

# **Youth and Household Headship: Issues and Challenges Faced by Young Female Headed Households in Sri Lanka**

**Boyagoda, K.**

Department of Demography, University of Colombo

[kumudikaboyagoda@demo.cmb.ac.lk](mailto:kumudikaboyagoda@demo.cmb.ac.lk)

Household headship is directly related to age. Age-specific headship rates indicate that male headship increase rapidly in their youth: 20s, because male headship largely coincides with marriage. In contrast, female headship mostly emerges with widowhood and therefore peaks in the older ages, especially after age 65. Hence, though male youth being heads of households is a culturally determined given, the same cannot be said of females. Yet a visible proportion of households in Sri Lanka are headed by young women, and this creates a demographic and a social issue, especially because age at household formation has a significant influence on the circumstances of female heads. The objective of this paper is to examine the characteristics of female-headed households, especially their reasons for household formation and the issues and challenges they face as young women in an unconventional role. The paper is drawn from a larger study on female headed households in Sri Lanka that collected both quantitative and qualitative data in the form of a sample survey and in-depth interviews. Seven per cent of the total sample had assumed household headship when they were below age 29, which is the upper demarcation age for youth in Sri Lanka. Though widowhood is the main cause for female headship in Sri Lanka, 67 per cent of the young women were de facto female heads due to migration of spouse. Marriage dissolution through divorce, separation and abandonment also appeared more significant than widowhood with 21 per cent reporting so. For the married women the challenges were physical separation from the spouse, its impact on fertility behaviour and child rearing. They feared infidelity and marriage dissolution as physical separation for long periods occurred at the inception of marriage. A relatively large proportion (12%) had been abandoned when pre-marital sexual relationships resulted in pregnancy. Apart from bringing up children alone, these women face social stigma, lack of opportunity for remarriage and sexual advances from relatives and community members. In-depth

interviews show that in contexts such as Sri Lanka where marriage and family still provide the major social safety net, young women heads both married and unmarried, are in a vulnerable situation.

**Key words:** *Youth, Sri Lanka, Household headship, Female headed households, Vulnerability.*