

Social Protection and Urban Infrastructures of Care in Colombo



OVERVIEW

From learning loss to poor nutrition intake, the impacts of Sri Lanka's polycrisis continue to shape the everyday lives of working-class poor families in Colombo. As these pressures accumulate, they have increasingly diminished families' quality of life. Our research with working mothers in these communities shows that this burden is gendered. Women perform both paid work and extensive unpaid care work and face acute time poverty and economic precarity. This has been exacerbated by the crumbling of traditional networks of care and existing state services and systems of social protection which are inadequate to meet their needs. Their employment choices are deeply shaped by childcare responsibilities, safety concerns, proximity to workplaces, and rigid gender norms that position childcare as a mother's primary responsibility.

Through this research, we explore the realities of time and care burdens faced by working women

in Colombo. We also examine how social protection can be better suited to meet the different dynamics and needs that these women face within their households, their places of work and beyond, emphasising the urgency of building systems that recognise care as foundational to wellbeing and economic resilience. By capturing these lived experiences, this study also offers a grounded evidence base to inform policy debates and strengthen investments in urban care infrastructures.

"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*

*All the names have been anonymised

KEY FINDINGS

Many mothers from Colombo's working class settlements worked in low wage, informal sector jobs that mirrored traditional gender roles, such as cleaning, cooking, caregiving, sewing, or tea service. Only a fraction received paid leave or retirement benefits.

Childcare arrangements were diverse yet fragile. A majority relied on no childcare at all, structuring work around school or preschool hours. Mothers rely on other female relatives such as grandmothers or older daughters as the next most common caregivers; an arrangement which is often strained by age, illness, emotional volatility and the opportunity cost of either educational attainment, employment opportunities or leisure and rest. Use of formal daycares was extremely low, with many expressing concerns around safety, cost, quality of daycares, as well as for their child's emotional wellbeing.

Mothers of children with disabilities carried exceptionally heavy physical, emotional and financial burdens, often leaving the workforce entirely.

Women working night shifts described moral judgment, safety fears, and physical exhaustion, as domestic responsibilities continued despite night-time work. Rigid, unsupportive workplaces, especially in the private sector, pushed mothers out of employment or forced them into informal, unpredictable work. Relocated high-rise communities faced weakened support networks and greater childcare insecurity.

Without accessible, affordable, safe, and trusted care infrastructures, including daycares, after-school programmes, and disability-inclusive services, working mothers remain time poor, economically vulnerable, and unable to pursue stable livelihoods or rest, leisure, or career mobility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

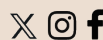
Strengthening Sri Lanka's urban infrastructures of care requires sustained investment, community-centred design, and a transformative social protection approach.

Expanding and resourcing creches, daycares, and after school programmes within communities is necessary, ensuring they are safe, affordable, trusted, and staffed by trained and well paid community workers. Centres must offer extended hours, clean facilities, supervised play, and regulatory oversight. Dedicated infrastructures for children with disabilities are urgently needed, recognising the intensive, lifelong care burden carried by mothers. These services must also be planned with meaningful community input to ensure they reflect the everyday realities, schedules, and constraints of working-class households.

Sri Lanka must explore newer models of care that go beyond childcare and provide spaces and opportunities for capacity building, rest and leisure for mothers and caregivers. Such models can enable women to participate more fully in economic and civic life.

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. Parallel awareness on dignified work is necessary to normalise recognition of domestic and informal workers as rights-holders.

School meal programmes must expand beyond Grade 5 to improve children's nutrition, reduce mothers' time poverty, generate income-earning opportunities for women, and strengthen community-based catering services. They can also serve as an important social safety net during periods of crisis, ensuring children's basic nutritional needs are met even when household finances are strained.



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