

Meeting the Basic Needs of the Family: The Changing Economic Role of Wives and Daughters in the Villages of North Central Province of Sri Lanka

Executive Summary:

The paper focuses attention on the diversity of income portfolios of rural women in poor households in the drought-prone areas of the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka. Farming is still an important activity but more and more females are drawn into non-farm activities as a survival strategy and wherever possible, as a strategy of accumulation. Older women have ventured into non-traditional farm activities and trading of agricultural produce while the younger (both married and unmarried) women work in factories or are employed in the Middle East.

A brief introduction, the statement of objectives and the conceptualisation are included in section one of the paper. The methodology employed, and the physical and socio-economic issues of the region are discussed in the next section. In the main section of the paper, the different strategies undertaken by women in poor households and their impacts are analysed.

Three types of households in three traditional tank villages viz., a) male headed households where both husband and wife contribute to household expenses, b) de facto and de jure female headed households in which females are sole providers and decision makers and c) families in which young unmarried females provide the major proportion of funds for the family were selected. Data was collected through questionnaires, in-depth interviews with women, discussion with key informants and observation. A selected number of case studies have been used to illustrate the diversity and impacts of female employment.

The research showed that the diversification of income sources has helped the women to reduce the impacts of shocks such as climate variability and the loss of the male breadwinner. It has also enabled women in poorer households to increase their income, reduce seasonal poverty, accumulate assets and improve the quality of health and education of the children. The study highlighted the urgent need to support diversification of economic activities of rural women, assist them to obtain micro credits, to acquire skills and to gain access to new opportunities.

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