

Socio-economic Differences in Household Complexity in Sri Lanka*

The joint-extended household in which married sons co-reside with their parents and one another is not idealized by Sri Lankan society the way it is by various cultures of the Indian subcontinent. However, it cannot be said that the extended family or kin group is unimportant. It is central in the determination of marriage partners, in determining the education of children, and in caring for the economic welfare of its members (Nyrop et al., 1971 Chapter 7).

Many Sri Lankan households contain extended family members. However, there are important differences between social groups in the propensity for individuals to reside in extended family households. This could reflect differential ability to afford the preferred living arrangement, different preferences, or differences in the availability of kin with whom to co-reside.

Differences are particularly puzzling during periods of rapid social change because the cultural and economic contexts within which different social strata operate often change at different speeds, and sometimes in different directions.

Modernization and dependent-development perspectives, as well as less

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theoretical ideas, lead to conflicting expectations as to what socio-economic differences in the propensity for household extension might be. According to one perspective, there should be a negative relationship between urban residence and household extension whereas according to another perspective there should be no relationship or a positive one. According to one perspective, there should be different relationships between household extension and social class in urban and rural areas whereas this is either ignored by another perspective or simply not expected at all.

The author, in a paper on this topic, attempts to generate hypotheses that can be tested empirically based on her understanding of different perspectives, and then tests them. By focusing on one country only, controlling for ethnicity, and further controlling for demographic factors, she attempts to assess the ability of the perspectives to predict the relative importance of affluence or economic need in the different propensity for household extension among different social groups. Some of the highlights of the paper and its conclusion are presented herein.

Background

Sri Lanka is a typical "developing" country; per capita gross national product (GNP) in 1975 was similar to that of nearby, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Although castes are officially illegal in Sri Lanka and caste traditions are breaking down, "recognition of caste differences permeates social life" (Nyrop et al., 1971). However, it is giving way to a class system based on occupation, especially in urban areas.

Sri Lanka is distinct from its South Asian neighbours in its lower household complexity. For instance, less than 8 per cent of the country's households in 1975 were reported to contain two or more couples compared with roughly twice that proportion or more in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. Part of this difference could be explained by such demographic factors as the later age at marriage in Sri Lanka. At roughly 25 years for women and 28 years for men in 1975 compared with 20 and 25 years, respectively, in Pakistan (Kabir, 1980) there would be a lower chance that parents would survive to see the joint household of two offspring or would still be married when children married, necessary situations for the formation of a household with two or more related couples. Probably more important, however, is the fact that the joint family household is not idealized by the Sinhalese to the same extent as by other major ethnic groups of the South Asian subcontinent (see Nyrop et al., 1971 Chapter 7).

Extended, but not joint, families are important to the Sinhalese. Family households often contain an unmarried relative of the head. The proportion of

Table 1. Percentage of population of Sri Lanka living in complex households, by sex and age group, 1975

Age	Both sexes	Female	Male
All ages	40.9	41.6	40.2
Under 15	34.8	34.6	35.0
15-24	40.7	42.1	39.3
25-34	47.5	44.2	51.0
35-49	36.2	36.0	36.4
50-64	50.3	58.8	42.7
65 and over	74.4	85.7	65.3
N=	43,079	21,374	21,705

Source: Susan De Vos and K. Radhakrishna Murty, "The age pattern to living in a complex family household in Sri Lanka," Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, no date (mimeo).

persons, by sex and age, living in complex households (with either extended or joint families) in Sri Lanka in 1975 is presented in **table 1**. The proportion is lowest among persons under 15 years of age (35 per cent) and greatest among those aged 65 or more (74 per cent), but the increase is not monotonic and the pattern differs by sex.

The family is central in the determination of marriage partners (Nyrop et al., 1971) and although lower than in other parts of South Asia, household complexity appears to be higher in Sri Lanka than in developed countries. This is indicated in table 2 by relative rates of household headship. Calculated as the percentage of a population of a given age-sex group that is considered a household head, *lower rates* indicate *greater household complexity* because more individuals reside in a household headed by someone else.

Theoretical perspectives

According to the "modernization" perspective, the null relationship between household complexity and urban/rural residence that existed in pre-industrial society would shift. The reason for this is based on a better "fit" of the conjugal household with an urban-industrial society whereas a traditionally extended family would "fit" better with a pre-modern agricultural society (Goode, 1963). Therefore complex households would be expected to be much less common among urban residents than among rural residents, especially among the middle class.

Table 2. Age-specific headship rates for Sri Lanka and selected countries/areas

Country/area	Male					
	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Sri Lanka (1975)	3	36	75	88	92	80
West Bengal (1951)	23	52	72	76	76	60
Japan (1970)	11	61	83	91	94	87
United States (1970)	21	84	92	93	94	87
Female						
Sri Lanka (1975)	0.2	2	10	17	27	33
West Bengal (1951)	2	6	10	12	12	10
Japan (1970)	4	4	8	16	19	13
United States (1970)	5	11	13	16	26	42

Note: Age-sex-specific headship rates are the percentage of any given age-sex category that is reported as the household head.

Source: Sri Lanka Fertility Survey household schedule weighted counts. United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 1981. "Estimates and Projections of the Number of Households by Country, 1975-2000," Working Paper E S A / P / W F . 7 3 .

According to this modernization perspective, it could be hypothesized that the "pre-industrial" household organization persists in rural areas while the "modern" organization dominates in urban areas (see also Shah, 1974; pp. 98-101). If this were true, one would find an interaction in the relationships of residence and social status with household composition: household complexity would be positively associated with social status in rural areas but not in urban areas. Perhaps among all social groups, but most strongly among the higher strata, there would be a negative relationship between urban residence and household complexity.

Proponents of a "dependent development" view of social change in currently developing countries offer a contrasting perspective on the relationship between household composition and socio-economic position. Low wages may force kin to share housing and income in order to subsist (see Hackenberg et al., 1984; Smith et al., 1984) whereas middle-class wages could enable people to live in less complex households. It could be presumed that households among the poor should be more complex than among the well-to-do rather than the other way around. Also, it may be presumed that such a mechanism could in-

volve either urban or rural residents, implying that no interaction necessarily exists between residence and social class in their relationships to household complexity. However, if the policy of low wage rates were particularly true for urban residents, one should especially find a negative relationship between household complexity and social class in urban areas.

A third set of empirically based arguments is referred to in the paper as “revisionist”. These arguments focus less on the implications of class, social prestige or economic resources for household complexity and more on the implications of an urban context for household composition. They take issue with the idea that there is a “fit” between urban-industrial society and the conjugal household (e.g. Kuo, 1974; Butterworth and Chance, 1981). Rather than being dysfunctional, the extended family household may often be quite functional in urban areas. Extended family households may be important in the process of rural-to-urban migration (e.g. Anderson, 1971; Arriaga, 1968; Stinner, 1977; Van der Tak and Gendell, 1973). The expense and difficulty in finding housing in urban areas may cause residents to call upon ties of kinship for purposes of co-residence to a greater extent than in rural areas (see also Caldwell et al., 1982; Kwong, 1984). Female employment outside the home may be facilitated by the presence of other adult females in the household who can help in child-care tasks (e.g. Morgan and Hiroshima, 1983).

Such arguments suggest that there is either a positive relationship between urban residence and household complexity, or no relationship at all.



In Sri Lanka, the presence of other adult females in the household may facilitate the employment of women outside the home.

Table 3. Proportion of complex households in urban areas by education in Sri Lanka, 1975

	Area			
	Total	Colombo	Other urban areas	Rural
No education	33.5	54.8	38.7	32.2
1-5 years	37.5	52.0	48.7	35.2
6-9 years	44.6	52.7	46.9	43.0
10 or more years	46.8	52.1	48.9	58.4
	Total sample sizes			
No education	1 172	35	107	1 030
1-5 years	2 438	121	260	2 057
6-9 years	1 624	168	267	1 190
10 or more years	842	75	166	601
Total	6 076	399	800	4 878

Note: Data come from the Sri Lanka Fertility Survey household and fertility samples. Distributions are based on weighted counts for a sample of 6,076 ever-married women 15-49 years of age.

They do not help predict the manner in which social strata might differ in their level of household complexity. (See **table 3** for trivariate crosstabulation of sample survey data).

The hypotheses stemming from the “modernization” perspective that: (a) there is a negative relationship between urban residence and household complexity; and (b) there is a positive relationship between household complexity and social class among rural residents but not among urban residents, is tested in a model that the author states can be used also to test the other hypothesized relationships. (However, this is not her final model).

If the relationship between social class and household complexity is the same in urban and rural areas, there would be no interaction between residence and social class. Likewise, if the relationship between residence and household complexity is the same among different social classes, there would be no significant interaction.

The study

Data

Data for the study come from a merged file of the household and individual surveys of the Sri Lanka World Fertility Survey (SLFS) conducted in 1975. Relevant information from the SLFS household and fertility files were linked together to form a nationally representative file of households lived in by women of childbearing age.

Such households constituted roughly 83 per cent of all households in the country. Roughly the same as the total household sample with respect to urban rural composition, the final sample comprises 6,076 households.

Variables

A complex household is defined as one in which there are related members belonging to two or more different conjugal units. This is a simplification of the scheme of Eugene Hammel and Peter Laslett (1974) in which there are five basic types of households: *solitaire*, *no family*, *simple family*, *extended family* and *multiple family*.

However, less than 1 per cent of the households of ever-married women 15-49 years old had only one person or were composed of unrelated individuals. Rather, the major contrast in household type was between simple family households, containing members who all belong to the same family nucleus (59 per cent), and complex households with members of more than one conjugal unit (31 per cent). (See [table 4](#)).

In its simple form, the scheme ignores the presence of household members who are unrelated to the household head such as servants or boarders.

The variable for residence is coded as "Colombo, other urban, rural." Social class is indicated by education as a characteristic of the woman instead of her husband. This is important because the sample is of ever-married women 15-49 years of age. Education is treated as a four-category variable in this study: none, 1-5 years, 6-9 years and 10 or more years.

In addition to independent and dependent variables of interest, the author controls for a number of demographic and life course characteristics of the women that are related to household composition: age, marital status and number of children.

A final control variable that was found to be related to household complexity is ethnicity. There are three categories: Sinhala, Tamil and Moor.

Table 4. Selected characteristics of ever-married women of childbearing age not living on an estate in Sri Lanka, 1975

Characteristics	Percentage	Number
Household complexity		
Simple	58.8	3 573
Complex	41.2	2 503
Residence		
Colombo	6.6	399
Other urban	13.2	799
Rural	80.2	4 878
Education		
None	19.3	1 172
1-5 years	40.1	2 438
6-9 years	26.7	1 624
10 or more years	13.9	842
Age		
15-24 years	15.4	938
25-34 years	36.6	2 226
35-44 years	32.4	1 969
45-49 years	15.5	943
Marital status		
Married	87.4	5 311
Not married	12.6	765
Number of living children		
None	8.4	509
One	15.1	917
Two	15.6	947
Three	14.6	889
Four	12.4	755
Five or more	33.9	2 059
Ethnicity		
Sinhala	78.3	4,757
Tamil	14.5	880
Moor	7.2	439

Note: For 6,076 ever-married women 15-49 years of age; the distributions are based on weighted counts.

Source: Sri Lanka Fertility Survey and Household Survey, 1975.

The Model

After testing the significance of different models through a stepwise procedure, the author settled on the following as the final model:

$$C = \text{ETH} + \text{A} + \text{M} + \text{K} + \text{A} * \text{M} + \text{A} * \text{K} + \text{M} * \text{K} + \text{A} * \text{M} * \text{K} + \text{R} + \text{ED} + \text{R} * \text{ED}$$

where

C	=	household complexity (complex, simple);
ETH	=	ethnicity (Sinhala, Tamil, Moor);
A	=	age (15-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-49);
M	=	marital status (not married, married-spouse-present);
K	=	number of live children (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5+);
A*M	=	interaction between age and marital status;
A*K	=	interaction between age and number of live children;
M*K	=	interaction between marital status and number of live children;
A*M*K	=	interaction between age, marital status and number of live children;
R	=	residence (Colombo, other urban, rural);
ED	=	education (none, 1-5 years, 6-9 years, 10 or more years);
R*ED	=	interaction between residence and education; and
*	=	interaction between the variables.

The model was estimated with the Generalised Linear Interactive Modelling programme, commonly known as GLIM (Baker and Nelder, 1978). Logit regression was used to adjust for heteroscedasticity introduced by a dichotomous dependent variable (household complexity). The independent and control variables were treated as categorical or numerical. The significance of each element in the equation was ascertained through a Chi-squared test (probability = <.001) of the ratio of the difference in the scaled deviance and degrees of freedom of models including and excluding each element.* In addition, the significance of education and residence within categories of residence or education was obtained by estimating the model within these subgroups.

Results

In providing the results, the author explains the significance of the interaction between education and residence, education differences in household complexity and urban-rural differences in different social strata. The results are summarized in **tables 5-6**.

* This was done in a hierarchical fashion such that if an interaction was found significant, its separate elements were not then tested for significance, as in the interaction between age, marital status and the number of live children.

Table 5. Logit effects of residence on living in a complex household for the whole country and within educational groups, Sri Lanka, 1975

Area	Bivariate		Controlling for ethnicity and demographic factors*			
	Total	None	Years of schooling			
			1-5	6-9	10 or more	
Rural	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted
Other urban	3.39	1.78	1.35	3.63	1.86	0.34
Colombo	2.00	3.24	7.76	5.50	3.16	0.52
Significance	<.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	=.05

Notes: Based on sample of 6,076 ever-married women 15-49 years of age. Logit effects are transformed into the natural form. Coefficients represent the natural antilog of the logit coefficients. Thus in the bivariate case, residents of "other urban" areas are 3.39 times more likely than rural residents to live in a complex household. Residents of Colombo are 2.00/3.39 times more likely to live in a complex household than are residents of "other urban" areas.

* Ethnicity, age, marital status and number of live children.

Conclusion

In her conclusion, the author states that differences in the composition of households between social groups in developing countries have long proved a puzzle to social scientists. Unfortunately the nature of household organization or composition is not dealt with in many treatises on social change, making such differences particularly problematic when societies are undergoing rapid change. Nonetheless, three change perspectives that the author refers to as "modernization," "dependent-development" and "revisionist" can be used to motivate different expectations about the relationship between household complexity on the one hand and urban/rural residence and social status on the other. She states that none of them is entirely consistent with data for ever-married women collected by the Sri Lanka Fertility Survey in 1975.

The modernization perspective leads one to expect a negative relationship between household complexity and urban residence, especially among the middle and upper class. Instead, the author found a generally positive relationship between household complexity and urban residence, especially among the lower class.

Table 6. The effect of education on household complexity within different areas of Sri Lanka, 1975. For 6,076 ever-married women 15-49 years of age

	Bivariate	Controlling for ethnicity and demographic factors*			
		Total	Colombo	Other urban	Rural
Education					
None	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted
1-5 years	1.51	1.12	0.54	2.69	1.02
6-9 years	2.95	1.62	0.39	2.19	1.58
10 or + years	8.51	3.89	0.34	1.45	6.02
Significance	<.001	<.001	>.05	>.05	<.001

Notes: The effects are expressed as odds of living in a complex household compared with a simple family household between omitted and included categories, in natural as opposed to log form. For instance, in rural areas (last column) individuals with 10 or more years of education are estimated to be 6.02 times more likely than people with no education to live in a complex household instead of a simple family household.

* Ethnicity, age, marital status, number of living children.

The dependent-development perspective leads one to expect a negative relationship between household complexity and social class, especially in urban areas. Instead, the author found a positive relationship between household complexity and social class in rural areas, and no relationship in urban areas.

The revisionist perspective is based on the observation that in a number of developing countries, there appears to be a positive relationship between household complexity and urban residence. The author found this to be the case in Sri Lanka as well. However, the revisionist perspective did not help to predict that the urban-rural difference was greatest among the least educated, decreased in magnitude with increases in education, and was insignificant among women with 10 or more years of education (14 per cent of the sample). In addition, the revisionist perspective failed to predict the positive association between household complexity and educational attainment in rural areas, or the null relationship in urban areas.



Extended family living offers advantages to the poor in urban areas of Sri Lanka; extra dependents can be cared for by older relatives. Also, such arrangements offer benefits to the middle class as the better educated children in such families can afford to wait for attractive jobs while the extended family supports them.

The findings could be explained if the lowest class were most vulnerable to the economic pressures of a housing shortage in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, but too poor to care for extra dependent individuals in rural areas. This perspective, like the "revisionist" one, does not predict a negative relationship between urban residence and household extension, among either the lower or among the middle and upper classes. Rather, the middle class as well as the poor in urban areas may well find advantages to extended family living, even if their reasons are different. For instance, it is often asserted that unemployment may be higher among the young and better educated because they can afford to wait for an attractive job, presumably because they can rely on a middle class family to support them while they are unemployed. The author states: "Unfortunately, I do not have data regarding the availability of housing or the economic activity of extended family members that is needed to test this idea. Hopefully future research will. Perhaps even more important, however, is the need for theories of social change to pay more attention to the position of the family and household in that change."

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