

## From 'Frying Pan to Fire': Unprecedented Challenges of COVID-19 on Blind People in Sri Lanka

T Suraweera#, S Thelijagoda, R Jayathilaka, S Bandara, S Hasintha and S Gunasekara

*SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka*

#theekshana.s@slit.lk

COVID-19 has shattered all walks of people's lives in most countries in diverse proportions. Sri Lanka being no exception, has experienced the spread of the deadly virus in early March 2020 and later in September in the same year. Since then, the Government has implemented a wide range of far-reaching health measures and several kinds of social restrictions with the view to combatting the spread of the disease. Among the badly challenged fractions of the population due to pandemic were the people with disabilities as well. It is known that the persons with visual impairments and blindness represent the majority of this vulnerable community. The impact of the pandemic on the blind people is mostly untouched. So, the purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges of COVID-19 experienced by the visually impaired people in the light of their social and economic life. A qualitative case study approach was adopted for data collection. Thirty-six blind persons representing diverse livelihood activities, selected through purposive sampling method were interviewed. The interview transcriptions were initially examined through word cloud and subjected to thematic analysis for examining changes to social and economic activities. Results highlight that owing to COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, blind people have been severally disturbed in several aspects, some of which are unique to this community. The key challenges identified are related to mobility and transportation, acquisition of daily needs, disturbed social interactions, income earning opportunities, and information and communication. The precautionary measures implemented on COVID-19 pandemic have brought about disturbances that are relatively more severe for the blind people on moving forward with their day-to-day life activities than for those without such malady. The decision makers dealing with pandemic situations should implement inclusive policies in terms of social, economic and health aspects of persons with visual impairment and blindness.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, challenges due to pandemic, visual impairment and blindness*