

## PERCEIVED CHANGES IN FAMILY RELATIONS LIFE DURING COVID-19 PERIOD: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON THENMARADCHI DIVISIONAL SECRETARIAT IN JAFFNA DISTRICT

Sarththiga.G<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

<sup>1</sup>sarthisarthis1995@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** Sri Lanka has been seriously affected by COVID-19, which has threatened human lives and livelihood across the globe. As a South Asian country, Sri Lanka tends to hold a higher position of sociability and the major role of family relations life in the social structure. The aim of the present study is exploring the perceived negative and positive changes in family relations at Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat in Jaffna district. The analysis is based on qualitative study. The primary data mainly collected through 10 case study methods and 1 key informant interview. This study utilized the secondary data too, such as available literature and information received from websites. Research ethics were strictly followed by the researchers throughout the research. This study analyzes the perceived changes in family relations life on three areas during the COVID-19 period: some structural factors in determining perceived changes in family relations life during the COVID-19 period, perceived negative changes in family relationships inside and outside the home at the COVID-19 period and perceived positive changes in family relationships inside and outside the home at the COVID-19 period. The results reveal that Hinduism is the predominant religion of the majority of the respondents and they belong to the age 30 and over. Majority of the women have completed their secondary educational qualifications. Wage labour was the primary livelihood of families and the majority of the respondents live under poverty. Results highlight that family cycle; gender role and family size were main structural factors. Results also indicate that arguments, intolerance, feeling caged, missing personal spaces, changes in daily routine, standing one another less and colder and more distant were the significant perceived negative changes in family relations life. Further, this study reveals that, better communications, spending more time together, feeling more emotionally close, engaging in joint activities, flexibility in managing family life and discovering new values could be identified as perceived positive changes in family relations. In conclusion, an effective coping mechanism should be used to mitigate negative situations and uplift positive family changes in stressful pandemic situations.

**Keywords:** Economic support, Family relations life, Pandemic, Social change, Socialization

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization declared an international public health emergency on 30 January 2020 and a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented changes to families. Millions of families significantly changed their everyday lifestyles and routines during the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic (Canzi et al., 2021). The family is considered as one of the essential basic social institutions in society. A family includes individuals who are socially associated with each other. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world and a number of factors could converge to affect families. Considerably, job losses were vast, and the federal unemployment rate rose to 14.7% and the income of many households were reducing (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

The pandemic has brought many negative changes in family relationships. The biggest dilemmas experienced by parents were a feeling of being caged and lack of personal space. Furthermore, because of social isolation and confinement in the home, many parents also pronounced significant changes in the family's daily routines and rituals (Canzi & et al., 2021). Families immediately uncovered posttraumatic stress disorders, emotional disturbances, and depressive disorders (Muccie et al, 2020). And also, parents are less motivated to take responsibilities, which negatively affects their children (Habes and et al, 2020). Likewise, this pandemic has caused to many positive changes in family relationships. Parents spend more time at home. As a result, they were more directly exposed to the daily tasks necessary to support their home and family (Kevin and et al, 2019). Parents are more aware of their children's issues and aware of their responsibilities for the health and wellbeing of children. In addition, with workplaces closed, mothers are more likely to try to improve their children's academic performance (Youssef, 2021).

Sri Lanka is one of the countries hit hard by this health emergency. For a while, almost 3 years, Sri Lankan households practiced social distancing by isolating themselves at home and restricting movements and interactions. Certainly, the Sri Lankan government has adopted progressive restrictive measures, forcing Sri Lankan families to self-isolate to control the spread of the virus. Social gatherings, group activities, and indoor and outdoor activities were strictly prohibited. Any type of non-essential business was forced to shut and, if possible, working from home was strictly encouraged (Amaratunga et al, 2020). As a result, families have undergone major and rapid changes in the way they spent time at work and home. Many parents were confronted with a lot of household chores, consisting of educating children at home, changes in paid work roles, such as working from home. Faced with these great upheavals and these new responsibilities, parents have become aware of perceived changes in their work and family relations.

In the field of study, the life of family relationships is a high degree of society and plays an important role in the social structure. Most of the families who are living under poverty and unemployment mostly affected by this COVID-19 pandemic. Perceived negative and positive changes in family relations during the COVID-19 period in the study area are viewed by the village community as a massive change. With the above changes, these families also faced negative changes such as, arguments, intolerance, feeling caged, missing personal spaces, changes in daily routine, standing one another less and colder and more distant. Further, better communications, spending more time together, feeling more emotionally close, engaging in joint activities, flexibility in managing family life and discovering new values could be identified as perceived positive changes in family relations in these areas. Therefore, this study is under the scrutiny of the researcher as it identified families in the Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat that have perceived negative and positive changes in their family relations life. As no such study has been conducted in this area so far, the study has been identified by the researcher as an important study and is set to fill the study gap.

## **2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

### **2.1 Main Objective**

To identify the perceived negative and positive changes in family relations life during the COVID-19 period at Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat

### **2.3 Specific Objectives**

- To identify some structural factors on family relation life during the COVID-19 period
- To find out the perceived negative changes in family relations life during the COVID-19 period
- To identify the perceived positive changes in family relations life during the COVID-19 period

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Study design**

Qualitative approach was utilized for this community based study to explore the perceived negative and positive changes in family relations life during the COVID-19 period.

### **3.2 Selection of the Study Area**

Field work for this study was done in Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat division in the Jaffna district within Northern Province of Sri Lanka. In the eastern border of this area is the Pachchilaippalli Divisional Secretariat. In the western border, there are Navatkuli Semmani Bridge and Upparu. In its northern border, there are Thondaimanaaru sea water and Karaveddi Divisional Secretariat. In its southern border, there are Jaffna Peninsula and Poonagari Divisional Secretariat. This area consists of 232, 19 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the Census of Thenmaradchchi Divisional Secretariat for November 2021, it has a population of 73,394 and 22,889 families (Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat report, 2022).

### **3.3 Sample size and Sample Techniques**

The study used non-probability purposive sampling method and Snowballing technique was adopted to find out the participants in the study area. 10 case study methods and 1 key informant interview were conducted from the Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat.

### **3.4 Tools for Data Collection**

Case study methods and Key informant interview were used as Primary Data collection tools. Case study methods is the best suited method to get the In-depth understanding of the Topic and was used to explore the perceived changes in Family relations life during the COVID-19 period. Key Informant Interview is another tool used to their household situations, roles of the household members, negative and positive changes and impacts of pandemic on low income families during COVID-19 period. And also, Internet information and research reports were utilized as the Secondary Data Collection Tools.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Thematic Data Analysis was done to explore the perceived negative and positive changes in family relations life during the COVID-19 period.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The study was conducted in Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat area away from other people and distraction. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Informed Verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting the case study methods. Confidentiality was maintained during data collection and they were ensured that information collected would be used only for study purposes. And the right to individual dignity was respected. The data will be stored in a protected environment.

## **4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

Following are the Themes that emerged in the current study with regard to the negative and positive changes of family relation life and Impact of COVID-19 on low income families. Qualitative data were obtained to thematic content analysis through the case study methods, and key informant interview.

### **4.1 Socio-Economic Background of respondents**

Out of 10 cases four are men and six are women. Majority of the respondents (08) belonged to Hindu and minority of the participants (2) were Christians in the present study. Most of the families have a nuclear family structure. They all were from socio-economic status and were studied up to ordinary level. Higher level of education is very low. Out of Ten cases, eight have experienced positive changes than negative changes in family relations life. And only two cases have both negative changes in their family relations life.

### **4.2 Structural factors**

The structural factors on family relation life pay attention not only outside but inside the relationship between men and women in the family. There were perceived changes in family size, family cycle and gender role since the beginning of the pandemic. The present study found various structural factors that contribute to perceived changes in family relations in the study area.

Firstly, the family cycle is one of the most structural factors in family relations to survive family function. It can also affect how families deal with the pandemic. Families may have different levels of ability to adapt to pandemic-related stressors depending on their stage of life cycle. The following case study shows that:

*“When COVID 19 came, they imposed a curfew and they could not go to any work. There were no earnings, we found it difficult to buy food. We faced a lot of problems after the COVID 19 issue. The family cycle has collapsed and gone into so many problems. My wife was caught with a stroke unexpectedly” (Case study, 03).*

Secondly, family size is one of the significant structural factors for changing family relation life in the research area. The following case study indicates this fact:

*“My husband lives and works in Colombo. He didn’t go to Colombo during the lockdown and didn’t have a job. Now he goes to small job in the village. I already have 3 boy children, at lock down period, another boy child was born. Now, I have 4*

*kids, reproduction has increased and my family size has also increased” (Case study, 01).*

Thirdly, the qualitative data analysis shows that the gender differences play a key role, and COVID-19 related conditions seem to affect men and women differently, impacting new roles for membership within families. The loss of family members was another prominent and significant reality due to the pandemic. The following case study methods confirm this fact:

*My native place is Kodikamam. I lived with my husband and children, it was peaceful. My husband had a grocery store. One day he suffered with the COVID 19 when customers came and went. A few days after my husband died suddenly due to the COVID 19 when I was at home. After the death of my husband I have been running a grocery store earning enough for my family” (Case study, 08).*

Most of the case studies identified some structural factors those are family cycle, gender role and family size in determining perceived changes in family relations during the COVID-19 period in rural areas. The findings also concluded that gender role is the main structural factor rather than other structural factors in determining changes in family relations in this study area and it is mostly visible in families. The following evidence supports the findings that, in the study of Neece et al, (2012) they focused when considering the stage of the family life cycle, which is revealed in the psychological literature and may also play a role in how families cope with the pandemic. Also, another similar study of Canzi et al, (2021) they carried out that, they speculate that extended families are small social communities that can mitigate the negative effects of social isolation due to COVID-19 restrictions. Moreover, Liu et al, (2020) in their study, they showed similar findings that the COVID-19 related situation appears to affect men and women differently. Women face more challenges in terms of psychological health, caregiving overload, and employment.

#### **4.3 Perceived negative changes in family relations life**

The analysis of data relating to the negative changes of the COVID-19 pandemic in the everyday lives of family relations in the study area revealed that many causes were negatively affected among the family members. It included arguments, intolerance, feeling caged, missing personal spaces, changes in daily routine, standing one another less and colder and more distant.

*“We know the negative changes the pandemic had on family relations life as well as how people function in society. Without doubt, the pandemic has caused difficulties for everyone, changing their lifestyle, daily routines and how family members interact with each one” (Key informant interview, 01).*

Firstly, arguments among family members mostly influence perceived negative changes in family relations. The following case study reveals that:

*“The COVID-19 gave me a lot of time to stay home, my home has been like a prison, and staying home too long sucks. Stress between me and my partner due to different thoughts on pandemic restrictions in various places. We fought more, I fought with my husband and beat the children in anger” (Case study, 06).*

Secondly, COVID-19 has caused major negative changes in intolerance among family members. The case study shows that,

*“During the lockdown period, we stayed at home with my family members and we were unable to go outside and buy the needed things. We became more intolerant” (Case study, 09).*

Thirdly, the pandemic has exposed family relations to the risk of feeling caged. Hence, children have emotional difficulties.

*“When I had the COVID-19 positive, I stayed in a separate room with my family members. I felt very bad about myself. I got scared when I heard that I had to be quarantined for 14 days and family members were unable to go out. We felt caged” (Case study, 04).*

Fourthly, personal space is understood as a system of significant objects and phenomena formed by the subject, which are in specific connections and relations with family relations. During the COVID 19 pandemic, personal spaces were missed in certain family functions and roles. The following case studies indicate that:

*“I’m in a big place with my family, with a baby, so it almost feels like I’m being on vacation. However, it pains me a lot to know that my husband is affected by COVID 19. We miss personal spaces of relationships” (Case study, 08).*

*“I work in a rural bank, and I’m constantly working from home. During the lockdown period, I stayed in a private place for safety reasons, and I was alone because my job is considered a dangerous activity, and my wife and child were staying at their home. I didn’t have any direct contact with my family members because of lockdown” (Case study, 02).*

In addition, the COVID 19 pandemic caused changes to everyone’s day to day lives and our daily schedules as to where we can go and what we can do. These changes can be challenging for everyone, and this is especially true for family members who thrive on routines and predictability. The following case studies depict that:

*“In general, if I get up early in the morning, I will do my domestic work as regularly. This COVID 19 has changed my daily activities. Now, when I woke up in the morning I had to fight with my children, because schools were closed for long days where they weren’t allowed to enter” (Case study, 05).*

*“Instead of having three meals a day, we reduced them to only two; breakfast and dinner. It was not easy for the children to adjust. It affects their healthy life” (Case study, 07).*

*“I am a very religious person, I have deep religious faith but when the curfew began, I didn’t even go to the temple, A Vairavar Kovil. Therefore, I was very worried. Before the COVID 19 pandemic, I used to go there and light the lamp as usual. The COVID 19 pandemic changed my daily routine” (Case study, 03).*

Further, the outbreak of Coronavirus disease has caused one another less among family members. It causes a negative change in family relations. The case studies show that,

*“When the lock down started, I was ecstatic. Being at home became a novelty and I began to struggle. I suffered from regular domestic attacks from my husband and who could neither move nor speak. I couldn’t sleep properly and felt like I was stuck in my house. I scolded my husband, I started to stand on my husband’s mistakes, I didn’t know how to manage” (Case study, 07).*

*“It has had a huge impact on my child. He has been diagnosed with anxiety and is under a lot of stress on lockdown. We have to depend on hospitals” (Case study, 04).*

Moreover, during the coronavirus disease pandemic, cold and distant were affected negatively in family relations. The following case study implies that:

*“I have been within earshot of people saying that staying at home and social distancing damage our immune systems. If we don’t adapt to many germs, our immune system weakens. This means that we are all more susceptible to colds and flu and COVID 19 once we start leaving the house” (Case study, 07).*

The current study concluded that most of the perceived negative changes are highly influential in terms of determining daily routine in family relations in Thenmaradchi divisional secretariat area. And also, negative changes have some social evils, every member of the family may suffer isolation and lack of participation in family cohesion. It influences the relationship of life with the families in Thenmaradchi. The following documentations verify these facts, Canzi et al, (2021) in their study, they pointed out that, more noticed perceiving negative changes in their family life during the lockdown. The biggest dilemmas for parents were a sense of being trapped and a lack of personal space. In addition, due to social isolation and confinement in the home, many parents also revealed relevant changes in the family’s daily routines and rituals. In addition, the following finding is the opposite, in the study of Habes, et al (2020) which results has been addressed, if families fail to gratify the social, emotional, and physical needs, they will directly or indirectly impact the whole society. Likewise, if parents are demotivated, incapable of dealing with everyday problems, and fulfilling their responsibilities, it will adversely affect their children.

#### **4.4 Perceived positive changes in family relations life**

In the family area, a greater part of parents tried to keep multiple roles with children during the COVID 19 period. It is closely related to family caregiving. The following key informant interview represents this situation:

*“The pandemic has taken a toll on parents, especially those with younger children, who in many cases, have had to take on several roles such as, caregiver, teacher, parent with few opportunities for breaks. Many parents are also expected to work from home with their own work responsibilities. It leads to cooperation and closer family bonds” (Key informant interview, 2022).*

Firstly, communication is a much-desired component of family care delivery in family relations life. COVID-19 severely impacts human interactions, including interpersonal communication within families. Parents are forced to shift from normal face-to-face interactios to modern ways of communicating with their children in rural areas. The case study reveals that:

*“Although I lost my job, I have built a strong connection with my children and my wife, and I have a close and direct relationship. Previously, life was about work and the house help did most of the work. I know my children and wife better now, I communicate better and even if being a parent every hour of every day is exhausting, there can be no better reward than raising our children and wife” (Case study, 08).*

Secondly, spending time together should be fun and enjoyable for all family members. With COVID-19 slowing down, families are excited to spend more time together. The following qualitative data indicate that:

*“As the pandemic continues, Families may still find themselves spending more time together with fun than they normally would in area” (Key informant interview, 01).*

*“I began spending a lot of time with my family members. Although making breakfast and dinner are part of my daily routine, I spend a lot of time sitting and chatting with my kids. I didn’t realize how much I missed them. After almost a month, I feel much better and have more fun time with my kids” (Case study, 05).*

Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created various feelings among family members such as sadness, irritability, stress and guilt. Parents can help by acknowledging their children’ emotions and providing support. The qualitative data illustrates that,

*“When I analyze the positive emotional feelings among family relations during the COVID-19 pandemic, their family members experienced a lot of emotional feelings such as admiration, calm, hope, love, compassion, determination, relief and sensory pleasure. I think all family members experience higher levels of positive emotions than negative emotions in rural areas, it helps to build strong family bonds in their family relations life” (Key informant interview, 01).*

*“I have an emotional sense that I am living a profitable and meaningful life, so I feel great about my family relationships” (Case study, 09).*

Fourthly, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered much of village life with shifts to working from home and promoting joint activities in family relations. The case study shows that,

*“In my house, we have found creative ways to encourage physical and joint activities with my kids. Children are allowed two hours of smartphone using each day. We had to change the system after that, we engaged in family dinners and family games night with our kids. They were much more willing to do joint activities”(Case study, 08).*

Further, due to the COVID 19 pandemic, most of all workers have experienced work from home. Parents have a chance to spend more time with their children at home, the ability to work from home, gives more flexibility in managing family relations. The following case study focuses on:

*“Usually I’m going to bed at night after 11.00pm, because my husband will go to work out and I have to take care of my kids. But my husband is now working from home and I work night duty but it has made our life a little better because I usually sleep a*



*little, but my husband looks after of the childrens so, I'm getting more sleep" (Case study, 10).*

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has discovered new values under a microscope, shining a light on who and what our community values most. In rural areas, people have created new values between family members and society due to the pandemic. The following thematic data illustrate it:

*"The COVID-19 have created new values and practices among family members and societies. When I observe it, the importance of leisure time is growing sharply, independence and imagination is also increasing and also obedience or good behavior of children is also dramatically increasing" (Key informant interview, 01).*

*"I spend a lot of time with my family members. We use sanitizer and wash our hands often when we return home from outside. We always wear face masks to go out and not remove them. We always wear medical masks to be safe. Further, we maintain 1M social distance and always avoid crowded places" (Case study, 05).*

The current study concluded that most of the perceived positive changes are highly influential on the off-spring future in family relations in rural areas. And also, positive changes have some social integrations, every member of the family is spending most time with each other, which identifies a stronger positive change than other changes in family relations in Thenmaradchi area. This finding also agrees with the following study of Youssef. (2021) he carried out when concerning the impact of covid-19 on parents-children family relationship, study revealed that the parents have increased their interest in children's matters, leading to their increased participation in children's matters, and realization of their responsibilities towards children health and wellbeing. Likewise, among the respondents were working mothers, and due to the closure of their workplace, these mothers had an increased inclination in improving children's academic performance. Another similar study of Lee & Ward, (2020) found that parents are spending more time doing activities with their children, and experiencing a greater sense of closeness and warmth than in pre-lockdown times. Further, the study by Lades et al, (2020) reveals similar findings that caring for children is associated with increased positive feelings and decreased negative feelings. And, another interesting similar finding in this study of Gunther-Bel et al, (2020) which has been less addressed is that parents reported more improvement than deterioration in their relationships during the lockdown period, which also points to family resilience processes during the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

Family System Theory plays a major role in family relation life and human behavior. Family plays an important role in determining human behavior. From a theoretical perspective, family conflict due to misunderstanding, disobedience, high expectations and financial strain. And, sexual division of labor is using as a tool against women to maintain the family system. In this study area, most of the participant's life partners are engaging as wage laborers. They do not get enough money during the COVID-19 period. So, they took a loan to fulfill their needs. And also, they have low job satisfaction. Following on from family systems theory, it recommends that the unreasonable effect of the pandemic on poor households may expand to children. Parents of families that were already struggling financially are now endeavoring more and have less access to community assets, such as food

closets and school-based mental health resources. So, Family System theory is most applied to explore the perceived negative and positive changes in family relations life at Thenmaradchi Divisional Secretariat in Jaffna district.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 outbreak has strengthened the relationship between family members in all its aspects, such as sharing in household burdens and taking responsibility jointly, leading to reduced conflicts between them. The results depict that, COVID 19 has caused perceived negative changes in family relations life such as, changing daily routine, engaging arguments, building intolerant, feeling caged and trapped, and missing personal spaces so on. Furthermore, better communications, spending more time together, feeling more emotionally close, engaging in joint activities, flexibility in managing family life and discovering new values could be identified as perceived positive changes in family relations in this study area. So, the present study recommends future studies to examine the perceived changes of COVID-19 on family bonding and relations life.

- Especially in other regions, where family life is prioritized but, due to professional responsibilities, is often taken for granted.
- In family ties, specifically for rural families, an effective adaptive strategy should be provided to deal with negative situations and boost positive family changes in stressful pandemic situations.
- Confirm the value of listening to children and consulting with them throughout the policymaking process.
- Livelihood assistance should be provided according to the background of the COVID 19 impact in rural areas.
- Making a strong bond between parent and children in family relations life. Families in rural areas should be guided in the ways to avoid violence in marriage relationship.

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