

## THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STATUS OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE LOW INCOME-RECEIVING FAMILIES IN SRI LANKA

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### INTRODUCTION

Attempts to understand the social and economic status of women in rural areas are often based on national statistics and therefore, they are the generalized information. Although the distinction between urban and rural sectors and the male and female categories are shown in the Census of Sri Lanka, a comparative and realistic data base of the social and economic status of various income categories are not disclosed. Often the studies which furnish accurate information on their social and economic status are either restricted to researchers in which a particular group of community is concerned, or else the realistic information is concealed by national averages. Consequently, the vital role played by rural women in household chores and household agricultural activities is not recognized or sufficiently accounted for (Wickramasinghe, 1987a). Rural women in Sri Lanka contribute substantially by taking part in the small holding agricultural sector, in addition to their domestic roles as mothers and wives. Yet, they are at a disadvantage and are handicapped by lack of opportunities for education and securing social positions, training, employment and access to resources (Wickramasinghe, 1987b). In addition, certain traditional social norms, though to a lesser extent, has impeded the proper recognition of women's contribution and the important role they play in increasing production and diminishing poverty.

However, greater emphasis placed on the need to recognize the immense contribution of women in promoting the living standards of the family and thereby the community, in the third world nations, has become an international issue during the

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last decade. In this context, the declaration of the Women's Year at the United Nations' General Assembly, in 1975, in Mexico, has had a profound effect on creating a general awareness in this issue. Also the proclamation of the period of 1975 to 1985, as the 'Decade of Women' has given a remarkable opportunity for nations to widen-up mutual understanding on the status of women within their respective national contexts. As a result of international collaboration and the interest of the individual states, a large number of international organizations such as FAO, UNESCO and the World Bank have recognized the necessity of including the component of rural women into the package of development with a view to focus attention on the disadvantaged female sector. The effectiveness of this broad task is difficult to analyze in Sri Lanka, mainly due to the limited time-span devoted in the process of plan implementation (Wickramasinghe, 1987c), but with the assistance of a large number of external donor agencies working in collaboration with the state, such as The Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD), The Swedish International Agency (SIDA), The Netherlands Government and The World Bank, the innovation of income generating activities has become an element in rural development programmes implemented in the 1980's.

In planning and implementing such development programmes it is appropriate to examine closely the current position of women. Such an examination could be considered as an analytic requisite to determine appropriate and desirable production activities. A realistic data base is of vital importance to the planners to enable them to organize income generating activities in such a way as to generate an additional income to family units without much disruption to the household activities and the family life.

In this study, an attempt is made to examine the level of education, marital status, employment, resource ownership, access to assets and women's participation in social activities and social position in decision making. However, it is worth mentioning here that the term 'status' has been used with particular reference to women's authority or power, for example, Sandy (1974) has used the term to signify the degree to which women have authority or power in both the domestic and public domain, while Stoler (1977), in the Javanese study, refers it specifically to social power.

In considering the women's status in a broader sense, the family has to be taken

into account as the lowest social unit, hierarchically speaking. Within this family unit, in the private domain women possess a prominent place, contrarily they possess a minor position, or a limited power in the public domain. This is particularly true in the rural society and it is common to most countries in the third world where economic dependence of women is generally accepted as a cultural norm implying an inferior status for them. Nevertheless, women's social status is partly determined by education, employment, income and the position of their families in society. The economic and employment opportunities prevalent in rural areas in Sri Lanka point to certain factors which contribute to the subordination of women. One such factor is that women's contribution to the household unit is in the form of subsistence. In addition are other factors such as the absence of an independent or a reliable income, the lack of employment opportunities perhaps combined with the limited ownership of resources denying them a claim for economic independence and social power.

However, if one segregates the low income-receiving families from the rest of society, the social status of the former group is considerably lower than that of the families who have the ability to obtain the basic things that are needed for their survival. An analytical examination of the standard of the women of the low income-receiving families, or those who struggle to fulfil the basic needs, is a difficult task which needs to be based on direct field investigation. Most of the current analysis based on censal data lead to form a generalized view. As a result a realistic approach to women's economic activities at household unit, and in the unorganized agricultural sector has not taken place. It could be attributed to the complexities and difficulties involved in obtaining accurate information at the national level. As it is affirmed by the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, the third world women are invisible to most economists. Sri Lanka is not an exception, but now there seems to be a gradual change towards recognizing the importance of women in national development. The motivation of women with a view to increase their participation in production activities by providing them with financial assistance and by widening up of opportunities for education and vocational training and thereby enabling them to share the benefits equally, is being increasingly recognized in Sri Lanka. Thus, partly due to the inherent limitations in the available statistical data, on which most of the plans and programmes are formulated, a number of implementation difficulties are being identified (Wickramasinghe, 1987c). In order to overcome such limitations, it has become an essential prere-

quisite to examine the status of women as it actually exists within each of the administrative units or of the areas, in which the programmes are to be implemented. As noted by Whyte and Whyte (1982), it is only upon such representative samples of precise information that realistic plans for development of rural areas are to be drawn up. In the present study therefore an attempt is made to examine the status of rural women particularly of the low income-receiving families of one administrative district, namely the Kegalle district of the central highlands, in order to guide policy makers and planners in formulating realistic programmes directed to meeting the needs of the society whom is to be benefitted.

### OBJECTIVES

- i. The author's aim was not only to explain female subordination but also to outline what the state oriented implementing agencies need to know in directing aid for the rural poor. The objective of the present study is to overcome the limitations and difficulties experienced in selecting participants while implementing the women's programmes in the Kegalle district and to reveal both social and economic status which are needed to be considered in selecting the project participants.
- ii. This case study was necessitated by the need to determine who deserve assistance, as intended by the donor agency, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which has provided The Integrated Rural Development Programme/Women's Bureau, with a grant for the implementation of some desirable projects among rural women. As it is clearly emphasized by Rian (1982) and IFAD (1986), the IFAD's mandate is to finance projects designed to relieve rural poverty prevalent in the rural areas, particularly among the poorest of the poor. The selection of the programme participants from the category of the 'Poorest of the poor' of the rural community proved to be a difficult task.
- iii. One of the overall objectives of this study is to furnish information to advance the data base of the social and economic status of women with particular attention to the educational status, employment and access to assets. Therefore, regional variations are expected to be highlighted in

order to guide the plan implementors in selecting areas of priority.

However this study does not claim to give a complete picture of the status of rural women in Sri Lanka in general because there are many divergences observed among various regions and communities. But the restriction of this study to one administrative district helps to highlight the situation more prominently to enable planners in the innovation of income generating activities for the women in this particular district, namely the Kegalle district.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In order to meet the outlined objectives, a representative sample from the total population of families of the category of low income-receivers was selected. The definition of the "low income-receivers" may vary according to the income margins concerned, the level of income of the whole community and also on the views and objectives of the researchers concerned. In this study, to facilitate the selection of a suitable representative sample, it was assumed that the category of low income receivers, were households which received free food subsidies from the government. This is mainly because the food subsidy receiving households are generally accepted to be the ones who are unable to meet the basic needs for their own survival. In addition to this broader segregation, an attempt was also made to select a sample of at least 12 percent from the low income category among the food subsidy holders, for instance the members of those households which fell into the income category of below 500 rupees per month. Based on this criteria a sample of 90 to 200 households was selected from each of the A.G.A. divisions of the district (Table 1). The size of the sample of any particular A.G.A. division was determined on the total number of households of the above mentioned income category.

Once the samples were sorted out the field data and information was collected by the following methodology:

- i. By administering a questionnaire survey pertain to information on the socio-economic status of the households, with due emphasis on such aspects as women's occupational distribution, income, responsibilities, property ownership, educational standards, training that has been achieved,

**Table 1. Number of Free Food Subsidy Holders and Distribution of Samples by A.G.A. Division**

A.G.A.* Division	No. of G.S.* Division	Size of the Sample	No. of Households Having food subsidies
Aranayake	21	210	3489
Dehiowita	12	120	7905
Deraniyagala	09	90	5496
Galigamuwa	21	210	10892
Kegalle	22	220	8748
Mawanella	25	250	9850
Rambukkana	31	310	8661
Ruwanwella	14	140	4950
Warakapola	26	260	13109
Yatiantota	20	200	10253
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>83353</b>

\*A.G.A. = Assistant Government Agent,

\*G.S. = Gramasevaka Niladari.

participation in social activities and membership and officeholding in such organizations.

- ii. By close field observation based on visiting individual households to record accurate information. This helped minimising the limitation generally observed in the declarations made by respondents.
- iii. By compiling of information and views obtained from the field officers, particularly the health workers and development officers of the area, about the families under inspection.

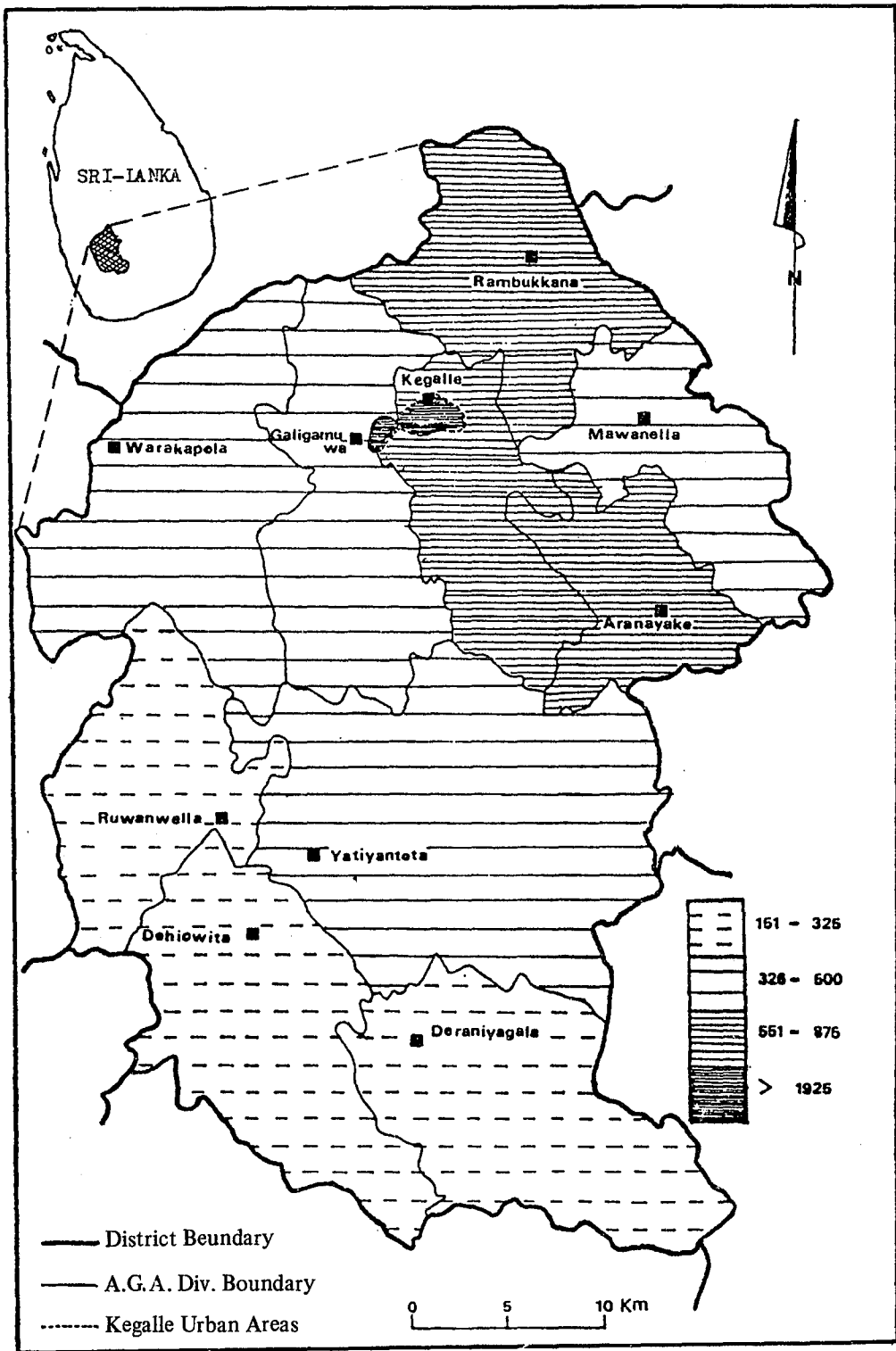
The information and data obtained in these ways were finally interpreted and tabulated in preparing the report.

## GENERAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISTRICT

The total population of the Kegalle district, in which this study is based, is about 682,411 out of which 337,474 are males and 344,937 are females having a comparatively low sex ratio of 98.7 males per 100 females, which is the high sex ratio of 104, the national figure. The district has a relatively high density of 412 persons per square kilometre and it is the 9th largest population of the Island. The total number of persons and the density vary among A.G.A. divisions (Fig. 1) and between the rural and suburban areas. Despite the highest population density noticed in the Kegalle urban council, the northern part of the district, where the smallholding agricultural sector is predominant, the population is denser than the southern section where the estate agricultural sector is outstanding. On the other hand a high proportion of the population, almost 92%, live in rural areas, and this includes 9% estate population.

However, a contrast is noticed in the distribution pattern of the land holdings. For example, about 44% of the land area is under estate sector amounting to about 46,236 hectares and 56% is in the smallholding sector which is less than 8 hectares in extent. This shows that according to the land distribution a considerable area is devoted to the estate sector, this has led to an inadequacy or scarcity of land to support the rural peasants of the district. The average size of the land holding in the district is 0.69 hectares and it is lower than the island average of 0.79 hectares, and the actual extent varies between 0.57 and 0.95 hectares. But almost 50% of the operational holdings is below 0.4 hectares in size. The rural population is largely dependent on this smallholding agricultural sector for food, employment and income, and the agricultural systems prevalent in the rural areas are mainly meant for subsistence.

The proportion of economically active population, on the other hand, varies between the rural and the suburban sectors and among males and females. According to the censal information male and female activity rates are 61.8% and 24.4% respectively. Moreover, the district is characterized with a relatively high unemployment-



**Fig. 1. Density of Population in Kegalle District, 1981 (per sq. km)  
By A.G.A. Divisions**



ment rate. About 23% is classified under unemployed in the rural sector while it is marginally higher in the urban sector.

Another outstanding characteristics of the district is the distribution pattern of its land ownership. As it is estimated from the Census of Agriculture (1981) about 11% of the farm operators are landless and almost another 51% are nearly landless, because their holdings which are primarily the homesteads, are less than 0.4 hectares in extent. This proportion covers 12% of the area. Another 36% of the operators have less than 1.2 hectares and that covers 33% of the area.

The literacy rates and the marital status of both males and females have shown some major trends during the last intercensal period, 1971 – 1981. The female literacy rate for example has increased from 70.3% to 83.2% while the rate of increase of males lags behind with an increase from 86.2% to 92.0%. However, the overall rate has increased from 78.4% to 87.5%. The marital age has also increased marginally from 26.3 years to 26.8 years during the intercensal period. But, this general figure has marked the outstanding variation between males and females; for example, the average age at marriage of women has increased from 24.3 years in 1971 to 25.5 in 1981 while that of men has decreased marginally from 28.5 years in 1971 to 28.4 in 1981. The well marked change recorded for women probably seems to be a result of the lengthened school carrier and the awareness of educational prospects of the female member of society.

## **THE HOUSEHOLD – THE MAJOR UNIT OF ANALYSIS**

The household unit can be taken as the primary social and economic unit within which a family is organized and maintained. The status of an individual household within the society is governed by both social and economic status of this unit. Broadly speaking, one could identify a number of functions, both social and economic in performance by the household unit. For example, it is the basic unit of production, reproduction, consumption, and of social interaction, the only easily identifiable starting point for any kind of social-economic investigation (White, 1980). Moreover, its economic functions are often of primary importance to the economists, and as it is described by Bohannon and Bohannon (1968), domestic economy might be defined as the art or science of consumption. Domestic groups

everywhere are the "ultimate consumers." In subsistence economies, however, household is a mode of production. To the economist concerned with modern Western or Soviet types of societies, the question of family organization is peripheral. Where, as among the Tiv, the primary institutionalized means by which people obtain their subsistence is the domestic unit, the description and analysis of the "householding group" is central to any understanding of the organizational principles of a country. However, it is an analytic unit, on which this study has been based to examine the status of women as members of the household unit.

### **THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LOW INCOME-RECEIVING HOUSEHOLDD**

The total number of population recorded within 2,010 households sampled in this study is 16,080. This composed of 7,943 females and 8,137 males showing a higher sex ratio of 103 males for 100 females. This ratio varies among different age groups. For example, the proportion of men per 100 females is about 109 for the age above 45 years and it increases to 116 if the age above 55 years is considered. The contradiction noticed when compared with the low sex ratio (98.7) of the district lay emphasis on two facts; first the average sex ratio revealed in the censanal data is not applicable to the community as a whole, particularly to the low income groups of the community, and secondly, the life span of the rural female is shorter than that of the male, which may be due to malnutrition and hardship that women undergo in their family roles.

The other feature observed in the analysis and summarized in Table 2 is that the proportion of children aged below 18, and of adults above 55 is almost one half of the total of the sampled community. Consequently, the number of dependents in each household is found to be high, creating many hardships in supporting them.

This condition in association with the low and unstable income, unemployment and underemployment and poor access to resources have advanced poverty among the rural poor. Out of 2,010 households, of which the survey was carried out, a majority is engaged in agriculture either as wage labourers or smallholding agricultural operators. The type of employment of both sexes are given in Table 3.

The agricultural wage labourers are daily paid workers and are mainly engaged

**Table 2. The Composition of the Households under 4 Age Groups**

Age Group	No. of people	Percentage
0 – 5 years	1531	06
6 – 17	5434	38
18 – 54	8098	50
55 & over	1017	06
Total	16080	100

**Table 3. Types of Employment of the Households Studies**

Work Field	Number	Percentage
Agricultural Wage Labourers	402	20
Small Farmers (*)	1206	60
Others	402	20
TOTAL	2010	100

(\*) households in this category are engaged in agricultural activities as wage labourers during the peak periods.

in smallholding operations. Often the daily wages that they earn vary among seasons, but the average is about Rs. 35.00 to 45.00 per day. On the other hand, women receive about 15 to 20 percent less than men. During the peak seasons, mainly during the cultivation and harvesting of rice, daily wages rise by about Rs. 5.00. Of 402 families of this category, 180 families are landless and live in improvised dwellings, while the rest have their own land in which they have built the dwellings, most of which are improvised with wattle and daub walls and thatched roofs. The rest have permanent houses. However, the extent of the land holdings ranges between 0.1 and 0.3 hectares and therefore, the income that they obtain

from family resources is either insignificant or extremely low. Due to the insufficient unstable income, this category live on satisfying their bare necessities. However a majority of the poor suffers from malnutrition.

The majority of households is small farmers, who depend on the produce and the limited income they receive through their own operational holdings. The males, females and children engage themselves in agricultural activities. But during the peak periods male members are able to work on a daily wage outside their own land. In terms of income, the agricultural production and the sources of family income are determined by the cropping system which they adopt. In the southern section of the district, even the small farmers partly depend on the income derived from rubber and tea, but coconut and paddy are meant for subsistence. While in the north, the crops predominant in their homesteads are minor export crops and bananas, but as to the north paddy and coconut are the major subsistents. About 80% of the households in this category own homesteads of less than 0.4 hectares of land, which is under mixed crops. However, it was not possible to get information on their monthly income, first, because they never maintain records of the production, and also because much of the production is used at the household level. Further they are reluctant to consider the production used by the farming as part of the income. Above all, as their intention is to have free food subsidies, they are reluctant to quote accurate earnings. However, if the field observation and the independent evaluation of the author is taken into account, it is likely that about 60% of the families obtain an income which is above Rs. 900.00 per month, and in that case they will disqualify to obtain free food subsidies. Nevertheless, Rs. 900.00 is not an income which could be considered as a sufficient amount to meet their expenditure even on food.

Another 20% of the households, is in range of employment activities such as masonry, carpentry, brick making, pottery making and dress making. Most of them earn considerably higher wages, of about Rs. 50.00 to 60.00 per day than the average wage of an agricultural labourer. About 30% of these households is landless who live as tenants and whose income is not stable.

On the other hand, the family size of the households studied is large and falls within the range of 7 to 13 members. A majority of the members depend either on an unstable income earned by a few members, or on the limited amount of products

obtained from their own units, which fluctuate seasonally mainly due to the seasonality of the crop production.

Furthermore, these households in the low income-receiving category are unable to meet even the food requirements of their families. Yet, due to the social commitments and traditional norms they are compelled to spend at least 10 to 15% of the income on social obligations. Occasional payment of debts to the local rich is common, and the expenditure on education, clothing, health care and nutritional constituents are things that are generally ignored or sometimes inadequately covered. Therefore, without any doubt, poverty among the low income-receiving households is one of the barriers which has to be removed if development is to be achieved.

### **WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT, INCOME AND SOURCES OF INCOME**

Within the system of smallholding agriculture operation, in which most of the women in the studied category are found to be engaged, sharing of farming activities with the men is predominant. The proportion of women employed in organized sectoral activities is low (Table 4). Although women's unemployment rate is about twice as that men, they do a considerable amount of weeding, harvesting, replanting, and sowing while men do the heavier tasks of ploughing, hauling, fertilizing, threshing, field preparation etc. In addition to the unpaid work, which they perform contributing to the productive activities of the household, occasionally they employed themselves as daily wage labourers to supplement the family income, in order to overcome the family hardships. As it is discovered by Illo (1970), these women decide for themselves whether it is necessary to find work to supplement the family needs. However, in the present study it was found that the relief from the household chores, the care of children and also the availability of work enable women to work away from their families and their own land. About 40% of the women work occasionally during the paddy transplanting and harvesting period either on a labour exchange basis or daily wage basis. Although a direct income is not accrued to the family on the labour exchange basis, it is advantageous in completing the work within a shorter time-span and also in cutting down costs. However, their collective performance was taken as pleasure. In addition to the work attended to in the paddy farming, women provide skilled labour in tea plucking and rubber tapping too.

In the category of non-agricultural wage tasks are tasks such as pottery making and brick making. But in each of these sectors their wages are about 15% less than that of men. Although they supply an indispensable service in both agricultural and non-agricultural work, women are reluctant to demand higher wages due to the possible risk of losing their opportunities of work. Often women's working time, particularly that of the housewives are longer, and are in the range of 16 to 18 hours, inclusive of household chores. Nevertheless much of the productive activities covered by women are not taken into account wholly, or else are being ignored altogether as it is supposed to be their imperative duty. Although this type of work by women is not evaluated in terms of a direct contribution towards the family it should be at least taken into account and considered therefore as economically beneficial. Quite clearly more than 40% of the energy spent by the households either on income earning or producing household subsistents is provided by women.

In addition, the time spent by women on cooking and related work is about 7 to 9 hours a day, depending on the size of the family. This excludes the time taken in collecting water, firewood, and the preparation of food. But, during the peak seasons in the agricultural sector women tend to sacrifice the household activities and leisure in order to raise their family income by working as wage labourers. Women contribute a greater proportion to the family's welfare and as revealed in this study they are more capable than men in attending to household responsibilities and in controlling family cash.

### **WOMEN'S LITERACY AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING**

The literacy level of women is an important factor in the advancement of women's status, for it contributes to raise their self confidence by giving them qualities of leadership and power in decision making both in the family and in the society.

The literacy level of women in the studied low income receiving category is low, having 81%, compared to the district average of 83.2% revealed at the Census of Population (1981). As in many other aspects, this rate also varies among the respective divisions (Table 4). In the southern areas which are remote in terms of the infrastructure having a low rate about 70% are noted, while in the advanced areas to

Table 4. An Overall Information Gathered from the Field Survey of the Women's Social Standards

A.G.A. Division	Average family size	% between age 18-55yrs	% employees	% employed in agric.	% household heads	% owning resources	% of literate
Aranayake	7	50	9	87	12	14	87
Dehiowita	7	45	13	93	14	30	70
Deraniyagala	7	49	11	92	14	39	72
Galigamuwa	8	50	11	80	10	14	90
Kegalle	8	54	14	75	10	15	90
Mawanella	7	49	13	78	11	12	88
Rambukkana	8	48	10	81	11	9	86
Ruwanwella	8	50	13	88	7	20	72
Warakapola	7	51	13	79	9	12	89
Yatiyantota	8	48	14	92	12	16	73
District	8	48	12	85	11	16	81

the north a higher rate, above 85% is found. Although it tends to give the idea that there exists a spatial variation, the explanation is to be found in the age factor. For example about 92% who are in the age category of above 57 years are illiterate, while almost 95% in the young generation below the age of 30 years are those who have passed Grade 6 at their school. A 48% of the latter group have passed Grade 8. Here we find that the low rate of literacy is dominant among the elder group. However, in time to come with advancement of literacy the backwardness of rural women in the society could be eradicated gradually if their access to assets are widened up.

Further, the opportunities for rural women for vocational training are very limited. About 640 women in the age group of 20 to 35 have had opportunities for training in dress making, weaving, pottery and handicrafts. Yet 200 of them have not made use of the knowledge and experience thus gained to engage themselves in relevant productive activities due to lack of resources. On the other hand, as seen in Table 4, although 85% of the women are engaged in activities connected with agriculture, the opportunities given to them to advance knowledge traditionally gained is negligible. Partly due to this shortcoming much of the utilizable low cost resources (e.g. hut waste, crop waste, animal waste) are not properly used in order to increase the household agricultural production. Women's participation at seminars and workshops is also very limited, when 817 cases were observed; this was again restricted to family health and family planning programmes. Under such circumstances, what is clearly observed is that the under utilization of one segment of the population, namely the women, whose contribution is of immense importance in raising the standards of living of the rural poor is resultant in low level income levels of this community. The women's determination and hopes for a better future of a family are to be achieved through a better income.

### **WOMEN'S MARITAL STATUS AND THE POSITION IN THE FAMILY**

Marriage is one of the most significant events in the lives of rural women, mainly of educationally and economically backward groups, because it affects women's wellbeing and thereby the social status for a greater part of their lives. Of the 2,010 households surveyed in this study, 2,624 women are married and this means that about 26% of the families are in shared dwellings either with the parents



of grand parents. This again has led to an increase in the number of dependents of a family. Women's age at marriage has advanced by 1.2 years, during the last intercensal period, but the observations derived at this study are more precise compared with those of the censal figure, placing the average age of marriage is 26.2 years. This may be a direct result of lengthened school career of the girls, and also the women's awareness about the advantages of educational attainments. In addition, it is due to the preference of postponing marriage to hold family responsibilities, to find employment and the earning of material wealth prior to their marriage. Moreover unlike in the past, young women are relatively free to decide their marriage.

However, this rise in marriageable age in association with the advancing educational career has enable women to take responsibilities in the family with self confidence. Although the women's subordination is accepted as a cultural norm, a higher degree of mutual consultation on family decisions, particularly on household matters and the lives of their children, is evidence in rural families. But the extent to which a family maintains such mutual understanding is determined by the level of education, interest in family affairs, ability, courage and the strength of the bondage that exist among them. The idea that the women has a vital role in improving the quality of life of the families concerned was strongly expressed by 85% of the respondent families during the survey. In addition, the invisible roles played by women within the family in decision making is a fact accepted by 82% of the male heads. In such situations the decisions formally taken by the male heads become family decisions.

### **WOMEN'S RESOURCE OWNERSHIP AND ACCESS TO ASSETS**

The raising of women's status at the community level has to be taken place with an equitable distribution of resources and it would bring them greater opportunities for advancing participation in decision making. In this context, even though much faith can be placed on education, women's domestic responsibilities and their position are not likely to change in the foreseeable future, particularly in the low status families.

However, as it is found in this study, the total income in most of the families is

inadequate to maintain an acceptable standard of living in the family, and therefore, any attempt to improve the status of women are to be accompanied with greater access to assets. Despite the inadequacy of property owned by the family on which almost 60% of the households depend, a very limited number of women, 309, own resources (see Table 4). This includes 110 women who head the families, and the remaining 199 women own a piece of land either given by parents as dowry or inherited by some means. But most of the family property; highland, lowland and the dwellings belong to men who head the families, but women's rights and their legitimacy are accepted. The most outstanding limitation of this position is that they are unable to use this property as guarantee or to seek assistance independently to develop them for better prospects. Therefore, this is one of the conditions which prevent women's confidence in improving productive resources and roles in decision-making. Due to these reasons women have very limited opportunities to make use of the credit facilities which are available at rural societies.

#### WOMEN'S STATUS IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to the fact that women have limited opportunities to devote time on social activities due to domestic responsibilities, the proportion of women engaged in social activities is very low, particularly among the rural poor. This may be partly a result of the traditional norm which identifies their domesticity and femininity as against a public role. Even if they participate at social organizations, they are not to be seen in a position of decision-making and often remain as a group of beneficiaries. For example, out of the sampled households, the number of women holding membership in village societies is 568 and a majority of them are members of rural welfare societies (Table 5).

The actual female office bearers are very limited and they hold office mostly in the committees of societies of which are of a religious and political character. On the other hand, most positions of power in almost all societies, are held by men, perhaps this may be largely due to the reluctance to have women in decision making positions and the unwillingness of men to receive instructions from them. However, the priority given for their domestic chores is one of the main reasons for their limited enrolment in social organizations.

Table 5. Women's Memberships in Village Societies

Social Organizations	Membership
Death Aid Societies	140
Rural Credit Societies	48
Women's Rural Development Societies	52
Religious Societies	170
Political Societies	143
Other (village level) Societies	15
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>568</b>

### CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the extent to which the international and local efforts aim at advancing the women's social status in society by various means enabling them to exercise power in decision-making in social aspects, their role in society is minimal. Social activities and important social positions and decision situations are more likely to be dominated by men and only under very limited circumstances by women, and here, in this case, it will be the women who possess either higher levels of education, or higher family status. This minimizes the capabilities of the rural women in the poor category holding the important position in social organizations. With regard to the family situation a majority of rural women play a major role in taking decisions within the family unit. Nevertheless, the degree of participation of women in production activities when compared with their role in the public domain is higher. The income earned by women and the work shared in the agricultural sector are essential to enable their families to overcome poverty to a large extent. As it is stressed by Whyte (1974), whatever system prevails, the physical burden of multiple roles falls particularly heavily on poor rural Asian women who are almost certainly inadequately nourished, who have never dreamt of the household equipment which lighten labour elsewhere, for whom even piped water is rarity, and who have to toil long hours in high temperatures on the backbreaking tasks involved in the agricultural cycle in the tropics. Their aspirations are directed towards the family.

They are generally satisfied with the significant status of the family and its economic wellbeing. It is important to realize that women are exhausted by a heavy workload and longer hours of work both at home and in the field, and the time devoted to themselves is inadequate. As it is observed in this field study, and also stressed by Papanek (1977) women work for long hours for lower or no remuneration. This situation is prevalent in most areas of rural Sri Lanka.

The women's contribution to the family income is important, and its importance increases with the lower socio-economic levels of their families. Often the women in families of a relatively higher status are reluctant to work hard, particularly in the agricultural sector, which may be due to lack of such need. The women of low income families on the other hand work longer hours and strive for the family's survival. At the same time it could be argued that the unpaid labour covered by women on their landholdings would be beyond the capability of men who normally work outside for wages. It is therefore an economic necessity of the family and also their part of the responsibility. To a large extent, the sustainability of the small scale crop production, which is heavily meant for subsistence and therefore the family survival is dependent on women due to their enrolment in household crop production. Although much has been achieved by rural women in the educational sphere, it will take some time to change the social attitudes concerning subordination of women in society. However, considerable attention has been drawn and worldwide prominence has been given to the needs of women since 1975 with the declaration of a women's decade. Yet, increasing of employment channels and the seeking of an adequate income and facilities for training are some of the prerequisites in promoting women's status in society. This is particularly so in the areas where women's enrolment in subsistence agricultural crop production is high. Therefore the national effort leading to improve the status of women and the standard of living of a poor category, should be directed at those people who deserve it most. In this context the generalized information revealed at national census are inadequate, hence the planning and implementation of programme for their welfare and up lift are to be based on field investigations.

The income limit or income declared by the householders cannot be taken as the only or the most desirable indicator in determining the standard of living of the people. In addition to that a large number of indicators such as family size, type and degree of employment, household resources, nature of skills, nature of housing,

standard of family diet, and level of education should be taken into account simultaneously. Often the social and economic status of women revealed in the censal information does not reflect the reality of the situation among the poorest of the poor in this society.

Although the decision-making positions borne by women in the social organizations are minimal, the vital roles played within the household unit is an accepted fact. Within the domestic sphere, the aspects like level of education, employment and the family responsibilities are immaterial in deciding the vitality of their roles. The commonly accepted fault noted in this study is that the hardship within a family unit is an obstacle to social status.

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