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Tourism and Social Stratification in Weligama, Sri Lanka: A Sociological Analysis of Economic Opportunities and Inequalities**Rifka Farwin, M.T.****Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka***rifkafarwin777@gmail.com***Abstract**

Weligama, a rapidly growing tourism hub on Sri Lanka's southern coast, has undergone significant socio-economic transformation driven by its expanding surf culture, hospitality sector, and foreign-owned enterprises. While tourism has generated considerable economic activity, its effects on local social stratification and inequality remain insufficiently examined. This study adopts a sociological lens to analyse how tourism reshapes social hierarchies, opportunity structures, and access to resources within the Weligama community. Guided by Conflict Theory and Weberian perspectives on class, status, and power, the research investigates how tourism-generated benefits are distributed across occupational groups, and how structural factors reinforce or challenge existing inequalities. The study employs a mixed-methods design, incorporating 45 semi-structured interviews, including 12 fisher folk, 10 small-scale vendors, 15 resort and guesthouse employees, and 8 local administrative stakeholders along with two focus group discussions representing diverse community demographics. Direct observations of tourist resident interactions and local business practices further enrich the analysis. Findings reveal uneven integration into the tourism economy: while business owners, skilled service workers, and individuals with higher educational capital gain substantial advantages, traditional groups such as fisher folk and informal vendors face barriers to accessing profitable opportunities. These disparities stem from differences in economic capital, vocational skills, social networks, and bargaining power reflecting core Weberian stratification elements. From a conflict-oriented perspective, tensions emerge between groups competing over coastal resources, employment spaces, and market access, contributing to heightened perceptions of social exclusion. The study highlights tourism's dual role as both a driver of livelihood diversification and a reproducer of inequality. It underscores the need for inclusive tourism development, targeted skill-building, and community-based interventions to ensure equitable benefit distribution and strengthen social cohesion in Weligama.

Keywords: *Community development, Social stratification, Social inequality, Sustainable tourism*