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Social discrimination towards frontline healthcare workers in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background: The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a highly contagious, global pandemic. During the pandemic, Health Care Workers (HCWs) have been facing stigma. Discriminated attitudes may negatively impact quality of care and disease prevention.

Objective: The study was aimed to assess the level of social discrimination towards frontline HCWs in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods & Materials: A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out for three months using the network sampling method among adult residents who had lived at least 6 months in Sri Lanka during the pandemic. A researcher-developed, pre-tested, 10-item, five-point Likert scale statement based questionnaire was used to assess the overall discrimination level and it was distributed via an online platform (E-mail, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Viber). Excluding HCWs, 221 adults were selected for the study. The study was approved by the ERC at KIU. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and SPSS version 25 and Minitab version 18.

Results: Mean age of participants was 29.24 ± 7.32 years. The majority were males (54.8%), Sinhalese (97.7%), Buddhist (95.5%), employed (66.5%), and married (62%). Most participants (61.5%) were living in urban areas. Individuals at risk of getting COVID 19; adults > 60 years old – 56.4%, Child < 15 years old – 31.2%). Individuals having family members with chronic diseases; – 40.7%. Likert scale statement data that used to assess the overall discrimination level satisfied the validity requirement with a 95% confidence level (Cronbach's Alpha=0.757, KMO value = 0.761, Bartlett's Test $p < 0.001$). Based on the eigen analysis of the covariance matrix, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was carried out. According to PCA, lower (87.3%) and moderate (12.7%) level discrimination levels were observed towards HCWs.

Conclusion: Social discrimination towards frontline healthcare workers in Sri Lanka is low among the study sample during the COVID-19 pandemic.