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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF FAMILY FOR THE RISE OF THE PERCENTAGE OF CHILD MOTHERS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract： This study was aimed to explore the impact of the family for the rise of child mothers, which is an issue in Sri Lanka in an investigative manner. The factors influencing the rise of child mothers, impact of the family on that, and the strategies to prevent such situations were also studied. Data was analyzed using functionalism and symbolic interactionism. For this descriptive study, a rural village area in Ampara where the percentage of child mothers is higher was used as the study field. 20 child mothers were selected from that village using purposive sampling method. Non-participatory observations and case studies were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. This study made it clear that the factors related to the child and the society are having an impact on children in such scenarios. The unhealthy family conditions and the risky backgrounds where they come from are distinctive in this context. Individual factors such as the personality of the children can also contribute in such situations. It is crucial that the children are educated enough to stay safe from this kind of situations, and it is essential that they are given a formal sex education. To control such incidents, the family should assure that the responsibilities and duties towards the children are ensured. While the sensitivity and consciousness of the community should also be improved for child safety, as of a country, it is a timely requirement to ensure the safety of the children on legal and policy bases.

Key words: child mothers, family, relationships, sexual harassments and children.

INTRODUCTION

The percentage of child mothers has been increasing day-by-day, in Sri Lanka. Currently, among the challenges that children face, this is a major concern. In rural areas, this situation is relatively more visible than in urban spaces. A child who becomes a child mother is confronted with biological as well as sociological challenges. In addition to that, those children are exposed to a vast range of psychological challenges. Thus, it is important to have a focus at the factors that create such fates in an academic perspective. In this context, it is noteworthy to study to what extent that the family contributes to those factors, as the primary social unit who bears the responsibility of the child during the childhood.

In this study, it is important to identify who can be defined as a child. According to the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, the term child shall apply to all persons under the age of 18 (Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999). Convention on the Rights of the Child, also defines a child as every human being below the age of eighteen years (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990:02). Thus, in this study both male and female children below the age of 18 are referred as children.

Apart from that, a family is defined as "a group of persons directly linked by kin connections, the adult members of which assume responsibility for caring for children" (Giddens, 2006:206). It is also significant to pay attention to the universal role played by the family when it comes to the discussion on children. According to Murdock (1949), the following should be the main functions of a family;

1. Educational function
2. Economic function
3. Reproductive function
4. Sexual function

Regarding a child, when these factors are concerned, family becomes the primary institution with responsibilities from giving birth to a child (reproduction) to socialization. It consists a vast range of duties: providing assistance to the children in the family, teaching them customs, traditions, norms and values are prime responsibilities of a family towards the children which gives the parents a huge role to play. The society expects the parents to provide the child with security and protection. Despite all these social conditions, the fact that the percentage of the child mothers having a rapid growth is a pathetic situation in many countries (UNFPA, 2014). Thus, it is a timely requirement to conduct a study on this issue.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE GROWTH OF THE PERCENTAGE OF CHILD MOTHERS IN SRI LANKA

It is no secret that in developing countries like Sri Lanka, the labor force can immensely contribute in the process of development. Since children today, become the labor force of the country tomorrow, it is crucial to empower them both physically and psychologically for the future progression. For that purpose, in Sri Lanka, providing children with free education, guidance for a variety of vocational trainings for higher studies and facilities for nutrition and health especially for children are such steps taken by the authorities. But, it is also notable that regardless these facilities, the instances of child abuse, sexual harassments and child labour are also considerably growing. Children facing such problems have a negative impact on the development of the entire country. When a child becomes a

child mother, it paves the way for the destruction of lives of two children; child mother and her baby. Hence, having an understanding about the factors causing this situation and raising awareness on that is significant. According to this study, it was observed that the factors causing the children to become child mothers can be classified into two categories such as;

1. Factors related to the child
2. Factors related to the society

When it comes to the factors related to the child, out of the 20 girl children who were considered for the study, 18 girls had no idea about the sexual harassment that caused pregnancy at the time they experienced their first sexual experience. It was confirmed that they had no understanding about sexuality, sexual relationships and insecure sexual activities. It was also revealed that, most of the children experienced their first sexual experiences as sexual harassments (19 girls out of 20).

In addition to that, in the face of such situations, the lack of personality of these children to reject or to stay away from such conditions is another factor that causes child pregnancy.

> *"It was one of our uncles who did it. But he told me that he would kill me and my mother if I told this to someone. I was afraid, so I did not tell anybody. It was only when I was pregnant, that my mother got to know about it" (a child mother aged 16, 2018).*

It is common to see that the child victims who experience of such sexual harassments are frightened by threatening of the person who commits the crime. There, because of the fear of threat to her/her closed ones, the child tends to hide things about the harassment from the society. It is one of the major hindrances to keep the child out of the risk. In other words, this does not allow prevention of child pregnancy. Sometimes, it causes lack of space to prevent continuous harassments to the same child.

From the sample used for the study, (4 girls out of 20) a small percentage of children define the harassments they faced as a positive experience for the life. Such children show a tendency towards engaging in sexual behaviors with several people. One of the key reasons for this condition is the lack of sexual education. According to the findings of the study, since the very first sexual experience becomes a good one, some children tend to engage in sexual activities with adults as well as boy children.

Apart from the factors related to the child, factors related to the society (external factors) also have a huge impact on creating child mothers. Here, the environment in which the child lives is a key risk factor. According to the literature review, it was clear that the percentage of child mothers in rural spaces is relatively higher than the urban spaces (Fernando, Gunawardena, Senarath, Weerasinghe, Alwis, Senanayake and De Silva, 2013). When the sample of the study is considered, the environment in which those children lived, can be recognized as risky environments. In other terms, they used to live in less populous spaces, but still, those spaces are insecure for the children and those environments are too solitary. It is very insecure for these children, since they have to travel alone to the school, hospital or the town and they have to pass less crowded areas, alone. When a child keeps on using the same road at a particular time, daily or for several days continuously, it also causes the harassers to target the child.

> *"I always use the same road in the village to go to tuition. For several days, one elderly boy who is known to my family told me that he can drop me to the class in his three-wheeler. I said no. but one day he forced me into the three-wheeler and harassed me. I got really scared of the things he said. I continued to do it for a long time. When he got to know that I was pregnant, he disappeared. Now the villagers are also looking for him"* (a child mother aged 15, 2018).

It is also noted that those harassers directly use the negligence and the inability of the children to make straight decisions as an advantage to continue such sexual abuses. The dissatisfied sexual urges of the people who live in the society as well as the unusual sexual deviations also result in making the children victims of sexual abuse. Here, when people cannot fulfill the sexual behaviors which are considered to be socially unaccepted from their wives/ girlfriends, they use children to engage in such sexual behaviors. Among the sexual deviation types, the condition called "pedophilia" is very common in the present society. Pedophilia is "defined as a sexual interest in prepubescent children. It is empirically linked with sexual offending against children: Child pornography offenders and sex offenders with child victims are more likely to be pedophiles based on self-report or objective measures of sexual interests" (Seto, 2009:391). People with this condition use children (both male and female) to fulfill their sexual desires. The reason for this is that they are sexually attracted to prepubescent children. In such situations, children became the prey of such people.

Another major cause for the statistical growth in this kind of situations is that these harassers are addicted to alcohol and drugs. Here, even though some accused people do not show a tendency of engaging in such activities in day-to-day life, the irregularities in the function of the brain and the abnormalities caused by the drugs by losing the consciousness can also cause such sexual abuses.

> *"My uncle never looks at us in a wrong way. Even when my parents fight, my aunty and uncle took us to their house. In those days, my uncle provided us food. So, either I or my younger brother had not doubt in my uncle. But this happened when my uncle was addicted to alcohol and started drinking with my father. I remember well that my uncle was very sad and ashamed of it, after what happened"* (a child mother aged 17, 2018).

Among these external factors, the family background of the victimized child as well as the situation of the family of the harasser can also be identified. Thus, it is important to pay attention on the factors which cause this kind of activities, influenced by the family unit of such children.

IMPACT OF FAMILY IN TRANSFORMING CHILDREN INTO CHILD MOTHERS

Once the family unit is concerned, it is a primary social unit of a society. There, caring children is one of the basic functions of the family. But, once closely observed, it was noted that most of the sexually abused children were abused at their family. It is very rare to see children who were abused by totally unknown and outside people. Therefore, majority of the children used for this study as the sample were sexually abused by a family member, a close relative or a friend of the family. In other

terms, it was someone they know for a long period of time. It can be explained through following data.

Table 3.1. Parties causing children to become child mothers

People who abused children	Number of Children	Percentage (%)
Children who were abused by their own fathers	03	15
Children who were abused by close relatives	12	60
Children who were abused by someone they knew well / friends	04	20
Children who were abused by an unknown person	01	05
Total	**20**	**100**

It was clear that these girl children are exposed to these challenges because of the inability of their families to fulfill the duties towards the children. It was highlighted in this study that lack of protection for a child inside and outside of the home, is a major reason for a child to become a child mother, once the family is concerned. How this situation affect children and its intensity differs from one another, all the girl children in this sample manifested this condition. One of the key findings is that lack of protection from mother makes a child vulnerable to these situations, more than the absence of father's protection. In that scenario, mothers of these children,

- Have left the home
- Are married to someone else legally or illegally
- Stay out of home for the job for a long period of time
- Have gone abroad as housewives
- Are addicted to drugs/alcohol
- Are working as sex workers
- Are used to have sexual relationships/ relationships with people external to the marriage
- Have no proper understanding of the responsibilities of the children
- Are used to spend more time outside of the home with friends

These factors emphasize the fact that some mothers of child mothers (11 out of 20 mothers), when they are loaded with other family responsibilities other than the children, tend to neglect the responsibilities of the children. Some mothers of child mothers (04 out of 20 mothers), based on the background they were grown up, tend to stay away from the responsibilities of their children. Anyways, this situation has a direct impact on children becoming preys to the outside people. Not only of mothers, but some children have been victimized by the behaviors and customs of their fathers. In this sample, a considerable amount of children become sexually abused by their father, or a close relative/a friend to father. This condition can be explained as follows;

Table 3.2. The connection that the parties causing children to become child mothers have with the fathers of those children

The connection that the parties causing children to become child mothers have with the fathers of those children	Number of Children	Percentage (%)
Children who were abused by their own fathers	03	27.3
Children who were abused by close friends to father	02	18.2
Children who were abused by close relatives to father	06	54.5
Total	**11**	**100**

Thus, it is clear that the nature and the behaviors of the fathers is also an influencing factor in this regard.

Apart from that, the economic condition of the family can also have a huge impact on children becoming preys of other people. Poor family background and related financial crises have a direct connection with these incidents. In such family conditions, when other family members engaged in income generation and because of some decisions they make, the children become isolated with lesser focus on them. Especially, girl children face helpless situations. When the parents and elder siblings stress more on making a better income, the children expose to these kinds of threats without proper security and protection.

At some instances, the authoritative control they experience at home also keeps the children silent from speaking out of what happened to them. In other terms, when parents have not created a space for the children to explain their problems openly, and when the children have an unlimited fear on the punishment given for the mistakes at home, they do not have strong connections with the parents. But it is expected from a family that its members have good inter-personal, close and friendly connections with each other. But lack of such emotional connections makes children more vulnerable and exposed to many problems. In addition to that, based on the ignorance of the children on the end result of such sexual abuses, they do not realize that they are going to mothers until they become pregnant or the body starts to show physical changes. In such cases, children become more confused.

When the family fails to provide the child with proper socialization process, awareness of self-defense and sexual education, it also negatively influences the children and makes them targets of people in society. Here, if the family and the space created at home are not comfortable for the children to discuss more private concerns of the sexuality with the parents or some elderly person who is close to them, they become ignorant of such concerns. In such a social context, children facing these conditions can be identified to be very risky, because these conditions expose children to informal means of information. Since there is no guarantee on the accuracy of such information, often what children have access is inaccurate information. Such information can mislead children and expose them to various problems.

> *"On the very first day I started this relationship with that brother (aiya), he told me not to worry because doing this will not make me pregnant, he said. I did not know anything, I believed him. When I told him that I was pregnant, he*

told me that it cannot be him. He told me that I should have gone with someone else. I tried to tell him again and again, but he did not accept it" (a child mother aged 17, 2018).

What should be discussed further on this matter is the fact that most of the child mothers still do not have a proper understanding on sexual relationships and pregnancy. Some children are surprised at the fact that they are going to give birth to another child. So, many of the child mothers do not really have an idea about who bear the fault for what happened to them. Thus, it is required to pay attention to what can be done at the family level to reduce the percentage of child mothers in Sri Lanka.

STRATEGIES TO ADOPT AT THE FAMILY LEVEL TO REDUCE THE PERCENTAGE OF CHILD MOTHERS IN SRI LANKA

One of the key findings of this study was that despite the fact that many external social factors have a huge impact on girl children becoming child mothers, their families have a tremendous role to play to control such incidents. It was clear that the parents have a key responsibility in this regard. Since most of the children become victims of the closed ones to the family, it is the responsibility of the parents and the adults in the family to keep the children safe. Parents should ensure that their children are always kept safe. It is also important that the parents create an open space at home for the children to discuss the challenges they face in life as they grow up, being the best friend to the children. Instead of staying distant to children, they can become close companions for their children. This can make the children come back to their parents in place of referring to friends and other closed ones in crisis situations.

Another important observation of this study was that most of the children who are physically and psychologically grown up, are in need of more social awareness. Thus it is crucial that the family gives them an informal education on sexuality, society and related factors. Here, parents should make sure that they provide accurate and true answers to the questions that the children raise, and they should not reject the questions children have regarding sexuality. It was obvious that some children in this sample have tried to get such issues clarified with their parents earlier, but when the parents rejected giving answers several times, they gave up.

When the strength of the connection between the children and the parents declines, it also makes the children vulnerable, exposing them to external social threats. In that case, often children tend to attract to others as follows;
- Peer groups
- Boyfriends/ girlfriends
- Friends

Associating such people for a long time, can also become a reason for the children to become victims of sexual abuses. Hence, it is important that parents are well aware of the networks that their children make with the outside world, the nature of those connections and its intensity.

The formation of the family structure is also a decisive factor on the life of the child. According to the functionalists, family works as a major social institution which supports to build up the whole structure of the society. This structure of the family plays an essential role in designing the structure

of the life of family members too. According to the American Sociologist Talcott Parsons, "the family's two main functions are primary socialization and personality stabilization" (Parsons and Bales, 1956). Children become victims of these kind of situations is when parents act and behave as if they have already deviated from their responsibilities. One instance is father being addicted to alcohol and drugs, with no control. In order to prevent these situations, the fathers who take drugs / alcohol should avoid using alcohol and drugs considering the future endeavors of the children.

It is pivotal that the families reconsider the consequences and the negative effects on children before making decisions in the face of financial challenges. Moreover, parents distancing children because of financial benefits is also a pathetic condition in the contemporary society which can affect the entire development of the child. Thus, parents and adults should constantly be alert about their responsibilities and duties when it comes to decision making in life.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the challenges and problems that the children in Sri Lanka come across with are being increased rapidly over time, it is a timely requirement to pay proper attention to that. Among these issues, the future of the children who become child mothers has become one of the major challenges. Through this study, several specific reasons and factors for the children to become child mothers were explored based on a rural village area in Ampara where the percentage of child mothers is higher by using 20 child mothers. Those factors can be classified into two categories as the factors related to the child and the factors related to the society. When it comes to the factors related to the child: lack of understanding on sexuality, nature of the personality, interpretation of some sexual relationships positively by the children, lack of awareness and decision making power can be explained. Among the social factors, insecure environment/space, power of the adults over the children to victimize them, sexual deviations and unsatisfied sexual desires of such men, addiction to alcohol and drugs and lack of security in family can be discussed.

Once the impact of family towards child mothers is concerned, the family members have a tremendous influence of children becoming child mothers. Irresponsibility of the parents, lack of proper security to the children from the family and absence of maternal protection are key factors in this context. One of the major reasons for that is that the mothers are burdened with limitless number of responsibilities which makes them distracted from their basic responsibilities towards their children. Poverty also has an indirect impact on this. Apart from that, the authoritative nature of the family, flaws in the socialization process of the children by the family and deprivation of opportunities to have dialogues on sexuality and social challenges can also play an important role in this regard.

To conclude, it is a requirement of the contemporary society to provide a proper formal education on sexuality to the children in Sri Lanka, since most of the child mothers lack awareness on human sexuality, even if they gave birth to a child. That of course can immensely contribute to the reduction of sexual harassments, abuses and sexual abduction of children while raising awareness and educating them how to ensure individual safety. In addition to that, it is essential to adopt necessary state policy reforms to ensure that the children who are already victimized and became child mothers are supported with proper education facilities to sustain their future. It is no secret that the authorities should also implement laws properly against the parties who victimize the children.

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