

Invisible Economic Contribution of House Wives in Rural Sri Lanka

Saman Handaragama, Hiruni Rathnayake and *Pradeep Uluwaduge

Department of Social Sciences, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka,

*saman@sab.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

This study focused to analysis the invisible economic contribution of house wives in rural Sri Lanka. The rural community has undergone many changes due to women's invisible economic contribution for their families. On this basis, the objectives of this study were to analysis invisible economic contribution of house wives in rural Sri Lanka and to examine changing gender relations, female unemployment, their response to poverty conditions, socio-economic and cultural hindrance, the way women manage their triple role, women's economic support and housewives' satisfaction. The study found that, women are performing a significant role in family affairs. The changing positions of women from reproductive to productive activities have offered significant changes in rural areas. With regard to housewives, it is possible to state that the housewives' unemployment has brought significant disadvantages to their families as well as rural community. It has reduced their eye on economic well-being of the family. They have received lower status and power due to less economic strength. Different type of limitations exhibit the way they have been neglected from rural economy. Despite these limitations, those who are not economically active has received lower level of satisfaction. On the other hand men still continue to receive household leadership and ownership of assets, but women play an important role in rural development, whether they are employed or not.

Keywords: Gender, Women's Role, Rural Development, Family Economy

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of housewives into rural economy is a favorable debate in this century especially with the development discourses. Especially in developing countries, women are a huge portion of the total workforce, particularly in agricultural sector. Because of their important role, they constitute a substantial economic resource [1].

However, traditionally domestic duties are to be associated with women in all societies, despite the fact that, they are increasingly getting involved in non-domestic and wage earning activities. Although a significant number of wives have support to their husbands as breadwinners, there seem to be less support from husbands in sharing domestic chores. In these circumstances working women are pressured with the dual burden of wage work and domestic work [2]. Accordingly, this study attempts to analysis the how women combine these two functions effectively? and how far their economic contribution is important in economic activities?

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The overall objective of this study was to analysis invisible economic contribution of house wives in rural Sri Lanka. Apart from this, specific objective of the study included to examine changing gender relations, female unemployment, their response to poverty conditions, socio-economic and cultural hindrance, the way women manage their triple role, women's economic support and housewives' satisfaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

Thunkama Grama Niladhari (DN) Division was selected as the field setting for study. It is situated in the *Embilipitiya* Divisional Secretariat (DS) in the *Rathnapura* District. Firstly, researchers walked in the village and having a simple observation. It helped researchers to collect background information of the area and understand the women economic condition of the village.

Practically it is bit difficult to collect data from entire population to fulfill the objectives of the study. Therefore, seventy-five (75) families were selected under the method of stratified random sampling. This method was selected due to the essentiality of presenting diverse economic strata in the population. The sample consisted with thirty five (35) unpaid, twenty (20) wage workers, ten (10) female entrepreneurs and ten (10) employees. After

drawing the sample, seventy five (75) questionnaires were administrated to gather information. Among them ten (10) respondents were purposively selected for interviews. In addition to those primary data gathering methods, censuses published by the government, published books, research reports and journals were used as secondary data. Collected data were analyzed using SPSS, and presented through charts, graphs and tables.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Household Poverty

Thunkama, as a traditional agricultural village and poverty has brought significant impact on people’s lives. The poverty conditions ultimately draw a range of social problems creating institutional breakdowns. Therefore it is important to investigate about household poverty in the area because it provides a foundation to elaborate the present analysis.

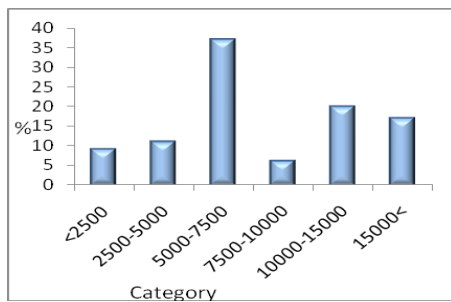


Fig 1: The Family Income of Housewives in Thunkama (Source: Field Survey 2010)

According to above Figure, there are 10% of families who belong to income category of less than Rs 2,500 per month. The highest proportion of the sample belonged to the income category of 5,000-7,500. 15% of the sample recorded to be with more than Rs 15,000 per month, but it was not enough to sustain their families due to high expenditure on cost of living, agricultural material, raw materials for their family businesses and expenditures for children’s affairs.

Through this figure, it is clearly depict that majority of households where housewives are not engaged in a job has lower family income. Majority of the sample lives with less than Rs. 10,000 per month. It is also 58%. On the other hand, although there is considerable portion of families where they have more than Rs. 15000 per month, also have middle with everyday consumption matters. The reason is their families are extended and number of family members has increased. Therefore, they have to spend lot on foods, sanitation and their needs. As well as that many families earn their primary income from agriculture. The cost on agricultural equipment and expenditure on agricultural services have created fewer saving. They just consume

and have to pay debts. On the other hand children, wives and elders of the family become dependent and again it creates financial difficulties.

The resource distribution into rural area is unfair. The village dwellers have less opportunity to obtain higher education, vocational training and scientific knowledge. It reduces their mobility and creates culture of poverty and the poverty cycle inside the village. When parents do not possess sufficient money to spend on children, the second generation also have subjected to the vulnerable position of serious poverty. In this case, the disadvantage of being a housewife who hasn’t income is obvious. This condition has led to the culture of poverty characterized by strong feeling of marginality and powerlessness. Those features are visible in *Thunkama* village leading to the institutional dysfunction too.

As interviews has suggested of this research, the economic inequality inside the village is highlighted. This point can be elaborate with Marx’s idea about conflict perspective. Specially, there are exploitations regarding cheaper labor and wages decline. As well as labializing and social stigma created stereotypes about poor’s and their children. All those factors carry on less social recognition, integrator and corporation of poor’s in the *Thunkama* village making less motivation towards personal development and personality growth. It reduces the social interactions.

Under this context, it is obvious that household poverty has drawn a large variety of problems. Especially when housewives do not engage in economically productive activities, they cannot remove from this condition. That is why women empowerment is needed to solve these problems in rural areas.

Female Unemployment

In developing countries women are a large part of labor force participation in agricultural sector. Comparing with developed countries it is clear that Sri Lanka has savior unemployment rate. In both urban and rural sector significantly the women unemployment has gradually increased [3]. It can be understood through Table -1

According to above table, it is clear that in each year the female unemployment in Sri Lanka is greater than men. This condition can be clearly observed in *Thunkama* village too. The sever unemployment among housewives was the significant factor. Because of several factors, women may limit to domestic affairs and mainly unemployed. The reasons behind that can be pointed out in fig.2

Table 1: Unemployment by Gender in Sri Lanka (1993-2011)

Year	Female (%)	Male (%)
1993	21.7	9.7
1995	18.7	9.0
1997	16.1	7.7
1999	13.0	6.7
2001	11.5	6.2
2003	12.3	6.0
2005	10.7	5.3
2007	9.0	4.3
2009	8.2	4.3
2010	7.5	3.5
2011	6.3	2.7

(Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2011)[4]

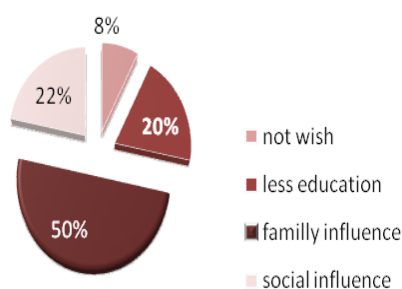


Fig 2: Reasons for Unemployment (Source: Field Survey 2010)

Above figure revealed that majority of wives are unemployed due to family influence. Especially household responsibilities, traditional attitudes and patriarchal dominant social structure led to this condition. The women as a home maker still have been recognized as free from income generating activities. Although they have got considerable education and wish to do a job, there is no chance for that.

Among unemployed housewives 60% had passed GCE (O/L) while 12% of them had passed GCE (A/L) examination. The 8% of unemployed housewives had been received vocational training especially regarding sawing, crafts and cookery. But unfortunately they are not allowed to engage in any kind of income generating activity, because family burden came first on their head and household responsibilities should be fulfill by themselves or with the support of other family members. But the external support is less for them hence it reduces their time for spending in an income generating activity.

On the other hand, it revealed that gender division of labor inside the families in *Thunkama* village. This condition has negatively effect on women. Because the female unemployment generates family problems, domestic abuses, dependence, deprivation, anxiety and disgust about family life. Those negative outcomes reduce the housewives’ social recognition and identity while decrease the social participation. All those factors negatively contribute the breakdown and institutional clash. The dysfunction of family due to internal conflicts are influential to their children and our society hence dysfunction of other institutions such as economy and education.

It states that dysfunction of economy and led to family conflict and seeks the support of law. Those incidents reduce children education and many families have children who do not possess school equipment to fulfill educational necessities successfully. It weakened the educational institutional functions.

Considering about all those factors it is clear that female especially housewives’ unemployment has created negative impacts on themselves, family and society. Only 10% of housewives benefited with material privileges and being well with necessary supports from their husbands and the rest are not privileged from less economic power.

Household Responsibilities

Consider about household responsibilities of housewives in *Thunkama*, mainly it focuses, how their responsibility towards children, family members including aging and wider society (fig.3).

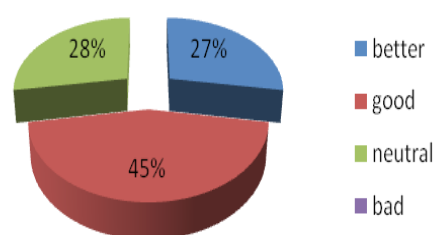


Fig 3: Housewives Relationship with Children (Source: Field Survey 2010)

With regarding the children, the mother children relationship in a family is important. Mother mainly contributes to the socialization of their offspring into their culture. As we assume, when mother is in the home with children makes positive strength of children’s socio-cultural and personality development. But considering about housewives in *Thunkama* although they were not

formally engage in a job always they are middle with every day economic activities in the farms, garden or in business firm. This condition has created somewhat distance between mother and child but it is not heavily important on their lives. Moreover as they living in an extended family and with kin, neighbors the necessary protection are received.

However, majority of the sample face savior economic hardships. Then the economy has become an important factor of their survival. Housewives also play a supportive role in family income generating activities hence give up the child consideration in some degrees. Especially childcare is very much considered in early childhood of children and when they are growing children allowed to be independent and manage their own duties themselves. However, those conditions have led to educational dysfunction of children resulting long-term impact on poverty conditions.

In one hand mother also economically depend on father, hence reduced the ability of middle with children day to day necessities. She hasn't sufficient economic power hence decision making of the family including about children are largely responsible by fathers. But emotionally children are very much close with mother and share household duties by female children while many male children go for income generating activities since teenage.

Regarding the housewives responsibility of elderly person in the family, it can be elaborated as below through the available data from field survey of *Thunkama*.

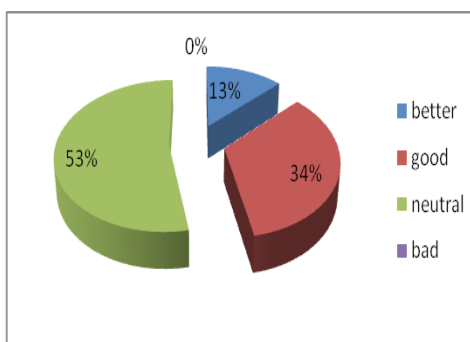


Fig 4: Housewives' Relationship with Elderly People

(Source: Field Survey 2010)

According to the fig.4, it is clear that women do specific tasks with regarding elderly care, since long period giving protection and emotional support to family members were internalized in to female roles by providing necessary medicine, foods they fulfill family needs. Importantly in *Thunkama* area there is fewer portions of housewives who fully dedicated for aging of the family.

The reason behind this is, those housewives also have middle with battle field in weaker economy. Hence, that kind of protection goes to children and housewives do other household affairs.

This nature becomes a kind of trend, because in rural areas elders are highly respected and protected through a family in the past societies. By in the current society those cultural values have been subjected to economic changes and the more life of rural dweller is getting change. So individualization, rationality, freedom, mobility like global aspects have influenced on rural life and hence the aging population has faced risk due to fading relations of housewives which link to household affairs. Under the changing socio-economic atmosphere, the traditional gender role cannot be accepted by women today. This is very much evident in *Thunkama*.

Women have always contributed in economic enhancement of their families. In agrarian and rural locations, women do their income producing works hence role conflict has then arisen due to the double burden and extension of role formation of women as housewives. This is obvious when they going to balance domestic work with income producing works [5]. Primarily women are responsible for personal, emotional and bodily needs of children, husband and other household members. Addition to those roles they primarily maintain cultural tradition in their families including preparing traditional foods, carrying out rituals and organizing family celebrating and festivals with religious activities [5]. All these features can be found in *Thunkama* village.

Economic Activities

In Sri Lanka, women engage in range of economic activities namely paddy-cultivation, domestic trade, sugarcane industry, animal husbandry, pottery, cotton industry were main while additionally they engage with cooking, crafts, women servants, prostitution, dancers and actresses [6]. According to these factors, it is difficult to define one or several economic roles women had to play. In ancient Sri Lankan social structure essentially it was a patriarchal dominant, therefore women had to maintain close relationships with men's economic activities which he as main economic provider of the family. But it is interesting to note that, the social organization in those periods did not favor the women subordination. Though women had to balance both domestic affairs and economic affairs, they had lot of freedom and dignity. However, with the gradual transformation of society from agrarian to economic their role was shaped by market demand. As a result, women entered to the new form of economic activities by now. It may be formal employment or informal income generating activity. Those changes have

influenced massively to the existed cultural recognitions regarding with marriage, family as well as public perception about women [7]. Therefore, the economic activities of *Thunkama* housewives also important to take into account so that it can be deeply analyze the women condition by today in rural areas.

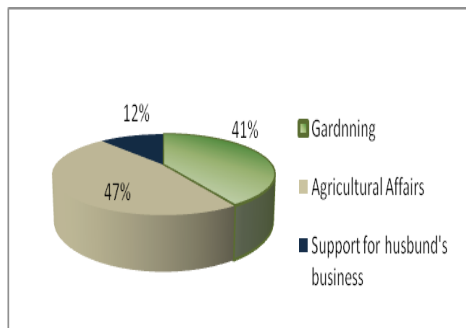


Fig 5: Housewives Economic Participation in *Thunkama* (Source: Field Survey 2010)

According to above fig.5 , the economic activities of the housewives mainly play a supportive role rather than an income generating for their own purposes. There is a holistic approach because housewives make effort for collecting family consumption.

In agricultural settings, they supported to their husbands, but mainly their labor is invisible cooking, seeding, harvesting, winnowing like many works are done by them. Important fact inhere is they are massively unpaid. Those activities were thought to be the duties of “good housewife”. In order to provide immediate family consumption they maintained home garden also. It saved family cost on additional goods while it balances the income and expenditure of the family by protecting sustainability of the family. They are good managers in household materials too.

In addition to those activities 12% of housewives supported to their husband’s business. Especially as they sustain through small-scale entrepreneurial activities, family labor provide additional power. In that case, housewives contribute largely for the success of the enterprises such as brick making, running boutique, small farming, sales, and tailors. Nevertheless, the vital point is the benefit and profits of those efforts in many times, goes to the husband or family as a collective consumption. Then the housewives were less advantaged through those activities directly.

By Comparing all these evidence it can be explained with Durkheim’s explanation regarding solidarity. In agrarian societies, the mechanical form of solidarity can be identified in the *Thunkama* village. All those economic activities are based on collective manner and the high division of labor, specialization, profit oriented are invisible. However, the women participation into economic activities is highly visible through their role is

invisible while it ensures the family sustainability.

4.5 Housewives Satisfaction

In *Thunkama*, the housewives were differently answered regarding their satisfaction as a housewife. Although most of women didn’t directly answer to the question of their satisfaction in interviews, observation provided evidence to their dissatisfaction. Many woman did not had a good satisfaction when explaining their overloaded house works and respect they received from husband and outside for her greater dedication for household and income generating activities. In addition through the administrated questionnaire, the following output regarding women satisfaction as a housewife could be found.

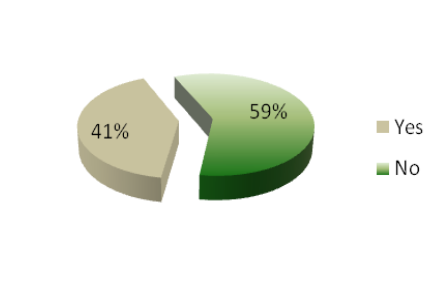


Fig 6: Housewives’ in *Thun kama* (Source: Field Survey 2010)

According to above fig. 6, 59% of housewives responded as unsatisfied housewives. Different kinds of reasons were there for that. Mainly overload of dual work of them has created disguised about family life. They have become mechanized. In one hand, they middle with children’s maters but not have enough economic and decision-making power. Then they become isolate within the family. Otherwise, though they wish to engage with income generating activities, the family didn’t allow for them especially the dominant patriarchy control the freedom of housewives. As in most cases, husbands are in outside of the family housewives have to balance family matters alone. In children education, marriage problems, day-to-day needs have to fulfill without or with less help from outside. This make additional psychological and physical burden on housewives.

The benefits of women work in domestic sphere have received on men and children. Due to women’s domestic labor, men can engage freely in economic activities and recreate for next working days having rest and leisure. In this way women indirectly contribute to the family satisfaction and they dedicate their own satisfaction. Women’s activities at home are not free of stress, either emotional or physical. Family life may provide women with gratification and fulfillment. That is why 41% of women are satisfied as housewives. Nevertheless, at the same time it is also a source of worry and guilty. The idea of home as a heaven and safe from exploitation is not the common experience of all housewives in *Thunkama*. It has led to violence, sexual coercion and a place where safety

is a matter of fact of housewives and children.

Because of internal conflicts within families' distress, disgust, anxiety, deprivation can be arisen. But in *Thunkama* Buddhist attitudes are fully accept, respected and traditional kinship and informal social controls are dominant those severe problems cannot be found. Instead of that the separation, neglect ion, divorces, assaulting, blaming can be found. All families have experience of any kind of simple or complex family problems. In a family case, the more influence and victims are directed towards women. But as marriage a bond it was ensured through tradition and protected marriage and family union, So that their offsprings can be legitimate. However the dissatisfaction as a wife or as a mother has drawn a short term and long term effects on their children's life. For an example weaker educational performance, drug addictions, mischievous behavior of the children and frustration and formlessness of children can be found.

5. CONCLUSION

This study focused to analysis the invisible economic contribution of house wives in rural Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, more than 76% populations are living in rural areas. Therefore, the central attention of policy planners was focused rural development in order to reach national economic and social objectives. In this case, women received vital consideration as active participants in rural development.

Consider about "Housewives in *Tunkama*", the family status of housewives who do not engage in an income generating activity is few and their unemployment has influence to the family well-being. This has impacted on children's socialization and culture of poverty is the significant factor. Nevertheless, although they were unemployed majority has taken considerably sound formal education. The family burden and household responsibilities are thought to be dominant. Their social participation is less while clear division of labor in households could be found. The family conflict and less satisfaction about family life are common among them.

Through a careful examine of housewives' day to day activities it is clear that they engage in range of activities. Cooking, washing cleaning and sweeping are common choruses among them. Although they have subjected to

the savoir burden, they do all those activities. Considering about their economic activities, they do not participate to profit oriented works. They act a dual role. Mainly they support to husband's economic activities. Special feature here is, housewives became unpaid family labors. This nature has created negatively affected on them. It reduces economic strength of women, freedom and decision making power in the family. This nature has negatively impact on their children as well as other family members including elders.

REFERENCES

- [1] Jayawardhana, H. M. "Women Agricultural Workers". In Sirima. Kiribamune (Ed.), *Reconciliation of Roles: Women Work and Family in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Navraug. 1992.
- [2] Garret, Stephanie. "Gender", London: Routledge. 1987.
- [3] Gunawardhana, Dilani. "Women in the Professions", In Sirima. Kiribamune (Ed.), *Reconciliation of Roles: Women Work and Family in Sri Lanka*, New Delhi: Navraug. 1992
- [4] Department of Census and Statistics. "Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey: Annual Report 2011", Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics. 2011.
- [5] Marecek, Jeanne. "Through American Eyes, Women, Work and Family life: Old Myths, New Realities". In Sirima. Kiribamune (Ed.), *Reconciliation of Roles: Women Work and Family in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Navraug. 1992.
- [6] Munasingha, Indrani. "Sri lankan Women in Antiquity". Dehiwala: Sridevi Printers. 2004
- [7] Uluwaduge. Pradeep (et.al). "Women's Economic Participation in Rural Development". In *International Journal of Education and Research*, Vol. 1, No. 8, Australia: Contemporary Research Center. 2013.