

RURAL POVERTY AMONG AGRARIAN COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE (SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NUWARA-ELIYA DISTRICT IN SRI LANKA)

T. Y. D. Wickramanayake¹ and K. M. S. Samarasekara²

¹ Faculty of Graduate Studies; ² Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura

thamaliwickramanayake@gmail.com

Abstract

Rural poverty is a persistent issue affecting the agrarian community in Sri Lanka, a country with a significant agricultural sector. Despite economic development, rural poverty remains a significant concern, requiring a gender perspective to understand its manifestation. The research problem in Sri Lanka focuses on the poverty and economic deterioration of the plantation agricultural community, highlighting the lack of positive gender perspective influence on their situation. The main objective of this research is to comprehensively investigate and understand the complex interplay between rural poverty and gender in Sri Lankan agrarian community. The study is used by the local farmers to collect Primary data for the research. The data collected from the agrarian community in this study focused on the up-country crops and tea cultivation district is Nuwara-Eliya in Central province, Sri Lanka. It selected thirty households from the Nuwara-Eliya divisional secretariat as primary respondents. The research sample selected under judgment sampling method of the non-probability sampling method and the structured interview schedule used for primary data collection. All respondents, varying in age and residency, were farmers facing income inadequacies, leading to reliance on loans. Gender disparities in land ownership and credit access were observed, with women resorting to Samurdhi Bank and Sanasa Bank loans. Despite active female participation in agriculture, traditional gender roles persisted. Challenges included women's unfamiliarity with agricultural machinery, suggesting a need for awareness programs. Education, especially for women, emerged as a pivotal factor in breaking the poverty cycle. The study highlighted parental efforts to educate children, opposing their involvement in agriculture. Respondents suggested government interventions like reducing fertilizer prices and living costs to uplift the agrarian community's economy. Anthropological research in Sri Lanka reveals complex dynamics affecting rural poverty among agricultural communities, particularly women, despite limited access to education, resources, and entrenched gender roles. The agricultural formula in Sri Lanka aims to empower women, boost productivity, and address structural inequalities through educational programs, credit reduction, and cultural norm challenge.

Keywords: Agrarian Community, Culture, Gender, Poverty, Rural Poverty

Introduction

Rural poverty is a multifaceted and persistent challenge that afflicts agrarian community worldwide, casting a long shadow over socio-economic development. people living in non-

urban areas are in a state or situation where they lack financial resources and essentials for survival. The rural poverty is in rural areas. The term “rural” conjures widely shared images of farms, ranches, villages, small towns, and open

spaces. A rural area is an area of land outside the densely populated urban areas in a town or city (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008).

In this context, Sri Lanka stands as a compelling case study, where agrarian community plays a key role in the nation's agricultural sector. Despite progress in economic development in the present, but in the past, rural poverty remains a serious concern, requiring a nuanced examination through the lens of gender. A gender perspective is critical to understanding how poverty manifests differently among men and women in these agrarian landscapes. In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of incorporating gender considerations into the study of poverty. A gender perspective acknowledges the unique roles, responsibilities and power dynamics that shape the experiences of men and women in rural settings. This lens is particularly critical in agrarian communities where traditional gender norms often affect access to resources, decision-making processes and opportunities to improve livelihoods.

The research problem of this study is that the existing poverty of the plantation agricultural community in the central province of Sri Lanka over a period of time and the impact of the gender perspective on it has not been positively influenced so far. Due to this, even though these people help to strengthen the national economy by doing agricultural work, their economic condition is deteriorating day by day.

The research problem of this study is that the existing poverty of the plantation agricultural community in the central province, Sri Lanka over a period of time and the impact of the gender perspective on it has not been positively influenced so far. Due to this, even though these people help to strengthen the national economy by doing agricultural work, their economic

condition is deteriorating day by day. Furthermore, the main objective of this research is to comprehensively investigate and understand the complex interplay between rural poverty and gender in Sri Lankan agrarian community. Then specific objectives of the research is to investigate the factors contributing to poverty in rural areas heavily dependent on agriculture as a primary means of livelihood, examining how gender affects and shapes the experience of poverty in the agricultural community, identify the unique challenges that both genders in the agricultural community face in terms of poverty and understand the vulnerabilities that may exacerbate their economic struggles and assess existing policies and interventions aimed at alleviating rural poverty and suggest recommendations or improvements that specifically consider gender perspectives.

The present research accordingly intentions to explore the complexities of rural poverty among agrarian community in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the gendered nature of the phenomenon. By adopting a gender perspective, the researcher uncovers the unique challenges faced by men and women in these community. Through detailed analysis, this study will provide valuable insights that can inform targeted interventions, policies and programs intended to alleviate rural poverty in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Poverty, despite economic development around the world, has not decreased, but is actually increasing (Schech & Haggis, 2002). The term 'poverty' is mostly used as if its meaning is clear, but this is not the case Poverty is a vague and value-loaded term, which differs in denotation in agreement with the culture and economic development. Poverty as an entity is brought into being through the institutions established to describe, quantify and locate it (Escobar,1995). A state or condition in which a person or

community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living (Liu et al, 2023). Poverty is manifested in low levels of education, high rates of mortality and poor health, factors which also contribute to poverty (World Bank, 2001: p. 31). Poverty is hunger. Absence of shelter is poverty. Being unwell and unable to visit a medical professional is poverty. Being illiterate and lacking access to education are both aspects of poverty. Living day by day and not having a job are all signs of poverty. Losing a kid to a sickness brought on by contaminated water is poverty. Poverty is the absence of freedom, representation, and power (Compassion International, 2023).

According to *Rathnapala* (1989), the most common definition of poverty is “if we have a good meal a day, cloth to wear, and some land to cultivate which gives an income that keeps us out of debt, then we are happy”. This indeed is no worthwhile definition of poverty; but it significantly defines the poverty line in the village, as conceived by the villagers. In his seminal commentary on *Rural Poverty in Sri Lanka* (1989) the local people, he as stated above. He mentioned this in his experimental commentary on Rural Poverty in Sri Lanka (1989). *Nandasena Rathnapala* selected nine villages for did his research on *Rural Poverty in Sri Lanka* (1989). There were *Kanatholuwa, Haderawalana, Diganwila, Pothuhara, Siyambala kadawara, Mallige, Meegaspitiya* and *Manawa*. This publication analyzed of the data was done in the light of experience encountered in these nine villages, although in the discussion the national setting, Particularly the rural life in Sri Lanka as represented by the villages and he had presented of poverty in general in rural Sri Lanka.

Poverty is one of the defining challenges of the 21st Century facing the world (Gweshengwe et al., 2020). Today, the culture of poverty is a topic

of discussion in the fields of sociology and anthropology. Interest in the culture of poverty gained momentum in the early 1960s when numerous anthropologists sought to study and define poverty as a distinct and separate entity. Theorists attempted to illustrate the poverty construct as an adaptive, self-sustaining system with a distinctive language and organization that sustains and perpetuates the condition. Anthropological research on poverty is different from research done by other social science disciplines. Currently poverty is viewed as a product of inequality that stems from global systems that affect the lives of individuals in local settings. Anthropologists can connect global impacts with community issues. L.H. Morgan and B. Malinowski demonstrate, that anthropologists have enhanced our understanding of the impact of welfare reform on the lives of individuals by developing alternative explanations for “blaming the victims” of poverty. Anthropologists have made attempts to expand research and policy agendas relevant to increasing economic security by decreasing poverty, income disparities, and social inequality in the U.S. and around the world (Frerer & Catherine, 2007).

There is no universally accepted definition of rural. Officially within the U.S. Census Bureau, rural is defined as territory and population outside of urbanized areas and urban clusters. Rural poverty refers to a situation in which rural inhabitants, groups, communities and societies at a given point in time experience a level of income below that which is needed to provide a desirable minimum living standard (Rahji, 1999).

Mariella Marzano researched ‘The Identification of Rural Poverty in Sri Lanka’. He concluded his research: Investigations into livelihoods can promote an appreciation of the sort of activities that people engage in and the resources they are able or would like to access with the associated

conflicts over entitlements. In a village setting the hierarchical nature of these approaches may highlight people's vulnerability. This has further effects for improvement in Sri Lanka where decisions over the allocation of agricultural assistance, notoriously at a local level, are often biased towards those who focus exclusively on agriculture and thus are considered to be ‘real’ farmers (Marzano, 2002). This reflected more than simple ignorance, and the cultural and ideological conventions and aspirations of local society. There had been a lot of research around the world on poverty and the culture of poverty. Sociological and anthropological research on the culture of poverty had been conducted worldwide as well as in Sri Lanka.

Romeshun and Mayadunne studied ‘Urban Poverty in Sri Lanka’ in 2011. They examined the likely magnitude of the under-estimation of poverty and this research presented some social and economic features of Sri Lanka’s urban sector overall, as a prelude to the discussion of urban poverty in Sri Lanka and focus on the Colombo administrative district. This was the most urbanized district of the country, containing over 86 per cent of Sri Lanka’s urban population (Romeshun & Mayadunne, 2011).

‘Poverty Concepts, Trends in Global Poverty and Sri Lanka’ was done by *Ruwan Jayathilaka* in 2015. This study provided an overview of global trends in poverty and poverty in Sri Lanka. Despite a global drop in the overall rate of poverty, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa saw a rise in the population of the poor. Sri Lanka had superior living circumstances and a falling trend in poverty when compared to the other South Asian nations. But liked the rest of South Asia, Sri Lanka had seen an increase in income disparity in recent years. Additionally, Sri Lanka's overall poverty rate had decreased recently, while inequality has increased (Jayathilaka, 2015).

Narayan & Yoshida conducted, ‘Poverty in Sri Lanka: The Impact of Growth with Rising Inequality’ in 2005. It provided some clues about what characteristics are associated with the wide differences in poverty incidence in Sri Lanka, much more detailed analysis is necessary to understand the processes that determine how these factors act as constraints to income opportunities. While employment in agriculture, particularly as wage labor, is associated with lower incomes, a key question was what explains persistent low productivity and incomes (and holds down agricultural wages) in the agricultural sector. Evidence also suggested that lack of access to markets acts as an important obstacle to income opportunities in remote rural areas, but the critical question that remains was what would be the most optimal way to improve links with urban centers and markets in lagging regions and provinces (Narayan & Yoshida 2005).

Gender is the social differences between men and women. These differences vary from place to place and may change over time. Gender is a socio-economic variable used to analyze roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of men and women (Oladosu et al., 2005). The relationship between gender and poverty has become an important topic in the poverty literature. Earlier literature on poverty focused on female-headed households and the problems they face (Appleton 1996). Gender is now being regarded as an essential concept for the analysis and eradication of poverty. While traditional conceptualizations consistently failed to delineate poverty’s gender dimensions, resulting in policies and programs which failed to improve the lives of poor women and their families (Beneria & Bismath 1996), it is now recognized that women are disproportionately represented among poor households and that poverty is being increasingly feminized (Ijaiya 2000).

Croppenstedt, Goldstein & Rosas conducted, ‘Gender and agriculture: Inefficiencies, segregation, and low productivity traps’ in 2013. The paper addresses the critical role of women in the agricultural sector in developing countries, where they constitute approximately 43 percent of the agricultural labor force. Despite their essential contributions, female farmers often experience lower output per unit of land and are less likely to engage in commercial farming compared to male counterparts. The disparities in productivity and participation arise from gender-based differences in access to crucial inputs, resources, and services. The review examines evidence on productivity discrepancies and resource access, identifying factors such as variations in property rights, educational opportunities, control over resources (e.g., land), and access to inputs and services (e.g., fertilizer, extension, and credit). Social norms also play a role in shaping these differences. Although women may be less active in commercial farming and excluded from contract farming, they frequently contribute significantly as wage laborers in the nontraditional export sector (Croppenstedt et al., 2013)

M. S. Ahluwalia researched ‘Rural poverty and agricultural performance in India’. This study examines at time series data collected over the previous 20 years about rural poverty. The time series demonstrates that there is no discernible historical trend, but the prevalence of poverty varies in response to changes in real agricultural output per head. India's overall agricultural performance and rural poverty have a statistically significant negative connection, indicating that agricultural progress tends to lower the prevalence of poverty on its own. A slightly different picture is shown by the study for individual states. Many states have shown that there is an inverse link between output per head and rural poverty, but there is also evidence that some mechanisms tend to raise the prevalence of

poverty regardless of changes in agricultural output per head (Ahluwalia, 1978).

Rodrigo researched ‘Looking at rural poverty and aid effectiveness through gender: a case of rural Sri Lanka.’ Summary provides an overview of economic and social conditions in Sri Lanka, focusing on factors such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII) and Gini Index. It highlights the challenges facing the country, especially in rural areas where economic disparities exist. While the majority of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, the Gini Index has seen a decline over the years, and disparities in economic opportunity and status remain significant. The study specifically examines Uva and North Central provinces, where poverty rates remain high despite significant donor interventions. Findings show that short-term livelihood interventions have been successful, but long-term interventions have not significantly reduced poverty (Rodrigo, 2014).

In the context of rural poverty among agrarian community in Sri Lanka, there is a significant anthropological research gap with respect to a comprehensive exploration of gender relations that shape socio-economic disparities. While existing local and international studies shed light on general rural poverty and agricultural challenges, there is a lack of in-depth investigations into the unique experiences and vulnerabilities faced by women in these agrarian community. Accordingly, this research examines the complexities of roles of the women in agriculture, access to resources and decision-making processes, and a gender-focused anthropological approach studies the impact of cultural norms, social structures and traditional practices on the economic well-being of women in these rural settings. Bridging this research gap not only improve our understanding of rural

poverty, but also facilitate the development of targeted interventions to uplift both genders in agrarian community in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

An Applied Anthropological study is conducted in Sri Lanka. It is used by the local farmers to collect Primary data for the research. The data collected from the agrarian community in this study focused on the up-country crops and tea cultivation district is *Nuwara-Eliya* in Central province, Sri Lanka.

The sample was selected according to the Agriculture and Environmental Statistics Division, Department of Census and Statistics in

Sri Lanka. Further, the highest up-country crops and tea cultivation district is *Nuwara Eliya* in Central Province (DCS, 2020/2021). Accordingly, the researcher selected the *Nuwara-Eliya* district situated in Central Province. The area where farmers, who were the respondents to the research, live in large numbers. It selected thirty households from the *Nuwara-Eliya* divisional secretariat as primary respondents. The research sample selected under judgment sampling method of the non-probability sampling method and the structured interview schedule used for primary data collection. As a result, an important issue in recent data obtained from thirty households in *Nuwara-Eliya* District.

Table 1: Distribution of the Sample

Province	District	Selected Divisional Secretariat	Selected <i>Grama Niladari</i> Division	Sample
Central Province	<i>Nuwara-Eliya</i>	<i>Nuwara-Eliya</i>	<i>Kotagala - 475</i>	15
			<i>Nuwara-Eliya</i>	15
Total Sample Size				30

Under quantitative data analysis, Nature of the families, the residency information, Number of days of purchase consumables etc. are analyzed by using statistical tables, graphs, and diagrams in simple statistical methods. As well as computer software like Microsoft package used as a quantitative data analysis. All qualitative data collected by data sources are unable to analyze using statistics. In these cases, qualitative data analyzed using data analysis techniques like sketchers, photos, models, etc.

Results and Discussion

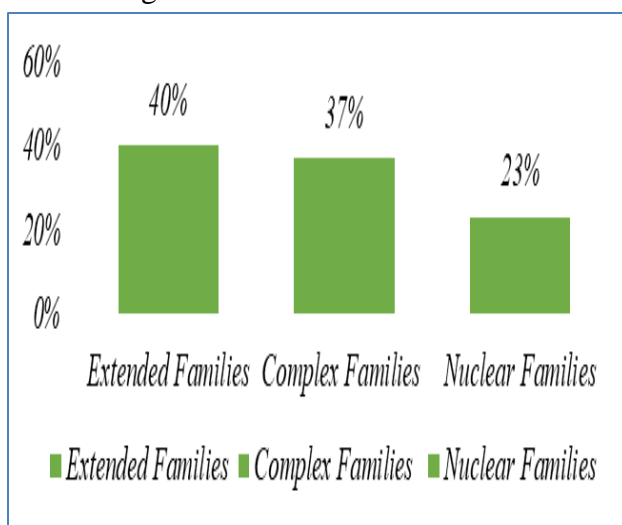
The outcomes and analysis of the study concerning "Rural Poverty among Agrarian Community in Sri Lanka: A Gender Perspective" investigate the study's findings and their

implications across various themes. In alignment with this, the results and discussion of the research are presented within the same thematic framework. Subsequently, the research outcomes pertaining to sectors demographic profile, gendered economic disparities, access to agricultural resources, labor dynamics and income disparities, women's empowerment in agriculture, impact of education on poverty and government policies and interventions.

During this applied anthropological study, a diverse group of respondents was engaged with, representing different religious and social cultures. Out of the thirty respondents. The total sample size was thirty, the total number of members of the study sample was two hundred

and thirty, and fifteen respondents were male and fifteen respondents were female. Regarding the nature of families during the study area as follows,

Figure 1: Nature of the families



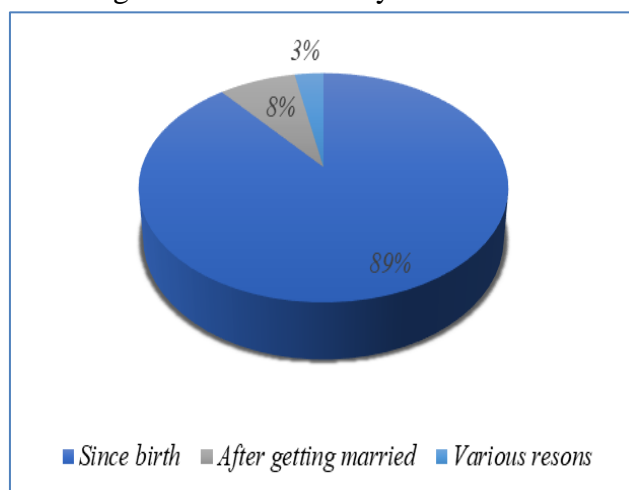
Forty percent of them were extended families. Moreover, the percentage of complex nuclear families was twenty three percent. That was, in addition to the nuclear family unit, one more external relative lived in these households. Thirty seven percent were nuclear families in the households. This revealed that the largest number of families in the study area are extended families, and the least number of families are nuclear families, however, the percentage of complex nuclear families is as well higher than nuclear families, and it is clear that the formation of nuclear families in the farming community is still at a relatively low level.

The family with the largest number of members had a total of six members. There were five of other families. As a percentage, twenty percentage. The percentage of households with a minimal number of members were two. It six point six-six percentage, and there were four of them. There were no broken families among the agrarian communities in the study area. This showed that families were not the cause of

poverty in this society. The families in the study sample were not comprised of any separate families; therefore, it should be mentioned that the independent variable of separate families or broken families had no impact on the culture of poverty, the study's dependent variable.

All of the respondents were farmers, and by taking into explanation their ages, it is possible to better appreciate their experiences. Then, the age of these respondents can be stated as follows. The residency information of the respondents can be specified as follows.

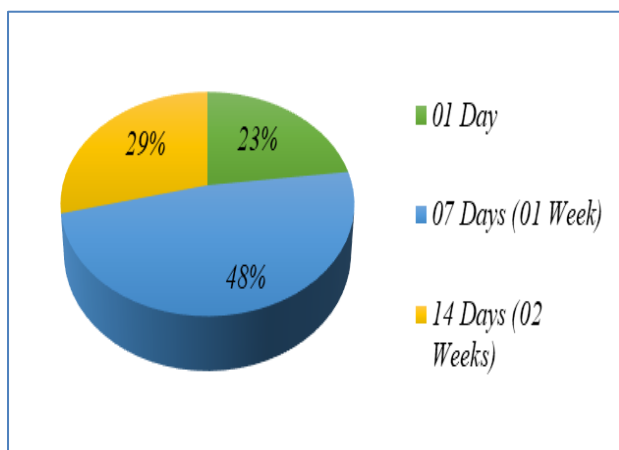
Figure 2: The residency information



Eighty-nine percentage of respondents had lived there since they were born, and eight percentage said they moved to *Nuwara-Eliya* after getting married. In addition, three percentage of those who migrated for various reasons likewise resided in the study area.

As exposed below, information related to food, nutrition, and health of members of the family unit, while purchasing consumables, respondents were first asked about how often they purchased required quantities and the factors affecting them. Accordingly, the times when they bought food could be stated as follows.

Figure 3: Number of days of purchase consumables



Forty-eight percentage bought consumables for seven days. They supposed that forty-eight percent indicated that they bought essential items on average once a week. Twenty-nine percent on people who bought enough consumables for fourteen days (two weeks). The remaining twenty-three percent had no particular opinion about financial management, indicating that even if they had money, they habitually bought essentials daily or a lot for several days. They specifically mentioned that they often prepared whatever was in available and did not plan meals in advance. Though, they planned and prepared food in advance for the days of alms-giving, paddy sowing, and harvesting. Additionally, the study found that they prepared rice for their major meals rather than relying on fast-food liked flour-based meals. It was noteworthy that no one during the research area, including infants and adults, exhibited any nutrition deficiencies. They seemed to consume a diet that was properly nutrient-dense.

However, non-communicable illnesses were discovered in this group, and in particular, six renal patients were identified throughout the research area, all of whom were older than sixty. There were also three elder-women and two kids who had asthma. They were informed that they would receive medical care for these illnesses in government hospitals.

The basic information and demographic profile of study sample can be presented comparable above and following explain about the information about agriculture which was the main livelihood of the households. Paddy cultivation could be stated as the main plantation crop in thirty households, and the quantity of families that cultivated residual plantation crops in addition to paddy cultivation was seventy-nine percentage. Only twenty-one percentage of the study sample was done with paddy cultivation. This showed that contemporary farmers were gradually moving away from a self-sufficient lifestyle. Accordingly, they had to buy some essential food items. But today, they had not sufficient income and were living a problematic life. The reason given by the farmers was a lack of proper income from agriculture. Then they seemed to have applied for loans and mortgages. The majority of farmers got used to taking loans from *Samurdhi* bank. The *samurai* officer of the villages proved this. People as well assumed that without *samurdhi* loans, they could not subsistence on day-to-day activities.

When examined the access to agricultural resources of study area, in the field study, the sample was prepared by using women and men equally, and according to the data provided by the respondents, the ownership of agricultural land is mostly in the male party. It is seventy-eight percent as a percentage. Moreover, in the study of women's assets, it was found that twenty-two percent of women assert ownership of agricultural land, and these women are married and dwell in their natal homes, whereas their married counterparts reside in the homes of their wives.

While the majority of the study area favors male land ownership, the research revealed that women often face barriers in accessing credit or financial assistance for agricultural activities.

The data contributors further informed that the women of farming families are resorting to availing loans through *Samurdhi* Bank and *Sanasa* Bank and besides that, they are also doing farming activities by pledging their gold ornaments.

Also, the daily increasing cost of living cannot be afforded and at present many farmers are often engaged in various jobs such as labor service, guard service etc.

Figure 4: Occupations engaged in by farmers



Thus, it will be clear that compared to men in agricultural household units, women also work shoulder to shoulder to strengthen their economy and fulfill their mission to the fullest. Thus, it appears that the women's party, like men, has created more job opportunities in addition to agricultural activities to strengthen the economy. It is clear that gender plays a significant role in shaping labor dynamics and income disparities within the agricultural sector.

In the past as well as in the present, women have been active participants in agricultural activities by contributing to agricultural activities. As mentioned by the respondents, women actively contribute to the activities of cutting paddy, drying paddy, weeding etc. Currently there is a traditional division of labor based on gender, where men are often assigned tasks that are considered physically demanding or technically skilled, while women are engaged in less strenuous activities. This sector subsidizes to the

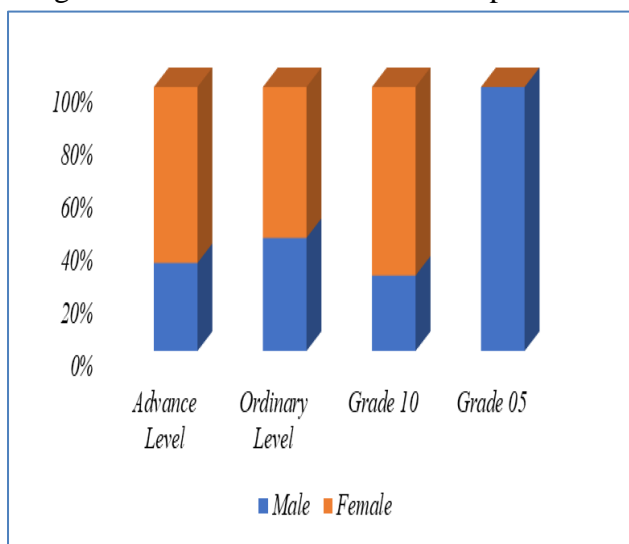
disparity in the types of agricultural work performed by men and women, with the latter often engaged in unpaid and subsistence farming. Data analysis of research on women's empowerment in agriculture reveals a complex interplay of factors affecting the status of women in agriculture. One of the most important factors contributing to disparities in agricultural productivity is women's ignorance of agricultural machinery. In this regard, the women said that if they can give proper understanding regarding the use of the machinery, they can give more strength to their men. Accordingly, the data contributors are of the opinion that it is very valuable for agricultural societies and agricultural development officers to intervene and create some awareness about this technology.

One of the most important factors contributing to disparities in agricultural productivity is women's ignorance of agricultural machinery. In this regard, the women said that if they can give

proper understanding regarding the use of the machinery, they can give more strength to their men. Accordingly, the respondents are of the opinion that it is actual valuable for agricultural societies and agricultural development officers to intervene and create some awareness about this technology.

When examining the impact of education on poverty in agricultural societies, particularly from a gender perspective, the problem appears to be deep and multifaceted. Education breaks the cycle of poverty and its effects on the agricultural community will be significant. The respondents who obtained data in this research consist of fifteen elderly farmer women and fifteen men and the education level of these thirty is as follows.

Figure 5: Education Level of the respondents



Thus, it appears that the level of education of women in the agrarian community is favorable compared to that of men. Similarly, when asked about the children who are still studying and the parents' interest in their children's education, it was found that the current generation is working very hard to provide education to their children. It is similarly special that there are three children who are still studying in the state universities of the Sri Lanka of study. Correspondingly, eighty

one percent of these parents are against their children doing agriculture and are struggling to provide good education to their children. Especially academically educated women will strive to invest money in their children's health and education and will strive to take their children's future out of poverty. Thus, it appears that education gives women the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about family planning, resulting in smaller, healthier families and less economic stress.

Also, when asked about the government policies and interventions that can be launched to alleviate the economic and social problems in the agricultural community and uplift their lives, the data contributors were of the opinion that they can live normally by reducing the price of fertilizers and reducing the cost of living. Nine and a half percent were of the opinion that the government has failed even to boost the country's economy despite its own economy. The remaining forty-one percent were of the opinion that the government should propose a suitable program to boost the economy of the agrarian community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This anthropological research on rural poverty among agricultural communities in Sri Lanka, from a gender perspective, revealed complex dynamics affecting poverty and development outcomes. The findings underscore the multiple challenges women face in agrarian societies, from limited access to education and resources to entrenched gender roles. Persistent gender disparities contribute significantly to the perpetuation of poverty in these community. But in this study area, it was not possible to identify the completely destitute poor families, but it is clear that these people act as a hindrance in the economic development of these people through the provision of concessional loans, prosperity subsidies, etc. by various rural societies and

banks. But the research revealed that most of the people (fifty nine percent) of the study period are struggling to strengthen their economy day by day.

The study reveals the transformative potential of education, especially for women, in breaking the cycle of poverty. It should be noted that there is a particular trend towards education of the new generation and especially educated women exhibit greater agency in agricultural activities, leading to increased productivity and economic contribution.

The conclusions of the research include conducting awareness campaigns to challenge cultural norms and stereotypes that limit the role of the women, reducing credit and subsidies to farmers, implementing targeted educational programs aimed at increasing access for women and girls in agricultural communities, and developing and implementing gender-sensitive policies that address the particular difficulties faced by women in society. But in the end, combating rural poverty in Sri Lankan agrarian community necessitates an all-encompassing strategy that takes gender equality into consideration. Furthermore, policies that address structural inequities and focused educational initiatives by the government may empower women, boost agricultural output, and pave the way for sustainable development in rural community.

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