

**Family and the Sexual Identity  
Development of Youth: A Comparative  
Sociological Study of the Semi-urban and  
Rural Youth in Ratnapura District of Sri  
Lanka**

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Comparative Sociological Study of the Semi-urban and Rural  
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**Thesis submitted to the University of Jayewardenepura for the  
award of the Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology  
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### Candidate's Declaration

The work described in this thesis was carried out by me under the supervision of Dr. Yasanjalee Jayathilake and a report on this has not been submitted in whole or in part to any university or any other institution for another Degree/Diploma.

  
.....  
Jayaprasad Welgama  
June 2007

### Supervisor's Certification

This thesis which is produced by WMJ Welgama(GS/SS/1561/2002), as a requisite of the Masters Degree in Sociology has been completed under the supervision of me. I hereby certify that this research is an independent work of him and that this thesis meets the required standard.

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# **Family and the Sexual Identity Development of Youth: A Comparative Sociological Study of the Semi-urban and Rural Youth in Ratnapura District of Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis presents a sociological analysis on family and the sexual identity development of semi-urban and rural youth in Sri Lanka. The basic research problem stems from the social milieu where Sri Lankan families are adapting the socialization process following the demands of global age. The study was carried out in the Ratnapura District of the Sabaragamuwa Province.

The focus of the study is to capture the functionality of the structured relationships within the family as it becomes the primary context of the sexual identity development of youth. Parent- child relationship and the inter-sibling relations are evaluated for the potential of shaping sexual self of the youth. In this context, special attention is drawn to the difference between semi- urban and rural family in regard to the sexual identity development and the family backgrounds that are responsible for the development of positive and negative sexual identities too are considered.

In addition to the above aims, the present study highlights the inherent complexity of the concept of sexual identity .In the process of conceptualizing sexual identity, the study examines historical and cross cultural expression of sexual identities. The study emphasizes the social construction of sexuality with the support of existing literature.

For this study, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. The sample represents semi- urban and rural youth (n=225) selected employing the technique of simple random sampling. Postal survey and the informal interview methods were adopted. Qualitative data were collected from ten case studies of youth whose family backgrounds have confused their sexual identities.

The study reveals the fact that the semi-urban and rural families do not drastically contrast with each other, they constitute two different contexts of sexual identity



development through subtle avenues of diversified interaction within the family. However the study proves that the social class of family is not correlated with any form of sexual identity. Semi-urban and rural difference pertaining to the sexual identity development is a result of diverse factors like gender role socialization, style of parenting and the degree of openness to the external influence. Further, the study captures how the different expressions of sexual identity vary on the basis of semi-urban and rural differences. Apart from that the study discloses low prevalence of sexuality related communication between parents and youth that results in the development of sexual identity either negative or positive side. Sibling-sibling relations are divulged to be less influential on sexual identity development. The qualitative analysis unveils a number of risk factors within the family that can be treated as the precursors of negative sexual identity development. Furthermore, the thesis argues that the Sri Lankan family leaves a little margin for the negative or unresolved sexual identities and it remains emotionally less supportive in case of negative sexual identities.



## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

This research is both quantitative and qualitative sociological study, which focuses the family role in the sexual identity development of Sri Lankan youth. A comparative analysis of the identity development of urban and rural youth is highlighted. Added to its biological and chronological dimensions, youth is a socially constructed phenomenon, which is discussed in the sociology of age and status. Each society has a different 'social age clock' by which individuals at different age groups are socially assigned different roles and statuses (Kroger 2000, p.46). In that sense the age related status might significantly vary in the cross-cultural experience. This study will be a novel experience as it may address the unique socio-cultural and economic background in which the Sri Lankan family constructs the youth sexual identities.

Generally, youth is accepted as the golden age of the human life cycle. Relative absence of morbidity being in the peak of physical vigor, specific psychological traits add more color to the youth who are at the threshold of maturity. Youth is considered to be the most progressive social category. Trotsky equated this specific age group to the thermometer of society (Survey Report on Youth Needs and Attitudes-National Youth Council 1983). This suggests that youth are the first to react being in the social forefronts. All these make youth an attractive material for research.

Sociology may provide formidable tools of analysis since the concept of youth is largely a social construction. The timing of Sri Lankan youth and the expected role of youth may show certain uniqueness as they are in a multicultural social milieu which is subjected to the currents of global change.

Despite of the romanticization, historically youth has been perceived as a problematic age of the human life cycle. The famous Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato had documented the restless attributes of the youth (Dacey & Travers 1996, p.262). The modern invention of the adolescence in 1880's by G.H Stanley Hall highlighted it as a period of 'storm and stress', which strikes the individual at the onset of youthful behavior. More often the available academic literatures go with the assumption that youth is problematic (Kuper & Kuper 1996, p.4). Many perspectives on the human development in biological, psychological and sociological orientations (Biopsychosocial Model), explain youth to be one of the most turbulent periods of human life cycle.

Is youth problematic? Concepts of 'identity' and 'identity crisis' coined by Erik Erickson adequately provide a formidable explanation regarding the psychosocial uncertainties of adolescence and youth (cited in Collins & Coltrane 1991). As explained in the Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology, identity refers to one's 'properties of uniqueness and individuality', which makes him or her distinct from all others. At the same time identity may show the 'qualities of sameness', which provides the individual with the power to be associated by the other groups (Barnard & Jonathan 1996, p.292). In that sense, identity is the uniqueness of one's self with reference to the larger social body he or she is linked. One's personal identity is a collective reflection of 'personal traits, physical attributes