

# Exploring the Experiences of Internal Migrant, Single Mother Workers in Sri Lanka's Katunayake and Wathupitiwa Free Trade Zones



**Revolutionary Existence for Human Development**



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## **About Revolutionary Existence for Human Development (RED)**

In October 2018, Chandra Deveranarayana, a well-known activist and social worker, established a women-led organisation called "Revolutionary Existence for Human Development"( RED) with a few of her colleagues with the intention of working against all kinds of repression , oppression, and exploitation and sexual harassment of female workers, especially widows, single mothers, and migrant female workers working in the free trade zones (FTZ). In addition, RED worked on all the environmental issues directly affecting FTZ workers and their lives. The vision of RED is "to collectively line up active women in society who are concerned about the rights, well-being, welfare, living status, and living environment of Sri Lankan women (especially free trade zone women, workers, widows, and single mothers)", and the mission is to "Empower Sri Lankan women by improving their social, economic, and political status; developing their physical and mental health; and building up women's leadership to protect their rights and to make better living conditions for Sri Lankan women."

During the COVID-19 pandemic and throughout Sri Lanka's economic crisis, RED worked with national and international organisations to assist affected individuals and communities by providing food, health, travel, and accommodation facilities. RED was able to address violations of FTZ workers' rights, such as wage curtailment, termination of services and mass layoffs. RED also advocated for the establishment of a better social security system, especially for FTZ workers, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, RED comprises approximately 400 to 500 members and has expanded their mission beyond the FTZs of Katunayake, Gampaha, and Anuradhapura districts to promote and defend the rights of war-affected widows, single mothers, and women in the garment sector as a whole . When female and male employees, including those in the private sector, face crises like Corona, Red hopes:

1. To develop a social protection system through tripartite negotiations that include employees, the government, and employers .
2. To create a strong platform for single mothers and widows to advocate for their rights, dignity, social justice, and a better future for their children.
3. To establish women's leadership who will advocate for the right to organize, a living wage, workplace rights and entitlements, and a safe workplace free of violence and harassment in the workplace and in society.

Ms. Chandra Devanarayana  
Executive Director  
Revolutionary Existence for human Development (RED)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Workers in the FTZs in Sri Lanka are socially marginalised in many ways. More than half of the females working in the FTZ - including single mothers - contribute to the Sri Lankan national economy, yet they were excluded from government relief programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the current economic crisis. They were suffering socially, economically, and culturally for various reasons, but studies on single mothers working in FTZs were very limited. The Revolutionary Existence for Human Development (RED) conducted this research to better understand the true plight of single mothers working in the Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs and to make recommendations to the authorities, including the government, the Board of Investment, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations, to improve their lives.

RED identified single mothers in FTZs as a separate vulnerable cluster, suffering from many issues with limited support from society, including the government. Although there is a growing body of literature focusing on the lives of free trade workers in Sri Lanka, not much systematic research has been carried out on single mothers in the FTZs before and during the pandemic. The research focuses on the lives of single mothers in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs from a sociological, economic, and cultural perspective.

The specific objectives of the study are: to identify the real situation of the single mothers in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZ; to analyse the actual situation of single mothers in FTZs from psychosocial and economic perspectives; to discover the perception and perspective of single mothers based on practical experience, the problems they face in the factory, boarding houses, and on the roads, and how they overcome such situations and to identify recommendations based on the research findings and urge the responsible bodies to improve the well-being of single mothers in FTZs.

The research questions were primarily based on the lives of single mothers, and information was gathered in sub-themes such as: single mothers' behavioural challenges; single mothers' child rearing challenges; single mothers' economic challenges; single mothers' social and cultural challenges; the impact of the pandemic on single mothers in the FTZ; and the legal framework pertaining to single mothers. Furthermore, in order to

provide the reader with the best understanding, this study included a brief explanation of Sinhala and Tamil war widows and single mothers in foreign countries in the literature chapter.

We picked fifteen single mothers out of twenty, four from Wathupitiwala and eleven from Katunayake. Two of them were from the Tamil speaking community at Katunayake. Potential participants were identified by the RED, Shramabhimani Kendaraya, and Dabindu Collective - two prominent organisations working for FTZ workers' rights for a long period of time. Seven individuals were selected from a multidisciplinary working environment, including social activists, members of trade union organizations, lawyers, members of policy-making organizations, and women's rights activists. Two government representatives were also selected based on their duties and services. The first phase of the study was a desk research to review the literature on FTZ and single mothers, both in Sri Lanka and other countries. The second phase was to collect primary data from the months of May and June 2022.

The third phase involved analysing the preliminary findings presented in the first draft of the report. Qualitative content analysis was used as the analytical method, and validating meetings were held with representatives from several organisations.

This study provided new evidence on the prevalence and associated factors of single motherhood in the free trade zones of Katunayake and Wathupitiwala. They include:

Single mothers in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs have been disadvantaged in many ways for decades, including lack of access to social safety nets, discrimination against productive labour, undervaluation of unproductive labour, limitations on freedom of association, and unequal wages.

It was noted that each related factor has a direct or indirect root in the cultural norms and values of Sri Lankan society.

Single mothers are constantly victimised at work due to power hierarchies; even though legal remedies exist; they are not adequately implemented to prevent harassment.

Single mothers are hindered from taking up permanent jobs while taking care of children alone and as a result, are far less financially well-off than other workers .

The mental state of single mothers who live alone with their children in boarding houses without any support from their family or society are at a very low level, and they have been victims of various psychological problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and the present economic crisis amplify the above-mentioned hazards. Being non-permanent residents, they have not received support from the government and social security schemes during the crises.

Taken together, the results have important implications for the full evaluation of welfare programmes targeting single mothers. Policymakers should also take into account the potential adverse effects on child development.

There is great importance and relevance in focusing further on the specific instances and socio-economic realities of single mothers living in the FTZs in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala in Gampaha District that have been revealed and emphasized in the current study, which has identified some recommendations as below.

### **Recommendations**

- **Recommendations to the State**

1. In consultation with women's organizations and Trade Unions to identify single mothers in the FTZs as a vulnerable category and formulate and implement a comprehensive financial and social safety net to address the severe economic and financial issues currently faced by them.
2. The State to give due recognition to the diversity of issues and challenges faced by single mothers and their children, by appointing a dedicated Task Force / multi-stakeholder forum to identify and implement a comprehensive programme, with the participation of the Department of Labour, Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment, Board of Investment (BOI), employers, apparel brands, women's organizations and Trade Unions.
3. The Board of Investment in consultation with the Ministry of Women's Affairs, women's organizations and Trade Unions, to provide quality daycare facilities, including excising ones within the Free Trade Zones.
4. In order to improve the psychological well-being of mothers who are facing social and economic pressures, mental health clinics to be opened in the FTZs through MOH with qualified counsellors.

5. State to take necessary steps to allocate resources and effectively implement the national policy on maternal and child health, which encompasses inter alia optimal care for children less than five years of age, through the provision of quality childcare services, maintaining optimal nutritional status (Sustainable Goal 4).
6. Ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Violence and Harassment 2019 (C-190) which ensures the right for everyone to work in an environment free from violence and harassment.
7. Ensure the registration of all migrant workers.
8. Ensure the government provides assistance for the single mothers in FTZs during emergency situations and to exercise their right to franchise.

- **Recommendations to Employers and Global Brands**

9. Implement special programs and take all necessary steps to ensure that single mothers do not suffer social and economic discrimination within the workplace.
10. Provide standard day care facilities within or in close proximity to the workplace.
11. Regulating boarding houses standard and facilities conducive for child rearing.
12. Special attention by harassment/health committees etc.
13. Incorporate specific measures in buyers code and ensure follow up.

- **Recommendations to Civil Society and Donors**

14. Women's organizations and trade unions to proactively lobby the government and UN agencies to identify single mothers and their children in the FTZs who are facing the dire consequences of the current financial and economic crisis as a vulnerable category, and to allocate social security payments, nutritional packages, and include them in other on-going and future welfare schemes.
15. In terms of the mothers' socio-economic background, the noted incidence of harassment, especially in workplaces is prominent, and in order to reduce such violations, a strong commitment and attention is needed to lobby the Department of Labour, Ministry of Women's Affairs and other relevant authorities to

implement existing laws, and ratification of ILO convention 190 on violence and harassment at work.

16. Civil society and donors to actively advocate that the state provide required support, by greater investment in sustainable structures, systems and related services to ensure safe and decent working and living conditions for single mothers, and standard education and nutritional support for their children.
17. Women's organizations and Trade Unions to rigorously engage in awareness raising to change negative societal attitudes towards single mothers and avoid the stigma of being a single mother.
18. Pay greater attention to the children of single mothers who are in need of better education and nutritional support.
19. Provide reproductive health awareness and legal support services.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Overview of 'Single Mothers'.

The status of women in modern society is an indispensable feature of debates concerning gender inequality, violence against women, women's dependency, and women's empowerment. Women's responses to these issues vary across different social, cultural, and geographical groups. Many scholars study the identities, positions, and functions of women from diverse societies. These studies elaborate on the idea of what it means to be a woman and how people perceive and treat women in different cultures. The status of women counts on the power relationship between men and women. This system of power relations is the basis for "patriarchy" (male-dominated society), which is common in the Sri Lankan context and is a part of the Sri Lankan culture, which includes many negatives, such as women being neglected, discriminated, humiliated, controlled, exploited, oppressed, and other forms of violence faced by women on a daily basis. This kind of subjugation exists in the family, the workplace, and larger societies (Bhasin, 2000). Firstly, daughters face discrimination from other family members when there is a preference for sons. When a woman marries and becomes a daughter-in-law to a family, she faces another form of submission from her male partner and the in-law's.

However, through gender ideologies, these differences extend to the social environment, establishing social status and hierarchy, providing limited access to resources and participation in society, and creating typical roles for men and women (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; UN women 2014; Bhasin, 2003). The complementary relationship between men and women is significant in structuring gender relations. There are several studies on gender that have concentrated on women's subordination, marginalization, etc." Gender roles lead to attitudes towards the rights and responsibilities of women and men in society. These attitudes can also be expressed broadly or specifically in areas such as economics, social, family, legal, or political (UN Women, 2014).

In a marital relationship, a woman's role and position are vital if both partners value their mutual activity; thus, they will achieve solidarity and a sustained relationship (Bhasin, 2000; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). However, factors like women's subordination, discrimination against women, and the perception of a woman's position in the family affect family solidarity and relationships. But today, a significant response has

been the change in the family structure, which has resulted in the

emergence of single-parent or single-mother families. It is necessary to understand the concept of a "single woman" to define the "single mother". A single mother means a widow, a divorced woman, or an unmarried woman who has a child or children. A woman can be a single in two different ways.

There are many reasons behind being a single mother. But, as a result of being single mothers, many face physical and emotional challenges that come with bringing up a child /children alone. They face numerous life challenges, including economic, health, and social issues as well as issues threatening the security of themselves or their children. The main struggle comes when they take the responsibility to head a family by themselves. Firstly, there is an economic vulnerability of the household. Secondly, there is social isolation in a single-mother-headed household since the bonds formed due to marriage alliances are absent (Pillai, & Swain, 2005). As we all know, as a result of the marital disruption of divorce, single mothers face many challenges in society. In such a case, a woman may lose support from her family, partner, and his family which further leads to economic hardships and problems of security. Being a divorcee and gaining custody of the child (ren) is the most pressing issue they have taken. The responsibility of raising a child or children as the dominant caregiver without a spouse or partner (Partners in development initiatives, 2011), they also face many problems.

As mentioned before, single mothers, be they widows, separated, divorced or unmarried, face various societal problems depending on social conditions, ethnicity, religion, and geographical area. The situation is heightened in the FTZs in Sri Lanka. FTZ workers are generally marginalized due to socio-cultural issues. Single mothers with children are more vulnerable to workplace and social harassment. They suffer from a variety of psychosocial issues that are not addressed. There are a limited number of focused studies on single mothers in the FTZ in Sri Lanka. Like other workers, they also face many challenges during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic and the present economic crisis. Hence, it is important to analyse the situation of single mothers in FTZs and find recommendations and ways to mobilize and empower them for their well-being.

## **1.2. Scope of Research**

RED has identified single mothers in FTZ as a distinct vulnerable cluster, suffering from many social, cultural, and economic problems due to a lack of support from society, including the government. Although there is a growing body of literature focusing on the lives of free trade zone workers in Sri Lanka, no systematic research has been carried out on single mothers in FTZ before and during the pandemic. Therefore, this report primarily focuses on the lives of single mothers before, during, and after the pandemic from a sociological, economic, and cultural perspective.

### **The specific objectives of the study are:**

- ✓ To identify the real situation of the single mothers in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs.
- ✓ To analyse the actual situation of single mothers in FTZs in relation to the psychosocial and economic perspectives.
- ✓ To discover the perception and perspective of single mothers based on practical experience, the problems they face in the factory, boarding houses, and on the roads, and how they overcome such situations.
- ✓ To identify recommendations based on the research findings and urge the responsible bodies to improve the well-being of single mothers in free trade zones.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 . Sinhala and Tamil War Widows

Sri Lanka has a 30 -year history of ethnic-based civil war. May 2009 was documented as the period that demarcated the end of this horrendous war. This war brought about many dark days to countless innocent lives (Jayawickreme, Jayawickreme, & Miller, 2010). The ill effects of this war saw its climax among the ethnic Tamil minorities living in the war-torn north and east (Jayawickrema, Jayawickremae, & Miller, 2010; Pannilage, 2017))

” (Pannilage,2017).

The primary impact of war is uncountable, affecting not only the victims but their loved ones as well, including the destruction of lives, families, and entire communities. There are also decisive social and economic dimensions to any conflict. War destroys entire infrastructure facilities, including houses, schools, hospitals, industries, lands, and agriculture. Also, casualties, displacement, and migration have changed the family and social networks of many communities in Sri Lanka (Somasundaram & Sivayokan, 2013; Pannilage,2017). As a result, the impact of the civil war on the lives of people from both parties caused many problems for women and children. Especially women became the most vulnerable after they lost their fathers, husbands, sons, and daughters (Witting ,Lambert, & Wickrama, 2016). War widows are one of the most important difficulties during and after armed wars, and they continue to face several life obstacles, including the battle to feed themselves and their children. Women-headed Tamil families face a range of challenges, including poverty (Herath & Silva, 2012; Pannilage, 2017).

The loss of the integrity of the Tamil communities' family-centered culture, along with a lack of social support, has caused significant psychological suffering (Somasundaran, 2007). This has led to high rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, as well as a general sense of unease in daily life (Somasundaran, 2007; Jayawickreme, Jayawickreme, Atanasov, Goonasekera, & Foa, 2012). Additionally, the militarization of everyday life, human trafficking, and land settlement, ownership, and usage have disproportionately affected female heads of families, including widows (Perera,

2015; Jayaweera, 2000). The government provides financial assistance to impacted women, but widowhood has many other social, psychological, and economic effects that derive from societal systems. Tamil women from war-torn areas have been brought in to fill vacancies in textile manufacturers after the conclusion of the conflict in 2009 (Perera, 2015; Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2004; Somasundaran & Sivayokan, 2013).

Similarly, military war widows also faced many challenges in post-war society in Sri Lanka. Military widow means a woman whose husband belongs to the security personnel of the army, navy, and air force of Sri Lanka. Attitudes towards a single woman or a single mother after the death of her husband, who served in the security forces, have always been present in society as war heroes (Pannilage & Gunawardana, 2016). Based on the research, many military widows have the privilege of protection and respect from society, more so than Tamil war widows (Gunawardana, 2017; Pannilage & Gunawardana, 2016). They are entitled to financial assistance from the government, better schools for their children, and aid and support from regimes. However, most military widows also experience psychological distress as a result of a variety of interconnected circumstances, such as new household management tasks, isolation, and changes in social relationship (Gunawardana,2017). Most of the time, society monitors the behaviour of the widow, especially the other women in the communities are often suspicious and as a result, the military widows also live with fear. As we all know, most of the time, men are trying to approach divorced or widowed women to take sexual advantage.

Based on the ADB report, over 25 percent of households in Sri Lanka are headed by women (ADB,2016; Rathwatte, 2021). The majority of those women have lost a spouse or a partner as a result of the 30-year armed ethnic conflict. These women were only able to engage in low-paying informal employment and/or daily income-generation activities after the conflict. As a result, these women were more vulnerable and economically affected without having any external support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following COVID-19 lock-downs and travel restrictions, the government initiated a relief programme for 10 categories of eligible beneficiaries from low-income backgrounds, but women-headed household were not considered as a priority group (Rathwatte, 2021) for government concessions granted under the emergency situation. As explained above, most military women-headed households are economically stable as

they are eligible for a government-mandated salary and the pension of the deceased spouse, while other war widows do not receive any form of redress.

## **2.2. Single Mothers in FTZs**

The transition from economic liberalism to export-oriented industrialization began in the late 1970s in Sri Lanka (Athukorala & Rajapathirana, 2000). This created more employment opportunities for young women in many labour-intensive industries, including free trade zones (Attanapola, 2004; Athukorala & Rajapathirana, 2000). By 2022, fourteen FTZs industrial parks and export promotion zones were providing work for more than 400,000 people, 75% of whom were women. FTZ women workers come from lower income families in rural areas, where they were raised with traditional ideas of womanhood and dignity. As a result of the migration to urban society, those women are influenced by other ideas and different lifestyles (Attanapola, 2004; Athukorala & Rajapathirana, 2000) and most of them have changed their attitudes. This leads them to change their thinking and behaviour patterns. Moreover, many workers live in poorly built, privately owned boarding houses near the FTZs with little access to piped water and electricity. Many scholars have said that the influences of this partly urban lifestyle have a negative impact on the dignity of the migrant workers, and as a result, FTZ is often referred to in public discourse as a “brothel” or “city of prostitutes” (Hewamanna, 2008, Attanapola, 2008).

The FTZs are a largely female-dominated workplace, especially abundant with gender inequality and poor working conditions (Hewamanna, 2008). Ultimately, greater female representation in the workforce does not necessarily equate to gender equality. Rural, unmarried women were expected to be obedient and to work hard without complaining or unionising (Fitzpartick & Kelly 1998; Hewamanna, 2008). Being female factory workers, they have already been fortified as a result of exploitative employers, which is further compounded by their (traditionally) poor socio-economic conditions (Attanapola, 2008; Hancock, Moore, & Middleton, 2015). They are exploited as an inexpensive workforce, with less opportunity to participate in collective action or to refuse repetitive employment. Those workers’ income is dependent on the level of output and financial efficacy of individual firms (Hancock, Moore, & Middleton, 2015; Sivananthiran, 2007). When compared with the other industries, FTZs are identified as having greater output expectations, longer working hours (Sivananthiran, 2007), and inadequate income

or support. Female workers have an excessive number of working hours in comparison to men but lower salaries than male workers. Many scholars have reported that the majority of FTZs do not allow female workers to access daycare or aid during pregnancy, and they may also face sexual, mental, and physical abuse (Gunathilake, 2018; Sivananthiran, 2007).

The power and domination involved in imperialism and the invasion of the indigenous world is an example of colonizing power (Gunathilaka, 2008; Attanapola, 2008). Throughout South-east Asia, the female population has long experienced the subjugation of internal and external socio-political and economic powers (Jayaweera, & Shanmugam, 2001; Sevananthiran, 2007). When looking into economic relations, it is important to consider the gendered relations within production, consumption, and accumulation. The sexual division of labour is one example where economic gender relations are played out, such as when women migrate from rural to urban areas to work in garment factories. As mentioned above, this patriarchal system promotes the appointment of women only to exploit them (sometimes negative measures of control and harassment) secure in the knowledge that women are disadvantaged and potentially powerless to assert control (Sivananthiran, 2007). In this circumstance, these female factory workers face constant vulnerability as a result of socio-political disadvantages such as inadequate pay (especially when compared to men), deprivation of voting rights, poor working conditions, such as working long hours, or ill-treatment and exclusion from factory work. Under this situation, female workers in the FTZs are collectively fighting for their basic workers' rights, such as freedom of association, equal salaries, and a better working environment for better living conditions as citizens and workers.

## **2.3. Challenges faced by single mothers in the FTZs**

### **Emotional and behavioural challenges**

Single mothers are facing numerous and varied challenges for many reasons, such as socio-economic, cultural, as well as political challenges. Culturally bound social stigma against single mothers is one of the major issues they face. This situation has negatively affected their health well-being and leads them many psychological issues.

A marital relationship is a very important social relationship for most women in Sri Lanka. As previously mentioned, with divorce, women potentially stand to lose an important source of social support (ILO, 2016), experience poorer physical and mental

health (Sbarra, 2015) and face less financial stability (Focus Women, 2015; Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2004; Silva & Herath, 2012). Adjusting to a new lifestyle after a separation involves cognitive and behavioural changes. Several obligations, particularly for single mothers, include locating a new home, living on less money, seeking work or applying for welfare, and adapting to single parenting with minimal external support. Moreover, coping with the emotional effects of separation, such as feelings about the former spouse (e.g., love, hate, bitterness, and failure), and more general feelings such as worry, sadness, relief, and guilt (Corcorn, 2011; Sbarra, 2015). As a result of cognitive status, most single mothers show behavioural changes such as sleeping and eating issues, difficulty carrying out daily activities, lethargy, crying, and so on. Many scholars have shown that separated and divorced people experience lower psychological well-being, lower levels of happiness and higher levels of depression than married counterparts (Sbarra, 2015; Nelson 2019) that FTZ single mothers have in common. Several studies have shown that divorced mothers are at greater risk for symptoms of depression than married mothers (Focus Women, 2015; Nelson, 2019).

Moreover, female workers in Sri Lankan FTZs reported several health problems such as fatigue, malnutrition, unwanted pregnancies, mental health issues, and sexually transmitted diseases for various reasons, including sexual harassment (Athtanapola, 2004; Hewamanne, 2009). As explained earlier, the majority of the population around FTZs are unmarried women and men are said to frequent FTZ areas with the intention of taking sexual and financial advantages (Hewamann, 2011). This situation is common among single mothers in FTZ as well. Finally, because of the social and economic challenges, those mothers show negative attitudes and behavioural changes as a result of their unbalanced mental status (Nelson, 2019).

### **Child rearing challenges**

Choosing life as a single mother can mean isolation from family, community, and work for many women. Single mothers in the FTZ are struggling with social and financial problems as mentioned earlier and as a result, most of them do not have much time to take care of their kids ( ). Changes in a mother's behaviour due to mental pressure can negatively affect the parent-child relationship (Ruwanpura, & Humphries, 2004, Nelson, 2019). Parents' child-rearing practices vary from lack of affection, less supervision, and an inability to control their children's development when poor parenting is associated with maladaptive behaviours (Mishra, Thamminaina, & Mishra, 2021). As a result, children

become more dependent, disobedient, and aggressive in the years following absence of the fathering figure (Focus Women, 2015; Nelson, 2019). Moreover, no support from the father to monitor the children's behaviour as a hero and role model in the family changes both the mother and the kids' behaviour. Therefore, it is difficult to control the children's aggressive behaviour in spite of the father's support, and this would be more stressful for single mothers (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006; Quist, 2015), particularly those who do not have any external support.

Furthermore, the quality of care depends on the responsiveness of the caregiver and the nature of the environment (Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2004). But the FTZ does not have a proper home environment as many workers including single mothers, live in privately owned (Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2004, 61) one-room boarding houses which are crowded, badly ventilated and with poor water and sanitation facilities. Single mothers without family support make informal childcare arrangements with boarding owners, neighbours and friends, often putting the child's safety and well-being at risk. In this situation, as shown by many scholars, many children grow up in an unsafe and inappropriate environment and carry the consequences of this early neglect into adulthood (Ruwanpura and Humphries 2004). Another problem single mothers are facing is that a large portion of their income goes to food, rent, and other necessities so there is little left for childcare. Many scholars have shown that the children of single mothers are believed to terminate schooling prematurely (if entering at all), enter the labour market early, and also face a higher risk of malnutrition and ill-health (Ruwanpura and Humphries 2004).

### **Economic challenges**

FTZ women, including FTZ single mothers, play a critical role in the Sri Lankan economy and are one of the backbones of the economically important sectors for the country. These female workers' struggle daily to balance often conflicting demands on their labour as paid (productive) factory workers and unpaid (reproductive) workers at home (Hewamanne, 2008). However, it is clear that the women are paid for some parts of their work and unpaid for others. Thus, they are paid and unpaid workers; "productive" and "unproductive" workers at almost the same time. Based on Marx (Senaviratne, 2018) productive labour is exchanged with capital to produce surplus-value, and unproductive labour is exchanged with revenue to produce use value (Seneviratne, 2018). Then, Senaviratne explained that "domestic work merely produces use-values but is essential to the production

of surplus-values" (1972, pp. 31-32). Thus, they claim that women's domestic work is productive, not in the literal sense of useful, but in the strict Marxist sense of creating surplus value. In the culture of Sri Lanka, there is no value placed on "unproductive" domestic work, and it is only considered a woman's responsibility. Therefore, generally, women's unpaid labour at home, such as care work, housework, teaching at home, and so on, done by women, has not been given any value (Ruwanpura and Humphries 2004; Senaviratne, 2018).

Single mothers struggle to balance productive and unproductive work without any external support. Because of child care issues, many single mothers in FTZs seek temporary employment, or work in the manpower sector (Hewamanne, 2011; Hettiarachchy, & Schensul, 2001). Even though some single mothers are engaged in permanent jobs, they are reluctant to work overtime or night-shifts and as a result, have to change their jobs frequently. They continuously face many financial issues in this situation.

### **Social and cultural challenges**

In Sri Lanka, motherhood is crucial to a woman's identity and women are recognised as natural reproducers, nurturers, mothers, and wives (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). As mentioned earlier, one-fifth of the households in the country are headed by women (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Bhasin, 2003) and majority of these women are single mothers. Many researchers have shown that widowed, divorced or separated single mothers are sexually and socially vulnerable, which is common for single mothers in FTZ in Sri Lanka too.

FTZ workers, especially women workers, are identified as a marginalised group in society. Cultural norms and narrative constructions about them place them very much on the margins of society, defining them as a powerless and voiceless category (Hettiarachchy, 2002; Hettiarachchy, & Schensul, 2001). The social perception of single mothers, especially FTZ single mothers, is worse than the other female workers in the FTZ. Many of those mothers face specific gender-based issues. Sexual harassment, unwanted attention by male management within and outside the workplace, women are verbally and sometimes physically threatened by males in the community as they make their way to and from the factory by foot or on public transport (Hettiarachchy, 2002; Hettiarachchy, & Schensul, 2001).

The problems faced by divorced women depend on their economic and social status, their identity with caste groups, their level of education, the background

they come from and their economic independence (Bharat, 1988; Witting, Lambert, & Wickrama, 2016). Unfortunately, single mothers in FTZ come from poor families in rural areas and are not highly educated (Bhasin, 2003, Hettiarachchy, 2002). As a result, they face numerous challenges on their own.

Stigmas exist when there is labelling, stereotyping, segregation, status loss, and discrimination in a power situation (Ruwanpura and Humphries 2004; Senaviratne, 2018). The disapproval of divorce by relatives, feelings of guilt in divorce, social exclusion of married women, and demoralization (Gerstel, 1987) are some of the signs of social stigma which are common among single mothers in FTZ.

Having romantic relationships with a man is easier in the FTZs than in the village due to a lack of supervision by family members. Also, in some studies, it has been shown that migrant female workers perceived emotional romantic relationships with men based on love and closeness to be valuable (Hewamanna, 2009). However, single motherhood as a result of premarital sex is considered a taboo since motherhood within marriage is highly valued in the Sri Lankan culture (Mishra, Thamminaina, & Mishra, 2021, Nelson, 2019; Meewalarachchi, 2004). Those women were highly marginalized from the society, causing them to take complete responsibility of leading a family all alone.

Furthermore, community participation is a way of life and an expectation in Sri Lankan culture. But, the majority of FTZ women have no time to participate in community involvement due to long hours of work (Hewamanne, 2016). When considering single mothers, lack of time is a major issue as they have more responsibilities than other women, like taking care of their children and so on (Ruwanpura, & Humphries, 2004, Nelson, 2019).

### **2.4 Impact of the pandemic on single mothers in the FTZs**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 March, resulting in a staggering global death toll and pushing many countries, including Sri Lanka, into a social and economic crisis (GROUNDVIEWS, 2021; Ratwatte, 2021). Society, perceived as systems consisting of various sub-systems has been globally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant changes in behaviour, attitudes, relationships, and thought patterns (LST, 2021). It has affected people's daily lifestyles by pressing them with fear of infection, and thereby changing their

life satisfaction, mental health, overall affecting their livelihoods badly.

FTZ workers, including single mothers were one of the most vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. But there is no specific evidence of how the FTZ single mothers suffered and lived during this period (GROUNDVIEWS, 2021). However, as FTZ female workers, they all faced numerous challenges, many of which were common for single mothers<sup>1</sup>.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that began in January through to October 2020 had the most adverse impact on supply chains and the lives of workers due to the enforcement of emergency lock-down measures along with global trade restrictions (GROUNDVIEWS, 2021; LST, 2021). A significant number of workers in FTZs either lost their jobs, shifted to part-time work, received only a fraction of their wages, or shifted to casual/part-time work, with destructive consequences to their personal and family lives (GROUNDVIEWS,2021). On the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, a cluster of confirmed Covid-19 cases originated from a Brandix-owned factory in Minuwangoda, Gampaha.<sup>2</sup> The fact that one of the FTZ factories had become the epicentre in the second wave of the pandemic only served to exacerbate the social stigma and marginalisation faced by FTZ workers (LST, 2021).

By 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 1,036 workers and 361 of their close contacts had tested positive for the corona-virus, making it the largest outbreak yet on the island and raising the country's total Covid-19 cases to over 4,844. New health and sanitation measures were taken in terms of imposing social distancing, lock-down, and curfew (GROUNDVIEWS,2021). Furthermore, in an attempt to control the spread of COVID-19, the military was called in on October 11 to round-up workers, often late at night or early in the morning, to forcibly take 53 workers to makeshift quarantine centres<sup>3</sup>. The fact that mothers were forcibly separated from their children and taken to quarantine centres without coming up with solutions is extremely heart-breaking<sup>4</sup>. It was reported that some of the factories had their own quarantine centres within the factory premises, where their shelters have this inherent risk of the spreading of the virus.

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<sup>1</sup><https://waronwant.org/news-analysis/garment-workers-frontline-pandemic-outbreak-sri-lanka>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AjFH8EJ1XE&t=218s>

<sup>3</sup><https://waronwant.org/news-analysis/garment-workers-frontline-pandemic-outbreak-sri-lanka>

<sup>4</sup><https://waronwant.org/news-analysis/garment-workers-frontline-pandemic-outbreak-sri-lanka>

When considering their economic and living conditions as mentioned earlier, it was reported that the high levels of unemployment, loss of job security, and pay cuts resulted in anxiety and economic stress among the workers. Many manufacturers responded to the outbreak with job cuts and wage cuts<sup>5</sup>. The unfortunate situation was that the wages were cut for the days they had to quarantine as a result of contact with COVID 19 infected patient or the fellow worker (GROUNDVIEWS, 2021; LST Video, 2021). Even though the permanent workers were paid at least half their normal wage during the lock-down periods, the manpower workers who are not institutionally attached to the workplace were not able to receive any assistance as they are employed at a daily wage(LST Video, 2021). As a result, on one hand factory workers struggled to reach new production targets with a smaller workforce, leading to several violations of labour rights that took a toll on the economic, human, and social well-being of workers (GROUNDVIEW, 2021; LST Video, 2021). On the other hand, many workers faced financial crises and were starving without having at least one meal per day (LST VIDEO, 2021). With the island-wide curfew imposed, FTZ workers found themselves trapped in their boarding houses around the zones (LST,video, 2021). The quarantine curfew worsened the situation as they could not go out for buying grocery or any other food items because of the social stigma. Some had simply survived on water. Any grocery purchases have been made on credit. Most had to work until as late as 2 pm on days when curfew was imposed from 6 pm, making it impossible for them to go home (LST Video, 2021). Most of these workers could not return to their villages because their neighbours would call up 119 and report them to the authorities (LST Video, 2021).

Furthermore, it was reported that neither their employers nor the government were sensitive to the workers' economic distress during the pandemic. Even so, FTZ workers did not receive the emergency relief measure of 5000 LKR provided by the government as they could not produce proof of residence in these areas in which they were living<sup>6</sup>. Hence, the lack of access to social protection mechanism has led to further economic marginalization of an already vulnerable group and has contributed to the loss of the little decision-making power they exercised in their lives through the leverage their income previously provided (Hewamanna, 2021).

However, with the impact of the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, the situation of FTZ including single

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AjFH8EJ1XE&t=218s>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AjFH8EJ1XE>

mothers has worsened. Due to currency fluctuations and fuel problems, many company owners are planning to close factories or move to other countries. In this situation, the main problem faced by garment workers during this period is job loss [De Silva, 2020; WARONWANT,2020].

Researchers have pointed to the psychological impact on single mothers during COVID 19, but no literature has been found on FTZ single mothers in Sri Lanka context. Hence, psychological impact has been generally discussed here to understand the situation of the female workers, including single mothers in the FTZs in Sri Lanka.

Many scholars have talked about the psychological distress among families during the pandemic due to domestic violence, financial issues, long-term lock-down, children's online education, working from home, etc (Clean Cloths Campaign , 2020; LST video, 2021; GROUNDVIEW, 2021). In particular, FTZ mothers may experience extra pressure from family unemployment, income deduction, or the inability to find a job as well as from home schooling and parental communication. Due to wage cuts and unemployment, many workers could no longer financially support their families, many of whom were solely dependent on their income, further straining their family situation and relationships. As a result of low level of social support, loneliness and financial insecurity during the pandemic, female workers were at a great risk of burnout. Caring for children during the pandemic was one of the main issues faced by the single mothers. Stuck in a small room due to quarantine curfew, fear of infection, and spending days were more stressful both children and mothers.

Furthermore, online education adds additional burdens to mothers who have school-aged children (LST, 2022). They were worried and suffered due to the inability of buying a phone for online education, and those who had phones suffered from the high cost of the data.

Moreover, some researches have shown that the workers' experiences of harassment in boarding houses include forced evictions with limited notice, sudden increases in rent and rates, difficulty in finding new boarding houses, and harassment due to delayed payments, etc. It was reported that the workers who returned to their villages were faced with a different set of challenges. They were treated as vectors of the deadly disease, rejected from society and in several instances, shunned by neighbours and being blamed for bringing the 'pandemic' to the villages. Clean Cloth

Campaign, 2020). As a result, women were frustrated and developed several cognitive and behavioural changes, as mentioned earlier. It was reported that the mothers vented their rage on their children, which was also common among FTZ single mothers. According to the gender role theory, mothers' mental health is more vulnerable to parenting issues than fathers', as mothers bear responsibility for childcare.

## **2.5 Single mothers in Asian and African Contexts**

In attempting to understand the situation of single mothers in the FTZ, the impact of the pandemic, etc. It is also important to situate the findings and the discourse within the larger picture in the world. In this literature review, look into the situation in other countries as well as in Sri Lanka and discuss single mothers with a special focus on them as an agency or as a social and political construct.

The global literature is rich in both statistics and anecdotal and case study references. This is drawn from the African Continent, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, addressing a multitude of aspects such as gender, poverty, trade, tariffs, social impact on the single mother and her children, and the social attitudes to abortion.

A distinction is made between unmarried women and divorced women: Divorce is increasing as evident especially in the literature from the African continent (Mutanda & Mbanefo, 2017), and thus, the incidence of single parent families. However, divorce does not always translate to better economic prospects: Women in Albania and Bosnia Herzegovina face discrimination at the courts which favour the male partner in divorce proceedings (Bimbashi, 2015).

Most literature reports that single women and single mothers face discrimination in their access to reproductive health services and rights (Bennet, 2001), employment (World Bank, 2011; Chizomam & Nayasha, 2011; Bimbashi, 2015), and education (Bennet, 2001). In addition, the women also face ostracisation (marginalization) from families and society and (fear) the loss of female companionship (Bennet, 2001).

Within the larger group of single women who have had sexual relations, Bennet (2001) focuses on women who have had abortions. She draws attention to the stigma associated with abortions for young unmarried women which results in subpar or "compromised" services being offered to these women and the socio-economic repercussions for the women and their children (should the pregnancy be carried to term) (Bennet, 2001:37). Her study identifies that these women fear

“public exposure”, “loss of the companionship of girlfriends”, “abuse from partners and families”, “abandonment by their boyfriends”, and “the possibility of infertility” among others (Bennet, 2001:41). These findings point back to the social and economic impact on women, discrimination, and lack of access to education and sexual and reproductive health services. It is especially important to note that such discriminatory treatment, especially in accessing reproductive health services is limited to single mothers (Bennet, 2001).

Employment, unemployment and lack of access to employment are also important considerations within the context of single mothers because of their familial, economic, and social responsibility towards their children. Women face hardships in trying to navigate the economic situation and the world of work which seeks to keep them out of the workforce (World Bank, 2011). Many employers believe that women are “less reliable workers” (ADB, 2004) and pay them lower rates than to men (World Bank, 2011:16). In addition, they hesitate to take on pregnant women (Bimbashi, 2015). Lack of childcare keeps some women out of the workforce (Bimbashi, 2015). Other factors that hamper women looking for employment include lack of adequate day care options at the place of work and also harassment (World Bank, 2011).

Single parenthood impacts women mostly on the economic front: Their low levels of education (Chizomam, 2009; Samaranayake, 2008), restrictive social norms (Bimbashi, 2015), lack of access to jobs due to discriminatory practices (World Bank, 2011), and inability to campaign for higher wages (World Bank, 2011) means that they earn lower wages than do their male counterparts and face the risk of losing employment first. In addition, their inability to leave their children for long means that their children also go to the place of work, hampering their education (Bimbashi, 2015). In addition, most women are unable to provide for their children resulting in some cases in child labour (Bimbashi, 2015), as they live on less than USD 2 a day (Chizomam, 2009). Also, this inability translates to undernourishment and malnourishment in their children as well as their mother (World Bank, 2011), which could also result in illnesses that further endanger their precarious economic situation (Oxfam). In addition, women also have less agency in economic condition decisions: They neither able to decide their ideal location for a store-front nor cope with the changes in the marketplace that negatively affect them (Oxfam). This lack of agency also arises from restrictive social norms and their role as a mother

(Oxfam), which hamper her going long distances to find the ideal location and conditions.

Both Bennet (2001) and Chizomam (2009) look at education and access to contraception as possible ways to keep women from becoming single mothers. Although employment is important, it is seen as providing less economic freedom and parity compared to married women due to the single mother’s low education level, which reduces her access to high-pay or skilled jobs (Chizomam, 2009; Bimbashi, 2015). Samaranayake agrees with the need for education: He recommends safeguarding the right to education for young girls, awareness programmes among the school community, formulating better social security systems and changes in attitude towards single mothers (Samaranayake, 2019).

These reports show that across the board and irrespective of the region, single parenthood remains a significant challenge to women on multiple fronts of employment, raising children, social and familial discrimination, and vulnerabilities related to economic condition.

The literature on single mothers around the world carry similar strains of restrictive social norms, lack of employment opportunities and access to reproductive health services, and low educational levels. This section looked at single mothers’ plight in Europe, the African continent and Asia in terms of gender, economy, education, access to services, and abortion.

## 2.6 Legal framework

Although there are several laws that protect the rights of working in Sri Lanka, there is no law specifically targeting single mothers. Hence, the laws and legal frameworks related to single mothers in FTZ are presented here to assist the reader in understand the legal background in Sri Lanka.

The Shop and Office Employees Act of 1954, the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act of 1956; the Factories Ordinance of 1950; and the Maternity Benefits Ordinance of 1941 are the domestic legal frameworks that ensure the rights of working women in Sri Lanka (Law Net)<sup>7</sup>. The maternity rights of working women in Sri Lanka are expressed in the Maternity Benefits Ordinance of 1941 and also in the Shop and Office Employees Act of 1954. Under these

<sup>7</sup><https://www.lawnet.gov.lk/employment-of-women-young-persons-and-children-the-factories-and-the-shop-and-office-employees-regulation-of-employment-and-remuneration-amendment-2/>

laws, female workers are entitled to up to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave. Also, the law requires employers of more than a specified number of women workers to provide childcare facilities for children under five years of age and authorises the promulgation of regulations regarding those facilities (Goonethilleke, Cooray, & De Saram, 2020). The Act also provides for nursing mothers' return to work, which is also ensured by the provisions of the Act.

The Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act of 1956 and the Factories Ordinance of 1950 are being implemented to ensure the safety and security of female workers in their workplace (Goonethilleke, Cooray, & De Saram, 2020). It provides the regulations for safety and welfare, work time, restrictions and exemptions on night shifts, overtime work, etc.

Furthermore, Sri Lanka signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 without any reservations (Women and the Media Collective 2010). This implies that the government has an obligation to protect individuals from the risk and to create an enabling environment for enhancing women's rights without any forms of discrimination.

As mentioned above, some of the single mothers work as sex workers due to financial problems. But prostitution in Sri Lanka is illegal and regulated by three ordinances: the Vagrant Ordinance from 1841 (most recently amended in 1947), the Houses of Brothels Ordinance (recently amended in 1943), and the Houses of Remand (recently amended in 1955), which allow for the detention of women in prostitution in rehabilitation facilities instead of in prison (Miller 2013).

Furthermore, international labour standards and legal instruments, such as basic principles and workplace rights developed by the ILO's constituents (governments, employers, and workers) protect the rights of employees, including FTZ single mothers. They are legally binding international agreements, conventions (or protocols) that can be ratified by member states, or recommendations that act as non-binding guidelines. Sri Lanka has ratified 43 conventions and 1 protocol.

Finally, the collective bargaining act, which requires agreement between the employee and employer, helps to protect the rights of the workers. This Act is always above the law and applies to all workers, including single mothers. Hence, this is also a very important act related to single mothers.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Design

An exploratory qualitative study design was used with an inductive approach of qualitative semi-structured interviews to enable complex descriptions from the participants' perspectives. It was concerned with past, present, and future problems faced by single mothers based on determining the nature of existing conditions, practices, and attitudes. This design was used because participants were able to express their own experiences as single mothers.

#### 3.2. Population

The target population in research is the aggregate of cases in which the researcher would like to make generalizations. For the purpose of this study, fifteen single mothers who are working in the areas of Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs were chosen. Selected women were approached and informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, measures taken to ensure confidentiality and that participation was voluntary. In addition, five individuals who are working for the rights of the single mothers in FTZ and two government representatives were interviewed to get broader knowledge about the practical issues faced by the single mothers, the support provided by the government departments, and the obstacles they face when seeking support from the state departments and the factories.

#### 3.3 Details of the participants

##### A. Single mothers

	Name & Age (pseudonym)	Details about Children	Marital status	Full time/part-time/manpower/ other	Divorce/ Separated/ Widow	Child living with caregiver/ with the mother
01	Chamila, 39 years old	One son- 9-year-old	Married	Full time as a tobacco cutter	Separated	
02	Dushani 47 years old	Daughter (25 years old) and a son 15 years of age	Married	Full time as a Machine operator	Separated	Daughter married / son is with the mother
03	Yogeshwari, 40 years of age	Two sons (25,22 years of ages)	Married	Part time jobs	Separated	Both lives with the mother
04	Padma, 38 of age	A Daughter, 8 years of age	Married	Looking after boarding houses	Separated	Both with the mother
05	Pushpa, 42 years of age	A daughter - 7 years of age	Married	Looking after boarding houses	Widowed	Child lives with the mother
06	Amali, 22 years of age	A son - 5 years of age	Legally Married - (They hid their real ages from the marriage registrar)	Looking after boarding houses	Separated	Child lives with the mother
07	Manori - 39 years of age	Daughter - 14 years of age and a son 4 years of age	Married	Full time work as a machine operator	Divorced	Children are with the mother
08	Shashika 33 years of age	Daughter - 12 years of ages	Married	Full time work as a machine operator	Separated	Child is taking-care of by the mother's friend
09	Malor	Daughter 11 years of age and a son 6 years of age	Married	Manpower worker	Separated	Children are with the mother
10	Saduni 22 years of age	Son 5 years of age and a daughter 1 years of age	They were married after the birth of their first child.	Full time as a Packer	Separated	Mother (with children) lives with the parents

11	Nayana 35 years of age	A daughter 13 years of age	Married	Full time as a machine operator	Separated	Child is with maternal grandparents
12	Kamala 42 years of age	Daughter 17 years of age (suffering with development issue -Hypothyroidism child) and a son 13 years of age	Married	Full time as a manpower worker	Separated	Children are taking care by maternal aunt
13	Dilanka 34 years of age	A daughter 8 years of age	Not married	Full time a machine operator	Separated	Child is taking care by maternal grandparents
14	Umali, 31 years of age	A son, 10 years of age	Legally married	Full time as a machine operator	Separated	Son is a Buddhist monk
15	Rani, 44 years of old	Daughter 26 years of age (from a first husband) and a son 4 years of old(from a second husband)	Married to the x' husband, not married to the second husband.	No proper job/ manpower worker	Separated	Daughter is married/ son is with the mother

## B. Multidisciplinary interviews

No	Name	Profession
01	Ayomi Wikremasekara	Project Manager - Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union
02	Swasthika Arulingam	A Lawyer
03	Wasantha Hewaweerage	A social worker, working for FTZ single mothers
04	Thuwaraha Chandrakumar	A social worker, working for garment workers
05	Thamara Kumari	Midwife - Awariwaththa
06	Daya Sunil	Gramasewaka- Awariwaththa
07	No name (request me to hide his name)	Working for the rights of the Garment workers

### 3.4. Sampling Procedure

Fifteen single mothers, four from Wathupiwala and eleven from Katunayake, were chosen for this study. Two of them were from the Tamil speaking community

at Katunayake. Potential participants were identified by the RED, Shramabhimani Kendraya, and Dabindu collectives, the prominent organisations working for the FTZ workers' rights for a longer period of time.

Seven individuals were selected after analysing their professional backgrounds, especially, the work they have done, their experience, and knowledge of single mothers in the FTZ. They were from a multidisciplinary working environment, including social activists, members of the trade union organizations, lawyers, members of the policy-making organizations and women's rights

activists. The two government representatives, a midwife and a Gramasevaka (village headman) were also selected based on their duties and services that they provide as government servants for single mothers who belong to the FTZ in Katunayake.

### 3.5. Data Collection Instrument

The first phase of the study was desk research to review the literature on FTZ / single mothers both in Sri Lanka and other countries.

The second phase of the study shifted to the collection of primary data during the months of May and June 2022. The study used semi-structured open-ended interviews to obtain the information from the

participants. The interview questions were developed by the researcher, considering the research outline given by the RED and the team. The topics covered in the interviews included life before being a single mother; life during and after being a single mother; life during the pandemic; difficulties and possibilities in present and future life; support from the family and society; about the children; and the issues related to mental distress and so on. The interviews had a conversational style, using some counselling techniques, to enable the interviewee to talk and reflect. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed and translated into English. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. Due to the fuel crisis and sudden travel restrictions caused by the economic and political crises, four phone interviews (out of fifteen) were held with single mothers. Furthermore, the phone interview method was used for the six members of the selected multidisciplinary group. Prior to the phone interview, a researcher made an appointment with the participants and explained the research objective and the process.

presented to protect the confidentiality of single mothers, and real names are used with the consent of multidisciplinary participants.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

The third phase of the study was to analyse and write-up the initial findings as the first draft of the final report. In order to obtain complex and rich details of the participants' diverse views, qualitative content analysis was chosen as the analytical method. Qualitative content analysis aims to capture the manifest and latent messages in the text, a process that involves multiple readings of the text and identifying units or sequences of meaning that are important to the study objective. Selected information was condensed further into codes, which were then classified and sub categorized based on manifest content similarities.

Several validating meetings were held during the research process from May to July with representatives from several organisations that work with free trade zones.

### **3.7. Ethical consideration**

A one-on-one interview procedure was used to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Before the participants gave their verbal consent, they were verbally informed by the researcher about the research, data collection procedure, and the voluntary participation, including their right to withdraw. The aforementioned organisations obtained consent and permission from the single mothers for the interview, and the participants volunteered. Pseudonyms are

## 4. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The interviews in this study aimed to explore the lives of single mothers in Sri Lanka's Katunayake and Wathupitiwala Free Trade Zones and how they overcome social, economic, and psychological barriers, as well as the support they have received during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents were aware of the content, and they openly expressed their life stories and experiences without concealing them. The results will be discussed in the Sri Lankan socio-economic and cultural context.

### 4.1. Challenges faced by single mothers in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs

Single mothers in the Katunayake and Wathupitiwala Free Trade Zones have reported that they and their children face many challenges as they are workers in the FTZ.

#### Emotional and behavioural challenges faced by single mothers

All the women were reported to have endured different kinds of abuses, both physical and mental before the separation. To end the violence, all women except for one had to leave/divorce their violent partners. In fact, many, if not most, women in abusive relationships eventually leave violent partners (Testan & Leonart, 2001). Saduni, a 22-year-old mother of two recalls her experience:

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This shows how a respondent is helpless in front of male power and the violence was multifaceted in nature, like physical and psychological violence. Like Saduni, 99% of respondents have experienced some form of violence in the patriarchal, male-dominated culture in Sri Lanka, as mentioned in the literature (Gunathilaka, 2008; Attanapola, 2008).

Further, as mentioned in the literature, trust is one of the main components of a healthy relationship and it is at the heart of all relationships. Eight respondents

mentioned that family members are the closest people, the ones that can inflict the deepest emotional wounds. Based on them, broken trust within a family can be devastating and hinder the functionality of the family unit. When respondents feel unsafe in their homes with their husbands, they trust their parents and go to them for safety. Sashika, 33, with a 12-year-old daughter, separated from her husband to live alone with her child in a boarding room. She states:

According to Sashika, even though she trusted her mother, the relationship between her and her mother was weak, which has landed Sashika in a lot of trouble. The trust she had in her mother was completely broken. Furthermore, based on Sashika, if they end up in such a situation with whom they are supposed to spend the rest of their lives with, then how can society ensure their safety outside the home and from others? This indicates how the male dominance in marital relationships where wives are supposed to obey their husbands and accept everything, as mentioned in the literature.

Furthermore, the suspicious nature of the husband and the lack of understanding between their spouses and respondents are decisive factors. It often leads to a lack of support from their husbands in the work they do. Eight respondents stated the husband's suspicious behaviour had a negative impact on their mental health. Seven out of fifteen women have severe mental distress. Their husbands were separated from them because they were (husbands) having extramarital affairs, but there were two cases where the women abandoned their partners because they could not tolerate the ongoing violence due to a family dispute. As mentioned in the literature, previous research has shown that when trust is not present, relationships suffer. Respondents stated that a complete lack of mistrust in their spouses would indicate a serious problem in their thinking pattern and would cause a family conflict, resulting in relationships breaking down or couples separating or divorcing.

Dilanka, 42, mother to a daughter (17) and a son (5), express her feelings after being separated from her

spouse and the way she tried to overcome the situation.

Yogeshwari, 22, with two sons (25 and 22), whose husband left her when her youngest child was in grade 2, expressed her feelings when facing crises in her life:

As mentioned in the literature, according to mental health practitioners, helplessness, loneliness, sadness, and sleep issues are some of the main feelings that arise due to separation. Some of the respondents indicated that they use sleep to overcome stress (as a defence mechanism to deal with stress), but three respondents stated that they do not have much time to get proper sleep because they have so many responsibilities to fulfil. Padma, 33 years old, who has a daughter (8), stated:

Like Padma, three mothers have indicated that they do not have proper sleep or proper rest. Hence, fear for their children is another mental pressure that is most commonly reported by FTZ single mothers. Furthermore, the separation of loved ones includes parents, spouses, children, friends, neighbours, the environment, etc. One of the main problems faced by single mothers in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs is the lack of additional support to care for their children while they are at work. Therefore, some women with parental support send their children to their mothers' or caregivers'. Three women expressed how they felt when they were separated from their children. Nayana, 35 years old expressed her feelings:

Kamala, 42 years old who lives away from her daughter (17) and son (13), expressed her feelings:

*"I feel very lonely. It's not like how it was when I was staying with my children. I have to go to work and come back alone and tired. Sometimes I cry thinking about my children at night when I'm trying to go to sleep. Even when I start eating something I wonder if my children have eaten anything too. What to do? There's no way I can do my job with my children close to me".*

Almost all the respondents stated that the children are the most precious jewels for them. They dream to see their children succeed. Sometimes, the social, economic, and cultural problems they face can create a sense of fear about their children's future. Being a single mother, facing many challenges and living in a FTZ environment may develop anticipation and fear. Their children undergo psychological distress too. Chamila expressed her fears about her daughter:

Further, Dilanka, 34 years old, not legally married and having an 8-year-old daughter stated:

Furthermore, all the respondents mentioned that they are constantly worried about their children's future. In such a situation, they hide their sufferings and lead an oppressive life. Another reason for the exacerbated mental pressure on single mothers in the FTZ is that the men around them are trying to take sexual advantage of them. Many women explained that many men approach them for marriage. Some men try to flirt with them while some make false promises which they never fulfil. Two women have fallen prey to such deceptive men and have faced the consequences.

Dialnka 34 years old, not legally married and having an 8-year-old daughter stated;

*"We were together for one month. After he got to know that I was conceived, he told me to abort my child. I didn't do that. I wanted to raise my daughter. I didn't know that he was married. After that, he insisted I do other things like going to nightclubs. I don't even know what that is. I didn't do anything wrong. If I want to do something wrong I can since my daughter is still very small but I do not. I have to take responsibility for my own problems. I always tell myself that I will not allow my child to have the same mindset as I do. I suffered a lot more with that man than at any other time in my life. I was surprised to think how inhuman some people can be."*

As explained in the literature, coping with the emotional effects of separation such as feelings about the former spouse (e.g., love, hate, bitterness, and failure) and more general feelings such as worry, sadness, relief and guilt are common for the FTZ single mothers who were interviewed. Many single mothers explicated that their day-to-day life behaviour has changed. Amali, 33-year-old, and mother to a four-year old son explained how she faces difficulties in day-to-day life:

Amali is going through a difficult time because of the imbalance in her mental status. Sleeping and eating issues, difficulty carrying out daily activities, lethargy, crying, and so on are signs of depression. As many scholars have shown in the literature, Amali also explained that, after separation and divorce, she has experienced lower psychological well-being, lower levels of happiness, and higher levels of depression. It was observed that twelve respondents were frustrated and seemed to have developed several cognitive and behavioural changes, as mentioned earlier. As a result, they have explained that they also easily get angry and vent their rage on their children.

All the women declared that their behaviour and thinking patterns changed after separation from their spouses. Long-term abuse changed the mothers' thought processes and perceptions towards society and men. They did not want to trust any men. Some women

mentioned that they could not tolerate their anger and guilt. Kamala stated:

*Umali, 31 years old, having a son (10), a Buddhist monk, expressed the change in her behaviour and feeling as follows:*

*"I have even fought with the factory supervisor. I get angry a lot. They have understood now that I shout only when I have a problem. I can bear any problems that come my way except that of being separated from my son. That's the only issue that makes me upset and angry. Neighbours know that I will scold them if they come to say anything. I don't bend my head to anyone because if we do so, we will not be able to raise it again. If someone says something, I will not stay quiet. Maybe it is because of the high knowledge I have about the society."*

The above quotes indicate how Kamala and Umali were empowered after facing many life challenges, especially after being rejected by their loved ones. But it does not mean that they are happy and mentally strong to face the life situation ahead. Yogeshwari explained the situation as follows;

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Like Yogeshwari, five respondents accepted the situation as a part of their life and hid their true from their colleagues and neighbours.

Moreover, twelve respondents pointed out that knowingly or unknowingly, single mothers face different kinds of harassment at the workplace, which can affect their ability to perform their duties and will negatively affect their mentality. Thwaraha, a social worker, stated the situation based on her working experiences:

According to her, all workers have to face such a dire situation in the workplace, which is a violation of their basic rights. Workers should have an achievable goal. Due to stress, they have changed their behaviours regardless of their health and well-being.

Finally, it is important to explore how those respondents overcome their psychological and physical needs. Regarding the overall results, respondents indicate that attending religious services is important when the individual is exposed to stressful life events. On the other hand, personal belief systems appear to

Dilanka stated:

*"I have strongly made up my mind. I want to be a monk but my daughter is too small. After all, I need to see her future. I want to make a path for her to have a better life. No matter which path I take in life, sadness follows and therefore, I don't like to be stuck in this life. I want to go and be a monk. I told my mother to care of my daughter and that I want to become a monk. She told me not to leave her because she is sick as well. She said that my daughter will be orphaned without her mother and father. I tell my daughter let's become monks. She likes Buddhism a lot. I'm going to be patient until she can make a decision".*

be more relevant to the reduction of psychological distress over time than religious attendance.

Padma further expressed:

As mentioned in the literature, the effects of organized religious practices may moderate the effects of life stress on mood through reappraisal of stressful events that facilitate religious practices such as believing that events happen for a reason, that events can lead to spiritual growth. This gives the community a consistent source of faith. However, respondents also stated that these practices helped alleviate some of the stress experienced by them. Based on psychology, hope has

been conceptualized as a character strength or virtue. Hope is considered to include agency thinking that involves having the confidence to move forward and finding the will to do so. However, almost all the single mothers have accepted their religion as a source of hope, mental freedom, and a protective factor in their lives.

#### **Child rearing challenges faced by single mothers**

One of the main problems faced by the respondents was taking care of the child alone without any external help. Balancing work and childcare over a long period of time is a main struggle faced by many single mothers in the FTZ. Many respondents, particularly those living in boarding houses with their children stated that the lack of outside support prevented them from working overtime and sending their children to extra classes or after-school extra-curricular activities. For example, Dushani explained the situation as follows:

She further explained that because the job is always tiring, she is unable to check the child's schoolwork regularly, making her feel guilty. Parents are primarily responsible for the educational and career development of their children, but the respondents explained they have unknowingly violated the rights of the children. The problem is, who is responsible for this? Twelve respondents stated that they are not privileged enough to cater to all their children's basic needs as well as supervise their academic performance. Based on child psychology, this kind of situation might negatively affect the children and, as a result, the children will be caused to withdraw in life.

To overcome such difficulties, some of the respondents get help from known people or daycare centres that are located in the area. Shashika recalls her situation:

According to her, she managed to get the help based on the "give and take" concept. The particular lady is

helping the mother because the mother is selling her food. So, this indicates that there are some mothers who are able to protect their children with the help of others.

But all the respondents stated that most mothers who are in FTZs keep the children in daycare centres as they do not have any external support to take care of them. Then the problem faced by the mothers is that they can get assistance from the daycare centres only the daytime. Furthermore, they stated that as a result, the mothers have no opportunity to work overtime and will have to survive with their basic salary. Based on the interviewees, the quality of the daycare centres is questionable. According to the midwife, most of the daycare centres in the Katunayake and Avariwatta areas are run by boarding room owners or neighbours and those centres are not registered with the government. Further, the caregivers do not have any training or qualifications to run the daycare centres. According to the respondents, the situation is the same in the other areas as well. The midwife stated:

The quality of the daycare centres is explained by Ayomi, a project manager:

Children should grow up in a safe and friendly environment. But many mothers have stated that they have no place to go. The most serious consequence of this is that, along with the existing economic problems as a single mother, she is unable to meet the needs of the children. As a result, they face numerous challenges, including psychological and psychological health issues, as previously stated. This condition severely affects the future well-being of the mother and children.

There is also the issue of children's health. Based on the midwife, the children will not get nutritional food at the daycare centres. She further stated that many children are malnourished in her area as the parents also do not have sufficient time for cooking or looking after their kids because of exhaustion after work and financial difficulties. According to the media and also

respondents, the program was also stopped by the government, and this has also affected the children's health. Hence, child health problems are the other major problem faced by those mothers. She further explained:

A midwife's statement was confirmed by a mother, Padma:

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Eating a balanced and nutritious diet is an essential part of a child's development. Children are constantly growing, and they need the right nutrients to maintain a healthy weight, recover quickly from illnesses, build strong bones and muscles, and maintain their energy levels. Therefore, proper nutrition for children is important as it sets a strong foundation for them to live a healthy and balanced life for the rest of their lives. Poor nutrition can lead to many health problems, but according to the respondents, the single mothers living in the boarding houses failed to provide nutritious foods for various reasons, as explained above.

Another issue identified by the respondents is the boarding house environment. A single-room boarding house in a crowded environment adversely affects a child's development. Five respondents explained that the children become vulnerable and their behaviour and attitudes are altered. It was also mentioned that some of the children in those crowded boarding houses were addicted to various forms of smoking and drug consumption. Hence, being a single mother and rearing a child in such an environment is a challenge for all mothers. Kanthi explained how her 4-year-old son learnt such negative behaviour from the living environment as follows:

A Grama Niladhari (local government administrative official) from Katunayake and Awaraiwattha also pointed out that the environment of the boarding houses is not suitable for the development of the children. Therefore, many single mothers struggle to protect their children. He explains: :

Therefore, it is clearly shown that there is no proper mechanism to protect, promote, and protect the rights of the single mothers in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala FTZs and as a result mothers have to endure all the hardships alone without any legal or social protection.

### **Economic challenges faced by single mothers**

Single mothers are usually forced to manage the responsibilities of both earning an income as well as raising their children. As a result, many mothers face economic hardship and that have been found to cause emotional distress. As mentioned earlier, the imbalance between the productive and unproductive work can create emotional distress in mothers which can hinder parents' ability to support, empathize with and adapt to their children. While conducting this research, many respondents described how economic problems are a major challenge as well as a contributing factor to their mental status. Hence, it is really important to discuss the economic situations of the single mothers in FTZ. Dilanka explained how she suffered without gaining financial support and how she managed to find a productive work by controlling her unproductive work. She stated:

It would be useful to discuss the mechanisms used by those mothers to overcome such difficulties. Some mothers have changed jobs due to the difficulty of taking care of their children alone. Some gave up full-time jobs and are doing part-time manpower jobs for daily wages and some are looking after boarding houses for a very little pay. Kanthi left her job because of her 4-year-old son. According to her, because of her child's behaviour, she is reluctant to send him to a day care center.

She further stated that the child's behaviour changed after she separated from her husband. Five out of fifteen respondents (single mothers) explained that separation from the father had changed their children's behaviour and that they found it difficult to balance the child's subsequent behaviour on their own. As a result, six respondents changed their full-time jobs, joined the manpower service, or stayed in boarding houses with little pay as boarding supervisors.

Finally, considering the aforementioned issues that single mothers face, the question is, who will bear responsibility for this? Swasthika, a lawyer explained:

She has indicated that as a mother who takes primary custody of her child, bearing the initial financial burden was a big challenge for her. Therefore, she kept the child at daycare while at work. The issue then arises as the well-being of the child as mentioned in the above section. According to the respondents, most daycare centres charge more than Rs.3000 per month (some reported charging Rs.7000) and boarding rent is more than Rs.6000 (which varies from place to place). Also, spending on food, medicine, and all other necessities

without doing productive work is a big challenge. Wasantha, a social worker gave a strong example about the situation.

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This is really a sad situation, and it shows how those single mothers are in an unfortunate state as they are unable to get even the most basic needs for themselves and their children.

Thuwaraha, a social worker described the way how single mothers were treated in their working places.

*“First are their economic issues, if they are the breadwinners of the family the responsibilities that they have to bear entirely for their family. Looking after their children, their education and children are very prone to get abused and sometimes they discontinue their education, malnutrition. Within the working area also they are harassed, like sexually harassed, economically harassed, and economically exploited. In the structure of the FTZ, there is no promotion as such, they have been given work, which is the only designated work that they have to do, so there is no career. Also, they don't have an opportunity to find a second way to generate their income. They are solely with the income from the factories. The other problem is their physical conditions, they are more prone to get back pains, the young girls and women working in the iron section. They used to get fertility issues, abortions, and miscarriages.”*

Fourteen respondents (single mothers) have stated that they felt vulnerable due to financial problems. To overcome this challenge, some mothers who have family support (parents or friends) get help from them and focus on earning money, hoping to provide a better future for their kids. Six of the respondents' children are raised by their grandparents or foster families. Some can argue that separation from both parents affects the child's mentality, while others may argue that they are protected and grow up in a better environment than the boarding houses in FTZ. This is very contradictory. Umali (31) explained that she ordained her 9-year-old son.

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She further said that after being separated from her son, she felt fewer responsibilities and was free to focus on her work and earn money. Like Umali, five respondents stated that they were separated from their children as well while living in boarding houses while working in the FTZ. Their children are also taken care of by their parents, siblings, and close friends. Being employed and able to support the children and one's family provides the psychological benefits of economic independence and increased self-esteem.

Moreover, eleven respondents pointed out that it is extremely difficult for a married woman to find a job, especially one with children. Therefore, they live in constant fear. This can also lead to the development of unnecessary stress, which will affect their efficiency and productivity. Five respondents stated that to overcome such situations, they were hiding their identity. For instance, they acted like unmarried women or pretended they were married. Nayana stated:

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, the current economic crisis has also had a great impact on the lives of single mothers. As a result, the cost of living has skyrocketed. This situation also badly affected the workers, especially the single mothers. Hence, it is very important to discuss the impact of the current economic crisis on single mothers. Swasthika, a lawyer and the 'President of the Commercial and Industrial Workers Union (CIWU)', explained the present situation as follows:

According to some respondents, the main factories are functioning without any problems, but the sub-

-factories are gradually closing down. Some of the main factories were given monthly increments for the workers as indicated follows:

	January 22	February 22	March 22	April 22
Basic salary	22700.00	22700.00	22700.00	27200.00
Sunday amount				
'Poya' day amount	1309.62	1746.15		
Attendance allowance 1	2000.00	2000.00	2000.00	2000.00
Attendance allowance 2	1500.00	1500.00	1500.00	1500.00
Attendance allowance 3	500.00	500.00	500.00	500.00
Three months advance bonus			2000.00	2000.00
Cost of living allowance temporary			49000.00	
Incentive 1				
Normal overtime amount	8767.88	9193.12	14556.38	4894.69
Double overtime amount	56.75			

After analysing the aforementioned paysheets, three respondents stated, several factories contributed to the workers receiving a temporary living allowance due to the economic crisis. According to one respondent, they had been getting the living allowance for three months. But the difficulty is that the cost of living is rising substantially, which affects single mothers who are dealing with a variety of challenges and cannot work full-time.

Even though the unions and other organizations are trying to find a solution to protect workers' rights and at least get compensation from the company, a lack of information regarding the closing of factories has been a problem. In such situations, mothers are at greater risk, especially those who live alone without any external support. Then the problem is how these single mothers will survive without any financial assistance. According to the Grama Sevaka, these mothers are not eligible for any form of government assistance, including financial assistance, as they are not permanent residents in the area. Based on the midwife, they do unethical jobs as sex workers to survive because of the financial crisis.

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prostitution are often arrested by the police and brought to court. Here, women who have been arrested on charges of prostitution are given bail or sent to jail with the aim of rehabilitating them. Due to the strong stigma associated with prostitution, not only women but also their children face the risk of stigmatization and social exclusion. This indicates that social withdrawal and social isolation were often associated with financial hardship. Therefore, the question is, 'Who will protect the children and their mothers?'

There is no information regarding the prevalence of single mothers in Sri Lanka, which indicates a scarcity, or at least invisibility, of this group. According to the midwife and Gramasevaka, the social welfare system in FTZ is not comparable with a high-quality coverage of health care. The midwife stated:

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It seems to be that the mothers who work as sex workers are at greater risk of losing a place to live. As prostitution is illegal in Sri Lanka, women involved in

This indicates that the social protection and health services, including mental health services, are poor in the area. In such a situation, single mothers alone have

to shoulder a complex and sometimes heavy responsibility.

### **Workplace harassment**

Although the respondents overcame some challenges with external support, it was mentioned that they constantly face harassment at the workplace. Ayomi, working with Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union described the workplace harassment that the mothers face.

Single mothers are very vulnerable in this situation. This shows how the power hierarchy violates women's rights. Another issue is that many mothers are afraid to report sexual harassment because they don't want to lose their jobs or be seen as troublemakers. Another reason is that disclosing their harassment can result in giving employers a chance to cut their wages or suddenly reduce their working hours. If that happens, it will affect their income.

As a result, it is clearly evident that there is no safety net mechanism in place for Free Trade Zone workers, and the authorities should focus on developing one to protect workers, including single mothers. She further explained that women remain silent without complaining about the harassment because, by disclosing their harassment, employers are able to cut their wages or suddenly reduce their working hours. She also stated that women, also face a lot of harassment from society and law enforcement agencies.

As explained by Swasthika, even though there are gaps in laws, many laws are on books to protect, promote, and safeguard women but they are not implemented properly. In particular, as she explained, socially marginalised women, including single mothers, constantly face various forms of harassment, and that situation exists in the FTZ as well. Hence, to protect the workers, C-190 needs to be ratified.

### **Cultural challenges faced by single mothers.**

Many workers come from rural areas and are coping with single motherhood without social and financial security. This could be extremely challenging in the free trade zone environment where different social norms exist. According to Ayomi, a project manager, many women have not been legally married, and their partners abandoned them with the kids.

Swasthika Arulingum, a human rights lawyer stated that there are no laws about anti-harassment in the workplace.

*"The problem is, we do not have anti-harassment laws in Sri Lanka, which is a reason why women have been asking to ratify C190. The ratification of this convention does not mean it will become a law in Sri Lanka. The women's trade unions have been pushing to pass anti-harassment laws but that hasn't come to be. There are no laws about harassment in the workplace.....The government anyway turns a blind eye to any weaker sections of society. The government and parliament by large are male-dominated so sexual harassment is not an issue for them. There was a statistical research stating that 90% of women travelling in public transport are sexually harassed. The concept of protecting women against harassment doesn't exist in the government and in society as a whole. Even in the court of law, the concept of abuse and harassment is not a familiar one. For example, women who are domestically abused are expected to show up at work regardless of what they go through on a daily basis. When a woman goes to complain to the police, the police look to mediate this matter, and then the woman will get beaten at home again. If the woman consults a lawyer and files for a domestic violence case, then there are various sexist comments made by the other party, whether she also has contributed to this case."*

In such situations, a women's social security is jeopardised. Consequently, these women's choices are likely to be limited by patriarchal norms in their social environment and the disadvantaged status of children of unmarried mothers may contribute to social and health risks. This was clearly explained by Dilanka, an unmarried mother:

As indicated in the literature, because of the social stigma attached to premarital sex, many unmarried pregnant women might abort the pregnancy or give the child up for adoption. But Dilanka respects motherhood, faces various kinds of social discrimination, gives birth to a child, and takes care of the child with love. By emphasising the emotional bond and biological connection with their child, Dilanka also argued that fulfilling her responsibility as a mother was more important than the possible shame and insecure future with their child. Thus, they are portrayed as the natural nurturers of their children, in line with prevailing ideas about motherhood and gender. Dilanka's story shows how she reflects and exercises her agency as a woman, 'the ability to set and pursue their own goals and interests', including respect for the well-being of others and social and moral norms.

As part of the violation of gender norms, respondents found themselves victims of dishonest and calculating men. In doing so, respondents acted according to a social environment in which men were portrayed as submissive, dependent, and helpless, whereas sexually-active single mothers were considered both promiscuous and immoral. Eight respondents (single mothers) have described themselves as morally upright women abandoned by a dishonest man after being seduced into sex. This may be because associating with prostitution risks ostracism from relatives and society. Rani, having 2 kids, a daughter and a son, described that the lack of knowledge about the society. She has involved with a man and later, due to the fear of her daughter's future, she left the man.

According to Rani, she lives with fear due to threats. Her answer to the same question was contradictory. She was confused and trying to hide the real facts. Anyway, she stated that whatever happens in her life, she's scared for her life and happiness because of their children's future. Including Rani, eight out of fifteen single mothers said that they suppress their physical needs, especially their sexual needs, because of the fear of society. Saduni expressed her feelings as follows:

Like Saduni, eleven respondents resisted re-marrying due to negative experiences with men and concern only for the well-being of their children. As a result, those respondents considered marrying a man other than the child's biological father could be detrimental to the child's future well-being. Even though they are separated from their spouse, they have mentioned that they do not have any idea about the legal procedures such as the methods of taking compensation and so on. Based on the researcher's observation, there are many non-governmental organisations working for workers' rights and gender-based violence, but very few organisations providing legal assistance for single mothers. Twelve out of fifteen respondents are experiencing financial difficulties without any support from their ex-spouses. This was emphasized by Thuwaraha, a social worker, as follows:

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As indicated in the literature, choosing life as a single mother can lead to isolation from family, community, and work. As mentioned above, these FTZ single mothers constantly face various forms of discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment and temptation, and being cornered so often at workplaces, boarding houses, as well as while travelling.

Further, Swasthika indicates that the state does not support single mothers by providing additional legal and social protection. For example, even normal maternity leave women have argued it's not enough, but for single mothers, it's needed to give them extra time. However, current legislation does not recognize single mothers or single parents as a unique category, nor does it provide them with additional time to care for their children or protect them from prejudice .

Finally, this section suggests that further studies are needed on several themes: how to develop a formal childcare system that can meet the needs of balancing single mothers' productive and unproductive work; the true situation of the children of FTZ single mothers; and how to identify existing laws and loopholes in the laws that are directly affecting the well-being of single mothers to present the identified recommendations to the government to take the necessary action for legal reforms.

### **Impact of the pandemic on single mothers**

As mentioned in the literature, the impact of COVID-19 on factories through government lockdowns has had an impact on single mothers by changing the nature of work, changing job functions, reducing income, temporary suspensions, changing the working condition and type of work to part-time or casual. There are also changes in health, disease control measures, and a reduced workforce and job losses. Wasantha, a social worker explained the situation as follows;

As Wasantha described, many respondents revealed that their employers cut their wages and paid them according to working hours. This adversely affected many single mothers as their financial reserves were

very low. Dushani and Shashika stated the situation as follow;

“..

This confirms that the lock-down caused by the pandemic has further increased their economy's vulnerability. The already precarious lives of single mothers were further jolted. Losing a job and dropping out of the labour force is particularly detrimental to single parents who are the sole breadwinners and primary providers of children in their homes. Many respondents mentioned that it was difficult to pay for a babysitter and find childcare during the COVID period, which affected finding a new job. Thuwara, a social worker stated:

Salary deductions from employees are not ethical, particularly in the post-COVID period. This also shows the power of the hierarchy. Furthermore, the condition of mothers infected with COVID has further worsened. In addition to economic hardship, they have constantly faced social marginalisation. In this regard, Dilanka said:

Like Dilanka, twelve respondents emphasized that they lived in fear of the virus. This led to parents' distress, increasing feelings of stress, uncertainty and depression related to finances and isolation. Therefore, it is vital that health and mental health services

recognise this distress, and understanding the impact of social and financial hardship on single parents is important for overcoming the post-COVID context.

Furthermore, six respondents were struggling with childcare issues, especially with the possibility of children being out of school and engaging in on-line education. The pandemic has highlighted that childcare is neither a women's issue nor a personal issue. It is an economic issue. Those mothers said that they were unable to return to work until they were assured that their children could safely return to childcare and educational arrangements. The childcare crisis caused by the pandemic may force mothers, especially socially isolated single mothers, to make difficult decisions that might lead to lower labour force participation and lower earnings for decades to come.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study reveals new evidence on the prevalence and associated factors of single motherhood in Katunayake and Wathupitiwala free trade zones. The primary intention and contribution of this study is to identify the actual living conditions, economic, social, and cultural challenges of single mothers in a socio-economic context. As scholars have reported, single mothers have faced several disadvantaged in many ways for decades, including lack of access to social safety nets, discrimination against productive labour, undervaluation of unproductive labour, limitations on freedom of association, and unequal wages. However, it was noted in this research that each related factor has a direct or indirect root in the cultural norms and values of Sri Lankan society.

- Because of power hierarchies, single mothers are constantly victimised at work and, even though legal remedies exist, they are not properly implemented for the prevention of harassment.
  - Single mothers who are working in the FTZ are hindered from taking up permanent jobs while taking care of children alone, so they are not economically strong.
  - The majority of single mothers who live alone with their children experience various types of behavioural and psychological suffering.
  - During the crises, the majority of the respondents did not get any aid from the government or social security schemes.
  - Single mothers need additional legal and social protection to care for their children and protect them from prejudice, but current legislation does not recognise them as a unique category.
  - The main factories are functioning without any problems, but sub-factories are closing down. Single mothers are at risk, as they are not eligible for government assistance and do unethical jobs as sex workers to survive.
  - Unions and other organizations are trying to protect workers' rights, but a lack of information is a problem.
  - According to the midwife many children are malnourished because their parents do not have time to prepare nutritious food for the kids or because of the financial difficulties.
- The program was stopped by the government, which has also affected the children's health badly.
  - The quality of childcare centres' is unclear, as most are managed by boarding room owners or neighbours and are not registered with the government. The majority of childcare centres are managed by unqualified carers. According to the midwife, the scenario would be the same in other places as well.
  - A single-room boarding house in a crowded environment adversely affects a child's development. The boarding house environment adversely affects a child's development, making them vulnerable and addicted to various forms of smoking and drug consumption. Being a single mother and raising a child in such an environment is a challenge for all mothers.
  - Mothers have changed jobs due to the difficulty of taking care of their children alone, such as giving up full-time jobs and doing part-time manpower jobs or looking after boarding houses for little pay.

Finally, single mothers living in FTZs face various challenges which have crucial implications for the comprehensive evaluation of assistance programmes aimed at them. Policy-makers should also consider the potential negative effects on child development.

### 5.1. Limitations and prospects for Future Research

There are some limitations of the study that have to be addressed at the end of this research. However, these limitations can also be seen as prospects for future researchers to expand and adjust the findings that presented.

Firstly, there is no statistics about the single mothers in FTZs, even with the government authorities or NGO's neither any prior research. Hence, statistics about single mothers' population could not be included in this research.

Secondly, current research data has been analysed without paying particular attention to factors such as ethnicity, age, religion etc. However, there is

strong data to contribute to research on the interdisciplinary aspects of research.

Thirdly, the present research does not highlight an in-depth analysis of the children of single mothers, the problems they face, and the lives they lead. Therefore, an in-depth study of the children of single mothers living primarily in the FTZs is necessary.

Fourthly, this study does not focus on the lives of single mothers who were living outside of the free trade zone environment, especially those mothers who had lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. Studying them can identify alternative strategies to improve the well-being of unemployed mothers. Therefore, further research on such communities would be fruitful.

## 6 .RECOMMENDATIONS

There is great importance and relevance in focusing further on the specific instances and socio-economic realities of single mothers living in the Free Trade Zones in Katuanayake and Wathupitiwala in the Gampaha district that have been revealed and emphasised in the current study.

### • **Recommendations to the State**

1. In consultation with women's organizations and Trade Unions to identify single mothers in the FTZs as a vulnerable category and formulate and implement a comprehensive financial and social safety net to address the severe economic and financial issues currently faced by them.
2. The State to give due recognition to the diversity of issues and challenges faced by single mothers and their children, by appointing a dedicated Task Force / multi-stakeholder forum to identify and implement a comprehensive programme, with the participation of the Department of Labour, Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment, Board of Investment (BOI), employers, apparel brands, women's organizations and Trade Unions.
3. The Board of Investment in consultation with the Ministry of Women's Affairs, women's organizations and Trade Unions, to provide quality daycare facilities, including excising ones within the Free Trade Zones.
4. In order to improve the psychological well-being of mothers who are facing social and economic pressures, mental health clinics to be opened in the FTZs through MOH with qualified counsellors.
5. State to take necessary steps to allocate resources and effectively implement the national policy on maternal and child health, which encompasses inter alia optimal care for children less than five years of age, through the provision of quality childcare services, maintaining optimal nutritional status (Sustainable Goal 4).
6. Ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Violence and Harassment 2019 (C-190) which ensures the right for everyone to work in an environment free from violence and harassment.

7. Ensure the registration of all migrant workers.

8. Ensure the government provides assistance for the single mothers in FTZs during emergency situations and to exercise their right to franchise.

### • **Recommendations to Employers and Global Brands**

9. Implement special programs and take all necessary steps to ensure that single mothers do not suffer social and economic discrimination within the workplace.
10. Provide standard day care facilities within or in close proximity to the workplace.
11. Regulating boarding houses standard and facilities conducive for child rearing.
12. Special attention by harassment/health committees, etc.
13. Incorporate specific measures in buyers code and ensure follow up.

### • **Recommendations to Civil Society and Donors**

14. Women's organizations and trade unions to proactively lobby the government and UN agencies to identify single mothers and their children in the FTZs who are facing the dire consequences of the current financial and economic crisis as a vulnerable category, and to allocate social security payments, nutritional packages, and include them in other on-going and future welfare schemes.
15. In terms of the mothers' socio-economic background, the noted incidence of harassment, especially in workplaces is prominent, and in order to reduce such violations, a strong commitment and attention is needed to lobby the Department of Labour, Ministry of Women's Affairs and other relevant authorities to implement existing laws, and ratification of ILO convention 190 on violence and harassment at work.
16. Civil society and donors to actively advocate that the state provide required support, by greater investment in sustainable structures, systems and related services to ensure safe and decent working and living conditions for single mothers, and standard

education and nutritional support for their children.

17. Women's organizations and trade unions to rigorously engage in awareness raising to change negative societal attitudes towards single mothers and avoid the stigma of being a single mother.
18. Pay greater attention to the children of single mothers who are in need of better education and nutritional support.
19. Provide reproductive health awareness and legal support services.

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APPENDIX 1 : QUESTIONS FOR THE  
MULTI-STAKE HOLDERS

These interviews were conducted with lawyers and social workers.

1. What are the general and legal issues faced by single mothers in FTZ?
2. What are the problems they faced during the pandemic and also in this current economic situation?
3. Are there laws and policies to protect the rights of single mothers, especially in free trade zones? What are they?
4. Do these laws see appropriate implementation and what are the challenges faced in implementation?
5. Most single mothers stay in boarding homes. What are the challenges brought about by the boarding home atmosphere?
6. Are there any unique problems faced by these women regarding their children? Do you see any way of overcoming these challenges? What are they?
7. Is there any assistance given by factories to help these women?
8. Are there any recommendations for actions factories must take to support these women?
9. The most common cases of free trade zones Single mothers seek legal help for what?
10. What are the most common barriers faced when seeking legal action?
11. Is there any support given by the government? Maybe along the lines of tax reductions or exceptions, etc.?
12. Any recommendations for the government to take in order to promote, protect, and safeguard the dignity of those women?

**Questions for Single Mothers**

N.B- Questions stated below are in no particular order and subject to context.

1. Give a brief introduction to yourself?
2. Explain your life before and after coming to the FTZ. (Where are you from originally?/What made you leave your home town and travel to FTZ? What did you come here and do? Do you work in a factory?/If not, what is your

occupation?/About your job/factory... and so on.)

3. What influences did your village have on you?
4. Explain your relationships, including your spouse, husband, and family life.
5. How did you feel about the separation/present feeling?(did you noticed any behaviour changes within you and your children; give an examples/ how do your overcome or manage such feeling and behaviour changes).
6. What problems were caused by the absence of a husband in your life and the absence of a father in your children's lives? How did you cope with this situation?
7. Describe the children (Has your child/children told you anything about getting bullied or cornered in school because he/she doesn't have a father?/Does your husband come to meet the children? If so, do any problems arise?
8. How did you spend your life during COVID? (government and other assistance/relationship with other people/financial difficulties/children's education)
9. Did you have any supportive figures to help you through these challenges? If so, who and how did they help you?
10. Usually, when a married woman without a husband is around, society tries to influence her with inappropriate requests. What are your experiences in that regard?
11. Explain about your financial situation, before and after separation/ how do your manage your financial issues?
12. What about your problems regarding your health? Do you have any health facilities? Are you able to reach a doctor when needed?(what about child issues)
13. As a young married woman whose husband has left, sometimes you may also have physical needs. How do you manage such feeling?
14. Is there any time when you enjoy yourself with your daughter? (How to spend the holidays?
15. Do the people in the factory help you when you need it?
16. What are your hopes for the future?

