

# **Transformation from Extended to Nuclear Families and the Emergence of Female-headed Households (FHHs) in Sri Lanka: Unseen Realities Connected to Wellbeing**

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Pre-colonial Sri Lankan family was extended in nature and provided a strong safety net for the wellbeing of its vulnerable members, especially women. This created room for the unmarried to remain in, and the estranged, deserted and widowed to return to. The extended family, in situations of distress, limited the emergence of households consisting of lone women or lone women with children. The colonial era brought about many changes that deteriorated the extended family. Today the majority of family households in the country are nuclear and nearly a quarter of the total households are female-headed. Deterioration of the extended family is seen as a major cause for the emergence of FHHs, identified as vulnerable, mainly because of the belief that families becoming nuclear, leaves the imperatives of survival to a lone woman in the absence of a male peer. Based on a sample survey and in-depth interviews with women heads in the urban, rural and estate sectors, this paper seeks to explore whether being female-headed necessarily means that a family is nuclear and whether female-headed nuclear families lack the support of extended family members for their wellbeing.

The highest proportion of FHHs in the study was extended, although depicting different structures to the conventional where women become a part of a male-headed extended family in the absence of a spouse. These different compositions brought in different contributions to the wellbeing of the woman head and her household – i.e. help in child care and financial security. The study also identified a process of return migration of widows, divorcees and separated women to their natal village in search of support from relatives, although they may not merge with other households but establish separate households in close proximity to their kin. This brought about specific securities needed by lone women which were not always financial – i.e. social recognition and protection. The findings demonstrate that conclusions about emergence of FHHs and their wellbeing should not be drawn on limited perspectives – i.e. because the

increase of nuclear families and households headed by women could undermine the diversities in these household structures and the complexities of support mechanisms for wellbeing.

**Key words:** *Extended Family; Female-Headed Households; Nuclear Family, Wellbeing*

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