

Sri Lanka: How the ongoing economic crisis is affecting students' life and education system

Monday 6 June 2022, by [DISSANAYAKA Gayanga](#), [RIZKAYA Nuzla](#) (Date first published: 2 June 2022).

On a rainy night on May 24, 18-year-old Rizam comes home from an exhausting day of work. He had been assigned for the day to help out in getting a stock count of the goods at the local supermarket he works at. After dinner, he retreats to his room to catch up on the online A/L revision class he had missed for the day. His friend had sent him the recording.

Rizam is one struggling A/L commerce stream student coming from a lower-middle-class family in Matale. Hoping to sit for his Advanced Level examination this October, Rizam had taken up working to cover his own expenses, depriving him of any chance to attend school. Working a shift of 12 hours, all five weekdays at the local store, Rizam catches up with his studies during weekends by attending private tuition classes, which, the fee he pays, with his own hard-earned money.

Facing crisis

Amid the prevailing economic crisis in Sri Lanka affecting every single citizen, be it a toddler without milk to be fed up to the adults who have taken to the streets to protest against the rising cost of living, the situation has indefinitely made it tougher for students like Rizam.

Taking up working right after sitting for his O/L exam in 2018, Rizam recalls working a shift of eight hours at the local store due to child labour laws. The additional hours he works now after turning 18 last October has brought an increment in his monthly income which he explains, is split into 3.

1. Daily expenses, education
2. Savings for higher education or emergencies
3. A sum to his family

But Rizam reveals he now frequently lends money from his savings to help cover domestic expenses shouldered by his father with the rising cost of essential goods. His father, a bus driver, he says "takes up only 2 routes for the entire day due to the country's fuel crisis."

Rizam too, frequently walks home after work from Matale town to Ukuwela, a distance of 5km with the lack of public transport.

Almost 60% of students at his tuition class do not attend physical classes mainly because of high transport costs and the waste of time waiting for public transport, Rizam says. He can't help but be "thankful for Covid happening for it gave us an insight and training in online studying," he remarked.

Daily Mirror contacted university students all across the island to get a glimpse of their overlooked struggles. Frustration with exams being regularly postponed, delays in their graduation, burnouts

due to the looming uncertainty and the lack of assurance in employment after completing the hard-earned degree were common responses.

“We constantly worry whether things will get cancelled or postponed. We always stress over travelling and we now have to plan everything around whether or not there will be sufficient fuel,” one student said.

Undergraduate students are also finding it strenuous to engage in academic activities such as working on dissertations and theses due to paper shortages and high printing costs.

23-year-old *Vihanga, an undergraduate student, relates that she is ‘overwhelmed these days’ due to her academic life.

Vihanga, who also took up a diploma course a year ago, says lecturers from both the programs frequently reschedule sessions due to power cuts, often leading to classes in both the study programs clashing at the same time. Attending the sessions using two separate devices, Vihanga relates she can pay little to no attention to any of them and experiences very high stress levels working on assignments which the students are advised to work on, at the time of the lecture being conducted.

Ambitions hindered by inflation

Rizam aspires to join the Sri Lanka Navy. Practising martial arts from a volunteer teacher in his area he relates he had been working on his physique to join the Navy since he was 15.

Presently Rizam holds a 1st Dan degree black belt in mixed martial arts.

“Students are clueless with their studies and worst of all they have given up, on their grades and their future” a lecturer from Kelaniya University opined.

“Many students no longer engage during lessons and most of them log off the online lecture halfway mainly due to power cuts. “Lecturers themselves now find it extra strenuous to teach them,” she said.

Numbers.lk, an independent organization providing data on issues related to Sri Lanka, recently reported that foreign universities are now deferring Sri Lankan students due to the ‘ongoing disruptions’ in the country.

Current Sri Lankan students studying overseas are facing ‘significant problems paying for their living costs while they study because they cannot access the funds they need from home’. The foreign universities had a ‘responsibility to ensure that a minimal number of their students were in this position’ the report read. Students in Sri Lanka are now left in the lurch with stress on both ends.

Poverty, a bane for education

With two younger sisters aged 15 and 12, the probability of Rizam having to abandon his own dreams to lift his family’s economy is more than 70%,” says S. N. Rafideen, a government school Principal and teacher, experienced in working in rural areas for more than 25 years.

“Obviously his parents would want to give his sisters in marriage as early as possible”- a trend Rafideen confirms very much happening in rural areas.

“Usually these boys would apply and take up a job as a labourer in a Middle Eastern country and

send the money to restore houses and make arrangements to give their siblings in marriage,” Rafideen says.

A report of a study conducted by Oxfam International across the developing world reveals that a child from a poor family is seven times less likely to finish secondary school than a child from a rich family.

Backing this fact, a government teacher employed in Pitabeddara, Matara district narrated to Daily Mirror that students in her school do not attend school regularly and even when they do, most of them attend with an empty stomach while their parents have no means to provide them with books and other basic necessities when coming to school.

One parent's struggle

The writers of this article couldn't help noticing the manner Rizam being very vague when relating his struggles, choosing not to blame or complain while opting to be optimistic about the situation instead.

“This is how young people try hard to maintain their mindset and keep up their determination to reach their goals and fulfil their dreams,” Rafideen says adding that “parents and teachers have a big role in backing, motivating and in providing required resources when a child's life is at this phase”.

But students living in poverty often have fewer resources to complete studying or to engage in activities that help equip them for success.

Impoverished families often lack access to technical devices, high-speed internet, and other infrastructure that can aid a student other than a school.

Parents of these families often have to work longer hours or take up multiple jobs, resulting in their unavailability in time to motivate and assist their children.

K.W.P Mallika from Dambadeniya is a single mother engaged in manual labour work, with a daughter sitting for her O/L exam this year.

Having no stable place to live, Mallika recalls pawning her gold necklace to board her daughter in a rented room, so that the child could study in a stable environment.

The owners of the boarding house had forced the daughter into domestic work resulting in Mallika and her child having to move into a new place, way above her budget.

“There are days when we both go to sleep on empty stomach. My child can't study at all when there is a power cut,” she says.

Mallika is now focused to earn a little extra money and aspires to purchase a house of her own one day while supporting her daughter for her higher education.

It is high time the Sri Lankan government took responsibility for the country's present state and began addressing the situations of students like Rizam and parents like Mallika in the country.

“A leader of a country should be able to view the issues of a citizen, by stepping into the person's shoes. A leader then should decide if he/she is capable of handling the responsibility of an entire nation” says Pradeepan, a student who sat for his A/L's last February and is now awaiting his future

in the midst of the crisis.

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