

A BUDDHISM AS A TOOL FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION OF FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism includes a unique analysis about human psychology and adaptation practices which help to relief of some psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, stress and aggression. Household is a basic unit of the social organization in order to well-function of the society. Although household has been considered as a universal of all social institutions, it can be identified that modern household has undergone significant transformations in its structure in the modern society. Female-Headed Households (FHHs) is a new structural form of household and this type of household has become significant phenomena in both developed and developing countries. According to the most recent Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, out of 5.4 million households in Sri Lanka, 1.4 million households or 25.8 percent of the households were female-headed. Main objective of this study was to identify Buddhist adaptation practices of FHHs which are used for psychological adaptation in their transformation situations. The empirical study was conducted in five Grama Niladari Divisions of Galgamuwa Divisional Secretariat division which conveyed a marked increase of FHHs and a highly climate affected rural area in Sri Lanka. Data were collected from a

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hundred FHHs based on Purposive sampling based on the list of FHHs in Galgamuwa divisional secretariat. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used as primary data collection techniques based on the survey method. As a result of this, majority of women (89%) have mentioned that they have tended to religious adaptation methods such as Shramadana campaigns for religious activities (repairing pagodas, constructing religious buildings etc.) arms giving and pilgrimage rituals to relief from critical stressful circumstances and to negative attitudes regarding life. In contrast, few proportions of FHHs (14%) had mentioned that they have tended to spiritual practices for mental concentration such as observing sil and meditation practices. Based on the findings, it has suggested that spiritual practices for mental concentration and counseling practices related to Buddhism should be promoted to reduce negative impacts of issues related to FHHs and to absorb full potentials of them into development discourse through empowering psychological well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

In every human society, the household is one of the most significant and essential parts of living. As an institution, it performs numerous significant roles in the socialization process and integrates generations into the norms and value system of the society. Household is a basic and essential unit of the social organization in order to well-function of the society (Haralambos & Halborn, 1995). According to Robert Bierstedt, household is the most significant social institution that offers various experiences. As human we are always with the household from the history of human civilization (Rao, 2010). Hence, the household influences the whole society in numerous ways and is a locus of an individual's social life. As per the opinion of United States Census Bureau, A household consists of all the people who occupy a housing unit. A household includes the related family members and all the unrelated people, if any such as lodgers, foster children, wards, or employees who share the household unit. A person living alone in a household unit, or group of unrelated people sharing a household unit such as partners or roomers, is also counted as a household" (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Although, household have been considered

as a universal of all social institutions, it can be identified that modern household has undergone eminent transformations in its structure in the modern society. In recent decades, Female-Headed Households (FHHs) emerged as a new structural form of household and this type of households have become significant phenomenon in the last half of 20th and 21st century (Baros, Fox & Mendonca, 1994). There are a large number of conceptual perceptions in defining the FHHs. Hence, there is not a unique definition which is accepted worldwide on female headship of households. “Female Headed Households are households where either no adult males are present, owing to divorce, separation, migration, non-marriage or widowhood, or where men, although present, do not contribute to the household income, because of illness or disability, old age, alcoholism or similar incapacity” (ABC of Women Workers’ Rights and Gender Equality, 2007). It has demonstrated a very comprehensive idea of female headship. Thus, we can identify that there are so many reasons of the state of a woman being the head of household. It can derive from being unmarried, separation, divorce, being widowed, and temporarily absentness and also no contribution to the household income due to serious illness, disability or similar causes. According to Nancy Folbre, FHHs in Sri Lanka in 1981 was 17.4 per cent (Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2003). Recently, it can be identified a marked increase of FHHs in Sri Lanka. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2012/2013 final report has mentioned that, out of 5.1 million household, 23.5 percent households were female headed in Sri Lanka (HIES Final Report, 2012/2013). According to the most recent Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, out of 5.4 million households in Sri Lanka, 1.4 million households or 25.8 percent of the households were women-headed (HIES Final Report, 2016). Following tables display the significant increase in the percentage of FHHS in recent years.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of FHHs by Age, Group and Sector 2012/2013

Age Group (Years)				
Sector (%)	Less than 25 (%)	25-39 (%)	40-59 (%)	60 & above (%)
Sri Lanka	1.2	18.0	43.0	37.8
Urban	0.8	15.8	45.9	37.5
Rural	1.3	18.6	41.7	38.4
Estate	0.9	14.6	56.0	28.4

(Source: HIES Final Report, 2012/2013: 81).

Table 2: Percentage of Distribution of FHHs by Age, Group and Sector, 2016

Age Group (Years)				
Sector (%)	Less than 25 (%)	25-39 (%)	40-59 (%)	60 & above (%)
Sri Lanka	1.3	19.1	38.5	41.2
Urban	1.5	16.1	39.8	42.6
Rural	1.3	19.7	37.9	41.2
Estate	1.9	18.5	43.9	35.7

(Source: HIES Final Report, 2016: 79).

According to above tables we can observe a growing trend of FHHs in Sri Lanka. Although, the concept of head of household are related to the power and authority, generally it is assumed that many socio-economic challenges have been faced by FHHs in the patriarchal society. In our present society, life of women after leaving husband, in particular reasons of death, divorce and separation often

confront with numerous problems and vulnerabilities. As well as negative attitudes and perceptions of the society towards women in particular, divorced, separated and widowed females have created various issues and impacts in social, economic and cultural aspects.

Man, the social animal is also a religious being and religion is a major concern of man. It is one of the earliest interests of human beings, because man not only has biological, economic and social needs, but also religious needs. The sociologist Emile Durkheim has mentioned in his book “Elementary forms of the Religious Life”, religions as a “unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden” (Rao, 2010). Many societies have a wide range of religious practices, worship, ceremonies, sacred objects, beliefs and norms. Buddhism includes a unique analysis about human psychology and adaptation practices which help to relief of some psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, stress and aggression. The teaching of buddha offer a great variety of methods of mental trainings suited to the various individual needs and capabilities (Nyanakaponika, 1972). When considering most cases of women headships, female-heads have confronted negative circumstances due to social economic deprivations and lack of social and emotional supportive systems. As a result of this, female heads have tended to accomplish religious rituals and adaptation practices as methods to relief of some psychological problems such as anxiety, depression and stress situations. Accordingly, main objective of this study was to identify Buddhist adaptation practices of FHHs which are used for psychological adaptation in their transformation situations. Main objective has been divided into three specific objectives to achieve ultimate purpose of the study. They are, to investigate various reasons which have caused women to become heads of the household, to study social, economic and psychological issues which caused to create stress, anxiety and depression situations among FHHs and to identify religious adaptation methods which used to relief from critical stressful circumstances and to negative attitudes regarding life.

2. METHODOLOGY:

This empirical study was conducted in five *Grama Niladari* divisions namely *Molewa, Kallanchiya, Koonwewa, Wadugama* and *Medawachchiya* in *Galgamuwa* Divisional Secretariat division which has situated in *Kurunegala* district, North Western province in Sri Lanka. In sampling, basically purposive sampling method under non-probably sampling was used to select FHHs from other population in the area. Then, cluster sampling under the probably sampling method was used to select women from the list of FHHs in *Galgamuwa* division. The researcher divided the population of FHHs in a *Grama niladari* division into separate groups such as widows, separated women, divorced women, women heads who live with a disabled spouse and never married women. Then a simple random sample of clusters was selected from the population, based on statistics of each *Grama niladari* divisions. Data were collected from 100 FHHs through questionnaires based on survey method. In addition, observation was also used in order to obtain an acute insight of the study.

3.FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN SRI LANKAN CONTEXT (LITERATURE REVIEW):

When considering the researches related to FHHs, it can be identified that there are very limited studies carried out in Sri Lankan context and therefore, some knowledge and strategic gaps have been created by limited access towards living conditions of FHHs. There is no research had been conducted in Sri Lankan context regarding Buddhist adaptation practices of *FHHs* which are used for psychological adaptation in their transformation situations. With respect to this situation, the researcher expects to investigate several researches conducted so far in Sri Lankan context related to FHHs.

There is a significant study namely “How effective is Female-Headed Household? A study with special reference to education poverty in the Eastern province in Sri Lanka”. The main objective of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of FHHs in terms of economic well-beings and vulnerability to poverty with compared to Male-Headed Households (MHHs) in a violent conflict affected community. According to the findings, it has indicated that low level

of education is a major factor which correlated with poverty. And also, it has revealed that adult literacy in particular among Tamil and Muslim FHHs is a key impediment to household well-being. It has discovered that assets and livelihood sustenance of FHHs are in risk and vulnerable compared to MHHs in rural Eastern region in Sri Lanka (Kulathunga, 2013). This study has mainly focused on economic stability and poverty among FHHs with special reference to conflict affected area in Eastern region in Sri Lanka.

“Mapping of Socio-Economic Support Services to FHHs in the North Province of Sri Lanka” had been another significant study conducted by United Nations in 2015. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with FHHs in Jaffna and Kilinochchi, and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with both state and non-state policy makers using data collection techniques. The objectives of the study had been to identify the state and non-state programmes that targeted FHHs in the North province, to analyze how those interventions met the needs of local communities, the effectiveness and sustainability of the prevailed programmes and to provide recommendations for future policy and programme interventions. Some critical findings had emerged through the study. Accordingly, based on data, that study had revealed an exclusion of certain vulnerable groups such as elderly and single women from the programmes due to lack of consistent definition for FHHs. And also, it had deified that lack of coordination and monitoring among state and non-state agencies to ensure the welfare of FHHs (United Nations, 2015).

“Living in Shadow: Status of Military Widows in Sri Lanka” was a significant study which has conducted in 2011. Sample had selected based on the 2011 annual report of the Ranawiru Sewa Authority (RSA). Total sample was 292 women and from Kurunegala (192) and Anuradhapura (100) whose husbands were in the armed forces, police or civil defense forces who were Killed in Action (KIA), declared Missing in Action (MIA) or disabled as a consequence of war between 1983 to 2009. Lack of financial management skills, obtaining debt, lack of assets and most of widows engaging in agriculture and informal sector were major issues related to economic vulnerabilities. And also, this research had identified that these women were often considered as

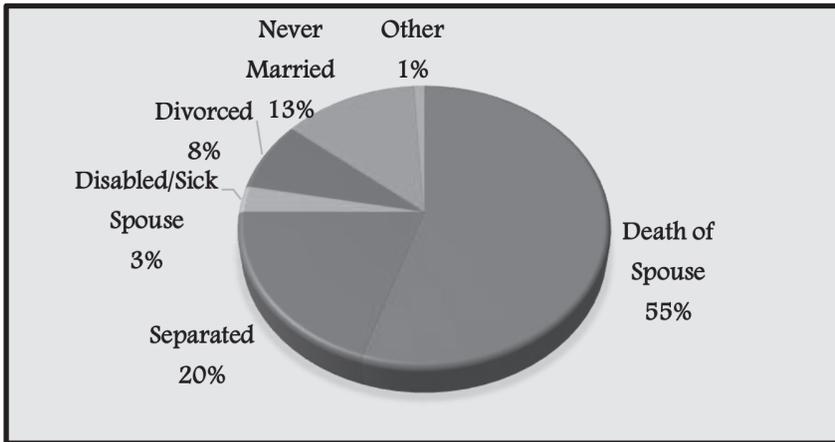
inauspicious and had excluded from auspicious social events, they are closely monitored with dealing with outside men even male relatives were major socio-cultural issues related to war widows (FOKUS WOMEN, 2016). This is a comprehensive study about socio-economic, cultural and psychological issues of women but in particularly war widows.

Considering all above studies, it is crystal clear that there is a gap of knowledge regarding religious adaptation methods which used to relief from critical stressful circumstances and to negative attitudes regarding life and their importance.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Data Related to Headship Formation of Women:

In the study of FHHs in rural areas in Sri Lanka, with the purpose to ascertain various reasons caused women become as a household head, primary data were gathered from responded women heads.



Source: Field Data – 2018

According to above data, responded women have presented five main reasons to become heads of the household namely, widowhood, separation, divorced, never married, and disability of the spouse. As seen in the above figure, it is evident that widowhood is the main source of female household headship. A larger proportion of women (55%) have become heads of the household due to the

death of their spouses. It has proved that female headships were largely formed due to the absence of the male spouse in patriarchal societies. The disruption of the household has also become a major factor to create female headships in rural areas. A considerable proportion of women (20%) have mentioned that they did not legally separate and but they live in two separated destinations. There are two groups of women in the category of separation. They are women who have been abandoned by the male spouse and women who have left the spouse on own account without a legal contract. Only two women reported that they have left their husbands due to domestic violence and using alcohol unlimitedly. In rest of 18 cases, they have been abandoned by the spouse. A considerable percentage of FHHs (8%) have assumed headship of the household as legally separated (divorced). A sizable proportion of women (12%) have to take responsibilities solely because they are not married ever. Some women have mentioned that they were not able to find a male partner because of lack of interests and irresponsibility of parents. But when considering further it can be identified that chronic diseases and physical disabilities sustained from childhood such as epilepsy, heart problem, Lame of legs have caused to be single of considerable proportion of unmarried women (6 cases). 8% of women have legally separated from their spouse and 3 % of women have to take the headship because of permanent disability of their husband. Accidents and some chronic diseases (Lame of legs because of Diabetics) have been caused to emerge female headship.

Heart problems and non-communicable diseases such as Blood Pressure, cancer, Cholesterol and kidney disease have caused for death of male partner of FHHs. Inadequate health infrastructure, unawareness, poverty, difficulties and vulnerabilities in livelihood, unsustainable food patterns are main reasons behind it. Some male partners have died due to man-made causes such as accidents (Road accidents, snake bites, attack by wild elephants, dropping into well), suicide because of vulnerabilities for poverty, burden of credits, health problems and homicide based on personal conflicts. Considering above information, it is clear that inadequate health condition is one of dominated reason for widowhood and on the

other hand for formation of female headship. Separation and divorce are major reasons for becoming women as household heads. Illegal relationship of the male partner, alcoholism and domestic violence were main factors for disintegration of households and to increase woman headships. But inadequate sexual education is one of latent social circumstance for marital breakdown when considering most rural areas. Totally, these results have proved that women get the position of the head of household only when men do not appear in the household or in a situation of permanent disability or long-term illness in the patriarchal society.

4.2. Social Economic and Psychological Issues of Female-Headed Households:

4.2.1. Social and Economic Issues

Majority of responded FHHs (42%) have attended school from grade 6 to Ordinary Level (O/L). A considerable proportion of women (36%) have completed only primary education (from grade 1 – 5). A few proportion (8%) have passed O/L. A lowest rate (6%) have only completed Advanced Level (A/L) while 8% of women reporting no schooling. These data have indicated that low level of education has prevailed mostly as a main social issue among FHHs in the research area. Inadequate awareness about the value of education, lack of motivation and failure to become educated as a necessary social requirement, becoming assistants for cultivation with parent due to economic difficulties have mainly affected to low level of education in particular women in rural societies.

Lack of formal employment and income-generating opportunities can be identified as one of the major issues related to employment of FHHs in rural areas. A clear majority of women heads (88%) have currently engaged either formal or informal employment. A higher number of employed FHHs (45) have engaged in agriculture. A considerable number of FHHs (28) work as manual labours in agriculture sector. A few proportions of female heads (6) having engaged in self-employment and Fewer number of FHHs (2) work as pre-school teachers and teaching assistants in pre-school. Old aged women who cannot be much active in livelihood activities basically depend on public financial

aids provided by government such as Samurdhi, *pin padi* etc. Thus, it is clear that most often women heads are in informal sector with lack of job security and risk of losing the job without prior notice. Because of the choices and opportunities are lacking, they have to work as manual laborers to gain income. But, it can cause for short-term and long-term health risk in their lives. Low level of education and lack of vocational and professional qualifications have directly affected to limit access to a better paid employment for FHHs. On the other hand, unawareness of employment opportunities, limited availability of employment opportunities nearby, lack of opportunities for skill development and lack of social supporting network to provide care to children in their absence have become obstructions to enter formal labour force.

High rate of dependents has caused to increase the vulnerabilities of poverty in various ways among FHHs. Most FHHs have least human capital (labour resources available to the household) to strengthen their well-being or support to their livelihood. A high rate of dependency of members specially having disabled persons, has created economic insecurities and difficulties such as insufficient financial capacity to fulfill even basic daily needs, difficulties on children's education and health issues, handicaps on employment or livelihood activities, increasing responsibilities and economic burden, stress and anxiety. Vulnerabilities to poverty are increased because of lack of possession of savings, assurance from accumulated deposit such as Employee Provident Fund and Employee Trust Fund (EPF and ETF), pensions or any type of insurance at least farmers' insurance (*Govi Vishrama*).

4.2.2. Hardships and Issues Related to Education of Children

Difficulties to supply basic needs related to education such as books, shoes, bags etc., inadequate infrastructure facilities such as transportation, lack of money to provide nutritious foods for their children and lack of money for tuition classes of children are major issues related to education of children of FHHs. Difficulties to supply basic educational needs have directly interrelated with the low level of income and instability of income generating sources/employment related to FHHs.

4.2.3. The Prevalence of Negative Attitudes about FHHs

The prevalence of negative attitudes about FHHs in the community is a key issue to disrupt fulfilling emotional needs of belongingness related to FHHs. The fear of rumors and gossips has highly influenced to limit social participation of FHHs and to prevent tendency to create social networks and relationships in the community. This has a great impact on livelihood activities of FHHs as well. Disrupting their income generating activities due to negative social attitudes has directly influenced to decrease the level of income of the household and to trap them into a cycle of poverty continuously. Lack of empowerment to raise voice against those negative social attitudes is a key factor to reduce the sustainability of living among FHHs.

4.2.4. Psychological Issues Related to FHHs

Stress, anxiety and depression are key findings related to psychological issues of FHHs. These negative psychological conditions have been raised by various reasons such as financial difficulties, instability of livelihood, poor health conditions, burden of responsibilities of the household, insecurity of the future of their children and negative attitudes towards FHHs in the community. In addition, lack of trustworthy intimate relationships to disclose their issues, inadequate emotional supportive mechanism in the community, lack of awareness of legal and counselling supportive mechanisms, reluctance and lack of confidence to disclose their issues to even designated government officers such as women development and counselling officers and inadequate awareness of legal and counselling supportive mechanisms have influenced to increase vulnerabilities among FHHs and to decrease their emotional well-being.

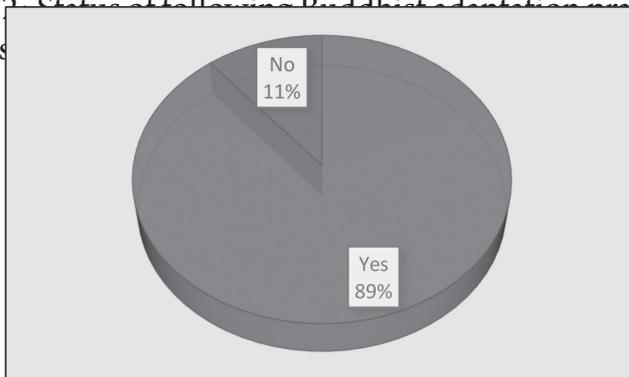
These crisis and stressful situations have directly influenced to increase tendency among FHHs towards Buddhist adaptation practices in their everyday lives.

4.3. Buddhist adaptation practices among FHHs which used for psychological adaptation in their transformation situations.

Mind is the very nearest to us, if mind is comprehended, all

things are comprehended (Sri Kalyana Dharma Publication Committee, 1981). Anxiety and tension tend to disrupt of social life of individuals. Social economic and psychological vulnerabilities, issues and crisis situations which produce these emotions can affect to reduce sustainability and quality of life. British Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski have noted that these life crises are surrounded with religious rituals (Haralambos & Halborn, 1995). These religious practices help to reduce crisis situations and to integrate personalities. Thus, this study has mainly focus to identify Buddhist adaptation practices among FHHs which support to protect peace mind and reduce disruptions of their lives. Following data has illustrated descriptive idea about those psychological adaptation practices related to Buddhism.

Figure 2. Status of following Buddhist adaptation practices with the purpose

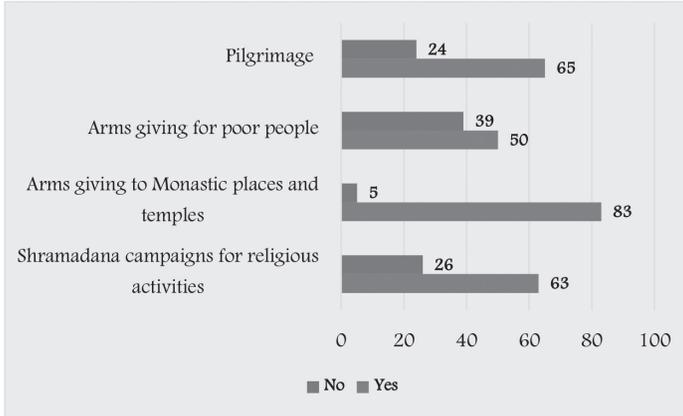


Source: Field Data – 2018

According to above data, it is evident that majority of women heads (89%) have indicated that they utilize various kind of Buddhist rituals and practices to get rid of painful and frustrated situation which created because of above mentioned social economic and psychological issues related to their living. A least proportion of female heads (11%) have mentioned although they follow some religious rituals and practices, they are not specifically focus with the purpose of release stressful situations in their livelihood and lives. They have followed some Buddhist religious practices only because of traditional practices. When deeply considering about Buddhist rituals and practices among FHHs which used as psychological

adaptation, several kinds of rituals and practices can be identified through the study.

Figure 3: FHHs by secular Buddhist adaptation practices (*Āmisa Pooja*)



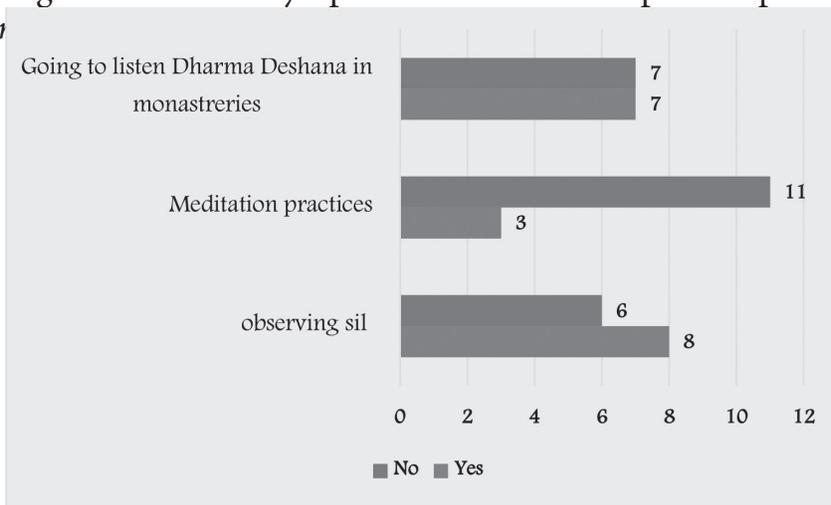
Source: Field Data – 2018

Above figure convinces that majority of female heads (89%) have tended to follow secular Buddhist rituals and practices. Most women heads (83) have tended to arms giving for monastic places and village temples. In every village in Sri Lanka, they have strong bound with village temples and there are some schedule of arms giving in a village. But, in this study, it has only focus arms giving practices which use FHHs as psychological adaptations to release their stressful social, economic and psychological barriers and issues in their everyday lives. Pilgrimage is famous religious activity in Sri Lanka. A considerable amount (65) have indicated that they go pilgrimages for sacred religious places such as *Kandy, Anuradhapura, Pollonnaruwa, Somawathiya, Thanthirimalei* at least two times per year. According to them, it is a good solution to get rid of their everyday crisis and other stress related to household responsibilities. A sizeable amount (63) have mentioned that they

participate for common works called “*Shramadana*” campaigns related to religious activities. This category includes repairing pagodas, monasteries and constructing religious buildings. According to them, some of them go for *Shramadana* activities to most sacred and famous places in Sri Lanka such as *Anuradhapura*, *Seruwavila*, *Polonnaruwa*. 50 of female heads have told that they have tended to arms giving for poor people and orphanages. Commonly, female heads have a feeling and idea that they have confronted many challenges and issues because of malpractices of their previous births (idea of *Karma*) and good things which they do in this life can guide them to a good life. This feeling has made tended them to accomplish merits such as above mentioned.

In some cases, women heads have tended to spiritual Buddhist practices and they can be indicated as followings.

Figure 4: FHHs by spiritual Buddhist adaptation practices (P₁)



According to above figure, it is clear that very few female heads (14) have tended to practice spiritual practices to release their anxiety and stressful situations related to living. A considerable number of women (8) have tended to observe sil in full moon poya day. Most women heads indicated that because of their household work and responsibilities of their children, they can not allocate time (full day) for observing *sil*. Thus, crisis of their livelihoods,

becoming main economic breadwinner of the household and responsibilities of children have been limited the tendency of spiritual practices among FHHs. A sizeable amount (7) have indicated that they go to listen Dharma instructions in monasteries in particularly in Poya Days. According to data, it has convinced that very least amount (3) have tended to practice medication as religious adaptation methods to release stress and acquire peaceful mind. Although meditation is a great practice which guide for mental concentration, most of women heads have not a practice, awareness and caring about value of mindfulness.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:

After considering all above information, it is clear that most female heads have reported that their present living condition is negative after assuming the head of the household because of instability of livelihood, issues related to education of their children, negative attitudes reading them in the society and lack of emotional supportive mechanisms. Thus, anxiety and stressful situations have created due to those issues and hardships among FHHs. As a result of that, majority of women heads have tended to accomplish some secular Buddhist religious rituals and practices specifically focus on releasing and get rid of complicated and crises of their lives. But, when comparing secular and spiritual practices, it is clear that most of women heads have tended to follow secular religious practices such as *Shramadana* campaigns for religious activities (repairing pagodas, constructing religious buildings etc.) arms giving and pilgrimage rituals to relief from critical stressful circumstances and to negative attitudes regarding life than spiritual practices. Very limited women heads have followed spiritual practices for mental concentration such as observing *sil* and meditation practices in their everyday lives. However, these Buddhist religious practices have guided them to regulate their lives, to get rid of sufferings regarding issues related to lives, to integrate personality and provide peaceful mind in some stressful and disrupted situations.

Based on these findings, it has suggested that parallel to the secular religious practices, spiritual practices for mental concentration and counseling practices related to Buddhism should be promoted to reduce negative impacts of issues related to FHHs and to absorb full

potentials of them into development discourse through empowering psychological well-being.

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