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## SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN FROM BROKEN FAMILIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY BASED IN LIYANAGEMULLA, KATANA DIVISIONAL SECRETARIAT

**Chathuranga K.G.<sup>1</sup>, Jayawardena, K. <sup>2</sup>, Manamudali, A. <sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Kelaniya

<sup>2&3</sup> Department of Social Work, School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development, Liyanegemulla, Seeduwa

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The study is focused on the Socio-economic problems of divorced women, women separated from their husbands, and widows, with a priority on those originating from dysfunctional families. The research was conducted at Seeduwa North Liyanagemulla Grama Niladhari Division within the Katana Divisional Secretariat, Gampaha. Information was obtained from ten participants selected by applying snowball sampling and analyzed using thematic analysis on their social and economic status. The findings show that women do not openly confess the absence of their husbands in public. Widows tend to be quite depressed, while childless women tend to be content with their fate. Some women are, however, distressed psychologically because their children remind them of their fathers. Initially, there were gossip and rumors, but they later became obsolete over time. Financially, the majority of the women work in the garment industry, and some take on overtime to make ends meet financially. However, those who are mothers struggle to earn enough to make ends meet. The study finds a stark need for being self-employed amongst these women, together with a likelihood of saving to act as financial security for future use by children. Entrepreneurship insurance in the family was also cited as required by the subjects. Overall, it is discovered in the research that widows lead melancholy lives when divorced and abandoned women without children indicate leading happier lives regardless of their lives as wives.*

**Keywords:** Socio-economic situation, Role of women, Broken families, Social work.

## Introduction

Broken families emerge due to the deterioration or dissolution of the traditional nuclear family structure, fundamentally transforming the social context of affected homes (Bengtson, 2001). These family disruptions take place following divorce, death, or abandonment by one of the parents, imposing a severe social and economic burden on the remaining members, particularly women who most likely absorb the primary caregiving and provision roles (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). According to the World Health Organization, a broken family refers to a home where a parent is absent due to divorce, separation, death, or abandonment, resulting in severe structural and functional issues among the remaining members of the family (Shinn, 1978).

The incidence of broken families globally has risen to epic proportions, with figures indicating widespread family break-up across various cultures. Within the United States alone, there were approximately 673,989 divorces in 2024, and figures from the European Union show that 11% of all households are single-mother-headed due to various forms of family breakdown (Weinraub & Kaufman, 2019). Further global estimates suggest that there are approximately 100 million single mothers worldwide, with single-mother households being most prevalent for women aged between 30-35 years (Folbre, 2019). In Asia, the United Nations reported 543,000 single-mother homes in 2021, an indicator of geographical significance of this social phenomenon.

Sri Lanka provides a very interesting example to study broken families because divorce rates have increased exponentially throughout the past decades. According to United Nations data in 2007, almost 60% of Sri Lankan marriages were collapsing as a result of divorce, a revolutionary shift in historical family stability patterns. The Sri Lankan Census and Statistics Department found that single-parent families increased from 209,839 before 2001 to 501,460 from 2001 to 2012, with a 139% increase in this period. Current statistics indicate that 23%

of Sri Lankan families are headed by women, 64.3% of whom consist of separated or widowed women (Schenk & Hasbullah, 2022).

Historical statistics based on the census also reveal more about the trajectory of family dissolution in Sri Lanka. Rates of widowhood increased from 8% to 8.7% from 1981 to 2011, divorce from 0.1% to 0.3%, and cases of informal separation increased to 0.9% of the population. The 2011 census also indicated that 58 out of every 10,000 men and 88 out of every 10,000 women in Sri Lanka were in either formal or informal separation unions (Withers, 2019).

Despite extensive research that has investigated the effect of broken homes on the developing nature of children, school achievement, and psychological health, there is still a lacuna in knowledge within the literature with regard to the holistic problems experienced by women who live in broken homes (Felisilda & Torreon, 2020; Hussain & Hussain, 2015). Women from broken families face complex combinations of economic hardship, stereotyping, psychological issues, and pressure on their roles as they become part of single motherhood while contributing domestic stability (Jensen, 2021).

Socio-economic problems confronted by women belonging to disunited families warrant comprehensive exploration, particularly in the Sri Lankan context, where cultural norms and conventional gender roles introduce variables. Understanding such problems is crucial while developing targeted social work interventions, policy frameworks, and support networks in the community that can effectively address the complex problems of the vulnerable population. This study aims to investigate the specific socio-economic issues of women from broken families in the Liyanagemulla region of Katana Divisional Secretariat, gaining qualitative knowledge that can be used to inform theoretical knowledge as well as intervention.

## **Literature review**

The broken family literature tracks a complex landscape of adversity that disproportionately falls on women in terms of economic vulnerability, social stigmatization, and emotional anguish. Across-the-board evidence demonstrates that family breakdown disproportionately affects the workforce and has a cumulative effect that runs far beyond the immediate family to influence community and intergenerational levels (Van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020).

### **Economic Challenges and Employment Patterns**

Economic vulnerability is perhaps the biggest challenge faced by women from broken families. In 1989, McLanahan and Booth developed an initial understanding of the economic risk of single mothers, documenting how loss of a partner's earnings results in immediate financial stress while further limiting work options through increased caregiving responsibilities. Recent research by Bezin et al. (2022) expanded this research, demonstrating that economic disadvantage in broken families also is likely to persist across generations to create poverty cycles that are difficult to break.

Female employment patterns among disintegrating families reflect deep constraints and mechanisms. Folbre (2019) found that women-headed households across the globe are more inclined to be working informally and multiple jobholding as coping mechanisms for survival within the family. The finding is in accordance with subregional studies in South Asia, whereby women from dissolving families tend to take up garment factory employment, home service work, and small entrepreneurship for maintenance within the family (Geovani et al., 2021).

### **Social Stigmatization and Community Integration**

Social problems of women belonging to dysfunctional families are common across cultures. Sorek (2019) referred to social isolation, judgment at the

community level, and low social capital as key forces behind the quality of life of mothers and children of divorced families. This stigmatization by society also offers obstacles in economic growth and mental well-being, as women must endure community disapproval and handle domestic work.

Cultural contexts are also highly significant within the experience of social stigmatization. Within South Asian contexts, Duramy and Gal (2020) showed how culturally situated traditional family relationships and community expectations work to create further challenges for women who fall outside normative family arrangements. Such cultural contexts are particularly relevant in Sri Lankan contexts where extended family systems and community regulation have historically existed as sources of support yet also as a source of judgment and pressure.

### **Psychological Well-being and Coping Mechanisms**

The psychological impacts of family breakdown among women have been the focus of increased scholarly research. Madow and Hardy (1947) originally explained the psychological impacts of family breakdown, while current studies have constructed an understanding of coping and resilience factors. Hussain and Hussain (2015) noted extreme differences in psychological adjustment between women with intact and fragmented families, with particular issues related to depression, anxiety, and social adjustment.

Coping strategies employed by women in dysfunctional families demonstrate vast variability based on available resources and support networks. Lanozo et al. (2021) identified work engagement, social bonding, and future planning as salient coping strategies that contribute to psychological resilience. The interventions generated from such findings suggest that economic empowerment and social bonding interventions can confer dual advantages for functional needs and mental health.

## **Gaps in Current Literature**

Despite extensive research on broken families, there exist some gaps in studies on contemporary literature. First, most research stresses children's outcomes rather than examining women living in such families' experiences. Second, there have been limited studies examining the interconnection of economic and social problems encountered by women in broken families in South Asian contexts. Third, there are limited studies examining the effectiveness of community-based interventions focusing on women in broken families.

Apart from that, literature mixes various types of family dissolution (abandonment, widowhood, divorce) into a general category, which may yield varying profiles of challenges requiring different intervention strategies. This research bridges these gaps in that it is solely focused on the women's experiences while taking into account social and economic factors of their challenges in one specific cultural and spatial context.

## **Methodology**

**Research Approach and Rationale** This study employed a qualitative method to examine the socioeconomic issues of women who are from broken families. The reason for using the qualitative method is for a variety of striking reasons that suit the objectives of the study and the nature of the phenomenon to be studied.

Firstly, the dynamic and multifaceted nature of socioeconomic issues requires a more detailed and in-depth understanding that is not possible with quantitative methods. A qualitative study can facilitate the examination of complex experiences, feelings, and coping mechanisms arising from family disintegration. Second, the delicacy of the issue requires that research be conducted in a manner that can establish trust and credibility with participants, such that they can freely narrate individual experiences. Thirdly, the limited literature that has been conducted on women's experiences in dissolved families necessitates exploratory

research that is capable of generating new ideas and theoretical information rather than trying out predetermined hypotheses.

The small sample (ten participants) also lent itself to the choice of qualitative methodology since qualitative research is especially well suited to providing in-depth contextual understanding from small samples rather than statistical generalizability. The approach enables researchers to tap into the richness and depth of individual experience with the observation of common patterns and themes across participants.

### **Participant Selection and Sampling**

Participants were recruited by snowball sampling, a purposive sampling method well-suited to reaching hard-to-reach populations. Initial contact was made through local leaders in the Liyanagemulla Grama Niladhari Division, who recognised women who conformed to the study requirements. Referrals by initial participants were used for subsequent participants, thus constituting a network-based sampling strategy.

### **Participant Profile**

The study was conducted with ten women belonging to the Seeduwa North Liyanagemulla Grama Niladhari Division, Katana Divisional Secretariat, Gampaha District. The subjects had all experienced family breakdown through the death of a spouse, divorce, or abandonment. The population composition was:

Age Range: 28-52 years (mean age: 38.4 years)

- Type of Family Breakdown: 4 widows, 3 divorced females, 3 abandoned/separated females
- Children: 7 subjects had dependent children (1-4 children per subject), 3 childless

- Work Status: 7 working in garment manufacturing factories, 3 own businesses
- Level of Education: 6 completed secondary school, 4 completed primary school only
- Time Since Family Dissolution: 2-12 years (mean: 6.2 years)
- Residential Situation: 6 single dwellers, 4 residing with extended family

### **Process of Data Collection**

Primary data were gathered using individual in-depth interviews over a period of three months. The interviews ranged about 60-90 minutes and were in Sinhala, the local language of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured to facilitate the exploration of a priori themes and yet be flexible enough to allow emerging issues. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed word-for-word.

### **Data Analysis**

The information collected were analyzed using the thematic analysis method in an effort to fulfill the research objectives. The research categorized the results into two significant themes: social and economic challenges faced by women in dysfunctional families.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Theoretical and Practical Context of Results**

The research results provide useful information on the multi-dimensionality of problems encountered by women who are from dysfunctional families, contributing to theoretical insight and the construction of practical intervention. Results are consistent with established theoretical frameworks but also reveal context-dependent fine points that supplement current knowledge.

Theoretically, the findings confirm Social Ecological Systems Theory, which stresses interrelatedness between individual, family, community, and societal

factors in shaping human experience. The study shows how family breakdown creates ripple effects across ecological levels, affecting the economic opportunities, social support, and mental health of women. The identified economic issues of job insecurity, insufficient earnings, and poor prospects for advancement reflect structural inequalities typical of patriarchal societies that disproportionately affect women.

The social behaviors of stigmatization observed follow Goffman's stigma theory, illustrating how women from dysfunctional families cope with "spoiled identity" among friends. Participants' ways of concealing (e.g., not revealing marital status in the workplace) verify the psychological burden of coping with stigmatized identity and social performance. This finding contributes to the body of work by shedding light on the workplace as an important site for stigma management among women from dysfunctional families.

### **Comparison with Previous Research**

The study findings show convergence and divergence with prior research. Consistent with the pioneering study by McLanahan and Booth (1989), economic vulnerability was a key concern, with the participants struggling to finance basic needs despite having employment. More diversity in coping strategies, particularly the emphasis on self-employment as a way of gaining economic independence, is the contribution of this current study that surpasses prior research that focused primarily on wage employment.

The patterns of psychological distress described, specifically in widows, are consistent with Sorek's (2019) results in relation to the quality of life effects of family dissolution. Nonetheless, the present research demonstrates significant differences between various forms of family breakdown, with widows exhibiting higher depression rates than divorced or abandoned women. This evidence indicates that the context of family breakdown strongly affects outcomes in psychological adjustment.

Contrary to some Western studies indicating increased social support seeking in women with broken families, the current study found significant concealment and withdrawal behaviors. This difference most likely represents culturally specific to South Asian settings where family honor and social reputation impose specific burdens on women experiencing family disintegration.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The conclusions contribute to theoretical theory-building in three respects. First, they suggest a need for a culturally competent understanding of women's experiences of family breakdown since theories borrowed from the West may not fully explain the dilemmas facing women in collectivist societies. Second, the study reaffirms work type (factory working versus self-employment) as a predictor of economic outcomes for broken-family women.

The research also contributes to feminist economic theory by illustrating how the common gender roles intersect with the breakdown of the family to produce particular dangers. The finding that women with children are more economically disadvantaged than childless women is a result of the economic implications of gendering caring work.

### **Policy and Practical Implications**

The results of the research hold significant implications for policy and social work practice. The economic problems uncovered suggest that there is a need for special employment programs tailored to the particular constraints of women in broken families, including flexible working arrangements and childcare support. The success of self-employed participants suggests the potential for microenterprise development programs as a source of genuine opportunity for economic self-reliance.

The social stigmatization findings highlight the importance of community education and awareness programs to reduce discrimination against women from

broken families. Workplace policies addressing marital status discrimination could help protect vulnerable women from employment-related stigma.

From a practice standpoint in social work, the findings show an integration of economic and social problems based on comprehensive intervention approaches. Support groups could provide peer networks to reduce social isolation, and economic empowerment interventions could be supplemented with financial literacy interventions.

### **Contribution to the Field**

This study covers an essential gap in the literature by focusing solely on women's lives and not on children's outcomes for fractured families. The cultural specificity of the findings assists in gaining more nuanced understandings of how the break-up of the family affects South Asian women. The observation of variation between widows, divorced women, and abandoned women provides useful lessons for devising targeted interventions.

The study also has methodological contributions by demonstrating the value of community-based qualitative research in learning about sensitive social issues. Snowball sampling was successful in gaining access to a hidden population while creating trust within the community.

### **Study Limitations**

Several limitations must be acknowledged in projecting these findings. The small sample size (n=10) limits generalizability beyond the research context at hand, although consistent with qualitative research aims of depth rather than breadth. Geographic specificity to one Grama Niladhari Division may not capture women's experiences of ruptured families elsewhere in Sri Lanka or other cultural contexts.

Cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of the current experience but is not able to capture the dynamic nature of adjustment over a period following family

break-up. Longitudinal studies would provide wonderful information on how difficulty and coping evolve with time.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Results of the analysis of data obtained show critical insights into social and economic issues suffered by women within dysfunctional families. The study establishes that such women are usually accorded high levels of initial support by their direct families but that the support might eventually diminish once their plight has been normalized. Widowed women, in particular, experience tremendous psychological distress because loss of a single breadwinner takes a toll on their family's stability and prospects for the future. The study also highlights that women in broken families are likely to be threatened by numerous mental disorders because they remember past hardship and good times with contrast. The majority of women have indicated that staying occupied with work or social life helps them overcome such psychological problems.

Economically, the majority of women in dysfunctional families are employed in the industrial sector, with the majority working in factories and other labor-oriented jobs. However, research sums it up that the dependent childbearing women struggle to finance their families' needs through their jobs and resort to overtime or other sources of income. Many women mention the necessity of becoming self-employed as one means of achieving financial security. Moreover, the research discovers that women are actively participating in various modes of financial savings, for example, investing in gold, land, and other assets as a source of future security.

Based on the findings, the following suggestions can be given to government and non-government agencies as well as social work practitioners. Despite the fact that welfare programs are widely practiced in Sri Lanka, the research reveals a significant problem: improper targeting of priority beneficiaries. Therefore, the dire need arises for enhancing welfare measures, in particular those extended to

vulnerable individuals, through assuring efficient channel guarantees. Enforcement of schemes for child care, schemes to protect the young, and counselling services are integral to bringing remedial actions toward healing psychosocial injury towards women living within weakened family circumstances.

Non-governmental organizations have an important role to play in community development and need to focus on mobilizing activities to enhance community participation and social inclusion among marginalized women. These activities can include skill development schemes, financial literacy training schemes, microfinance programs, and small business development programs. By equipping women with functional skills and access to capital, they can be empowered to become economically independent.

Social work professionals can also assist through additional research on women in broken families, where intervention areas are specifically determined and community-based interventions are initiated. Community-level support groups can result in collective empowerment of women as they share experiences, become resourceful, and build social capital. An integrated approach bringing together economic empowerment, mental health services, and legal support is needed in dealing with the multi-faceted challenges faced by women who are from fractured families. Joint action can create sustainable solutions for improving the overall well-being of such women and their families.

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