked till late at night, with one respondent working from 6.30am - 10.30pm or even later. Two respondents with infants younger than a year chose to adjust their shifts and work from 6am-2pm. This enabled them to maximise time with their infants, while working full time. Respondents in this category earned on average LKR 61,250 a month, with the lowest salary being LKR 24,500. In all but one case, children were left with the respondent's mother or mother-in-law. Women worked early hours to manage child care, but later hours at night in order to earn more. Those working night shifts also had to extend their work according to the orders they received as they worked in catering/hospitality.

Part time

7 respondents worked fewer than 35 hours a week. Either they worked a few days a week or worked half the day, usually corresponding to the school day as either their work revolved around the school, or they had no other child care. 2 respondents were domestic workers who worked a few days a week at households. Others included a preschool teacher, servers working at schools and a worker at a tea packing factory which was paid by the amount of tea packed rather than an hourly rate. None of respondents who were working part time had another adult capable of child care in the household. In the case of the two domestic workers, children were left alone with an older sibling who was a child to look after them, while the remaining respondents had no child care at all. The average age of the youngest child was 7. LKR 12,733 was the average salary with the lowest being just LKR 2000.

Split shift

5 respondents had a split shift working arrangement which allowed them to return home between 12- 2pm for an extended lunch break. This enabled them to perform child care duties such as picking their children up, cooking lunch and feeding them. This was usually when some kind of childcare was available during the morning hours in the form of school or preschool, and needed to be bridged before an alternative was employed. They earned an average of LKR 30,000. In one case the split shift enabled a respondent to go to a new location for work, but generally these workplaces were close to the home and worked full time, despite the extended break. Three respondents were domestic workers while the other two worked at private companies doing cleaning and tea service. None of the respondents received EPF/ETF benefits. The break in the workday enabled the respondents to bridge child care options, for example, picking a child up from school and taking him to his grandparents, dropping a daughter off at tuition class or waiting till an older sibling returned from school. Split shift also allowed women to perform housework in the middle of the work day, which prevented it from accumulating. Many women had chosen their workplace precisely because it enabled them this flexibility and mobility.

Zero hours/ On call work

3 women worked unpredictable hours that were not guaranteed. These included two women who worked as waitresses for events and functions at hotels and one woman who worked at a tea packing factory. Generally the going rate for a shift ranged from LKR 1200 - 2500. They used different child care options - mother, sister, and leaving the children alone.

Figure 03: Use of time during an average work day

Return to work

Out of the 20 women who were working at the time they got pregnant, 6 left the workforce after the birth of a child. Out of the 14 who did not leave the workforce for at least one birth, most returned to work within 6 months. Those who were able to return later than that, were able to take maternity leave at half pay and no pay as they worked in the government sector. Women frequently stated that financial insecurity was the main reason behind the timing of their return to work, citing that their husband's income was not sufficient, or that they had loans to pay off. 2 women returned to work within 40 days of birth for their last child, because of their financial situations, despite having taken longer periods of maternity leave for earlier births. The time taken to return to the workforce shortened with each birth, from 6 months to 3 months to finally 40 days. While women were compelled to return to work earlier for financial reasons, there were also additional costs to this choice as women had to purchase formula so that their infants could feed while they were at work which cost roughly LKR 3000 a month. Those who had formal maternity leave were also able to avail themselves of breastfeeding intervals. Contract workers working in the private sector were particularly vulnerable as they did not have the formal protections that formal employment was supposed to ensure such as maternity leave or time off for breastfeeding, yet at the same time they did not have the flexibility of informal workers who would be able to set their own working hours or negotiate with individuals instead of a company. One respondent employed at a tea packing factory returned to work after 40 days when her youngest child was born. She worked both day and night shifts, and managed the infant's feeding by pumping and storing breast milk. During night shifts she spoke of how her mother would come during her break at 3.00am and give her an empty bottle, and she would pump breastmilk at the security guard's hut and give her mother the bottle. This arrangement was a covert work-around, with factory management turning a blind eye. It was also only possible because they lived within walking distance of the factory.

Role of community and family support

When working mothers stopped working after childbirth, they were very dependent on family. The absence of their income also increased financial difficulties. Some described how the lack of income forced them to pawn jewellery or take a loan. “My husband didn't have a proper job during that time, so we pawned jewellery. There was a time after my second daughter was born that we didn't have enough money to pay the electricity bill and didn't have any lights in the house.” Some women were compelled to continue working through pregnancy because of the shortage of income, particularly in the last few years due to the economic crisis. For example, while Vaishnavi tried to avoid working night shifts for her first two pregnancies, for her most recent pregnancy she was compelled to work multiple night shifts due to a lack of income.

Women who were not originally from Colombo often returned to their village to have the baby, or brought down their mothers to their residence. A network of aunts, sisters and mothers were essential in caring for postnatal mothers and performing other care work. Neighbours and other community members often played a role in helping expectant mothers by providing food. One mother who did not have running water at the time of pregnancy noted that her neighbours would haul buckets of water for her. However, not everyone had good relations with their neighbours, particularly economic migrants who were living on rent.

Attitudes towards employment

Most respondents reported that they worked for financial reasons. 12 respondents were the breadwinner or sole earner of the household. In some cases women were compelled to enter the workforce upon the death of their spouse or separation. In others, women were prompted to work because their spouse was unable or unwilling to work, or the father of the children was not part of the household. These women were more likely to work long hours and work non-standard hours, with none of them working part time.

Secondly, respondents in dual income households reported that they were working because their husband’s income was insufficient to meet expenses, leaving them no choice but to find work. This describes domestic workers in particular. Notably, within these dual income households, women also started income-generating activities explicitly for their children’s expenses. Engaging in part-time work or home-based businesses was a means of supplementing their husband’s income and having money which they could allocate by themselves. They reported spending this money on snacks and toys for children or on tuition classes and printouts for school. Paying for tuition was an explicit motivation for some respondents with one mother noting, "my eldest daughter has started A/levels and she is doing science. Our income isn’t enough. Even though school hasn’t started yet she needs to go for classes. That’s why I started this (snack packeting business). The child has to be educated.”

One mother noted some of the positive impacts of working beyond the pay check, noting that she had been depressed after her children started school and had too much time on her hands. Going to work was a source of enjoyment as she could meet other adults and socialise - “it’s just a few hours a day but it’s good to joke and laugh with the others there.” Women also shared satisfaction at being able to provide for their children “at least when we go out I can buy him a toy.” In addition to these, for a minority of women, particularly those in higher paying positions or government positions, employment was viewed through the

lens of career advancement. Employment was a means of self actualisation or accruing other benefits such as the security of a pension and the social prestige of a government job.

> *"I go to my job because it is more than money. I won't get the exposure and recognition I get from my job at any other place. We get a feeling of belonging from working at jobs too. Even if the job is bad, we have that. If we are solely dependent on our children, if they happen to hurt our feelings, we have to be ready to bear it, because they would be our only treasure. So I think doing a job is good regardless."*
> - Manjula

Implications for female labour force participation

Most respondents found work through family members, friends and word of mouth. The immediate environment also played a role in the type of work that women decided to do. For example, they may continue a family business or do something because a relative introduced them to an organisation. Even friends played a big role in sharing information about jobs. One respondent who worked in the armed forces noted that she joined the forces because her friend was also applying. Similarly, a respondent who had a catering contract for the school meal programme learned of it and put a tender because of her friend. This was important for some respondents as it ensured that the workplace was safe, flexible and accommodating of child care responsibilities.

Women stopped work after the birth of the child not just because of a lack of care options, but out of a belief that this was necessary for the well-being of their child. Most respondents had internalised the cultural norm that work was incompatible with motherhood and that raising children was the sole responsibility of the mother. Many women also stopped work after marriage, stating that their husband's income was sufficient, and only restarted it because of financial necessity. In this manner, working, particularly outside the house, was a necessary evil. Many women working full-time jobs stated that they would have preferred to do a home-based business, and had tried unsuccessfully to start one. This was a mode of income generation that did not challenge cultural expectations and gender roles. A comparison of home-based businesses in the study could be made with middle-class female entrepreneurs who set up businesses that do not conflict with the demands of motherhood, often referred to as 'mumpreneurs' (Kumaranatunge, 2023). Similar to middle-class counterparts, home-based businesses in the study were not the primary source of income generation for the family nor did they contribute significantly to expenses.

While the respondents running home-based businesses were similar to middle class mumpreneurs in the way in which they prioritised motherhood and valued flexibility over income security, the similarities ended there. Middle-class mumpreneurs relied on outsourcing their care responsibilities to domestic workers, an option which was not available to respondents. While home-based workers were able to selectively plan their work around unpaid care responsibilities, they often worked fewer hours. Only 3 out of 11 self-employed women were able to give a rough estimate of their monthly profit, while a majority were unable to estimate earnings and overheads and were often uncertain if the business was breaking even. Literature on home-based workers in Sri Lanka recognises that such work is taken on to balance child care

responsibilities (ILO, 2021). Gunatilaka (2016) notes that “cultural norms can themselves dictate what sort of business is appropriate for women, and these may be exactly those activities that have the lowest returns” (pg.46). While developing home-based businesses was frequently stated as a recommendation by respondents during FGDs, they also noted that the increase in competition had also lowered demand and profitability. While home-based businesses were invariably built around food and food processing, women were limited by the scale of their operation.

Studies have noted that women’s limited sociophysical mobility plays a role in job selection, noting that long commutes are not viewed as socially acceptable for women, particularly at night. Working close to the home was another trend, particularly with those who lived in wattes. Domestic workers found potential clients in nearby houses through word of mouth. In addition, respondents from wattes situated near commercial and business hubs were able to gain employment at these institutions near their house. For example, a tea factory had been a source of employment to the watte community, with one woman noting that she had worked there in some capacity since she was 12. These workers benefited from flexibility but had no formal protections. Proximity to workplaces eased care burdens, as even male family members employed nearby would come home for lunch and check on children during the school holidays. Respondents from the high-rise site had to travel further for work, particularly as the site was cut off from bus routes. Finding work was also complicated as they no longer lived in proximity to wealthier households requiring domestic workers.

Night work

8 out of 45 respondents had experience with night work. Out of these, 6 respondents regularly worked night shifts, while the other two stated that night work happened occasionally. All but 1 of the respondents regularly performing night work were employed in the hospitality industry, with the remaining respondent working at a tea packing factory.

Many respondents noted that night work was often considered morally inappropriate for women, and some avoided night work out of fears of social reprimand rather than physical safety. For example, Marium took on shifts as a waitress for functions at a hotel in Maligawatte, which allowed her to return by midnight. While shifts were unpredictable and insufficient, she had to reject offers from hotels in Mount Lavinia and Bentota, even if they provided transport as she thought it was inappropriate for her to come back home at 2 or 3am. Another woman employed as a cook noted, “There are times where I can only come at 1am, 2am in the morning. It's alright for me personally because I have people to come with and because Ubers and Pickme's are available. But for other people, society might think that she is going for something else.”

Physical exhaustion associated with night work was also reported by respondents, particularly because women were not excused from their domestic responsibilities in the day. “But the thing is, just because we (women) go to work at night and come in the morning, it doesn't mean that we can come home and sleep like our husbands would have done. After we come home, the laundry and the bed will need to be tidied up and that work is also on us. Women will need time to recover (after night work), but instead she will do all of the other work in the house and go back to work the next night.” Another respondent who occasionally had to do night shifts noted that it was impossible to sleep during the day because her children would always wake her up. During the FGDs, respondents noted that night work was not

desirable, even though it was a decision driven by desperation, seeing it as a form of self-exploitation. Night work was not seen as a form of empowerment, but a form of trading sleep for income.

Barriers to re-entering the work force

Another barrier to reentering the labour force was the lack of a supportive work environment, particularly in the private sector. Rigid cultural norms about gender and motherhood permeated workplaces, often driving mothers out of the labour force. These norms were reaffirmed during hiring processes. Natasha noted that she had interviewed at multiple companies and was rejected at all interviews when she revealed that she had 6-month old twins. “They would say, “this is the time you should be spending with your children,” as if I don’t know that. I’m working because I have to work.” Another respondent working at a clothing store hid the fact that she had children from her employers the whole time she was employed there.

Flexibility to respond to disruptions related to their children was very important in finding a good workplace, and women frequently left rigid workplaces to find more flexible ones. Malshani noted that she was unable to leave her retail workplace at any point during the workday, even if her child was sick or there was a meeting. She moved to a new company where she is allowed to take leave and half-days for her children and also for herself, “they don’t try to keep you here by force. The company has told us that we just need to inform them and we can get a gatepass and go.” Many also worked in places with other mothers and noted that they had seen those women take leave to take care of their child so they knew they could also do so without repercussions. However, supportive work environments were derived more from the whims and personality of the supervisor rather than a systematic company culture. While some women were fined for every 10 minutes they were late to work, others were given considerable latitude and allowed to leave early during Ramadan. There was considerable variation based on the sector women were employed. Women also had more flexibility with small scale businesses such as opticians or pharmacists, rather than larger businesses like banks, and those working as cleaners had more consistent work schedules than those working as cooks or servers. But even within sectors there was some variation. For example, women working for a tea service found their working conditions varying considerably based on where they were posted.

Companies that support women’s career progression while also enabling flexibility were rare. Natasha eventually found a company environment that she was able to thrive in. While all her previous interviews were conducted by men, this interview was led by a woman. She had initially applied for a marketing position, but because she didn't have the necessary experience, the company found another role for her. She noted, “companies need to give people like me a chance more often. So many places don't, so most mothers are abandoned. My company is an Indian company with an Australian manager who supports me - if it was a Sri Lankan they would not have given me a chance. The people who supervise my work have been very kind- teaching me things I don't know, giving me leave when I need to look after the children. I have loyalty to them because of that - really I value the company like gold.” At the time of the interview, Natasha was finishing her probationary period, earning LKR 61,000. She expected her salary to increase to LKR 120,000 after she was made permanent. She had also felt comfortable disclosing the fact that she did not have a husband to Human Resources and had not experienced any backlash or stigma because of it. Natasha’s story showcases a rare case study of a company culture that allows mothers to thrive, and reaps

the benefits of their loyalty. She had secured a well-paying job with perks such as meals and health expenses, as well as benefits such as overtime pay, retirement benefits and paid leave. She also genuinely enjoyed her job. But aside from company culture, there were a host of other factors that enabled Natasha to secure this position in the first place. She had previous work experience and had used the opportunity to improve her English, a factor which she cited as the main reason she was able to get this job. She had a loving and supportive family; a mother who did the housework and cooking, a father who dropped her at work at 6.30am every morning and doted on her twin sons in her absence, and two sisters who were also available in a crisis. It was a combination of these factors that enabled her to thrive as a working mother.

Domestic workers

11 respondents out of the 45 were employed as domestic workers. The daily wage received by domestic workers was between LKR 1000 - 2000, with an average of LKR 1481. This was received daily with the exception of one respondent who had asked to be paid weekly so that she could budget for the week and not run out of money every day. Notably this was the only respondent who was paid even if she was unable to come to work because she was sick.

The average monthly salary was LKR 28,727. Only one out of 11 was a breadwinner or primary earner in the household. Only one out of 11 respondents had completed O/Levels. A majority of respondents had never worked another kind of job. 2 had worked in a garment factory and 2 had done catering before.

Most worked 6 days a week, with only a Saturday or Sunday off. Some worked public holidays while others only did so if their employer requested them to because of the additional work. They generally started work earlier, at around 7.30am and were thus able to get off earlier, working between 5- 10 hours a day. The length of the day varied, with some saying it depended on how much work they had to do, and they were often able to go home earlier. Pay was also flexible because it often depended on the amount of work or length of hours worked. As a result, calculating exact incomes for the month was difficult.

Three worked part-time, three worked split shifts and five worked standard hours. Flexibility was also the great advantage of this work, as women were given the flexibility to pick up children or leave earlier. For teachers meetings, respondents were generally able to go for the meeting and return without having their pay cut. One respondent noted that she would forward the Whatsapp message received by the teacher to her employer so that she could go for the meeting. One respondent noted that her employer would let her go back and forth so that she could breastfeed her infant.

A majority of domestic workers also worked in houses that were close to their residence. Those from high-rise apartments usually worked at a household that was close to the site of their former watte. This was an important means of obtaining work and also reduced commuting costs and time wasted. All the respondents worked for one household exclusively, except one respondent who worked at an office in the morning but worked at a house of the manager of the office in the afternoon. He was responsible for paying both shifts.

In 7 out of 11 instances, the employer provided a meal for the worker as well, indicating that beyond the salary there are other benefits to be had. Other benefits included employers providing interest free loans

which were cut from the respondents salary, and employers paying for medicine and hospitalisation in one instance.

Child care modes during work

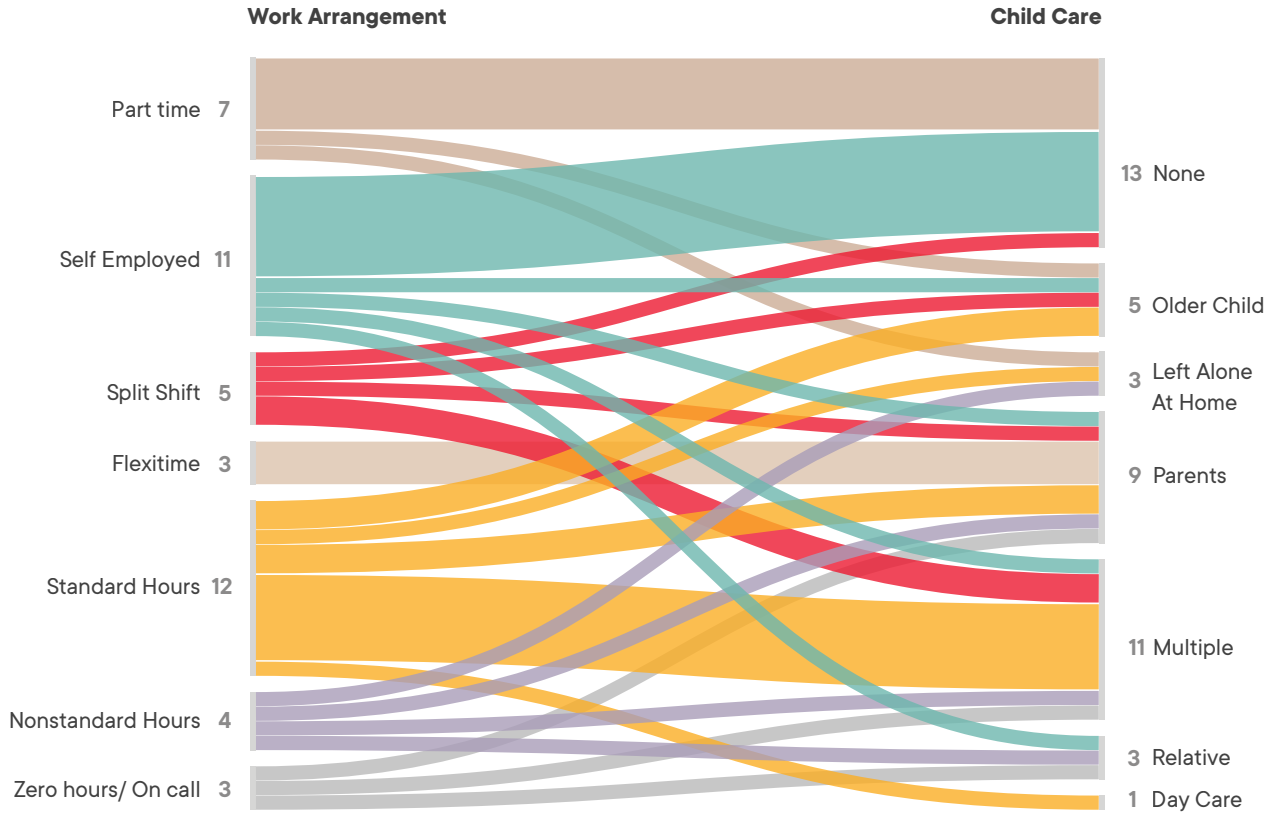

Figure 04: Childcare arrangements vs Working arrangements

No Source of child care

The majority of women interviewed had no source of child care while performing income generating activities. These women were either engaged in home-based businesses or part-time work. Notably, some women running home-based businesses had alternate means of chil care but wanted to look after the children themselves. Those working part time relied on schools and preschools and structured their working day around this. For example, Vishali was working at a tea packing factory part time after dropping her child off at the nearby preschool at 9.30am. She is a casual worker, going in only 2 days a week and is paid by the amount of boxes she packs, increasing her precarity and uncertainty of income. On the days she works she relies on the preschool teacher staying late after 12.30pm to look after her child till 1.30pm. “I need to find a regular job but my child is there. I have to look after my child. I’m very scared if something were to happen to him.”

Very few of these respondents had a regular or predictable stream of income, with those who were self employed and running home-based businesses often unable to account for how much profit they made. Those who had a regular income were frequently involved in the education sector, either working at a preschool or serving meals at a school. In both instances, they were poorly paid with some getting as little as LKR300 for a few hours work. In these instances work was very much chosen because it aligned with

their child's schedule, including school holidays and offered extra money which was often spent on the child.

Those who were running home-based businesses were better able to cope with disruptions related to child care, such as a child being ill or a sudden school closure as they were home anyways and able to adjust their business accordingly. Respondents running home-based businesses were also more active in school life, some even being parent representatives of their child's class. Describing how she would respond to a parents meeting at school, Tharanga noted that:

"Since there is not much work in the morning I can go. I go to my daughter's school a lot. I go to take care of the class, serve food, for meetings. It is usually us that get caught doing these things because we live close by. If the mothers are working, they don't get called. It is mothers like us that don't work that get called. They don't make any payments for this type of work." Such observations also offer insight into how income generating activities were perceived, with formal employment outside the home being considered "work." Notably mothers who were working full-time, especially as breadwinners noted that they were often excused from these meetings because teachers were aware of their situation.

Part-time workers without child care were most vulnerable to these disruptions as they would often have to miss work in the event of a child falling ill, forgoing their daily income.

Respondent's mothers

> *"My mother has been there since the beginning, so she has been the person who takes care of her. Even though I am not there, I can ease my mind thinking that my mother is there to take care of my children. I know that my child is entirely safe with her."*
> - Nimali

The next most common source of child care was the respondent's mother. This was often because the respondents did not trust anyone else to take care of their children, but also because their mothers were able to perform the same care work that they would do. Grandmothers took on the responsibilities of intensive mothering, to the extent that during fieldwork one grandmother even turned up for a respondent interview because she assumed the interview was another activity related to the child. Because their mothers often functioned as a double for them, respondents had more time to participate in the labour force and work outside the home. A majority of participants worked full time and standard hours if their mothers were involved in child care, and they tended to have regular and predictable salaries ranging from from LKR 20,000 a month to LKR 120,000.This did not necessarily translate into more labour protections as only 5 out of 13 received retirement benefits and 6 could take paid leave.

One result of this was that children tended to emotionally rely on their grandmothers more than mothers: "my mother is the one who wakes them up and gets them ready to go to school. They are very attached to her. Once they drink their milk they go next to her and sleep. That's why I'm not worried or scared, when I go to work she will look after them."

Other child-related tasks that did not fall under the purview of grandmothers included attending school meetings. One mother noted, "If it's a very big meeting my daughter will take leave and go, I can't go for

those things, I don't want to get into a sari and go". Out of the 13 respondents who relied on their mother for child care, 9 stated they would take leave if a child was sick, though only 5 respondents were able to take paid leave.

There were instances where a respondent's mother had to leave to the workforce to take on care duties for their daughter, particularly when their daughter was the breadwinner of the family. While relying on grandmothers for child care is a common arrangement across the developing world as is often associated with higher female labour force participation and increased child educational attainment (Emma Samman et al.,2016) (IFC, 2018) , not all mothers were able or willing to perform this care work for their daughters. For instance, some mothers resided in distant provinces and were unable to travel. Others were too frail or sick to take care of young and active children. In some cases, women were estranged from their mothers, underscoring the fact that childcare hinges on emotional relationships that can be volatile and fraught.

The frailty of aging parents meant that respondents often insisted on doing housework because they didn't want to increase the workload of their mothers, performing labour intensive tasks such as laundry, which has been identified in other developing countries as a particularly strenuous and time-consuming chore for grandmothers. (Emma Samman et al.,2016) (IFC, 2018)

The sole respondent who chose formal daycare in the study had reservations of the toll that child care would take on her mother's health. "If he is not in the daycare, I have to send him in a van to my mother's place. Then my mother's peace of mind is gone. My mother is 74. She is old and needs rest. Taking care of our children is not what they should be doing. Them being here in the case of an emergency and them having the duty of taking care of our children are two very different things."

The reliance on aging mothers for daycare presented natural challenges. In the event that their mother fell ill, only 4 respondents had another child care option in the form of other relatives. 7 respondents stated that they would have to take leave to take care of their child, while 2 said that their children were able to stay at home while they worked. Many noted that this arrangement was tenable in the long run, 'If my mother fell ill for a long time I would have to stop working' noted Malshani, while Nimali stated " If my mother falls ill, no matter how much I don't like it, if I can't find someone to take care of my child, even I might have to use such a service like a day care."

Husbands and other relatives

Only two respondents stated that their husbands provided child care while they worked, and in both instances it was in tandem with another source of child care such as the respondent's mother or elder daughter. In no instance was the husband the sole source of child care, even when he was not working. The respondents husbands were seen as unwilling and incapable of taking care of children, particularly with regard to keeping them safe with the frequent refrain that "Fathers don't look after them like mothers do." Many women noted that even outside of working hours, their husbands did not help them with child care responsibilities. "My husband doesn't help me out at all, all he does is sleep when he comes home."

During FGDs it was pointed out that fathers did not know how to look after their children or play, and were too strict with them. They noted that children preferred being with mothers. Some respondents noted that

their husbands attended parents meetings, but this was often the extent of their involvement. Husbands that worked outside the home also often dropped children at school on their way to work.

Drug use by husbands also created unsafe environments at home and this was one reason why some respondents could not rely on them as child care providers. While their husband's drug use was a source of emotional distress and mental pain for many respondents, it also had tangible and material effects on their ability to care and provide for their children. For example, Marium was separated from her husband due to his persistent drug use and violent behaviour and currently living with her father and two children. She took on shifts as a waitress for functions at a nearby hotel at night, but this was erratic and insufficient. Recently she found a permanent job in the kitchen of a hotel. She told her husband to pick up her son from the preschool and bring him to her sisters, but he instead kept the child till late at night. He would also accost her on the road on the way to work. Fearful that he would keep the child away from her, and worried that her child would be exposed to his father's drug use, she stayed away from work for three days. When she returned, they had found a replacement. Her husband was still able to control and sabotage her working life by exploiting her lack of secure child care.

7 respondents relied on relatives for child care including their sisters, aunts, in-laws, but also fathers and uncles. Male relatives, particularly older ones, were capable of performing child care. One respondent noted, "my babies don't cry when I leave for work but the moment they are separated from my father they start crying." Another respondent noted that her uncle performed a lot of care work, from taking her sons to tuition class, attending school meetings, caring for their grandmother and doing the housework. Notably, relatives also played an important role in picking and dropping children from school and as emergency care when regular caregivers were unavailable.

Older children

9 respondents stated that they relied on older children to take care of younger children, including adult children. Four of these respondents worked standard hours while others worked a mix of arrangements. The older children who watched the younger children tended to be daughters. Girls are often socialised to internalise their primary roles of caring for the family, while boys perceive these duties as the responsibility of women (Kottegoda, 2023). For instance, Zainab's 14 year old daughter took on domestic responsibilities and care work in the home. "My elder daughter looks after her brother and my mother. She is very responsible, when my mother was in hospital and I had to stay with her, she was the one who did all the cooking and maintaining the house. My daughter being there is a big strength to me."

Adult daughters still residing in the household also performed child care duties that enabled their mothers more freedom to work. For example, Anoma's daughter is 21 years old, but her father does not want her to work. She failed her O/Levels and has not worked since, apart from doing a beauty course. "My daughter is grown up now, and her father doesn't like her going for a job. He said as long as she is with us we can look after her. Because she looks after her younger brother, I can start working." Even working daughters could be counted on for child care support when children were sick or going to school meeting. For older girls in the household, there was an opportunity cost to being a source of child care, whether in terms of educational attainment, employment opportunities or just leisure and rest being lost.

Children left alone/ Neighbours

This describes situations where children were able to stay alone by themselves, without adult supervision. The average age of the youngest child in these instances was 11, indicating that respondents rarely left younger children by themselves. Respondents from wattes used this more than respondents from the high-rise apartment.

Respondents from wattes frequently noted that they were able to leave their children alone because neighbours would keep an eye on them and be available in an emergency even if they were not directly involved in child care. “The neighbours will always ask my child, ‘did your mother come yet’ when I leave I tell them I’m going, when they leave they tell me they are going and I will keep an eye on their children. That’s a good thing about this watte.” stated Asma. Many respondents from wattes spoke about how they had grown up in the watte and everyone knew them and their children, which gave them a sense of security when going to work. “People in the neighbourhood know that I am working. So if something happens to my children, if they have a fall or anything like that, they would come to help. By the time I get home, they would have already taken him to the hospital and done the needful. All I have to do is to come and check on them.”

Kanthi who worked full time at a government office, observed that she was able to go to work because of a network of care relations. One of her neighbours would pick her child up and then take her to the house of another neighbour running a home-based business. The child would stay at the neighbours house till her older sisters returned from school to take care of her. Kanthi noted that “if we have good friends we don't need to be scared of anything, we can manage.” In high-rise apartments, respondents frequently did not know or trust their neighbours and few felt comfortable leaving their children with them or relying on them for support.

For example, Kaushalya took shifts at different hotels as a waitress and would be out from 3pm to midnight when she had a shift. During these times she would disconnect the gas connection and lock the gate to the apartment, instructing her children not to let anyone inside the house. She has now found two elderly ladies in the building to come over during these times.

Many respondents whose children were left alone also worked close to the house, so they felt that in an emergency they would be able to come back home. They would often tell the children to lock the house and wait and keep a phone with them so that they could call in case of an emergency.

Paid child care

There were a few examples of women paying for child care, directly or indirectly.

One respondent sent her youngest daughter to tuition classes conducted by another lady in the neighbourhood everyday after school. “It’s someone we know, we’ve gone to her house. She’s the lady who gives tuition. Her father will drop her there after school and I will pick her up after work." While the lady in question was paid LKR 2000 for tuition classes, this child care option seemed driven by the respondent’s daughter who enjoyed spending time there because the tuition teacher had daughters

around her age. While her elder brothers stayed at home and watched TV during the school holidays, she spent her time at the tuition teacher's house. Her mother was also happy because her daughter was safe and in one location the whole day during school holidays. Another respondent spoke of paying a neighbour LKR 5000 in 2014 and 2015 to take care of her son while she was going to work. One respondent had also employed a minor to take care of her child briefly, but due to security concerns she switched to a formal daycare.

Formal day cares

While only one respondent was using a day care at the time of the interview, 4 other respondents had used day care at some point and one respondent was actively looking for a day care to enable her to gain more permanent employment. There were two main types of day cares in use among these respondents: for profit private day cares and faith-based non profit day cares. Private day care was used by 2 respondents who were the highest paid and highest qualified. They paid roughly LKR 30,000 a month. Manjula noted that the day care she had chosen in Colombo 7 was patronised by the children of expats and the day care staff only spoke to the children in English. Parents were required to provide children with everything they needed, "In my current daycare you have to send everything; a towel, shampoo - it is only the water that they give free of charge." While her child had the option of ordering lunch at the day care, the meal was LKR 750 - 800 and not sufficient for him, so Manjula would wake up every morning at 4.30am to make lunch and a snack for her child. Hours were set and parents were fined LKR 500 for every 15 minute delay in picking up their child after 6pm. They were also able to view CCTV footage of the day care to observe how their children were being cared for, although Manjula had not taken this opportunity. "They take care of the child well. But as in any job, mishaps have happened. They also call your child "baba, baba" the whole day and at some point they also snap at my son. But I have no other option and I don't know if I can actually find a better place"

In the other model, the day cares were run by the church on a need-basis. These day cares cost roughly LKR 500 a month and parents were not required to send anything apart from clean handkerchiefs and a change of clothes. Children were given milk in the morning, lunch in the afternoon and milk and a piece of cake in the evening. One respondent noted that the day care even took the children on trips at minimal cost to the parents. Safety and trust was guaranteed by the connection to the church, and also by observing the behaviour of the women who ran the day care. Vaishnavi noted that when she first went to vet the day care, she saw that children were accompanied to the toilet and that the women in charge were affectionate towards the children. "My children were excited to go to the day care, even getting dressed by themselves in the morning. If I didn't send them for a day or two, one of those ladies would even visit our house to ask why we hadn't sent the children." However, as noted during a community validation of findings, Church day cares were exclusive as those who were not Christian could not enroll in them.

Both Manjula and Vaishnavi had opinions on the nature of the day care model. To Manjula, paying a high fee was a way of guaranteeing quality, "the issue of free day cares is about their quality. We can't expect high quality from something that is given free of charge. The aunties that work in his day care are scared because our children will tell us and we will complain. So even if they don't have that care for children, they would give that care because they have been given it." Paying for day care was a means of ensuring that the day care was sustainable. "If you put a child to a day care and you expect something like a free

meal, that will incur some kind of cost. If you want a good meal, not something like dhal and rice but if it is something that is nutritious that you expect, you will have to incur some kind of cost. You also have to pay someone to take care of their child. If you give the service for free, before long the service will go down because you won't be able to fund it." By contrast, Vaishnavi preferred that the caregivers at her day care were motivated by social service rather than profit, and this gave her more confidence in the care that her children were receiving. She noted that a lot of her coworkers chose a day care 'by the name', opting for expensive and prestigious daycares to ensure quality. "People think just because they pay a lot the quality will be good. What matters is whether the people at the day care are good at the job and if they like taking care of children."

Motivations and barriers to using day cares

Vaishnavi chose to enroll her children in day care after her husband contracted tuberculosis in India and was recovering in isolation. She had to take on multiple shifts at the tea factory to make up for the loss in income. The presence of affordable day care enabled her recover from this income shock, and additional benefits such as free meals also helped manage expenses. Similarly, at time of fieldwork, Marium was looking for a day care for her child to replace preschool so that she could transition from unpredictable shift work as a waitress to working full time for a cleaning service that would ensure a predictable and increased salary. She was divorced and reliant on her relatives for day-to-day survival.

While some respondents stated that daycare options were unaffordable or unavailable in their area, there were various other barriers to using daycares. For example, two respondents, a nurse at a private hospital and a member of the armed forces had daycare/ creches at their workplace. Parents had to provide food, milk powder, diapers etc when sending children to these facilities and the cost was around LKR 2500 a month. However, in both instances respondents were unable to send their children as their husbands did not want to do so. Sujatha, a nurse, stated she really liked the way the creche at the hospital was run, noting that everyone spoke to the children in English. She also wanted to reduce the burden on her husband's mother who was the main source of child care while she worked. However, her husband thought daycares would be strict and violent.

Such ideas contributed to a discourse around the safety and quality of day cares. Through experience, word-of-mouth, Whatsapp forwards and social media, mothers were exposed to horror stories of bad day cares. A key narrative was that day cares fed children Piriton[1] to make them sleep and easier to manage. Another mother heard that a daycare used by her colleague was withholding water from children, so that they did not need to use the toilet.

Before finding her current day care, Manjula noted that "I checked out a couple of places when I was looking. In one place it was just a mat and the children were just there with nothing else there. You can't keep children like that, they are not patients. Children need to be able to run and jump and play. They even mentioned that they give food, but when I checked the menu in some places I was shocked; it was only sweets - toffees, chocolates, things like that. Cost-wise it was lower but if we are told to not give children sugar within the first two years."

Another reason for not using day cares apart from cost and safety, was a belief that caregiving should be done by a family member, ideally a mother. Many respondents stated that they would not trust anyone

[1] An antihistamine syrup with drowsiness as a side effect

else to take care of their children apart from their own mother. Apart from the fear of entrusting a child to a stranger, there were also fears about separating a child from the family, with respondents expressing concerns that children would grow distant from her parents.

> *"I think the children will become distant from their parents. They would spend less time with their parents. They would become isolated. I think daycares will make that happen. I have an experience: when my first child was in the first grade, there was one child who was in a day care in that class. He would cry a lot about not wanting to go to the daycare. When the van driver would drop him off at the daycare, he could cry all the time. It was very difficult to take him to the daycare. Both of that child's parents were working so they had no choice. I don't think people will use one (daycare) if it is put here either. A lot of people choose to leave their jobs when they have children right?"*
>
> - Lakmini

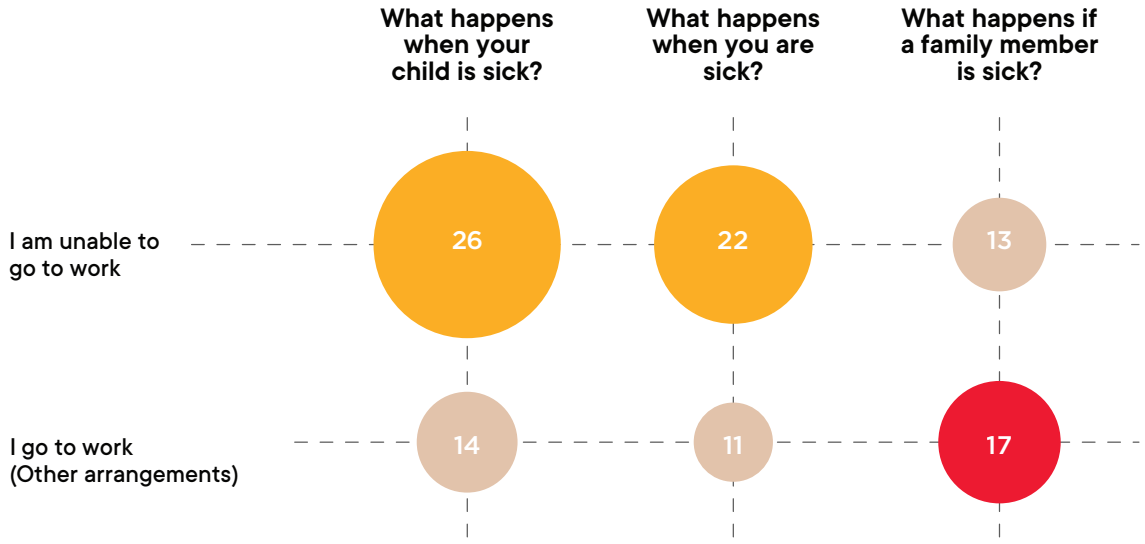

Figure 05: Responses to shocks

Child care outside working hours

> *"I have no time to rest. I wake up early and cook, feed the children, make them milk, wash them... the whole day goes."*
>
> - Seela

Despite having child care options while they worked, the dynamic nature of child care meant that mothers were constantly juggling paid work, unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities as child care spilled into all aspects of their time and lives.

Child care options were present but sometimes could not be utilised to their full potential due to the dynamic and expansive nature of care work. For instance, one pressure point was the picking and dropping of children at various activities, with time-use surveys suggesting that women in the Western Province spent over two hours a day accompanying children to places (Gunathilake, 2016, pg 93). The mismatch between the working day and school times also affected women's ability to go to work. Mariam noted that

while her sisters could look after her child after he attended preschool, they were unable to walk even short distances due to diabetic wounds. This compelled her to work on a shift basis as a waitress at a hotel at night, which meant erratic and low wages. While she wanted to go to work in a cleaning service, she was unable to, because of school pick up. Apart from small children, respondents also preferred to accompany daughters to tuition classes - although those over 16 were usually allowed to travel by themselves or with friends. During the focus group discussion, some mothers noted that this meant that daughters often did fewer extra curricular activities at school compared to sons.

Some mothers also felt that they had to supervise their children's play activities as well, due to safety concerns. This was not always the case, particularly in close knit settlements where there were eyes on the street. One mother noted "My sons are now getting older and want to stay and play outside a lot. We have been staying in this watte for the past 31 years since I was born, so I don't think there will ever be any trouble. Even if something does happen, someone will come find me and tell me. Even if they have done something wrong, they would tell me saying "Today your sons did this and this". They can't hide while doing anything bad because I will definitely end up hearing about it."

For families relocated to high-rise apartments, the anonymity of high-rise living and the scale of the building did not allow for this. During the FGD, respondents from the high-rise noted "We can't identify who is safe and who isn't, anyone can come and go". One mother said that she would prefer her child to be at a daycare rather than be exposed to the high-rise environment which she felt was dangerous and unsuitable for her child. Some children were taken to parks and playgrounds outside the high-rise apartments by their mothers, but for most of the day they were forced to stay inside the house. "They play when they are in school" They cannot play in the corridors either because they get scolded by neighbours who are trying to sleep. We have a lot of elderly and sick people on our floor, so they don't like it when the children play and shout." As a result, screen time was the only entertainment for most children. Respondents also noted that they couldn't blame their children for spending so much time on screens, especially when they were unable to play outside.

Mothers also oversaw their children's homework and education. They were responsible for purchasing stationary or printouts, ensuring that homework was completed. Especially for exam classes mothers took a very hands on approach to making sure their children studied, waking them up early, making sure they did past papers. This was understood as a mother's responsibility. One mother spoke of how she even switched jobs because she realised that her child was getting low marks because she was coming home late after work and not overseeing the homework.

Feeding was another activity that mothers had to perform for children. Apart from breastfeeding infants, even toddlers and younger children had to be fed because they were fussy eaters. Ensuring their children finished lunch was a reason why many mothers opted for a split share work routine. Some respondents even expressed that their child would not be happy in a daycare because it would not accommodate their tastes and the way in which they liked to eat. Cooking separately for children and balancing nutritional needs with tastiness was also a burden that frequently fell on mothers.

Caring for children with disabilities

For women whose children were severely ill or disabled, the intensity of the care burden was also much greater, as they navigated their child's additional needs. In many cases, women were compelled to leave the workforce when their children fell ill. In these instances their life revolved around caring for their children, and most were only able to do small-scale home businesses such as spice packeting or catering.

Physically, the work of caring for children with disabilities was strenuous, with parents noting challenges at every stage of the child's development. For example, their children could not raise their heads by themselves as infants till they were around 2, which meant they had to be constantly carried. Moreover, the care burden continued as their children aged into adults. The mothers noted that while their adult children were able to eat by themselves, things like going to the toilet and showering were still things that they needed help with. In addition, adult-children with disabilities were now physically harder to manage, particularly for aging women.

Apart from additional tasks such as going for blood tests, treatments and medical appointments, women also performed all the mental labour of managing their children's disability or illness. Thilini noted that after her son got leukemia 'I know everything there is to know about this illness now' and described how she would source the different medications he needed in proportion to their family's finances, while also keeping track of blood test reports and other logistics.

In a similar vein, the mothers of children with disabilities were invested not only in the medical aspects of their child's condition, but also in making sure that they had a good quality of life. This involved taking them to various classes, including the programme run in Gunasinghapura, as well as exercise and dance classes. These classes were also a way for mothers to connect and share experiences and information with each other, but more importantly, to relax and have a break from care duties. The Gunasinghapura afterschool programme afforded them a few hours twice a week during which they could socialise with other adults and relax. "We forget our worries here".

Mothers of children with disabilities noted that they were the only people who were suited to looking after their children. "Our relatives won't know how to take care of them or calm them down when they are upset." "No one wants to look after them." They expressed reluctance to trust anyone else to take care of their children, and noted that while relatives might meet basic needs, they would not provide the love and specific care that such children require "my family would give him a meal, but they wouldn't care for him like I would." Similarly, Thilini noted that she was the only person who could care for her son, noting that '"I can't keep my child with anyone else. It is only the people in the family who understand the situation that my child is in. We are the ones who know how bad it can get if we get any germs. It's only us who feel the pain. No one else will bother to even warm the water that will be used to bathe'. When they were not in a position to take care of their child due to illness, extended family were able to help out. However, this was only when they were severely ill, for more minor things they pushed through the illness because their child was reliant on them.

Many of these mothers were over the age of 60, and the thought of who would care for their child when they died was a source of great mental distress, with one woman even stating “My hope is that my child dies before me.”

Despite utilising government healthcare, parents of disabled and sick children were often compelled to use private healthcare, particularly for sudden kinds of medicine that were not distributed at government clinics and other expenses such as specific blood reports which had to be done at private hospitals. “My son has one medicine that he has to drink every four hours. It is usually Rs 50 a pill. A month's worth of the better quality version of that pill will cost us about 12,000 a month. We can't afford to do that. We have two other children to take care of. I have to get a blood report for him every week from Asiri hospital. We have to pay for it.” - Thilini.

Another significant expense was transport. Mothers of children with disabilities noted that they had to travel everywhere by three wheeler, spending LKR 400- 800 a day on transport. Travelling by public transport was very difficult as their children would often be overwhelmed by crowded buses. Sometimes they would panic and shout, distressing other passengers. Many mothers recounted being scolded by conductors over these incidents, and these public scenes were a source of shame and embarrassment. The physical and emotional toll of travelling with children with disabilities on public transport made mothers opt for more expensive modes. Moreover, fears of contracting infection on public transport meant that a mother whose child had leukemia travelled to all medical appointments by cab, incurring additional expenses.

Mothers of children with disabilities benefited from a disability allowance. The disability allowance was initially LKR 5000 and then increased to LKR 7500, and is now LKR 10,000. To receive it they have to go to the Grama Sevaka and get their documents signed, after which they go to receive the money from the Divisional Secretariat in cash. A few receive it via bank transfer, but still require to get a signature from the Grama Sevaka. They also have a Whatsapp group where they share information with each other about navigating the process of getting the disability allowance. This is usually spent on medicine, transport and other expenses such as adult pampers.

Those with severely ill children did not benefit from any disability allowance. One household had Aswesuma for 2 years before it was stopped, and the family was able to use this money to meet medical expenses. In the other case, as the respondent’s husband worked for the state sector he was not eligible for Aswesuma. They met expenses by taking on loans which they were still trying to pay off, with LKR 30,000 being spent on loan payments every month.

Time poverty

Women’s working lives were affected by other domestic responsibilities apart from child care, such as household chores, maintenance, laundry and cooking. 21 out of 45 respondents were solely responsible for cooking and housework with no support from anyone else. 28 respondents did all the cooking by themselves and 28 did all the housework by themselves. Cooking tended to be concentrated with either the respondent or their mother/mother in law, with 9 stating that their mother was the only one who did the cooking. Two respondents stated that their husbands did the cooking. With housework there was more

of a range of people doing it and the daughters played a bigger role compared to mothers. This may be because of the nature of the work as well. One respondent stated that while her mother did the cooking and child care, she didn't want her to have the additional burden of housework. One respondent noted, 'I'm the man of the house' when explaining that her mother did all the cooking in the household, showing how ingrained gendered understandings of housework were.

Husbands and sons played a negligible role in performing housework and their gender was frequently stated as an excuse "he doesn't help because he's a boy, I only have boys so no one helps me," "He's a boy so he doesn't do much." Husbands were considered unable to do housework and unwilling as well, frequently portrayed as too tired to do housework or coming home too late. "When he comes home he's tired and wants to sleep immediately. He doesn't think that it's difficult for me, he does nothing around the house." Even in instances where women and men were performing the same job and hours, the expectation of housework fell overwhelming on the woman. For example, one respondent worked in a tea packing factory alongside her husband. They frequently worked both day and night shifts, beginning work at 8am and finishing the night shift the following day at 7am. "The first thing we do when we finish our shift is go to the market and buy groceries. Then we come home and he goes to sleep, but I can't go to sleep no? I do laundry and cook because otherwise there won't be anything for the children to eat when they come home. By the time I sleep it is 2pm."

Women's time poverty is increased because they have to do additional housework after full time work, with little to no help from other members of the family, especially male members. The dual burden of housework and waged labour was enough to prompt women to look for other kinds of work. Malshani used to work at a lingerie shop in Colombo 7 as a sales assistant. Her legs would ache after standing the whole day and the lack of sales representatives meant that she was overworked. She would have to close the shop at 8.30pm and only return home at 9pm. "Once I'm home I'm not just waiting, there's so much work to do after that." The physical strain of housework and work took a toll on her. "I started forgetting things, falling ill frequently. Then me and my husband talked about it and decided that this was not working out." Even though the salary was much better at her previous job, she prefers this. "Retail is alright if you're a single person. It's not a suitable job if you have a family life."

Out of the 21 respondents that performed both cooking and housework alone, there was no trend in the nature of work arrangements with respondents in this category including those who worked standard full time hours, part time and split share arrangements as well as home-based work. Qualitative insights also indicated that it was based more on the gender roles and relationships in each household rather than adjusted according to work patterns. Some women noted that they had tried to teach their sons to do more housework because they wanted them to not be so reliant on their future wives. "It is too late for my husband, that is the way he is. But if I can least teach my son to be able to do things for himself." In some instances they noted pushback from husbands for doing so.

When asked how they spent their off-days, the most common response was performing housework, particularly as it had accumulated during the week. One respondent stated that even though her daughters did the housework during the week, she would perform it during the weekend because 'they don't do it properly.' Off-days were a means of catching up on more labour intensive and time consuming tasks such as doing laundry or cleaning the toilet.

Another common activity on rest days was accompanying children to Sunday school or tuition classes. Very few respondents spoke of engaging in leisure activities for and by themselves, all recreational activities were framed in through the desires and needs of children. Many respondents spoke of taking their children to the park, beach or Galle Face Green, or taking them out for a meal. Other activities included visiting relations, religious observances and women's group meetings. One woman was taking classes for a part-time masters programme, while another was learning Japanese. It was only the highest paid respondent who was able to articulate a need for spare time to herself:

> *"One day, he (my son) didn't have any homework and he went to sleep. I looked around the house for a book to read and then I realised there was nothing. Then I thought that I would do something for myself. Now I buy a book for myself every month. After I left my mother's house, there has not really been any time for me to spend for myself. But I realised that if everyone disappears one day, I will also disappear. So now I try to do something for myself."*
> - Manjula

A consistent theme was the exhaustion of performing paid labour and unpaid care work. Several respondents stated that they had no energy to do anything but sleep or rest when they were not working. "Im so tired there are times when I fall asleep while eating dinner." "I fall asleep as I hit the bed" "I'm so tired all I can do is fall asleep". The nature of work also exacerbated this, as many were working physically demanding jobs that required them to be on their feet all day. In addition, one respondent worked back to back shifts that meant that she did not sleep for 26 hours at a stretch. Only a minority of respondents slept more than 7 hours a day, with most respondents getting 6 or fewer hours of sleep.

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