

# **Psychological Impact of Poverty Alleviation through Resettlement Programmes: Special Reference to Young Adult Women Resettlers in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

Resettlement as a poverty alleviation strategy is common in Sri Lanka. Many local and international entities along with the government, relocate poor people with better housing facilities and uplift their living standards. Especially, providing a new housing unit with basic facilities is making them a favorable atmosphere to nurturing a new livelihood pattern, new social network system, access to market, access for school and health facilities, etc. However, there are many negative consequences of resettlement, particularly relating to the mental health and psychological well-being of resettlers.

It is also revealed that women are more vulnerable to resettlement and experience many mental health issues during and after resettlement. In addition, there are several psychological impacts among the resettlers that have been identified apparently. However, no detailed study to date has directly focused on the main contributions to the mental health of women resettlers in Sri Lanka. This study aimed to address said gap from a sociological perspective with reference to popular resettlement models, concepts, and other related frameworks. Particularly, this study is focused in Kaluthara district of Sri Lanka.

The study revealed that resettled woman usually go through a transition period where she experience emotional disturbances such as fear, anxiety and stress which gradually reduces when she adjusts to the new environment, if resettlement initiative assures, financial strength with better livelihood opportunities and social recognition. Also, study findings conclude how resettlers could experience mental and emotional instability due to lack of essential facilities like proper sanitation, efficient public services, better safety and security, corporative and pleasant neighborhood etc.

**Keywords:** Resettlement, Mental Health, Poverty Alleviation, Psychological Impact

## 1. Introduction

**Specific Aim** - This paper presents a significant perspective of **poverty alleviation resettlement programme (PARP)** and evaluates how **PARP** in Sri Lanka, psychologically affects young adult women resettlers from a practical perspective. This study may benefit resettlement policymakers, resettlement researchers, poverty alleviation fundraisers, etc, to make resettlement process more effective and people-oriented in future.

## 2. Method

To understand the complex psychological perspective and social aspect of the resettlement phenomena, ‘Multiple Case Studies Method’ was adopted in this research. The ‘**Respondents**’ were Five (05) young adult women age between 25 to 45 years from Kalutara District Sri Lanka. First respondent was a housewife married to 40-year-old man doing daily wage job with 5-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter, who got a new house under “Free Houses for the Poor” resettlement programme. She will be referred to as “**Kamala**” a fictional name adapted in this paper as per adhering to the ethical conditions of the research. Second respondent was a 29 year-old women doing small sweets manufacturing business from home living with her husband. She will be referred with a fictional name “**Jayamini**”. Third respondent is age 25 women doing daily wage work living with her husband and two (02) children referred to as “**Samali**”. Forth, was a single unemployed women age 27 living with her mother and brother will be referred to as “**Chandra**”. Fifth respondent was a divorced women age 38 doing daily wage job with a 12 year old daughter living with her parents referred to as “**Padma**”.

These respondents was selected ‘purposively’ considering their literacy and social position, where they are quite prominent characters among the resettlement community also having better life and resettlement experiences which was observed and understood during the site visits and informal discussions conducted. The respondents’ feedback was collected after lengthy discussion with them, spending almost Eight (08) days in the resettlement site. Qualitative case study interview checklist was designed under three (03) main categories namely Researcher and Reflexivity, Study Design, Analysis and Findings, accommodating thirty two (32) questions.

The said “Free Houses for the Poor” is a resettlement initiative in Sri Lanka, sponsored by international donors and managed by a local entity from 2006 in Puttalam and Kalutara Districts with the main objective of providing better housing facilities and uplifting poor people’s livings standards with better livelihood opportunities. Under this project, very poor

families live in cadjan houses and sandy floor, mostly fishermen and coolies were given new free houses with better physical structure, improved interior and external environment, sanitary & hygiene facilities.

### 3. Results and Analysis

Many scholars and resettlement research experts have discussed psychological impact of resettlement, particularly post-resettlement mental health consequences like Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms, Depression because of Inability to acquire the host language, insecure, loneliness, isolation, continues worry about the future, feeling helpless, not been able to continue their livelihood, etc.

First, poor people experience immense mental pressure, not having a house on their own. Therefore, study experts highlight the importance of resettlers having **proper ownership of their houses** in poverty alleviation resettlement (PAR) housing projects and how their happiness, life satisfaction, and positive mental health increase as a result (**Durand-Lasserve et al., 2007; Werlin, 1999**). Similarly, **Mental Health Foundation UK (2021)** emphasize the importance of a secure house with good construction quality also highlights how poor housing conditions affects mental health of family members leading to common psychological problems like stress, anxiety and depression.

Four (04) respondents out of Five (05) in this study did not have their own house before resettlement and were living on rent while One (01) respondent was living in an old abandoned house with poor house condition. Most respondents revealed that they feel really contented after resettlement since they enjoy the security of having their own house without mortgage or house rent where they can leave that asset to their children in future. Their feedback clearly indicates the negative mental impact that they experienced living in poor housing and degrading living conditions before resettlement. One respondent said how she wakes up happy in the morning and goes to bed with a relaxed mind at night, having her own house, which gives the comfort of a home rather than just a temporally dwelling.

*“I was mentally suffering because we did not have our own house. Also, in certain months, it was really difficult to pay rent on time due to financial problems” –Kamala*

Second, people experience mental pressure during significant changes in their lives particularly, when adjusting to a new physical environment. The popular resettlement model **Scudder-Colson Theory framework (1970)** highlights how resettlers could experience psychological problems, mainly severe stress in initial stages of resettlement. Accordingly,

there is a ‘**Transition Period**’, also known as ‘**Adjustment Coping Period**’, which starts soon after resettlers physically moved to new location. In this period, resettlers usually adjust to their new lifestyle and livelihood. However, some resettlers experience emotional and mental challenges during this period as a result of not been able to adjust to the new environment. It is reported that “**Kamala**” also experienced similar psychological strain, leading to sleep disorders soon after resettlement.

*“When we first moved here it was little uncomfortable for me....I really don’t know why but I felt that way.... The new house was really good than our old one...But it took some time for me to adjust to the new environment. First few weeks, I couldn’t sleep well....I used to get up suddenly in the night and felt uncomfortable...I felt scared with an uneasy feeling”*  
-**Kamala**

She also revealed how she, her husband and children all used to sleep together in one room in their old house before resettlement because there was not enough space. She also added that in their new house she and her husband sleep in one room and children in a separate room because there is sufficient space. Further she explained how her fear and anxiety disturbed her sleep at night since she was not familiar with the new place that led to persistent sense of apprehension, restlessness or sometimes even fast heart rate.

*Sometimes I wake up suddenly in the night, then I go and check whether my children are ok...I have a very strange unusual feeling which I cannot really explain...When I told my husband about this, he said it may be because we are new to this place and I will be okay soon...It took me over one month to get adjusted to the new environment and now I’m fully okay...In fact, I’m really happy now...When I think back, I really can’t imagine how we lived in that old house.”* - **Kamala**

However, according to **Chandra** who is unmarried and **Padma** who is divorced, they have not experienced such psychological challenges like **Kamala** when adjusting to new environment after resettlement also they feel that new neighbourhood is safer than earlier place in terms of both physical and social aspects. Further, they highlighted the importance of having a secured neighbourhood particularly as unmarried and divorced women living without a male householder and psychological distress they sometimes experienced before resettlement due to antisocial behaviours of their old neighbours.

Third, people experience mental pressure due to lack of sanitation and hygiene facilities. Discussing the psychological pain experienced before resettlement **without having proper access to improved sanitation facilities**, particularly toilets and bathing, the respondents revealed how lack of such basic and essential facilities leads to indignity, anxiety, fear, humiliation, and embarrassment. All Five (05) respondents agreed that they had very poor sanitation facilities before resettlement and the mental stress they experienced as young women. Sharing a negative experience due to lack of hygienic and sanitation facilities before resettlement, **Kamala** explained how one incident made her life miserable for a long period.

*“One day, one of my husband’s friends came to see him, and before leaving, he wanted to use the toilet. After he left, my husband was in a bad mood and blamed me as if I’m responsible for not having proper toilet facilities” - Kamala*

According to what she revealed, in old house, their toilet didn’t have a direct water line, so they had to fill a water bucket before using the toilet. Also, the squat pan toilet bowl was damaged. In addition, there was not enough ventilation to the toilet, and the walls were dirty. However, the new house toilet has all the essential facilities to maintain good sanitation and hygiene, such as direct water supply, commode, bathroom sink, wall mirror, and clothes hanger.

*“I feel really happy that we have a good toilet now. When you use these new things, only we feel the difference. This will be really useful for my children also ...At least they should have facilities that we did not have” - Kamala*

**Padma** also expressed her dissatisfaction of sanitation facilities before resettlement and how she mentally suffered without a toilet inside their house. Further, she revealed how she had to keep watch on her 12 year old daughter when she goes to the toilet since the access to the toilet was from outside their house and the neighborhood was not very safe.

Forth, people experience mental pressure due to lack of protection and confidentiality. It is also reported that some respondents experienced lots of stress and anxiety from time to time because of **“safety, security, and privacy issues.”** Relating to privacy, **Kamala** revealed that it was difficult to have a healthy husband and wife relationship with emotional and physical intimacy when they were in the old house before resettlement. Further, she assured that this was mainly a result of not having a proper physical,

relational and emotional environment, particularly with neighbourhood disturbance, lack of privacy in the house, not having a proper house environment, etc..

*“After my first child, I got pregnant only after we came to the new place. In our old house my husband and I hardly had privacy to spend time together”-Kamala*

It is also reported that most resettlers experienced lots of difficulties due to inadequate living space and insufficient dwelling conditions in their old house. Four (04) out of Five (05) respondents revealed that they went through mental and emotional distress due to lack of living and garden space before resettlement.

*“We couldn’t take any children’s birthday party or any other function the way we wanted. We didn’t invite people because the house condition was very poor and there was not enough space. Sometimes I felt really sad not being able to give my children what they want.”- Kamala*

She added that after resettlement, they don’t have such space problem because the new house is more spacious and also has a backyard where they can invite visitors without difficulty when there is a family event. Further, she said that children play in the garden and do gardening, which brings satisfaction to life as a mother.

According to “**Samali**” mother of Nine (09) year old daughter and Son Seven (07) years, revealed how she mentally suffered because her children didn’t have the opportunity to play outdoor and engage in other physical activities which is really necessary for a growing child.

*“My children are small...Just like doing their studies they also should play...Otherwise they will be sick children in the future...But I don’t like to send them outside because this neighborhood is not safe...This was a big problem we had before resettlement...But now we have a small garden in our new house...Actually this is not enough but what to do...Something is better than nothing”- Samali*

Another significant factor that affects a person's mental health is her/his social interaction with their neighbors. A study conducted at **Nottingham University UK, 2021**, reveals the importance of people connecting with their community members to have good mental health. However, Three (03) out Five (05) respondents expressed their dislike having relationship with their neighbors before resettlement.

**Kamala** explained why she did not like her husband having interaction with their old neighbors due to community influence on alcohol use.

*“Some days, my husband takes liquor, and that is not a big problem for me because he looks after the family...but there were many heavy drinkers in our earlier neighborhood. Some of them were alcoholics... They used to come and call my husband to join them, particularly on weekends. I hate this and get frustrated when such things happen....At times we argue and stop talking to each other because of this...I'm really scared he will also get addicted to drinks...I really get mentally down in those situations”-Kamala*

**Jayamini**, living with her husband explained, how resettlement helped her husband to reduce drinking alcohol, which brought positive emotional state and inner peace to her life. Further, she revealed how she experienced domestic violence, verbal abuse and sometimes sexual exploitation before resettlement which had significant negative consequences on her physical, mental and emotional health. She also explained how new neighborhood helped her husband to limit alcohol intake which brought peace and happiness in their life and physical wellbeing to himself.

*“After coming to the new place he lost contacts with his old friends... They were heavy drinkers...Doctors also advised him to stop drinking but that didn't happen because he had lots of drinking friends...Thank god now that problem is over and he is much better...”-Jayamini*

In addition to worrying about her husband, most respondents were really concerned and afraid of their children growing up in a bad neighborhood.

*“Every time I suffer when I think of my children's future. “My son is five years now...before resettlement, I was really scared that my child would get addicted to smoking or alcohol when he grows up, if he makes friends with our old neighborhood*

*children. Not just the son, but I'm also worried about the daughter. Even though she is small, she will grow up soon...I don't like bringing up a daughter in an environment like this...That was not a good neighborhood for a girl"- Kamala*

She also explained how things changed after moving to their new house, which has a better neighborhood. Accordingly, the new neighbors are friendly and helpful, but they don't interfere with other's life which is a great mental relief to her.

“According to most respondents, they had **limited access to common property and services**, particularly public transport from their earlier place. As a result, they faced many traveling problems, leading to stressful situations, particularly sending children to school in the morning. However, after resettlement main bus stand and the railway station were close to the new houses, therefore, morning rush was reduced, and they had enough time to prepare meals and attend to other housework in the morning. This indicates clearly that said resettlement initiative has enhanced more opportunities to ‘**common property and services**’ to resettlers and that had reduced emotional distress and brought them inner peace.

According to the popular resettlement model, **Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) Model by M. Cernea (1990)**, Loss of access to common property and services is a critical factor in resettlement which marginalizes resettlers economically and socially. This also leads to many negative emotions like stress, anger, resentment, frustration, and loss of enthusiasm. However, according to most respondent's feedback about ‘access to common property and services’, it is clear that the said resettlement initiative has improved the lives of resettlers in those areas and brought them happiness, life satisfaction, and positive mental health.

**IRR Model** also highlights how resettlement could affect resettlers' livelihood leading to ‘joblessness.’ Further, **Christopher McDowell (2000)** states that most resettlers lose their job, particularly small business owners and salary workers, after resettlement.

Findings reveal that **Kamala** also experienced a similar situation leading to helplessness and hopelessness in early stages of resettlement as a result of her husband who is a daily wage worker doing temporary jobs, has been without work in the first few weeks after resettlement.

*“I don’t do a job...only my husband works...he does temporary daily work cleaning, sweeping, polishing...He is a multitasking man...He does even painting and plumbing work...When we were in the old house, he had a lot of work because he knew lots of people around that area...People liked him because his work is good. He doesn’t go after money...He wants to do a good job and get something reasonable”- Kamala*

Further, she stated how her husband lost most work after coming to the new house. Accordingly, it had been very difficult for him to find jobs in first few months after resettlement since he didn’t have connections with people in the new area.

*“When we first came here, it was very difficult for him to find jobs...He got only a few cleaning jobs in the first few weeks...That was also through contact of our neighbor...People usually don’t give painting and plumbing jobs unless somebody recommends”-Kamala*

Further, **Kamala** explained how she mentally suffered immensely without proper income for her husband. Managing daily house expenses was really difficult, and financial challenges led her to anxiety, unusual temper, fearfulness, and even arguments with her husband.

*“First few days after coming here, he did not have work...I went really mad...we don’t have savings...he is a daily worker...how can I feed my two children without money...Sometimes I felt that in vain we came to this new house...Even though our old house was not good at least my husband had worked when we were there...Money is more important than a good house”*

**- Kamala**

However, she revealed that she felt like this only in the first few weeks after resettlement. Gradually his husband started networking with people in the surrounding area and got daily work without difficulty. With the new house, they have earned social respect therefore, considerable changes have happened in their lives.

*“Earlier, my husband did any work cleaning, sweeping, heavy lifting jobs...But now he does only painting and plumbing work...He makes good money...Because of our new house, now we have a better position in the society...This new life has*

*improved my confidence and dignity...I think resettlement is a very good opportunity that we got...I think we are really lucky”-Kamala*

Discussing their future plans, **Kamala** revealed that how they are preparing to start a small business from home. She also revealed how she mentally suffered from not have been able to support their family income before resettlement.

*“I’m going to start a small sweet manufacturing business from home. There is enough space to do that in our new house...I discussed this with my husband, and he is okay with that...I feel bad when I see only he is working hard to make money...I’m going to make sweets from home and put that in shops nearby...My neighbor **Jayamini** is the one who gave me this idea...She will also help me”-Kamala*

**Kamala** also revealed how her small business loan request got rejected because they didn’t have proper assets before resettlement. As a result, she mentally suffered a lot, feeling worthless and depressed, and given up starting the business.

*“In fact, I wanted to start this sweets manufacturing business a long time back when we were in the old house. I couldn’t get a loan from banks because we didn’t have a house...I was really sad and angry when they rejected me...Why do banks give money to people having money...This is what I felt...I was in pain and hated the society”- Kamala*

However, after resettlement, a micro-credit organization agreed to give them a loan under an entrepreneurship development programme and now she is happy with a feeling of financial security. Eligibility to apply for loans and other credit facilities from leading banks and established financial institutions for livelihood development is identified as a “Financial Capital” gain in **Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF)** by **British Department for International Development** which is popularly used to asses livelihood development in resettlement. Therefore, it is clear that said resettlement initiative has been successful increasing resettlers' financial strength that, leads to psychological well-being.

However, all resettlers had not experienced similar difficulties in their business or work like **Kamala** when they initially moved to the new location. According to **Jayamini** who runs a small sweets manufacturing business from home said that she got more

opportunities to sell her products after resettlement. Explaining the reason for higher demand, she highlighted travelling convenience to new shops and better social status they have got with the new house.

*“I have more business after resettlement...Not like those days now we can go to many big shops easily. Travelling is easy from this place. And with our new house we have better regard from people. People respect us and like to work with us. Lots of people recommend our products to their friends. When shop owners know that you are poor they bargain a lot...”-Jayamini*

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined a different dimension of **poverty alleviation resettlement programme (PARP)** and evaluated how **PARP** in Sri Lanka, psychologically affects young adult women resettlers. This was carried out as a multiple case study of five (05) women resettler with different ages, marital status, household counts and family members. However, their income levels and income type were relatively similar and all got a new house under ‘free houses for the poor’ a poverty alleviation resettlement programme in Kalutara District. The evaluation mainly focused how said resettlement programme psychologically affected resettlers and compared their emotional and mental status before and after relocation. According to findings, it is concluded that there is a significant relationship between a women’s mental well-being and having a good house and its ownership. Findings also suggests that said resettlement initiative is successful assuring said argument where resettlers enjoy better mental health with inner peace being safe and free in a new house after resettlement. Also, the study explains how some women go through a transition period in resettlement that takes time to adjust and cope with the new environment where they experience emotional disturbance like excess worry and fear that leads to sleep disruption and anxiety problems. However, this is not common to most respondents in this study therefore, it suggests that said poverty alleviation resettlement project was not a negative emotional experience to all resettles as suggested by certain resettlement models.

In addition, it is also clear how poverty can affect women with negative emotions like indignity, anxiety, fear, humiliation, and embarrassment, particularly not having basic and essential facilities such as proper sanitation, access to public services, safety, and

security. Since all respondents agreed with said argument, it justifies the important of resettlement authorities pay careful attention providing such facilities in future resettlement programmes.

The study also concludes the importance of having a good neighbourhood, financial strength, and social status to enjoy inner peace of mind and overall emotional and psychological well-being of a woman. Further, findings reveal that most resettlers had gained better social recognition and also they satisfied with their new neighbours. As suggested in IRR Model, few respondents have experienced negative impact on their jobs after resettlement that led to psychological stress while others have gained advantage of relocation programme and developed their business and work.

With reference to the overall success of the ‘free houses for the poor’ programme, it can be concluded that except for a few occurrences the woman who participated in this case study is emotionally and mentally satisfied with their resettlement experience and psychological impact of poverty alleviation through resettlement is positive and satisfactory. Further, study findings also conclude the importance of resettlement authorities pay critical attention to psychological and emotional wellbeing of women and this study may benefit resettlement policymakers, resettlement researchers, poverty alleviation fundraisers, etc, to make resettlement process more effective and people-oriented in future, which was one of the main focus of this research.

## **5. Declarations**

### **Funding and/or Conflicts of interests/Competing interests**

This study received no funding from any internal or external entity and the authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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