



## Social dimension of food poverty of female-headed households after Covid-19 and economic crisis in Sri Lanka

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> Covid-19 economic crisis food poverty food quality female-headed households</p>	<p>The economic crisis in early 2022 in Sri Lanka has had a massive negative impact on the social and economic life of female-headed households in the country. In particular, food poverty affects many families. This study was conducted to investigate the food consumption patterns of female-headed households after the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Female headed households in five Divisional Secretariat Division of Ampara District were selected as the study sample based on purposive sampling techniques. Qualitative research methodology was used. In-depth interview and focused group discussion were used as primary data collection tools. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis method. The study found that after the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, there was a massive decline in food consumption, quality of food consumed and quantity of food consumed by female-headed households. Most female-headed households consume food only to satisfy hunger. Very small households have maintained the quality of food consumption, which has put them in debt. Traditional food consumption practices have changed and new food habits have emerged in certain families. The study suggests that the prevalence of food poverty among female-headed households should be addressed immediately and alternative programs should be designed to improve their condition.</p>

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic created a truly global crisis that had a significant impact on Sri Lanka's economy, pushing the country into recession. Subsequently, the political instability that emerged in Sri Lanka in 2019 has caused a severe decline in the country's economy to date. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2022), the trade deficit has increased due to import controls, lack of availability of foreign exchange in the market, and loss of tourism revenue, which has led to increased pressure on the country's exchange rate. Under these circumstances, households have been affected on several fronts, as prices have increased significantly, wage employment in services and industry is expected to contract, remittances have declined, and incomes from agriculture have been negatively affected by the ban on agrochemical fertilizers in 2021 (World Bank, 2022).

The impact on economic, educational, political, family, and other social institutions and their other elements has continued to have adverse effects (Care, 2020; IMF, 2020). In particular, the majority of families are at risk of experiencing unprecedented levels of hardship. This affects families across the wealth distribution, including those with breadwinners working in both the formal and informal economy (UNESCAP, 2022).

In particular, studies have shown that the economic crisis has severely affected the most vulnerable, excluded and disadvantaged families (Helvetas & Roiatti, 2021; Kabeer et al., 2021). This has led to national economic decline in communities and increased poverty rates. For example, the FAO report (2022) indicates that approximately 6.3 million people in Sri Lanka face moderate to severe food insecurity. According to the Central Bank report (2022), about 9 million people in Sri Lanka are trapped under this

poverty line after the economic crisis. The World Bank (2023) highlighted that the ongoing financial crisis in Sri Lanka could increase poverty from 13.1% in 2021 to 25.6% in 2023.

The economic crisis has both direct and indirect impacts on female-headed households in Sri Lanka (FAO, 2023). In particular, the national poverty rate before the economic crisis negatively affected female-headed households, the elderly and the migrant population (Department of Population and Statistics, 2022). Further studies indicate that Sri Lanka's economic decline has further increased national poverty and doubled the rural poverty rate among vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly (World Bank, 2022). In this regard, female-headed households have been given significant attention among the families affected by the crisis.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009), female-headed households are defined as those where the woman in the family is divorced, abandoned by her husband, separated, loses her husband, the husband does not share income in the family after marriage, and the husband goes abroad. 25% of households in Sri Lanka are headed by women (United Nations Women's Organization, 2022). It is therefore significant that the number of female-headed households in Sri Lanka's household population is 4:1. In particular, the previous wars have had a significant impact on the increase in the number of female-headed households in the country (Siwachandran, 2013). Divorce and natural disasters have also had an impact. Female-headed households are perceived as economically weaker households, where they have an easy tendency to enter the poverty line due to their unstable economic condition (UN Women, 2022). There are no specific plans, economic

and social development for female-headed families in the development policies of Sri Lanka (Jayathilaka, 2020).

The massive national economic setbacks that have occurred in Sri Lanka over the past three years have resulted in unemployment, rising commodity prices, and shortages of goods (FHSS, 2021). The report goes on to say that these factors have had a negative impact on people's food consumption. For example, 1.8 million people are highly vulnerable and have been pushed into persistent poverty following the Covid-19 crisis in Sri Lanka, including female-headed households (Thilagarathna, 2020). Poverty prevents a person from living a healthy life, maintaining a dignified quality of life and self-esteem (Sen, 2000). The impact of Covid-19 and economic crisis has affected the quality of life of female headed households in Sri Lanka. Such impacts have affected the daily needs and occupation of these families (WG, 2022). As a result, they are forced to bear a heavy economic burden and one in five families have been unable to meet their minimum basic food needs and children in one in three families have reduced the amount of food they consume daily (RNA Report, 2022).

Thus, female-headed households in Sri Lanka, who already have a poor social and economic background, are pushed into severe poverty due to the economic crisis and face more complex economic challenges. In general, studies focus more on the impact of social, economic and political crises on the general population in the country. However, female-headed families are in the most vulnerable socio-economic position in the society, such economic oppression has very undesirable effects on their families (Yoosefi et. al., 2020). Material consumption, education, health and basic needs of female-headed households are deeply affected. Therefore, this study was conducted with

the objective of determining the impact of the recent economic crisis in Sri Lanka on the food consumption of female-headed households.

## Method

Qualitative research method was mainly used in this study. Although the economic crisis has affected most of the female headed households in Sri Lanka, this study represents only one of the districts in Sri Lanka. The Ampara District of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka was selected for this study to determine the food consumption of female-headed households after the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Ampara district consists of 22 Divisional Secretariat divisions where all the three ethnic communities as Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims reside. (District Secretariat, 2022). According to the District Secretariat Report of Ampara District (2022), approximately there are about 26,129 female-headed households found in the district.

Out of these 22 Divisional Secretariat divisions, Ninthavur Divisional Secretariat was selected for this study where majority of Muslims live. Ninthavur Divisional Secretariat consists of 25 villages. There are about 2823 female-headed households found in different age category in these villages. Among these families, about 101 families with 03 children between the age of 30-50 female heads were identified. Within these, 80 female-headed households were selected on the basis of purposive sampling method.

The selected 80 female headed households were subjected to qualitative data collection. Based on that, in-depth interview and focus group discussion method were used as primary data collection techniques in this study. Six focus group discussions were conducted in which 11 female-headed households were included in one group and

14 female-headed households were included in in-depth interviews. Secondary data were obtained through reports, books, records, journal articles and reliable website sources.

Based on the research question, major themes of the study were identified. Two distinct themes emerged from the data. The main themes from the data of this study were quality and quantity of food consumed and deviation from regular eating routine. The Quality and Quantities of Food Consumed related variables were categorized and identified as sub-themes as follows: the first related to the food stand (quality) and the second related to the quantity of food, similarly to the analyses the deviation from regular eating routine analyzed through the eating times in the female-headed families were categorized separately. First, the collected data were familiarized by carefully reading the written transcripts of the interviews. Then the data were divided and categorized into similar groups according to the themes. Then the groups were reclassified according to the selected themes from which the results of this study were further refined.

## Results and Discussion

### *Income and expenditure on food consumption*

According to the United Nations Women's Organization (2022), female-headed households in Asian countries are engaged in informal economic activities for their livelihoods. They are identified as a vulnerable group as such activities are considered unstable and insecure (Jayathilaka and Vijayasinghe, 2020). The poverty line of Sri Lanka (2019) has doubled after Covid-19 as it has increased by 20% at present (Department of Statistics, 2022) and its further worsened after the economic crisis in 2022, which has negatively affected the female-headed families.

Based on the income and number of family members of the studied female-headed households, it can be observed that all the families are below the poverty line. The surveyed families have been engaged in different types of income generating activities for the last 04 years. However, most of the families were affected due to occupational disruptions and lost their income after the impact of economic crisis. These were presented in the following Table 1 and Table 2.

Occupation, income and ways of income generation in female-headed households before the economic crisis may not have had a massive negative impact on their household's consumption lifestyle to some extent. Prior to the economic crisis, all of the female-headed households surveyed were generating monthly income through various means, especially self-employment, government assistance, and non-government assistance. In particular, 48 families were engaged in various types of self-employments to earn monthly income for their family needs. Similarly, the average income of these female headed families is between Rs.30,000.00 - Rs.11,000.00 (Table-01 explains occupations and income details). Female headed families have been engaged in consumption for their family with such income.

Nevertheless, due to the continuous economic crisis for about 03 years, the increase in the price of goods, hoarding of goods and shortage of goods have caused massive impact on the income of female-headed families and their businesses.

The study found that the situation of obtaining stable income through business in most of the female-headed households (36) has changed after the crisis. Most of the female-headed households (36) did not have any business and depended on governmental and non-governmental organizations' assistance and relatives'

**Table 1. Occupation, Sources of income and income level of Female-Headed Households (Before the Covid-19 & economic crisis)**

Sources of income	Number of family members	Monthly income (Sri Lankan Rupees)		
		Average income	Highest income	Lowest income
Retail business, Government assistance	6	20,000.00	25,000.00	20,000.00
Poultry farming, Government assistance	8	30,000.00	40,000.00	30,000.00
Tailoring, Government assistance	4	12,500.00	15,000.00	12,500.00
Government and Non-governmental organizations assistances	8	15,000.00	20,000.00	15,000.00
Manufacture of snacks, Government assistance	7	15,000.00	20,000.00	15,000.00
Horticulture, Non-governmental organizations assistance	6	18,000.00	20,000.00	18,000.00
Government assistance	12	11,000.00	9,500.00	8,000.00
Non-governmental organizations assistances	20	15,000.00	12,500.00	10,000.00
Occasional occupations	10	12,000.00	12,500.00	10,000.00

(Source: Field data, 2022)

help. Another 14 female-headed households were found to have no permanent monthly income. Some of the others abandoned their professions after political crises. As a result, they have lost their income. Still others do not receive regular monthly allowances from the government. Even though job opportunities are low after the economic crisis, 15 female-headed families have done jobs based on the opportunities they get. As a result, they are unable to receive a regular monthly income.

Similarly, the number of people providing material and financial support to these families has also decreased, so the sources of income have also decreased after the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. As a result, about 14 female-headed households have become families with no regular income. Despite this, Table 2 shows the unexpected income received by these families during the month of this study. However, their income from such support has been affected because of the continuing economic crisis. This increases the cost of living of all female-headed households.

According to the study, the majority of female-headed households reported that lack of income, low income and high prices of goods had a massive negative impact on

their household's food consumption. Most of these families had multiple jobs before the economic crisis. At the same time, help from others was occasionally available. Since these incomes were found to be higher than the current income, consumption was also based on the income before the economic crisis in the country. Table 3 illustrates the monthly income and expenditure of female-headed households on food consumption along with the number of family members.

All female-headed households consumed three main meals per day based on their income prior to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. As most of the families have children, snacks were provided to them in addition to these three main meals. During this period, most of the women worked multiple jobs to support the family and were able to provide food for their family members with the income they earned. Although all female-headed households did not always maintain food quality, most of them reported that food quality was maintained to some extent.

However, the income of all female-headed households decreased after the economic crisis, which had a negative impact on their food consumption. Table 4 shows the average monthly income and

**Table 2. Occupation, Sources of income and Income level of Female-Headed Households (After the Covid-19 & economic crisis)**

Sources of income	Number of family members	Monthly income (Sri Lankan Rupees)		
		Average income	Highest income	Lowest income
Retail business, Government assistance	4	7,000.00	9,000.00	5,000.00
Poultry farming, Government assistance	5	8000	10,000.00	6,000.00
Tailoring, Government assistance	3	6000	8,000.00	4000.00
Government and Non-governmental organizations assistances	8	9000	10,000.00	8,000.00
Manufacture of snacks, Government assistance	5	9,500.00	11,000.00	8,000.00
Horticulture, Non-governmental organizations assistance	4	13,500.00	15,000.00	12,000.00
Government assistance	9	7,500.00	9,000.00	6,000.00
Non-governmental organizations assistances	2	27,500.00	35,000.00	20,000.00
Non-governmental organizations assistances	11	9,500.00	11,000.00	8,000.00
Occasional occupations	15	7,000.00	9,000.00	5,000.00
No occupation	14	5,250.00	6,500.00	4,000.00

(Source: Field data, 2022)

expenditure of female-headed households on food consumption and the number of family members after the economic crisis.

The table shows that monthly food expenditure exceeds income in female-headed households after the economic crisis. Such income losses have affected the food consumption of all female-headed households in several ways.

### ***Quality and quantities of food consumed***

This study revealed that most of the female-headed households experienced a reduction in the quantity and quality of food consumed by its members after the economic crisis. Most of the respondents emphasized that the food in some significant female-headed households was not of the same standard. They state that the high cost of food and the lack of income have made it a challenge to procure it, making it impossible to consider dinner as one of the important meals of the day.

In particular, breakfast was avoided as the most important of the three main

meals in most families. At the same time, most families knew that breakfast is very important and that it is necessary to make it nutritious. However, they mentioned that it has become very difficult to provide nutritious food in the morning for at least two days a week.

When Khadija (name changed), who paid more attention to the quality of the children's food, mentioned this:

*"Before the economic crisis, I used to give my two schoolchildren green gram, chickpea and leaf porridge for breakfast. However, since the prices of these have tripled and it is very difficult to buy them as before, I only provide such food, when possible, in a month... This month I mostly provided rice with sambol, sometimes rice with curry (when possible) ..."*

Similarly, some mothers mentioned that they provide only what they can afford and that the nutrition and quality of the food is largely not maintained. As one mother Sharmila (name changed) mentions:

*"Earlier I used to cook eggs and vegetables at home in the morning, it is relatively unhealthy to*

**Table 3. Income and Expenditure of Food Consumption of Female Headed Households (Before the Covid-19 & economic crisis)**

Average Monthly Income (Sri Lankan Rupees)	Monthly Income and Expenditure (Sri Lankan Rupees)		
	Number of Family members	Average monthly expenditure of food consumption	Expenditure of one person
20,000.00	05	10,000.00	2,000.00
30,000.00	04	12,000.00	3,000.00
12,500.00	05	8,000.00	1,600.00
15,000.00	04	9,000.00	2,250.00
15,000.00	04	8,000.00	2,000.00
18,000.00	03	5,000.00	1,667.00

(Source: Field Data, 2022)

**Table 4. Average monthly income and average monthly expenditure for food consumption of Female Headed Households (After the Covid-19 & economic crisis)**

Monthly income (Sri Lankan Rupees)	Monthly Expenditure (Sri Lankan Rupees)		
	Number of Families	Number of Family members	Average monthly expenditure of food consumption
0- 5000.00	14	6	8000.00
5001.00 - 10,000.00	50	4	12000.00
10,001.00 - 15,000.00	16	5	12000.00
15,001 - 20,000.00	0	0	0
20,001.00 - 25,000.00	0	0	0
25,001.00 - 30,000.00	2	3	15,000.00

(Source: Field data, 2022)

*buy bread and dosa for children from local shops. I was able to provide more for the children by cooking rather than buying from shops. However, due to the increase in the price of flour after the crisis in the country, it is not possible to cook more and provide nutrition as before. Because of this, the amount of food has to be reduced and the children have to be given less nutritious food ..."*

The above statements highlighted that the amount of food and nutrition provided to the family members is reduced after the economic crises in Sri Lanka. Food poverty is common among poor households in Sri Lanka. Moreover, studies show that food poverty is more prevalent among female-headed households (Bogus, 2015). In this context, the economic crisis has had a massive negative impact on the global food web. The impact has affected the food and

nutrition of billions of poor people in many societies around the world, affecting women and children (Swinner and Mc Dermott, 2020). This has also affected Sri Lanka's food supply, food prices and food availability. According to the report of the Department of Population and Statistics (2021), the increase in inflation in Sri Lanka indicates that food prices have increased. This study pointed out that the increase in food prices has directly affected the food consumption of female-headed households in Sri Lanka.

Similarly, Labodi and others (2020) explained that the impact of Covid-19 has increased hunger among the poor and caused a massive decline in nutrition and food quality. Furthermore, the report of FHHS (2020) also presented that the low-income capacity of families in Sri Lanka has become a barrier to their consumption after

the Covid-19. For example, the main meals served in the morning and evening have completely disappeared in some families and milk tea or tea served before breakfast is served as an alternative to breakfast. In some families, tea and biscuits are given to the children for breakfast or dinner after the economic crisis. As Farsana (name changed) explains with great concern:

*“Before the economic crisis, I used to give my children tea and biscuits or buns before breakfast. It was like this sometimes during school days too, but I used to offer breakfast (bread, string hoppers and pittu) to eat in school. Now the family situation is very bad, so the morning tea is sometimes served with biscuits or pancakes for breakfast. Nothing can offer more than this now...”*

In some families, even before the economic crisis, the leftover rice from the meal cooked during the day was served as dinner. However, curries were also served with rice to some extent in those times. Nowadays, however, there are fewer curries with rice for dinner, and omelets are usually eaten instead. According to some of these families, the children are only given food for dinner to satisfy their hunger, and that is all that can be considered now. They also mentioned that there is a bad economic situation where the quality of food cannot be taken into consideration.

In this situation, when Rifa (name changed) mentions about breakfast:

*“Due to the abandonment of the businesses that were continuously run in the past, we have to provide food for my children with the money we get now. So, in the morning, I usually gave my children the leftover rice that was cooked the night before. Sometimes children eat when they are hungry, sometimes they avoid eating. Nowadays, breakfast is not considered as an important thing in our house...”*

According to the respondents, the continuous increase in prices and the lack of economy in the consumption of goods have created situations in the family where they cannot pay attention to the quality of food and meals. A lack of food resources causes people to deviate from their usual eating habits (Downsent, 2010). Similarly, studies have shown that poor people are less likely to eat appropriate food and eat food that meets social expectations compared to others (Leather, 1996; Gordon et al., 2018; Swinnen et al., 2010). While another study explains this situation, the COVID-19 and the political situation have increased food prices and lack of income, thus affecting people's consumption (Rosella et al., 2020; O'Connell & Brannen, 2021). This can also be observed in the study area.

According to the female-headed families surveyed, only a few of them focus on the nutritional level of their children. These families provide nutritious food to their family members on certain days of the week. The continuous financial and material support from their close relatives has influenced the provision of food to the family members. When Raneeza (name changed) mentions about this:

*“With elderly parents and growing children at home, I knew it was important to provide nutritious food, but I could not provide it as often as I used to. However, my relatives are very concerned about my children and they help more than before. With their help, I am able to provide nutritious food for everyone only a few days a week...”*

However, when observed among the respondents of the study, most of the households do not provide food of satisfactory quality with adequate nutrition to their family members. In most families, fish and meat were the main meals for more than four days a week before the economic

crisis. Eggs were added only when they were not available. However, currently only two days of fish or meat or eggs can be added in a week. This situation has arisen in these families because the prices of fish, meat and eggs have tripled. When Bhameesa (name changed) explains about this:

*“Before the economic crisis, a kilo of chicken cost 750.00 rupees. We would buy a kilo and use it for two days. Now, at Rs. 1400.00 per kilo, we can buy only 500 grams of chicken. There are five members of the family. So, the main curry is enough for one day. In this situation, how can we buy main curry for four days a week? It is not affordable for us now and we do not have the capacity to buy it now...”*

According to these statements, it can be seen that the amount of nutrients in the daily food intake of the families has become low due to the high price. Several studies (Abate et al., 2020; Jayathilaka & Wijesinghe, 2020; CEPA, 2021) pointed out that female-headed families consume less nutritious food after the economic crisis. In particular, most female-headed families avoid purchasing high-priced foods such as meat, chicken, and fish and instead purchase low-priced items. Moreover, researches indicate that the consumption of such foods has a strong impact on the food quality of poor female-headed households (Bennett, & Daly, 2014; Kalansooriya, 2020).

Similarly, all respondents indicated that before the economic crisis, fruit and other nutritious foods were provided to children at least once a week in addition to the main meal. In particular, in some families, bananas, papayas and drinks were given daily. Similarly, chickpeas and yams were provided in the evenings, and fruit was purchased in large quantities during the fruit season to serve the children at home. Spending on family members is not considered a big problem because before the

economic crisis, the women in the family earned income through many businesses. However, today’s economic crisis makes it impossible for families to cook such nutritious meals at least two days a week. One mother, Nabeela (name changed), points this out:

*“We used to have some fruits (banana, papaw, and orange) in the house every day and the price did not affect us. Likewise, when I go to the hospital for clinic twice a month, I buy oranges and grapes for the children. Now I am not able to buy fruits like before. There is a high cost and shortage of goods now. As we have to meet all the needs of the family with the monthly income, now we have to make only the essential expenses. Such fruits are not bought and kept at home for the last six months. ...”*

Hewletts and Royary (2021) mentioned that 42% of the population consumed less quantity and poor quality of food according to Covid19. This situation is also observed in the study area. However, some families continue to serve such food to their family members for at least two days despite the high cost of the products. Due to this, the families have fallen into debt situations. Therefore, this research suggests that although some families paid great attention to the quality of food before the economic crisis, they are not able to maintain the quality of food continuously as before.

According to the definition of Smith (1995), scarcity exists when there is poverty, which leads to economic poverty; especially, there is no opportunity for employment or income. He further emphasized that this leads to other scarcities (deprivation), especially lack of nutrition and lack of housing. Thus, the food intake of all the female-headed households studied indicates that the nutritional status is low and the quantity of food is very low.

### ***Deviation from the regular eating routine***

In general, it is customary for female-headed households living in this study area to eat three meals: breakfast, lunch and dinner as the main meals (FOKUS, 2015). In particular, breakfast includes string hopper, pittu, and cereals based on the local custom. It was observed that rice, fish curry, meat and vegetables are consumed for lunch and rice and some of the curries are consumed for dinner. Being a coastal area, fish food has been consumed more in these families. Meanwhile, meats were also consumed in parallel. Even the consumption of staple foods by families living below the poverty line also depends on the culture of the region and follows the same food practices mentioned above.

Thus, it is important to observe how the food practices of these families have been affected after the economic crisis. The study shows that most of the households have significantly deviated from the food consumption practices that were followed before the crisis. The practice of eating three main meals has changed in most of the families studied. Breakfast consumption patterns have decreased in most female-headed households. Even though these families are facing difficult economic conditions, they have consumed breakfast in the family with the little income they received from their businesses. However, since the cost of preparing breakfast has increased after the economic crisis and they have not been able to continue their income-generating activities, most of the families consume lunch as their main meal. This is what Marina (name changed), a mother of three, says about this situation.

*“Nowadays, we pay a lot of money to buy everything from rice. This expenditure exceeds our income. As a result, we could not eat three meals generously as usual. We can only eat one*

*meal. At other times, we have to make do and eat with what we have. This is not enough for growing children. What can we do? There is nothing we can do...”*

At the same time, more families said they had reduced the amount of food they ate because the cost of the family lunch had doubled. Most families used to eat protein foods (fish, meat, eggs) as main curries and green vegetables as side curries before the economic crisis. However, many families have completely avoided cooking vegetables as a side dish because of the high price of vegetables, it costs at least 200.00 rupees to cook one vegetable, and the lack of income to spend on vegetables. However, it is seen that in some families these were consumed only once or twice a week. In some families, there is a custom of eating meat only on Fridays. They also report that they get some peace of mind because their children eat the notorious food at least one day a week.

In addition, some of these households used to eat a considerable amount of fish before the economic crisis. There is no shortage of main curries in their families because they used to buy large quantities of fish at low prices and store them for drying and processing. However, due to the high price of fish and the affected fisheries, they cannot afford to buy and store fish as before. As a result, the vegetables available in female-headed families are currently being consumed as the main source of food. Sameeha (name changed), a mother of two, explains:

*“Before, most of my relatives used to bring fish every day, so I used to cook a lot of fish and give it to my children. Since the recent economic crisis, the price of fish is high and the fishing industry has been affected. As a result, the availability of fish has decreased. Fish food cannot be included in the diet as before because of the high price of fish. As a result, we have to cook and eat only vegetables for many days...”*

In addition, families who used to eat meat as their main curry for more than three days a week have now switched to vegetables as their main curry. While Sabrina (name changed) mentions with great concern:

*“Before the economic problems, fish and meat were the main food. Now everything has changed. When the prices of meat and fish went up, we could not afford them. Vegetables are also expensive during the crisis. So I started a home garden. The vegetables from the garden are now the main curry in our family. Fried eggs are served with it for dinner...”*

However, some families used to eat more rice and curry in all three meals. However, the amount of food consumed in these families has decreased and the main meals have changed. In addition, this indicates that the food culture habits that were usually followed in female-headed families have changed.

The study revealed that the quality of food purchased by people in rural areas decreased by 29.4%, the amount of food consumed by 18.8% and the number of meals consumed per day by 8.4% due to financial constraints in the country after the economic crisis in Sri Lanka nationally, (Kalansooriya, 2021). Similarly, other food items such as milk and snacks have also been consumed before the economic crisis. Especially these families drink milk tea in the morning, some families drink plain tea, milk tea in the evening, fried food and so on (Jayathilaka & Wijesinghe, 2022; Kaushalya, 2022).

Since all the families have growing children, except for a few families, most of the families used to drink milk in the morning before the economic crisis. As most of the families had school going children, it was customary to go to school after drinking milk tea most of the time. In some families, it is also taken at home for breakfast. However, these habits have also changed in most of

the female-headed households after the economic crisis.

At present, the price of powdered milk has tripled and the shortage of powdered milk in the market has changed the habits of consuming powdered milk. Some families have the habit of drinking plain tea in the morning without adding powdered milk. Family members follow them. However, in some families, children go to school without eating or drinking anything in the morning because they do not like it. In such families, children go to school without drinking milk or tea and without eating breakfast.

However, in some notable families, children are in the habit of drinking packaged milk for breakfast in the morning. Since these families have small businesses at home, the children like to drink such packaged milk because it satisfies their hunger, so the families inevitably give it to the children. Some families give it to their children because it costs less than the cost of regular milk tea. They say that these conditions are unavoidable. As Salma (name changed), who runs a small shop, explains:

*“Milk powder is becoming more expensive. There is no powdered milk in the shops either. Many restaurants have also closed. It takes a lot of money to buy such food now. My two children ask for packets of milk for their morning tea and breakfast when they go to school. Since the cost of the milk package is not a problem, they continue to take it for breakfast. I provide them with them from my store. Nowadays, they drink milk packets before they go to school. It affects my business, but it is unavoidable...”*

Other studies show that mothers in low-income families manage their diets in different ways. In particular, they buy less expensive products that satisfy hunger and buy more of cheaper products. In some families, cheap snacks with tea are eaten for breakfast because breakfast is perceived to be

expensive and there is a lack of income for it (Bennett & Daly, 2014; O'Connell & Brannen, 2021; Lister, 2013). Chen (2000) argues that poverty leads to scarcity. The explanation of low income and low income leads to poverty indicates that unemployment and other income deprivation conditions in the households studied lead to the consumption of low and non-nutritious food. A very worried mother "Askiya" mentions this in general:

*"After the economic crisis in the country, no food can be bought. Breakfast has to be eaten very sparingly because of the high price. For a meal in the morning, we manage with tea and biscuits. Now I do not eat breakfast on most days. In some respectable families, the two-course meal has probably become one meal. Such practices are followed because of the family's low income and the need to meet the family's food needs..."*

As the 37-year-old mother explains:

*"Most days of the week, the children cannot be served breakfast. During these times, I manage the morning and lunch time by giving the children lunch around 11 o'clock. Since I have to solve the family's food problem with the money available, I use this method ...".*

Most of the women work in the informal sector and have easily lost their livelihoods after the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. This has seriously affected their economic security. According to a report by the United Nations Women's Organization (2021), taking care of their dependents has become a burden due to the severe economic decline. In addition, women's economic vulnerability creates negative influences and more challenges in their family structure (Chant, 2008; Kabear and others, 2021).

Walby (2015) explains the uniqueness of crisis in its unequal impact on society. As he mentions, a crisis is "an event that can cause great damage to the social system.

Thus, although economic crisis occurs at the macro level, studies at the micro level reveal that it has interrelated negative effects on social institutions (Haldane and May, 2011). Gramsci (1971) reveals that because of the crisis, its effect has a significant impact on the group level at the social level. According to him, the interpretation of a crisis is significant for its outcome because it affects how groups respond (Gramsci, 1971).

In this way, most of the women included in this study have such conditions and their economies have been affected. While there are very few social security programs focused on female-headed households and the existing programs are very weak in Sri Lanka (CARE, 2020), the economic crisis has had a severe impact on the usual food consumption of most female-headed households. The study reveals that the above factors have adversely affected the usual food practices of female-headed households after the economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

## Conclusion

Female-headed households have become poor households in Sri Lanka. The research on food consumption with increased poverty in female-headed households after the Covid-19 and economic crisis in Sri Lanka identified the decline in the quality and quantity of food consumed in all female-headed households. In particular, the pattern of consuming main meals in three times has changed in many households. In addition, the quality of food consumed has also been affected. Due to low income and non-income situations that have developed in many families, the habits of consuming three times main meals before economic crisis have changed. The condition has developed where most families consume only one meal as the main meal. In particular, the provision of morning and evening meals has been completely stopped in a significant

number of families. All families are in the most difficult situation where they consume non-nutritious and low-quality food with the intention of satisfying the hunger of family members without the intention of consuming nutritious food.

Although most families have knowledge about how to provide nutritious food for their children, they find it difficult to follow them at present. Before the economic crisis, in addition to the main meals, the family members used to provide supplementary meals to the children at noon and in the evening. However, most families have stopped this practice. However, a significant number of families continue to provide supplementary food to their children as much as possible. The consumption of only high-quality food and the limitation of the quantity of food for a few days in a week have led to a high level of indebtedness in some families. Traditional food practices in all families have been affected. New dietary practices have also emerged in some families. Therefore, the government and other non-governmental organizations should formulate and implement appropriate policies for the well-being of female-headed families.

## Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

## Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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