

Influence of Family on Children's Welfare

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Abstract- *The family is the basic social institution in the society. It functions as the basic unit which produces future generations and provides love and affection to the children while facilitating the socialisation process. Children's wellbeing is largely a part of family's responsibility in the society. However, the traditional role played by the family in the society has changed drastically during recent past due to number of interrelated factors. Hence, this study has been conducted to find out impact of family on the children's wellbeing in the contemporary society while understanding the factors associated in affecting negatively the social and psychological conditions of children. The study was conducted using qualitative research methods. The secondary data has been used in the subjects of sociological analysis on the role of family and its associated roles, children's psycho-social issues and contemporary changes in the social structure. Primary data were collected through an empirical study from a sample of children, parents and school teachers in Hambantota, Batticaloa and Vavuniya districts in Sri Lanka. The study found that there were a large number of inter-related causes that negatively effects on children's wellbeing. These reasons included the family disharmony, lack of love, care and affection to the children, children exposure to the family violence, family income and discrimination of families due to socio-cultural reasons.*

Keywords- Children; Family; Impact; Society; Wellbeing

I. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The family is generally regarded as a major social institution and a locus of much of a person's social activity. It is a social unit created by blood, marriage, or adoption, and can be described as nuclear (parents and children) or extended (encompassing other relatives) (Nam, 2004). It is generally assumed today that the modern family has undergone significant transformations in its structure. We are told that societal changes have contributed to a sharp reduction in the percentage of classical "typical" families, principally "nuclear" families. Replacing these, we are made to understand, are childless families, one-parent families, other family configurations, and quasifamily units based on non-marital cohabitation. This argument of the decline has been advanced for a number of decades, but little research has been conducted to test the premise. Bane (1976) disagreed with that

conclusion and pointed out that family sizes were getting smaller and mobility was splitting up some families, but the family remained as a functional social institution (Nam, 2004). The family acts as the basic social foundation. It functions as the basic unit which produces future generations and provides love and affection to the children. It is the responsibility of the family to provide economically for its members and facilitate the socialisation process. Children learn to adhere to certain social values in the society mainly through the family unit. The life long process of learning begins shortly after birth. Since newborns can hear, see, smell, taste and feel heat, cold and pain, they are constantly orienting themselves to the surrounding world.

Human being as family members, constitute an important part of their social environment. People minister to the baby's needs by feeding, cleansing, carrying, and comforting the baby. Broadly, the term well-being has been defined from two perspectives. The clinical perspective defines well-being as the absence of negative conditions and the psychological perspective defines well-being as the prevalence of positive attributes. Positive psychological definitions of wellbeing generally include some of six general characteristics. The six characteristics of well-being most prevalent in definitions of well-being are:

- the active pursuit of well-being;
- a balance of attributes;
- positive affect or life satisfaction;
- pro-social behavior;
- multiple dimensions; and
- personal optimization.

Gough and McGregor (2007:6) defined well-being as 'What people are notionally able to do and to be, and what they have actually been able to do and to be. According to Anger (2008), even the philosophical literature refers to the 'simple notion' of well-being (i.e. 'a life going well') in a variety of ways, including a person's good, benefit, advantage, interest, prudential value, welfare, happiness, flourishing, eudemonia, utility, quality of life, and thriving. Seed house (1995 : 65) summarizes contemporary perspectives on well-being as follows:

Either: (a) 'Well-being' is an empty notion, or (b) 'well-being' is an important and meaningful term which conveys meaning no other term conveys (and, given further research, will be shown to convey this meaning universally), or (c) 'well-being' is 'essentially contested'—its meaning and content fluctuates dependent on who is using it, and why they are using it.

McAllister (2005:2) defined well-being as more than the absence of illness or pathology [...with] subjective (self assessed) and objective (ascribed) dimensions. It can be measured at the level of individuals or society [and] it accounts for elements of life satisfaction that cannot be defined, explained or primarily influenced by economic growth (Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2010). Shin and Johnson (1978:478) have defined well-being form of happiness as "a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own chosen criteria".

Subjective Well-Being was defined by Deiner (2009) as the general evaluation of one's quality of life. The concept has been conceptualized as the three components: (1) a cognitive appraisal that one's life was good (life satisfaction); (2) experiencing positive levels of pleasant emotions; (3) experiencing relatively low levels of negative moods (Deiner, 2009).

Furthermore, well-being has been defined as "Play[ing] an active role in creating their well-being by balancing different factors, developing and making use of resources and responding to stress (Bradshaw et al, 2007: 136). United Nation's Convention on the rights of the child, defined the 'child' as a person below the age of 18, (unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger)¹. UN Declaration of the Human Rights of the Child has mentioned that "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth". Under the Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, Article 27 (13) Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties, the State pledges to 'promote with special care the interest of children and youth so as to ensure their full development, physical, mental, moral, religious, and social, and to protect them from exploitation and discrimination'.

Recent research has found that family structure is strongly associated with children's well-being, (Björklund et al. 2007; Breivik and Olweus 2006; Jonsson and Gähler 1997; Steele et al. 2009). Låftman (2010) found children living with single mothers had fewer material resources, less parental support, and poorer health than those living with two original parents. Sun and Li (2002) concluded that children's

psychological well-being is more elastic and responsive to parents' marital disruption than is their academic achievement. Adolescent's satisfaction with the father-adolescent relationship significantly influences fluctuations in son's and daughter's psychological wellbeing (Tami, 2016).

Impact of Family on Children's Wellbeing

Accordingly, children's wellbeing is a substantial part of family's responsibility in the society. Especially, the families in Asiatic societies like Sri Lanka have been taken much of responsibilities to take care their children irrespective of the nature of the family unit e.g extended or nuclear. However, the traditional role played by the family in the society has changed considerably during recent past due to number of interrelated factors including the modernisation of the society. In this context, the present study has been conducted to find out impact of family on children's wellbeing with particular emphasis to the contemporary Sri Lankan society.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The overall objective of this study is to examine impact of family in the children's wellbeing in the contemporary Sri Lankan society.

The specific objectives of the study include:

To examine factors associated in affecting negatively social and psychological conditions of children. To identify and understand the perceptions of children on their own wellbeing, including the positive and negative factors which affect them.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods. The secondary data has been used in the subjects of sociological analysis on the role of family and its associated roles, children's psycho-social issues and contemporary changes in the social structure.

3.1 The Study sample

Participatory methods and techniques were used for both primary data collection and data analysis. Primary data were collected through a study from a sample of 180 children, 60 parents and 36 teachers in Hambantota, Batticaloa and Vavuniya Districts, covering the Southern, Eastern and Northern provinces of Sri Lanka. Since the children's wellbeing is associated with many factors, data collection was

extended to obtain views of parents and teachers in the sample in addition to the own views of children.

The sample was selected on a proportionate basis using purposive sampling method. Accordingly, 60 children from each districts totalling to 180 children were included in the sample. Total number of teachers in the sample was 36 and they were equally distributed in the three districts. The 60 parents also selected to include 20 from each districts. The table 01 has presented distribution of sample respondents of the study.

Table -01 StudySample

Type of Sample	Number of Participants			Total
	Hambantota	Batticaloa	Vauniya	
Children	60	60	60	180
Teachers	12	12	12	36
Parents	Mothers	13	14	39
	Fathers	08	07	21
Total	92	92	92	276

The research used qualitative data collection methods of participatory discussions in all the study locations to collect data from the sample respondents. Separate guidelines were applied for each of the categories of target group. Four case studies (short stories) of children were also generated on some of the fields where it was appropriate to obtain an in-depth understanding of the issues related to children's wellbeing.

3.2 Tools and techniques used to collect primary data

Semi-structured interviews - Semi-structured interviews were held with the children, teachers and parents. These interviews were facilitated using a pre-prepared guideline. **Interactive discussions** - Participatory interactive discussions were facilitated among the children to obtain data on their situations, issues and problems. **Happy-Sad face exercise** - The children were divided in to groups and were asked to draw collective pictures of faces. Later, from the drawings, two faces were selected as a happy face and a sad face and then a discussion was facilitated among the children on the reasons for happiness and reasons for sadness.

Secret box exercise - The researcher went to the field with a pre-prepared box. It was first explained to the children that this was a secret box and no one should look at what is inside. Children were given pens and papers to write and they were asked to write whatever mentally stressed issues they faced or any factors that negatively affected their wellbeing. The children wrote these in secretly and put their pieces of paper in the box.

3.3 Ethical considerations

The entire data collection process were done with relax atmosphere avoiding any potential risks to the participants. Sensitive questions were not included in the guidelines and some socio-cultural sensitive information when necessary was collected through indirectly observing the phenomenon rather than direct interactions. The timing of the interviews and discussions were sets up after consultations of the respondents and they were given opportunities to make decisions on to participate in the research or not. Even, those participated in the research were given opportunities to avoid answering any questions that they were not comfortable.

In order to maintain the research ethics, written permission was obtained from all the institutions prior to the research. During the data collection process, as the first step, the information providers were explained the objectives of the research and their verbal consents were obtained for the discussions/research. In all the discussions and interviews the researcher obtained verbal consents from participants for note taking and recording. In order to maintain the privacy of participants as per research ethics, the actual identities of children have been changed when reporting sensitive issues. Especially the names and other personal identities were changed when reporting case studies of individual children. The need for publication of data collected was informed to the respondents where appropriate.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that the traditional role of the family in the contemporary Sri Lankan society has changed considerably. More specifically, the changes were identified in the areas of division of roles in the family such as traditionally the mother taking responsibilities of child caring and home based work while the father is responsible for economic aspects of the family. Due to the changes of the economic system of the country from agricultural to the market driven, It was found that both mothers and fathers were taking responsibilities of maintaining family's economy. In many cases, both the mother and father of the family were engaged in any kinds of economic activities. For example, Pannilage (2017) concluded that many householders in rural Sri Lanka are engaged in informal labour work where the income is very less especially for the women. However, no mechanisms were found to handle responsibilities which were originally handled by the family to look after children. Hence, responsibility of the family to maintain children's wellbeing is still remained unchanged, but attentions from the parents has reduced significantly. On the other hand, the society is still expecting the family unit to take responsibilities of children's wellbeing

irrespective of its fail due to the changes in the social system. Key factors identified as negatively affecting children's wellbeing include (a) Disharmony in the family due to various socio-economic reasons (b) Lack of love, care and affection from parents (c) Exposure to family violence (d) Social discrimination and (e) Family income.

4.1 Family disharmony

Family breakdown is not a single event, but a process that involves a number of risk and protective factors that interact in complex ways both before and after parental separation or divorce to increase or limit the risk of the adverse outcomes associated with family breakdown. These inter-related factors include parental conflict; the quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships; maternal mental health; financial hardship; and repeated changes in living arrangements, including family structure (Ann and Smith, 2009). The study found that there were a large number of inter-related reasons for the destruction of family harmony at the study locations. These reasons include the constant civil war situation² experienced during the year 1983- 2009, negative exposure to the globalisation processes such as less attention paid to cultural and social values, mother migration for foreign employments and poverty. During the civil war, males were more vulnerable and were more often targeted from both sides of the government forces and anti-government armed groups.

They were at greater risk to be arrested, killed, and detained or to disappear. As a result, there are a large numbers of women widows in the society. These women have lost their husbands, the breadwinner of the family. The loss of one member of a family, particularly the breadwinner of the family, has a marked impact on the function of the family unit (Pannilage and Gunawardena, 2016; Pannilage, 2013). Out of 60 families directly observed in this research, 25% (N=15) had divorce or separations while another 20% (N=12) families had only the mothers since the male member has death or disappeared during the civil conflict. Meantime, there were 13.3% (N=08) father only families due to mother migrations. The uncertainty and loss of an essential role player in the family can cause destruction and disharmony in the family. Especially when the father is not at home, the mother has to take all the responsibilities of the family including those which had been played by the father. She is sometimes unable to explain the truth to the children about their fathers as the children have behavioural problems. The mother also has to adapt to all the negative implications of being a widow in the society.

The study found that there were a number of cases where the children's mental wellbeing had been affected due

to the non-availability of harmony in their families. The case - 01 would be an exceptional one which a father had tried to kill his own son by giving him poisons. However, the case highlights the mental stress of the child after the incident of exposure to the violence situation. The case study also highlights effects of poverty for children's wellbeing as the second incident of the story on falling down on the way to hospital has been taken place due to the non-availability of proper transportation service to take the patient to a hospital (case study-01).

Case-01, a nine year old boy

His parent had been having marital problems - his father suspected his mother of having an affair with another. His father had first given the poison to the child and then he had drunk the poison himself. The father died. A neighbor saw this incident and rushed the child, who was still alive, to hospital in a three-wheeler. By then the child was unconscious. On the way the child had fallen out of the three wheeler and hurt his back. He was admitted to the hospital's intensive care unit. Now his mother takes care of him but he feels isolated and unhappy. The teachers found out that he takes safety pins and pricks his body with safety pins. He was found with a lot of pin marks. He revealed that the pins do not pain him and he likes to prick himself. When the researcher met him he was in immediate need of psychiatrist treatment as he was under severe mental stress and unconsciously pricking himself. It is obvious that when the family environment is healthy the individuals too are healthy and are able to recover more quickly and effectively from challenges within the family setting. The civil war had major impacts on the family system of the child respondents – resulting in the loss of one or both partners, separations, trauma, as well as pathological family dynamics which adversely affected individual family members particularly the children. The cohesiveness and traditional relationships of the family does no longer exist. For instance, during the study process, there were number of complaints from teachers and parents stating that the children no longer respected or listened to their elders, including teachers and parents.

4.2 Lack of love, care and affection for children

Lack of love and care from parents for their children is one of the key factors identified as negatively affecting the children's wellbeing. Some of the issues highlighted under this point include the negative psychological effects on children due to the non-availability of their father or mother, or both, in other words a socially broken family, parents being away from the home, a broken home due to domestic violence

etc., parent's delinquency (especially father's alcohol addiction), and receiving less love and affection from parents. In all the study locations, the research identified cases of children who were unhappy and in stress due to lack of love and care from their parents or guardians. The absence of their father, mother, or both, from the family is a serious concern for children. Absence of the father was reported to be due to various reasons including his having gone away and married a second time, disappearances and death. Disappearances and death of fathers were specially highlighted due to the civil war. When the father is not at home, children in that family face difficulties, not only economically but also socially and psychologically.

The children who expressed their views did not mention this factor directly, but they mentioned it indirectly answering the questions regarding factors negatively affecting their wellbeing in the secret box exercise. They mentioned that 'when a child has no father she or he is very sad'. This was further reinforced during the discussion with teachers. They mentioned that most of the mentally stressed children and children exhibiting behavioural difficulties of their schools were from broken families. There were a considerable number of families that have given unbearable burdens to children.

Case study-02, a 14 year old girl child

Her father is working as a casual laborer and mother has gone abroad for a foreign job. Being the eldest in the family, the burden of taking care of her younger siblings falls on her shoulders. She gets up very early in the morning to prepare food for her family and then goes to school with two of her siblings (brother & sister) who are old enough to go to school. Her other 2 siblings are left at home alone. After school she rushes back home to prepare lunch for the family. At the age of 14 she is shouldering the family burden.

Some of those burdens mentioned by the children included that parents request children to look after siblings go to the nearby shops to buy consumer items, fetching water and collection of fuel woods. 29% (N= 53) of the sample respondent children mentioned that they don't get enough love and care from their parents and as results they don't satisfy at all about their parents' love , care and affection. Meantime, only 22% (N= 40) of the children in the sample mentioned that they are completely satisfied with their parents' love, care and affection. The figure -01 below has presented the detail responses receive

In all the study locations, some children were identified whose mothers were not at home. Especially, most of the mothers have gone abroad for jobs and this has

negatively effect on their children's wellbeing. From the children's point of view as well as that of their teachers', it was affirmed that when the mother is not at home due to various reasons, the children in those families are at risk of mental stress.

In many cases, children of families in such situations reported that in their mother's absence their father does not provide enough attention to their education or wellbeing. In some cases, the fathers are alcoholics and beat their children and they can't understand the real needs and feelings of their children. Jichan and Enright (2017) demonstrated that fathers' anger (state and trait anger for social anxiety and state anger for negative peer relationships) and their total anger expression are linked to their sons' negative socio-emotional outcomes.

The case study -02 explain the level of family burdens on children in the study locations. Level of relationships maintained by the parents with their children was found as one of the key factors which contribute to the children's wellbeing. Children's views on this factor was that they are very happy when their parents continually discuss with them, ask their needs and when parents take them to school/preschool, town etc. Meantime, the children are sad when their parent don't speak with them on regular basis, when parents don't take them to school, to neighbors or relatives and allow children to freely engage in play, games and peer group relations.

4.3 Children's exposure to family violence

Parental conflict is a key variable associated with negative outcomes in children from both intact and non-intact families. Research in this area clearly shows that family functioning has a greater impact on outcomes than family structure. High levels of conflict, stress resulting from the separation and/or resulting poverty can all negatively affect maternal mental health. Poor mental health affects the ability of parents, whether married, separated or divorced, to parent effectively, which in turn impacts on children's well-being (Ann and Smith, 2009). Meantime, Smith and Jenkins (1991) stated that parental conflict has been identified as a key mediating variable in producing negative outcomes in children, including those in intact families.

Children's exposure to family violence was found as a serious factor that negatively affects a child's wellbeing. Family violence was reported to be due to a number of reasons, out of which alcoholism was highlighted as the main. There were cases of family violence in all the three districts of the study. During the discussions with the children, parents and school teachers, respondents mentioned that children had

a high exposure to family violence and were therefore in a stressful environment. Some of the statements made by the children under this category include; “Family quarrels - at most of our homes this is happening so we cannot be happy.”, “We are sad and afraid when our father beats our mother when he comes home after taking alcohol.”, “Conflicts between our parents happen because of alcoholism.” “When our father comes home drunk, he beats us and our mother”. The teachers mentioned that some of the children who have behavioural problems are from ‘the bad families’; they named those families that have a violent home environment as ‘bad families’.

Case study -03, a 13 year girl child

“One day I went to the next house and they gave me sugarcane juice. I liked it. When I came back home, my father who had come home, had heard I went to the next house and shared sugarcane juice. For this he hit me hard. He hits all of us including my sisters, especially my mother. She is hit always. He also pulls me by my hair and hits my head very hard, and drops me on the ground. My back pains a lot. Up to today, I am suffering with this problem of pain in my head and back. This incident happened around a year before. He does not hit me continuously, but he hits my mother very badly. She continues to do the housework despite the pain. I find this impossible to bear. When school is over I feel sad to go home”.

The children themselves said that it is very difficult to maintain the discipline of children from those families. If a teacher reprimanded such a child for their indiscipline, the parents of that child would visit the school and scold the teachers. Such instances were mentioned more from schools in the Southern Province (Hambantota), while there were similar instances from the Batticaloa and Vavuniya schools as well. Almost all the children in every location studied mentioned their exposure to family violence. In most of the cases, the immediate victims are the mother in the family (e.g. the case study -03), as the father comes home drunk and engages in violence against the mother. However, at the same time this has an impact on the children as well. There are two aspects in family violence; firstly it affects the child directly as he or she is exposed to the family violence, secondly family violence largely affects the child’s mental condition as he or she is marginalised by others in the society who says that they are from bad families. This is experienced by girls more than boys due to cultural practices of the society.

4.4 Social discrimination

Social discrimination was found as one of the key factors which affect children’s wellbeing. Some children directly mentioned that they have been discriminated against due to various reasons. Some of the reasons cited for the discrimination are due to their family being of low caste, poor, or having been labelled as a ‘bad family’. Although society is fast moving and highly globalised, the research findings prove that caste is still an existing factor in Sri Lankan society to some extent. This was specially mentioned by the children in children’s clubs in the Southern Province. They said that they have being marginalised by others saying that they are of low caste. There were a number of cases from all the locations studied where children are being marginalised and labelled as belongs to bad families. Some children directly mentioned this and said that they were very sad as they have been marginalised saying that they are from bad families. Families with parents who are alcohol addicts, or whose families quarrel and where domestic violence occurs or parents who are in second marriages or have relationships with another have often been labelled as ‘bad families’.

Some of the parents did not allow their children to mix with others as they have pre-selected some families with which the children should interact. This discrimination was visible in many of the villages of the sample study. In one of the villages in Hambantota district, there was a group of people who have been labelled as people that should not mix with others. Parents do not like to send their children to develop relationships with children from that group. In war affected regions, there are a number of children who are displaced, orphans, or belong to the families where their mother is widow. There are some restrictions from other children’s parents to develop relationships with such children, labelling them as ‘not good’. This also prevents opportunities for children to have peer group relationships which facilitate a social environment for children to heal their mental stress.

4.5 Family income

The studies (e.g., Hofferth 2006; Marks 2006; Ram and Hou, 2003) have confirmed that economic resources and parental engagement remain important explanations for associations between family structure and child wellbeing. Financial hardship and the stress it induces can both contribute to family breakdown and is often a consequence of it. When compared with their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, children from poorer backgrounds, whether from intact or non-intact families, generally do less well across a number of measures, such as health and educational attainment. Compared with two parent families, lone parent families tend to be significantly worse off financially. Financial hardship increases the likelihood of other variables

associated with negative outcomes, such as poor housing, health problems, poor nutrition and fewer material resources for nurturing children (Ann and Smith, 2009).

Poverty exists in all the locations of the present study at varying degrees. The sample study confirmed that over 90% of families (N=55) earn less than required monthly income for the survival of a family³. Meantime, 15% (N=09) of the families in the sample earn a monthly income of LKR. 15,000 which is implausible when compared with the cost of living of the country (Figure -02). Therefore, financial hardship of the families in the sample study is visible. It is understood that being a poor family brings a lot of mental stress to children as well as adults. There were plenty of cases found during the study which highlighted poverty as being the root cause for children's mental stress. Some of the children directly mentioned that they are poor and do not have enough money to even eat at home.

Some children said that they do not have enough educational materials, good clothes, shoes, etc. due to the economic difficulties they face. Case study -04 has illustrated the level of economic difficulties face by the children due to being a poor family.

All these factors directly affect a child's wellbeing. Being a poor family is a separate factor which affects the mental conditions of children, but when society - especially peers, teachers and others marginalize children because they are poor and they restrict their movements with others, this makes the situation more serious and even more difficult to bear. There were some instances where children strongly highlighted their hardships of poverty which affect their lives and education (case study -04). A teacher mentioned that "they don't have even enough school clothes and other educational material; every day they (children) wash their school clothes to prepare for the next day".

V. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes with that although the traditional family unit as the basic social unit has barely survived in the contemporary society, its function has been irrevocably changed due to various reasons. Children's wellbeing has been negatively affected due to the changed role of the family which served as the basic social unit to look after children. It was concluded that family disharmony due to socio-economic factors such as poverty, alcoholism and social discrimination leads to distract love and care of the children, the future generation of the society. The protracted and unresolved conflicts between parents considerably affect the children's wellbeing negatively. Better interactions and communication

between parents, and positive child-parent relationships are essential factors for children's well-being. Parenting behaviour and the quality of the parent-child relationship play a critical role in understanding children's well-being in relation to role of family. Therefore, the impact of family on the children's wellbeing is remarkable. Strengthening of the basic social institution; the family in the society will have considerable positive impact towards wellbeing of the children.

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