

# SOCIAL ADAPTATIONS IN TRANSITION TO VERTICAL LIVING: A STUDY OF COMMUNITIES RELOCATED UNDER URBAN REGENERATION PROJECT OF COLOMBO

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**Abstract:** Urban relocation initiatives often focus on physical changes over the social adaptations, necessary for a viable community, particularly for vertical environment. This study thoroughly examines these adaptations experienced by communities in Colombo, particularly those who were moved as part of the Urban Regeneration Project, as they adapted to living in vertical environments. It focusses deeply on the significant changes that took place in the social networks of the residents and how their social behaviors have changed after relocation. Direct observations, comprehensive social network mapping, and in-depth interviews with nine selected houses were all part of the study, which used a qualitative phenomenological approach. Despite earlier disruptions, residents actively rebuilt casual and functional networks and modified social behaviors to fit the new vertical environment, according to key findings. This study strongly supports the development of more resilient and cohesive communities in high-rise environments by highlighting the vital significance of including social resilience considerations into future urban relocation planning.

**Keywords:** *Urban Relocation, Vertical Living, Social Networks, Social Adaptation, Community Relocation*

## 1. Introduction

Housing in multi-storied complexes is generally discussed as a practical solution to address housing delivery related issues in rapidly growing urban areas, mainly due to land scarcity (e.g.: Urban Development Authority [UDA], 2019). Yet when communities are forced to relocate from grounded residences, most of maybe informal settlements, to high-rise apartments, the communities seem to have experience significant challenges in terms of socio-spatial and socio-cultural transformations. They need to find new adaptation strategies to recap the impact upon conventional lifestyles, social networks and community bonds (Jayaweera & Perera, 2021).

It is believed that living on ground encourages strong social networks and shared cultural practices, including extended family living, informal economic activity, and social events in many low-income communities (UN-Habitat, 2016). Such patterns tend to be disrupted by the shift to high-rise structures, making it more difficult to preserve cultural identity and community cohesion. According to studies, relocated communities must find with new means of adaption, which may include using new common areas for socializing, forming new resident groups, or adapting customs to accommodate vertical environments (Gugler, 2004).

Considering the ongoing development of multi-storied housing in Colombo, the extent to which individuals can adapt sociocultural will determine the success and failures of these efforts. Urban Planners could develop more inclusive and culturally sensitive multi-storied housing options by having a better understanding of their adaption processes (Watson, 2009). To support sustainable and socially integrated urban housing, drawing from lessons learnt from Colombo, this study intends to investigate communities' adaptation of their cultural practices and social behaviours in response to new housing solutions, in vertical structures.

Research on the socio-spatial and economic impacts of urban growth continues to expand, but little is known about how Colombo's resettled communities respond to these shifts in society (Fernando, 2017). Understanding how communities in underserved settlements adapt to new living conditions in vertical environment is the primary objective of this study. The study will mainly focus on strategies for rebuilding social networks and spatial practices, looking at how individuals manage their lived experiences in unfamiliar high-rise settings, preserve cultural traditions, and restructure their social networks. The goal of this research is to provide more sustainable and community-focused approaches to urban regeneration by promoting housing and urban planning policies that more effectively include social and cultural factors into relocation programs.

### 1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Regeneration projects are crucial for addressing housing issues in rapidly growing urban areas. As shown by Urban

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Regeneration Project the City of Colombo's (UDA, 2019), these projects often include relocating low-income inhabitants to multi-story high-rise buildings. Even with housing and infrastructural improvements, these forced relocations lead significant sociocultural changes in the communities they affect (UN-Habitat, 2016; Perera et al., 2021). Traditional social structures and living patterns tend to be changed when communities develop vertically as compared to horizontally, which creates significant concerns about social sustainability (Kotharkar & Mukherjee, 2020). The lack of culturally sensitive architecture contributes to social fragmentation, and high-rise settings frequently limit informal connections and shared economic activities that are essential to the social fabric (Gajaweera, 2022; Watson, 2009; Maharjan et al., 2021). (Manawadu & Kariyawasam, 2018). The adaptive strategies used by resettled communities in Colombo to maintain cultural practices and social ties in vertical environments are not similarly studied as the physical and financial impacts (Fernando, 2017).

## 2. Literature review

This chapter reviews recent studies on social network transformation, behavioral changes after moving to vertical environments, and the broader implications of urban relocation initiatives. It highlights the interactions between daily activities and interpersonal interactions in high-rise housing environments by integrating concepts from both traditional theories and recent empirical studies. The evaluation additionally draws the knowledge gaps that indicate this research.

### 2.1 URBAN RELOCATION AND RESETTLEMENT

Though the aim of urban relocation projects like the Colombo Urban Regeneration Project is to enhance physical living conditions, research regularly reveal that relocation changes long-standing social structures. According to recent studies, long-standing neighborhood ties, mutual support networks, and cultural practices frequently deteriorate throughout the transition, even while infrastructure improves (Silva & Jayathilaka, 2020; Maharjan et al., 2021). Researchers believe how relocation impacts routines, mental stability, and social dependencies in addition to changing households' physical location (Zhang & Huang, 2022).

Granovetter (1973) and Wellman (2001) carried out earlier theoretical contributions that emphasized the fragility of community ties after relocation, but more recent research emphasizes that improving housing alone is not enough to restore social life. Asian urban residents actively renegotiate relationships and rebuild trust networks throughout time, according to research (Gunawardena, 2020; Ong et al., 2023). There is a significant research gap because, despite the expanding body of knowledge, there are still few comprehensive investigations on how relocated families consciously rebuild social ties.

### 2.2 VERTICAL LIVING AND SOCIAL ADAPTATIONS

New spatial arrangements created in high-rise environments frequently limit the spontaneous interactions that are typical of low-rise settlements. Recent research reveals deeper patterns of adaptation, whereas previous viewpoints emphasized isolation. According to studies, residents gradually develop new kinds of interaction defined by ground-level proximity, shared corridors, and community-based activities, despite the initial social fragmentation that occurs (Leung et al., 2020; Farooq & Sohail, 2021). Additionally, relocation causes behavioral changes in collective activities, childcare, and informal commerce (Nair & Singh, 2022). At the same time, residents can restore a sense of belonging in vertical settings through community-driven tactics including creating resident organizations or using corridors for gatherings (Yuen, 2021; Gajaweera, 2022). These results support further research in the Sri Lankan context and demonstrate the capacity of displaced communities to adapt.

### 2.3 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND COMMUNITY REBUILDING AFTER RELOCATION

The strength, function, and distribution of social networks are all altered by relocation, according to recent studies. Particularly vulnerable are weak ties, which are necessary for information exchange and occasional support (Zhang & Yu, 2020). It takes time and frequent interaction in the new environment to rebuild them (Liu et al., 2017; Chong, 2022). While elderly inhabitants rely on familiar neighbors or family clusters, younger residents are becoming more dependent on school-based and digital networks (Nawaz & Hasan, 2023). This study attempts to close the gap in the literature by examining how these networks are intentionally reconstructed upon relocation.

### 2.4 SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY

A strong perspective for comprehending post-relocation adaptation is provided by social network theory. It outlines how resilience, belonging, and day-to-day functioning are influenced by both strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Wellman, 2001). Recent applications to vertical living demonstrate how shared spaces and spatial proximity influence relational rehabilitation (Kim & Park, 2021). Due to this, the paradigm is especially helpful when analyzing network shifts in the context of Colombo's shift.

## 3. Research Methodology

The research approach used in this study is explained in detail in this chapter. It describes the overall research strategy, the justification of selecting the study area and sample, and the techniques applied for data collecting and analysis. Additionally,

it describes the methods used for studying the social adaptations of the relocated communities, focusing on their integration into new vertical housing environments, changing social networks, and geographical proximity.

### 3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

For the purpose to explore the lived experiences of communities relocated as part of the Colombo Urban Regeneration Project, this study uses a qualitative research methodology, more especially phenomenology. Considering social interactions, cultural changes, and personal narratives are difficult to measure, this qualitative approach is essential (Creswell, 2013). Given the focus on how people view and experience the shift from horizontal to vertical life, a phenomenological approach is particularly relevant (Moustakas, 1994). This approach enables a thorough analysis of how people deal with social shifts, geographical integration, and daily adaptations (Van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology, which emphasizes first-hand experiences, shows emotional and behavioral shifts and offers crucial insights into how social networks emerge or preserved (Seamon, 2000).

### 3.2 STUDY AREA AND SAMPLE SELECTION

The study area was selected with consideration to reflect a central project of the Urban Regeneration program in Colombo. The 2014 completion of Randiya Uyana, Henamulla, was selected due to its success and full occupancy. Its ten-year operational history ensures that adaptation has taken place in enough time, nevertheless not so long as it obscures the early phases of adaptation. The UDA owns and maintains the 1137 housing units that together make up the scheme.

A small sample size was considered appropriate for this phenomenological approach to gather detailed, detailed narratives that would allow for a deeper exploration of social adaptations (Moustakas, 1994). Purposive sampling was used to select nine households from the Colombo Urban Regeneration Project's resettled population. This strategy made sure that participants had life experiences that were closely related to the social adaptations in vertical living that were the focus of the study. Within the selection criteria included the following: houses having at least 10 years of resettlement experience to enable an in-depth study of long-term social changes; and households that originated from the same neighborhood, allowing for an analysis of pre-existing social network changes (Creswell, 2013). To guarantee unbiased selection within defined clusters, factors like gender, age, and religion have been deliberately excluded. (Patton, 2015; Van Manen, 2016).

### 3.3 DATA GATHERING AND RECORDING METHODS

Throughout the study, ethical standards were closely followed to respect the rights and dignity of participants, guaranteeing informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymous. Data was gathered using several of important methods:

- **Social Network Mapping:** This method was essential for determining how relocation affected both new and pre-existing social networks. By mapping each household's networks and combining them into origin neighborhood clusters, it made it possible to visualize social relationships before and after relocation (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). This gave insights into social integration and disconnection (Borgatti et al., 2009).
- **In depth Semi-structured Interviews:** These interviews were the main technique for gathering data and gave participants a chance to express their experiences regarding the transition to vertical living. In keeping with the phenomenological emphasis on individual perceptions, the semi-structured technique made it easier to record personal narratives, emotions, and social adaptations (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2016).
- **On-site observations:** These provided important information about commonplace encounters and communal dynamics in hallways and common areas (Van Manen, 2016). Social patterns, casual get-togethers, spatial usage, and housing changes made by inhabitants to support vertical living were all documented in field notes.
- **Spatial mapping:** This method was essential for examining spatial impacts on social networks before and after relocation. Mapping housing arrangements, communal areas, and places of contact was necessary to comprehend how spatial patterns affect social cohesiveness.

### 3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, social networks were manually examined and categorized into five main roles: acquaintance, friendly, economic, emotional, and daily. This classification was based on significant concerns in social capital and urban relocation studies (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Granovetter, 1973). Using Granovetter's (1973) strength of weak connections framework, relationships were classified as either preserved, disrupted, or rebuilt was reviewed to analyze post-relocation changes. The level of support, interaction frequency, and the strength of emotional or financial bonds were all taken into consideration in the analysis.

To show how people adjusted or maintained relationships in a new environment, a mapping technique was used. Through manual analysis, patterns of adaptability within various community groups were examined, providing insights into how people react to the social effects of urban renewal and vertical living. Different colors showed different kinds of interactions:

● day-to-day support (childcare, grocery sharing, errands), ● friendly interaction (casual friendships, leisure activities), ● economic support (financial help, job opportunities, lending/borrowing), ● emotional support (family bonds, close friends, crisis comfort), and ● acquaintance (general familiarity, limited interaction). The variety, goals, and strengths of social bonds within communities relocated were demonstrated by this visual approach.

#### 4. Analysis, Findings and Discussion

The social adaptations of residents who were relocated as part of Urban Regeneration Project in Colombo are reviewed in this chapter. It mainly focused on the transformation of social networks, whether they are preserved, disrupted, or rebuilt. The findings are examined in the context of adapted living strategies, place attachment, spatial proximity, and demographic characteristics.

##### 4.1 OVERVIEW OF SELECTED HOUSEHOLDS

###### Cluster 1: Ferguson Road Households

Prior to relocation, the Ferguson Road community functioned as a tightly knit social fabric, characterized by robust social bonds forged through long-term co-residence and mutual support systems.

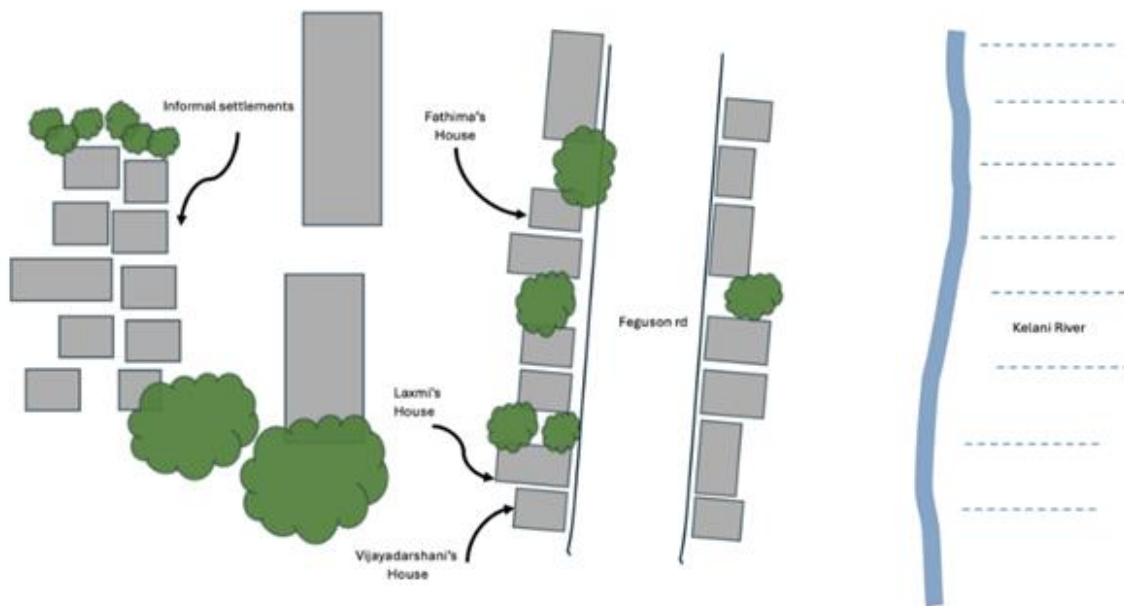


Figure 1: Layout of Ferguson Road cluster (Source: Author)

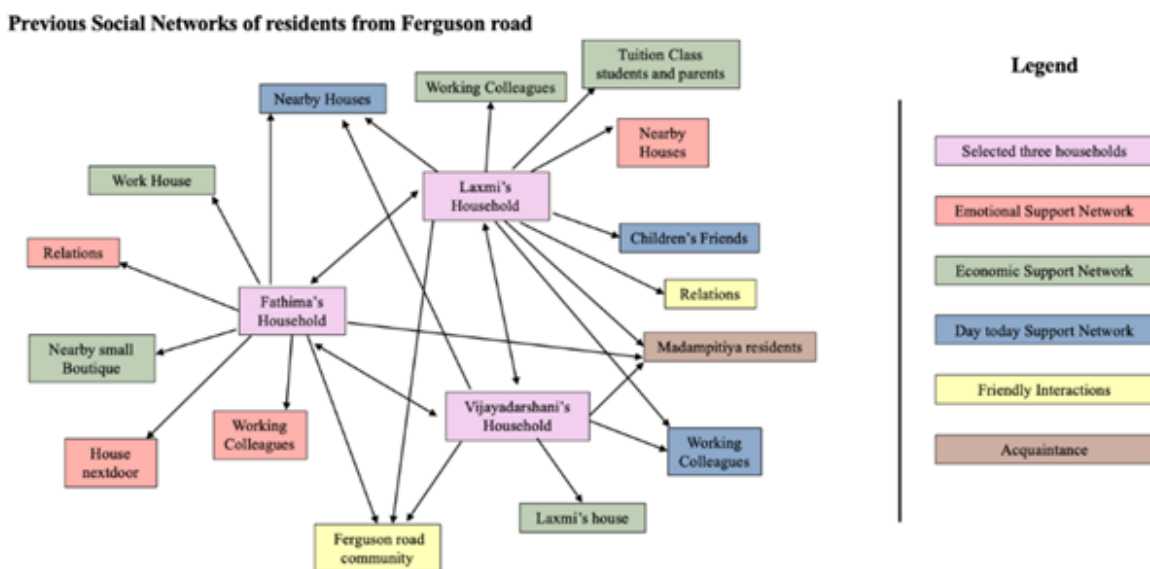


Figure 2: Previous Social Network Cluster of Ferguson Road (Source: Author)

Following relocation, residents experienced notable disruptions to their social networks. Selected three households from the original neighborhood were resettled in Randiya Uyana, leading to a weakening of pre-existing connections primarily due to increased physical distance. While strong family ties largely persisted, broader neighborhood interactions were significantly disrupted. However, new, more casual social connections gradually emerged within Randiya Uyana, often facilitated by community involvement initiatives and newly formed school networks.

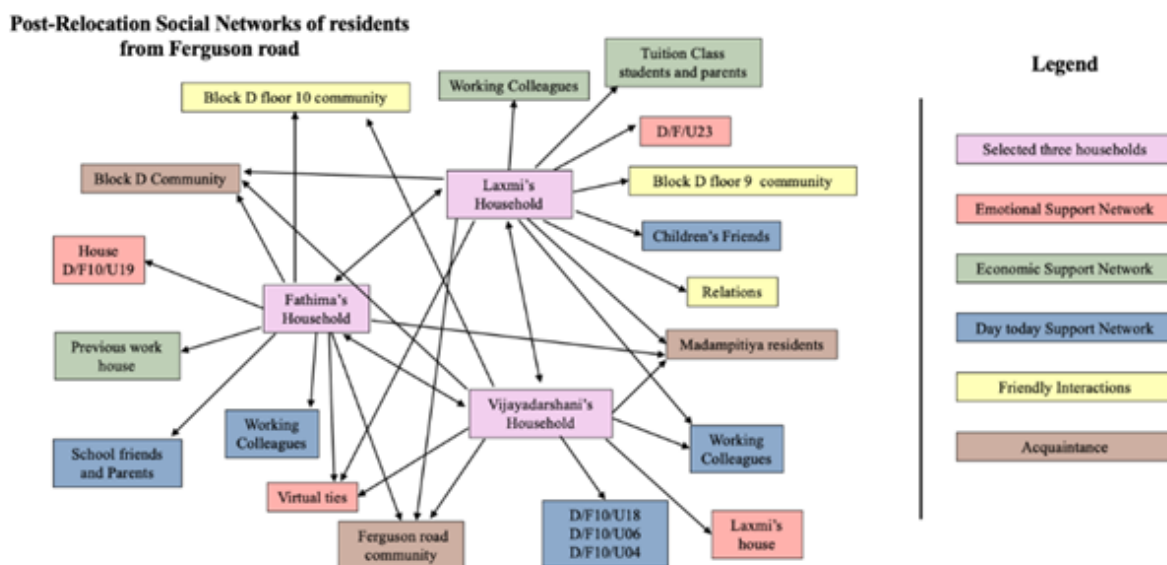


Figure 3 3: Post- relocation Social Network of Ferguson Road cluster (Source: Author)

**Household 1: Mrs. Laxmi’s Family (D/F9/U22)** -Laxmi, a middle-aged Tamil woman, moved to Randiya Uyana in 2014 from a flood-affected community. Initially fearful of the vertical environment and unfamiliar with neighbors, her family gradually adjusted. An active community member, preschool administrator, and elocution teacher, Laxmi successfully expanded her social network through her preschool, maintaining connections with former teacher networks and her sister's family.

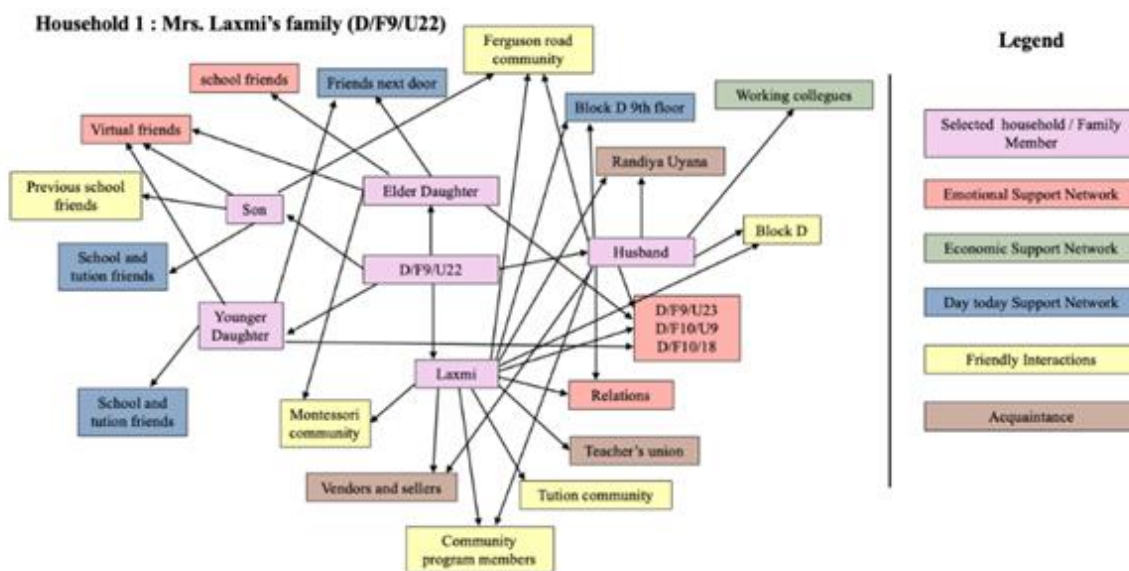


Figure 4: Social Network of Laxmi's House (Source - Author)

**Household 2: Mrs. Vijayadarshani’s Family (D/F10/U5)** - Laxmi's sister, Vijayadarshani, also relocated from Ferguson Road. She re-established and broadened her social circle after securing a job at her sister's preschool and engaging in community service. She rebuilt her daily support system with new neighbors (Units 04 and 06) and her children made new friends, while her husband expanded his network through regular visits to a nearby kovil. Old connections became occasional.

Household 2 : Mrs.Vijayarshani's family (D/F10/U05)

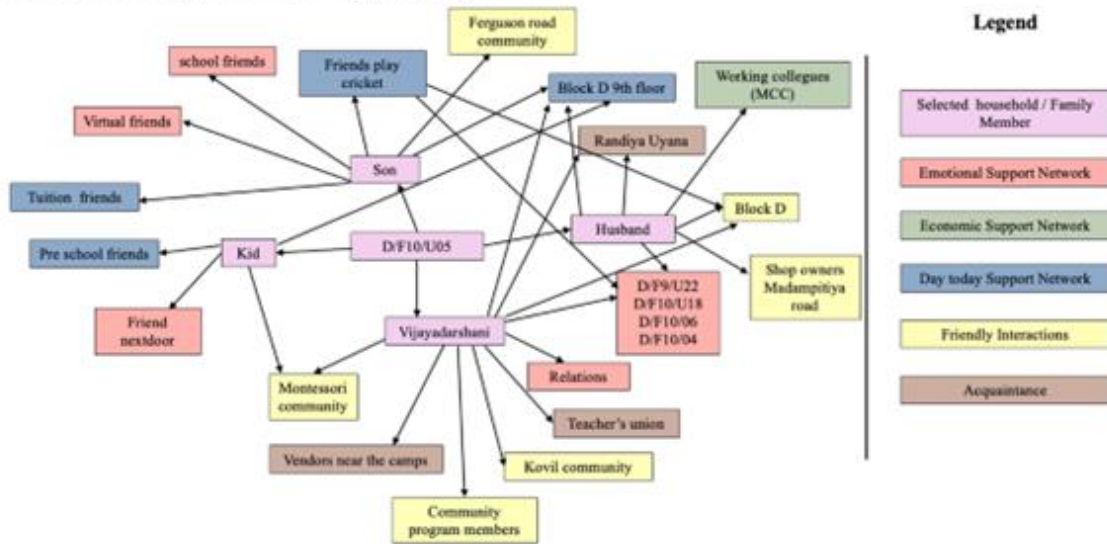


Figure 5: Social Network of Vijayarshani's House (Source - Author)

**Household 3: Mrs. Fathima Fazmina's Family (D/F10/U18)** - Fathima Fazmina, a Muslim lady, faced significant emotional challenges due to her disabled child's needs, having relied on a strong support system from neighbors in Ferguson Road. After relocating, she gradually fulfilled these needs by forming new connections with neighbors in Randiya Uyana (Unit 19 and others on 9th floor, Block B). While her husband maintained some former Ferguson neighbors and work-related ties, the strongest previous ties for Fathima and her children broke down, though her kids began making new friends at school.

Household 3 : Mrs.Fathima's family (D/F10/U18)

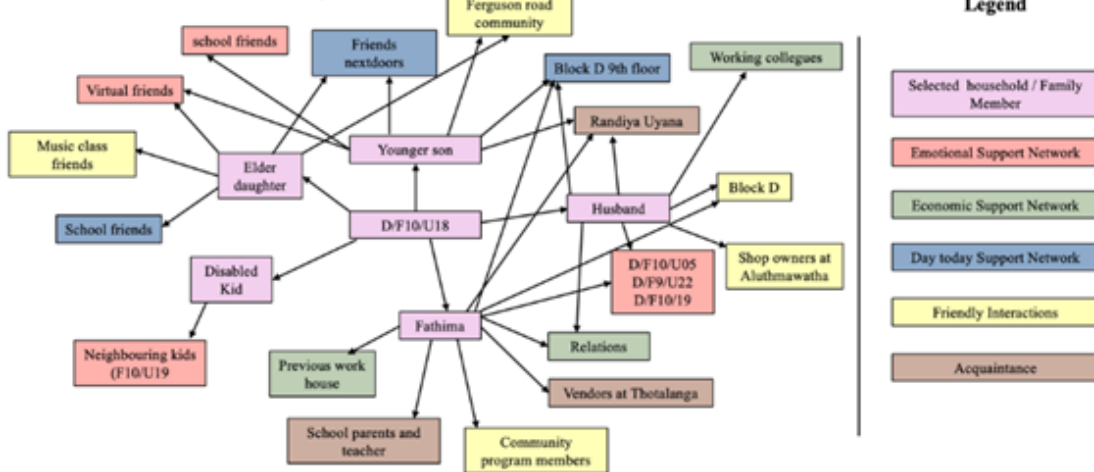


Figure 6 Social Network of Fathima's House (Source - Author)

**Cluster 2: 147 Watta, Grandpass Households**

Before their relocation, the 147 Watta community in Grandpass had developed close-knit, overlapping social bonds deeply rooted in both familial relationships and geographical proximity. Active community involvement among residents also contributed to the formation of wider acquaintance networks.

Post-relocation, the adaptation process proved to be more individualized for these households. While some familial ties endured, previously close friendships, such as those between households like Lionel and Chooleratne's, became more challenging to maintain due to the new vertical separation. A significant number of neighborhood connections were unfortunately lost. Younger community members' networks demonstrated a clear shift towards virtual platforms, school-based friendships, and work-related connections. Nevertheless, new, more intimate relationships sometimes developed with immediate neighbors within their specific block in the new high-rise setting

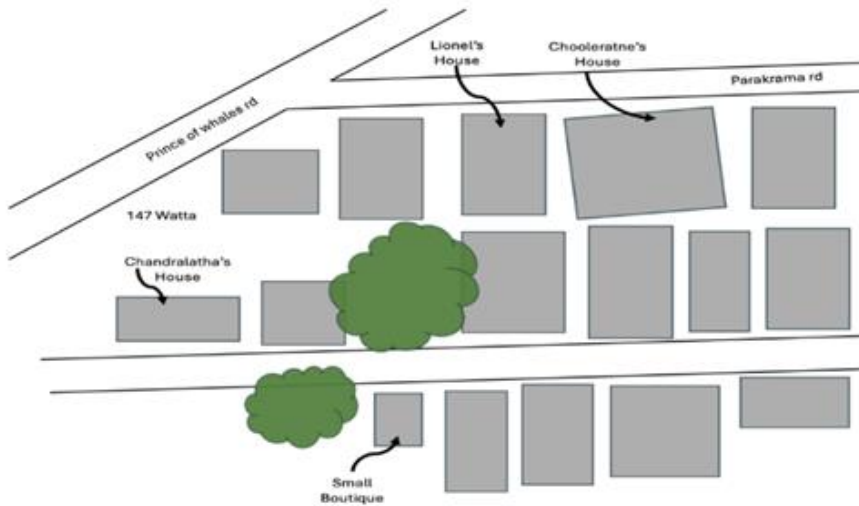


Figure 7 Layout of 147 watta (Source - Author)

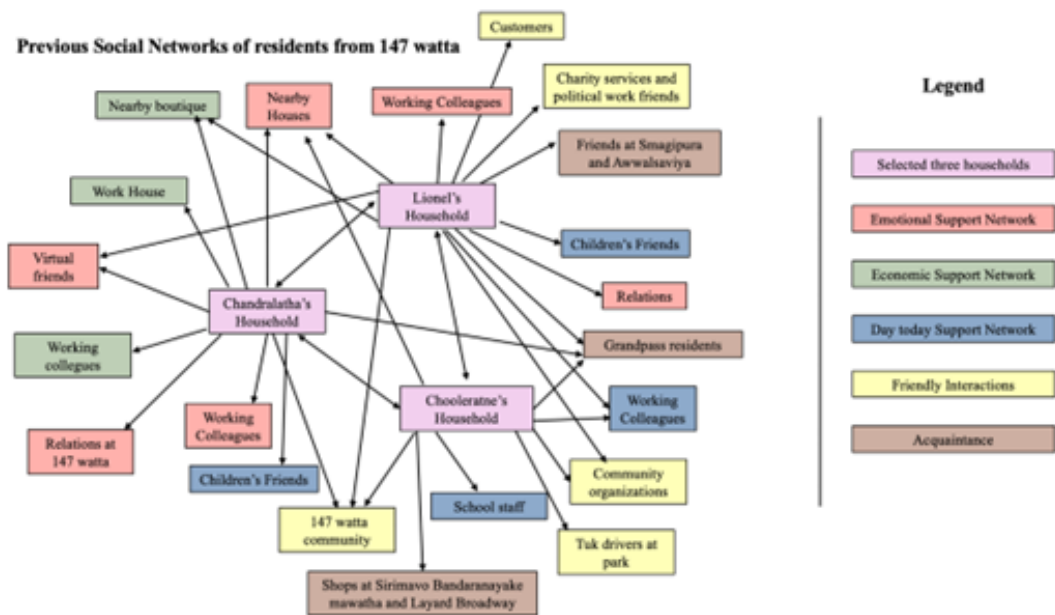


Figure 8 Previous Social Network of 147 watta (Source - Author)

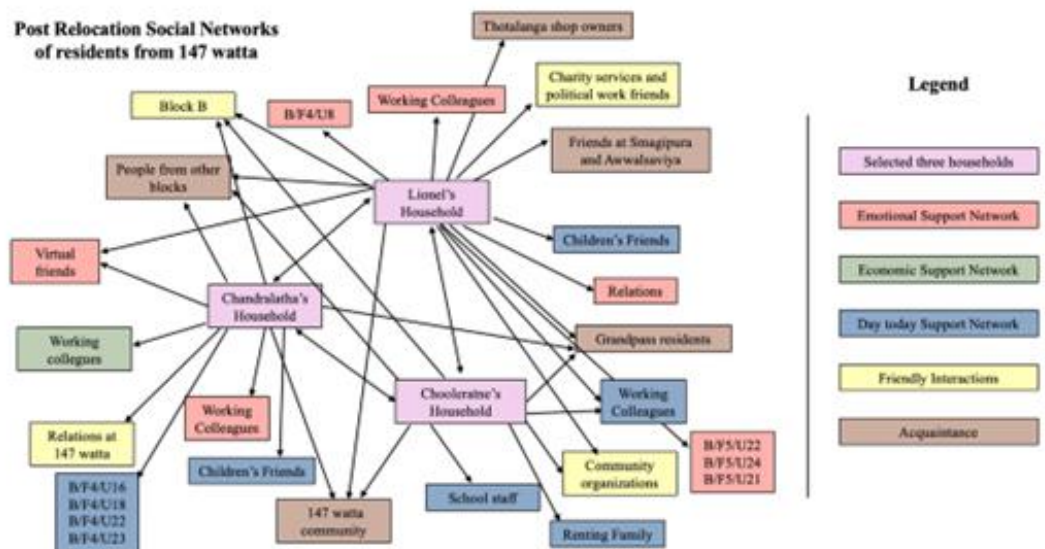


Figure 9 Post Relocation Social Network of 147 watta (Source - Author)

**Household 4: Mr. Lionel's Family (B/F9/U7)** - Mr. Lionel, a well-known figure for his charity work and community involvement, successfully re-established wide connections after his relocation. While he maintained significant emotional, economic, and everyday networks, his wife lost the social and economic connections from her former business, which could not be rebuilt in the flat. His children's networks developed independently, influenced more by life stages. His once-close connection with Chooleratne's family faded due to physical distance, though day-to-day support with U8 was rebuilt.

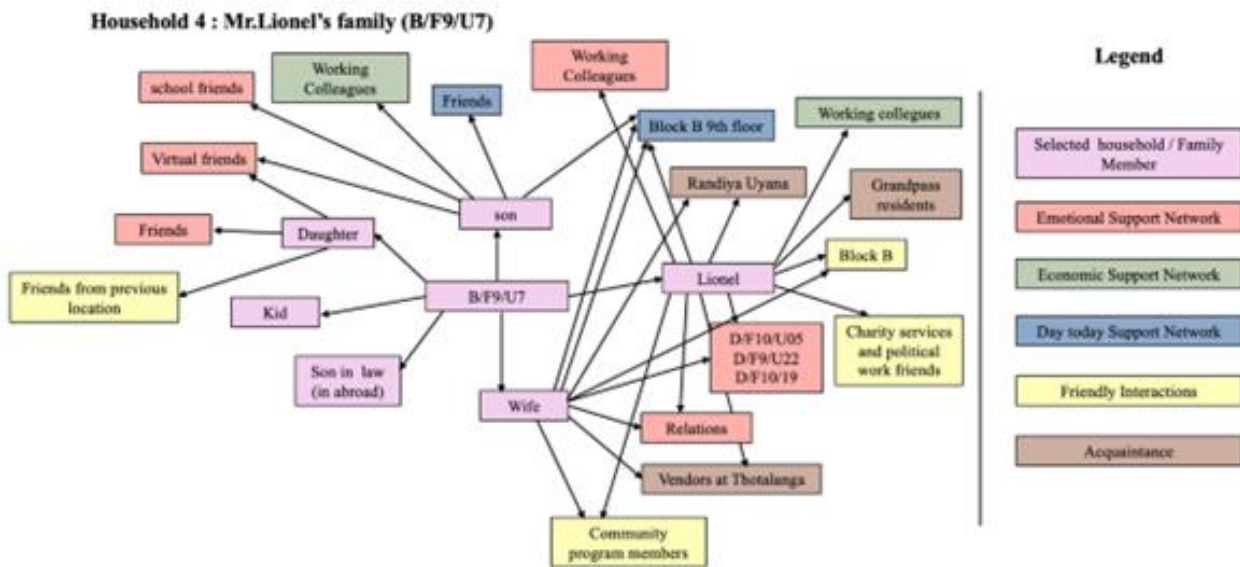


Figure 10 social network of Lionel's house (Source - Author)

**Household 5: Mrs. Chandralatha's Family (B/F4/U17)**- Chandralatha, a housewife, found satisfaction in her new flat despite initial struggles with higher living costs. While many of her previous neighborhood connections were lost, she developed a close new friendship with her next-door neighbor (Unit 4). Her husband and family maintain friendly daily interactions with several neighboring households, a mix of old and new relationships. Her children's networks also shifted, with the daughter and son-in-law leaning towards work, education, and virtual connections.

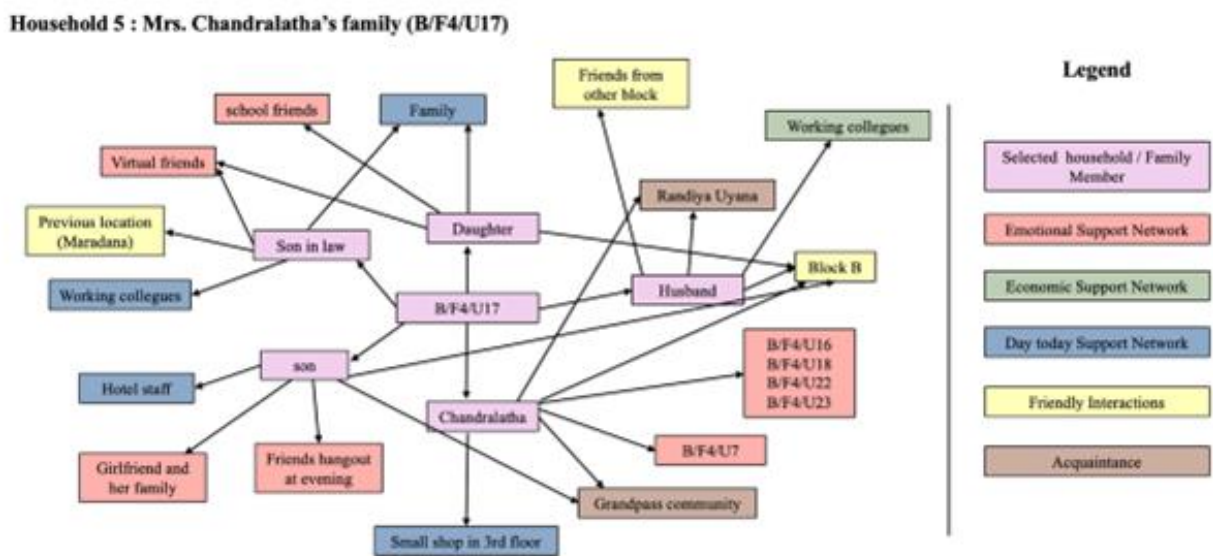


Figure 11 social network of Chandralatha's house (Source - Author)

**Household 6: Mr. Chooleratne's Family (B/F5/U23)** - Mr. Chooleratne's interest in social work facilitated the emergence of wide casual connections post-relocation. His family gradually formed strong ties with neighboring houses, engaging in food exchange and everyday assistance. While some emotional support ties with former 147 Watta neighbors were maintained, they were not as strong. His sister and wife maintained narrower, deeply rooted relationships, primarily with close family members, and established day-to-day connections with a rented couple in their flat.

Household 6 : Mr.Chooleratne's family (B/F5/U23)

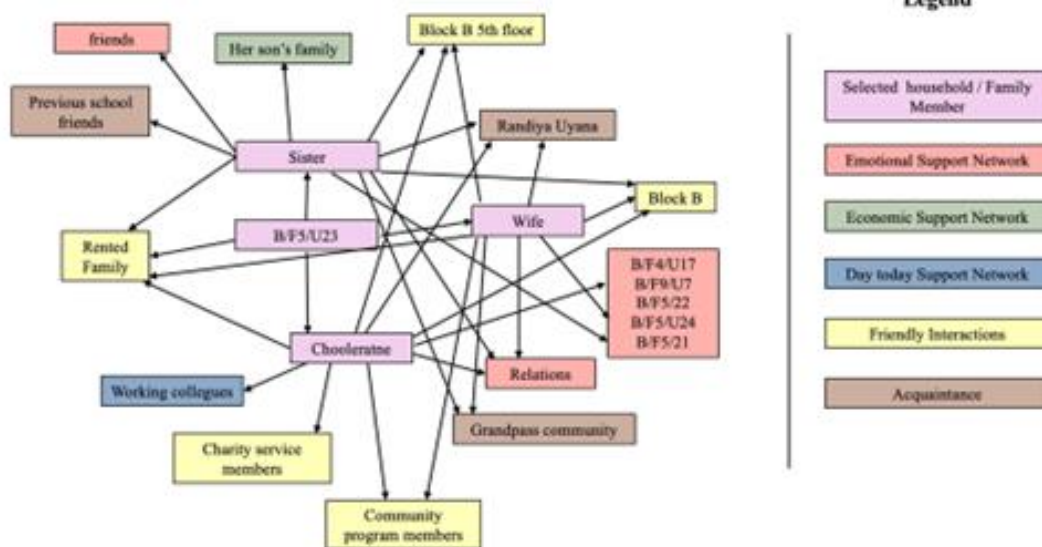


Figure 12 social network of Chooleratne 's house (Source - Author)

**Cluster 3: 350 Watta, Madampitiya**

The 350 Watta settlement was characterized by a robust, close-knit social fabric before relocation, notable for its strong intergenerational connections among its 50-60 families.

After relocation, core connections, particularly with familiar families from 350 Watta, largely continued, demonstrating remarkable resilience despite the physical move. However, daily interactions became more concentrated and limited to nearby units within the new apartment complex. New networks progressively formed through interactions with immediate neighbors, colleagues at workplaces, and participation in community programs. While trust-based relationships with former neighbors remained strong, even across physical distance, residents observed that newly established relationships often lacked the same ingrained depth of trust as their previous ties.

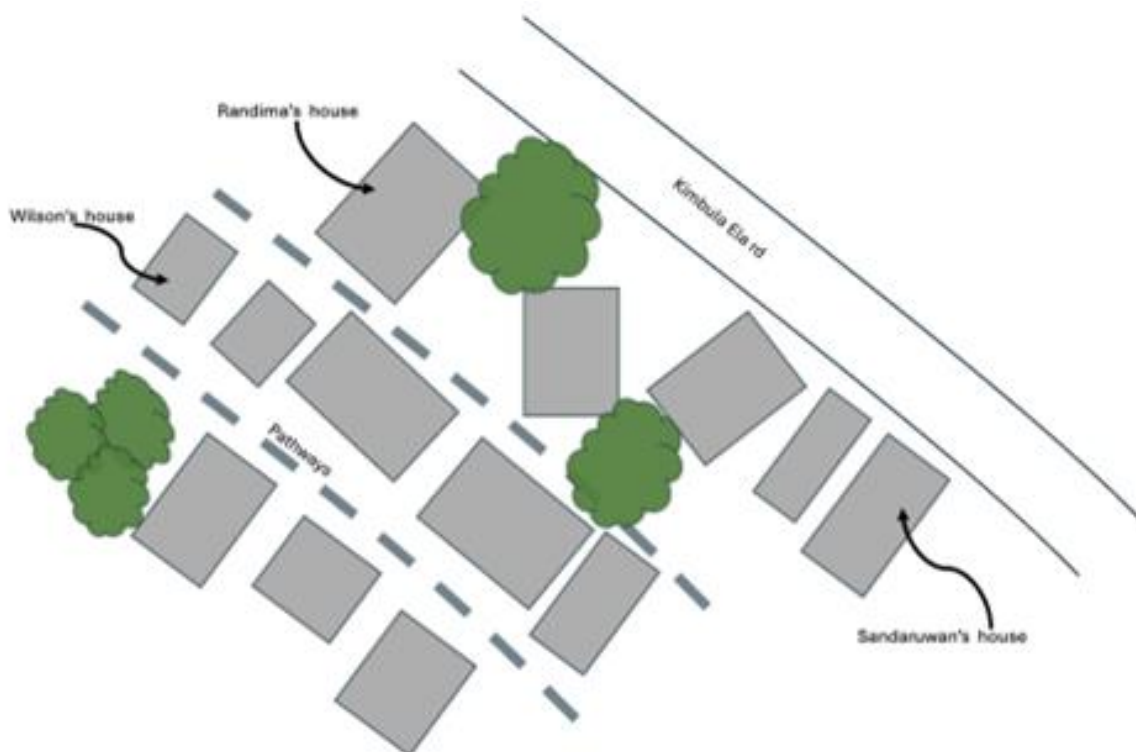


Figure 13 Layout of 350 watta (source - Author)

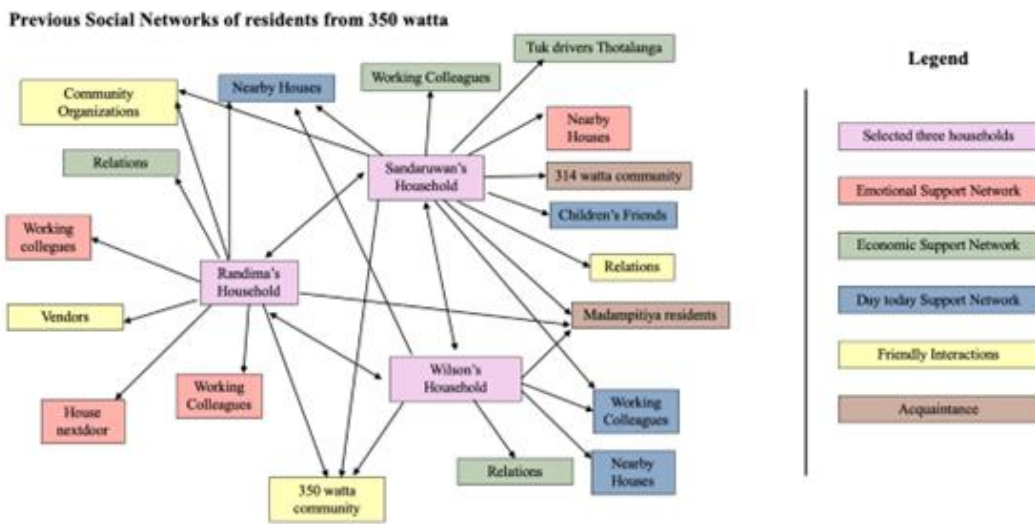


Figure 14 Previous social networks of 350 watta social network of Lionel's house (Source - Author)

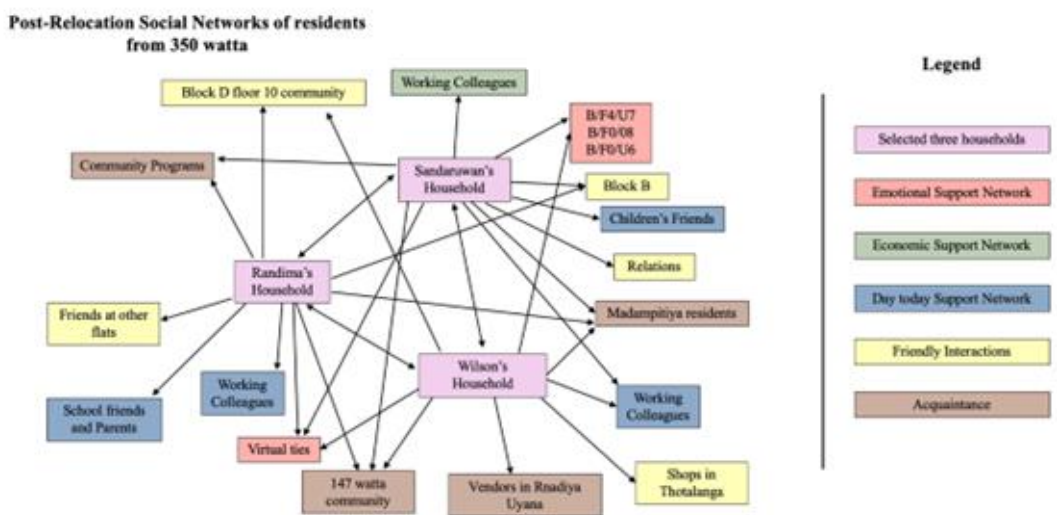


Figure 15 Post relocation network of 350 watta social network of Lionel's house (Source - Author)

**Household 7: Mr. Sandaruwan's Family (B/F4/U8)** -Mr. Sandaruwan, an active community president and voluntary service provider, successfully re-established a wide network post-relocation, primarily through community activities and new connections with local vendors and social work groups. While his children's close daily interactions with 350 Watta neighbors diminished, they prioritized work, school, and virtual relationships. The family maintained strong ties with former 350 Watta neighbors, especially those on the same floor, and formed friendly daily relationships with immediate new neighbors.

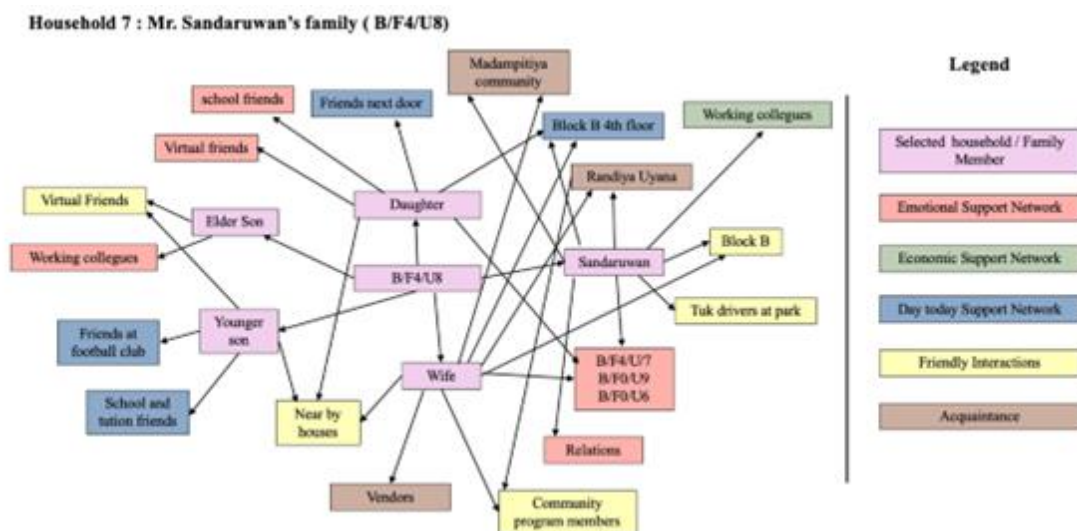


Figure 16 Social Network of Sandaruwan's Family social network of Lionel's house (Source - Author)

**Household 8: Mrs. Randima’s Family (B/F0/U9)** - Randima's household demonstrates typical adaptation to financial challenges in vertical living. They maintain day-to-day contacts with nearby households and have built strong social networks within Block B, alongside casual connections across Randiya Uyana. Her children actively maintain strong relationships with neighboring houses through cooperative activities. Randima and her husband, through active participation in community initiatives, have successfully re-established some lost support networks and strengthened their social bonds.

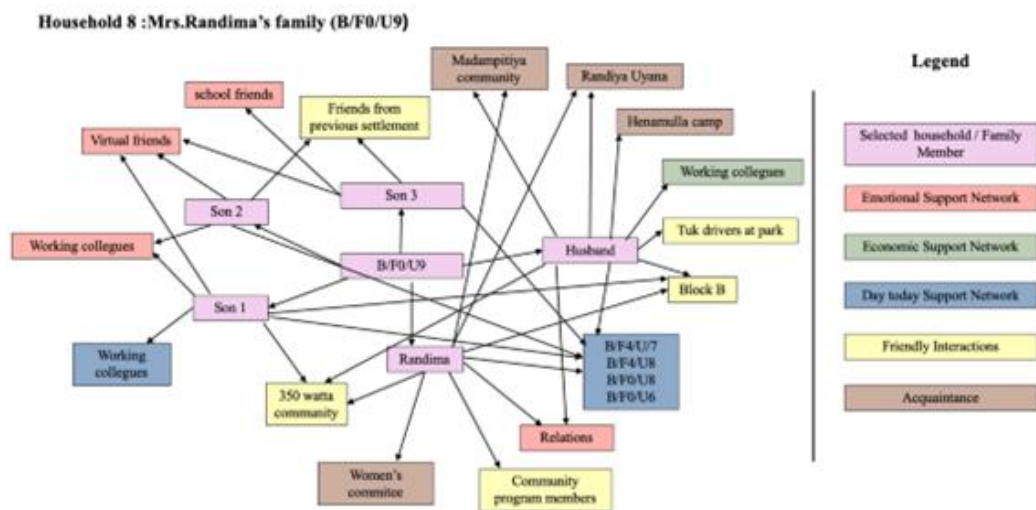


Figure 17 social network of Randima’s house (Source - Author)

**Household 9: Mr. Wilson’s Family (B/F2/U8)**- Wilson, Randima's father, and his family also relocated from 350 Watta. Their social structure is distinct, relying mostly on Randima’s family for emotional, financial, and daily assistance, and they prefer a quieter life, keeping their distance from the neighborhood. While Wilson avoids developing close new relationships, his wife and daughter maintain casual ties with a few known individuals from 350 Watta. Interestingly, their children have maintained some connections from the old neighborhood, such as the daughter's contact with her former employer.



Figure 18 social network of Wilson's house (Source - Author)

#### 4.2 KEY FINDINGS

Significant and complicated changes in the form and structure of social networks after moving to Randiya Uyana were clearly shown by the thorough social network analysis carried out across all three housing clusters (Ferguson Road, 147 Watta, and 350 Watta). These networks had been particularly strong and well-established in the community before to the shift continuously providing critical emotional support, financial help, and a sense of belonging. But most of these pre-existing relationships, particularly those that were founded entirely on neighborhood proximity, were either severely disrupted or fundamentally changed after the move. The vertical nature of new living environment significantly reduced the spontaneous daily connections that used to promote strong emotional ties.

Family bonds have continually shown themselves to be the most robust type of social ties despite these challenges. On the other hand, non-family neighborhood ties significantly weakened and were frequently replaced by new, informal relationships that developed via common experiences in the new housing project, schools, and other community

organizations. It became clear that community initiatives were especially important in assisting locals in rebuilding and re-establishing their social networks. Although living vertically tended to increase the number of pleasant acquaintances, it often limited the psychological closeness and depth of these relationships, which in turn reduced the inhabitants' sense of belonging. A notable finding was the increasing dependence of younger generations on virtual networks, which was impacted by the relocation both well as more general technology developments and changing life stages. Overall, the findings highlight how the physical design of the new environment, the relocation procedures, and the changing social needs of the residents all had a significant impact on the maintenance, disengagement, or deliberate restoration of social ties.

## 5. Conclusion, Limitations, Future Research

### 5.1 CONCLUSION

This study examined the social adaptation of populations relocated under the Urban Regeneration Project as they moved from horizontal settlements to vertical housing. The results show that although living in a high-rise facilitates the creation of new, informal relationships, it also weakens the sense of belonging and breaks long-standing neighbourhood ties by reducing daily, emotional, and financial support networks. As inhabitants get used to having less opportunities for engagement, their social behaviour becomes more self-reliant and need-based. Nonetheless, communities demonstrate resilience by establishing new relationships with neighbouring neighbours and preserving existing networks through occasional trips and online communication, especially among younger generations. The study emphasises the significance of including social resilience into upcoming urban development plans and questions the idea that social decline is inevitable following relocation.

### 5.2 LIMITATIONS

This study has some of limitations even though it provides significant details. First and foremost, the limited sample size of nine houses due to time restrictions restricts the applicability of findings to all Colombo communities that have been relocated. Additionally, the scope of the manual social network analysis was limited, prohibiting the deeper pattern discovery and thorough, complete data that could be obtained from advanced technology approaches. The depth of insights into daily routines was also impacted by practical constraints that prevented longer-term residency or in-depth house visits. Finally, concentrating on a single case study region could not adequately capture the variety of vertical living experiences found throughout Colombo.

### 5.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of the research indicate several directions for further research. To improve knowledge of social adaptations, more thorough research on the long-term effects of vertical living across a range of demographic groups is needed. This research should use larger and more varied samples. Data accuracy and analytical depth could be greatly increased by applying advanced social network analysis tools like UCINET and Gephi into practice. It is advised to do longitudinal research on the long-term evolution of social networks in vertical environments. Furthermore, to better understand how socioeconomic factors like family structure, income, and education affect the adaptation process, future study should incorporate these factors. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons would offer important insights into how various cultural contexts influence vertical living environment adaptability, resulting in more inclusive and successful urban redevelopment initiatives.

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