

# Design Ethnography of Parental Disengagement in Low-Income Urban Sri Lanka : A Participatory Study in Siribara Manikepura

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**Abstract** – Siribara Manikepura, a low-income urban community in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, faces severe poverty and overcrowding. Residents live in cramped homes with limited outdoor space for children, contributing to social issues like drug abuse and school dropouts. These conditions deeply affect family dynamics and child development. The study employed qualitative methods, including direct observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and contextual immersion over multiple visits. Daily routines, living conditions, and parent-child interactions were documented. A total of 32 participants from 14 households were interviewed. Particular attention was given to the physical environment, parenting practices, and children's behavior. Using a participatory design approach, parents and children were engaged as active participants in identifying challenges and co-imagining solutions suited to their cultural and social realities. Constructivism guided the study, emphasizing how meaning and learning are co-created through social interaction and lived experience. Findings reveal a troubling pattern of disengaged parenting, even in households where one parent is unemployed. Children are often unsupervised, unclean, and disconnected from structured education or discipline. Parents, burdened by economic instability, focus on immediate survival rather than long-term wellbeing. Drug use among teenage boys, alcohol abuse among adult males, and early employment among girls form a common trajectory, largely unaddressed within the community. The research highlights an urgent need for culturally rooted, space-conscious, and empathetic interventions—through design, education, or policy—to strengthen parent-child relationships and break these cycles.

**Keywords:** Urban poverty; Low-income Families; Child Parent Disengagement; Urban Issues

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## I. Introduction

### A. Background & Context

Siribara Manikepura is a living area of over 200 low-income families in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka. Although it is neighbouring the University of Moratuwa, the area is marked by severe poverty, overcrowding, and several other social issues. Many families live in extremely small, congested homes. Sometimes even the houses are shared among multiple families leading to privacy and hygiene issues. Almost all the land plots are less than 5 perches, and the children have no outdoor space to play or rest. So, the children usually play on the road. Social issues such as drug abuse, school dropouts and thefts are prevalent, especially among children. This study is framed within a constructivist perspective, which informs its participatory and community-centered approach. This research aims to understand the daily realities of children and families living in this marginalized community. The study seeks to examine how spatial limitations, economic hardship, and parental disengagement intersect to impact children's emotional, social, and educational development. It also serves as a foundational step towards identifying opportunities for community-centered design or behavioral interventions for problem solving.

### B. Research Questions

1. What are the major factors contributing to parental disengagement in low-income urban families?
2. What opportunities exist for community-centered or culturally rooted interventions to strengthen parent-child relationships in such settings?

### C. Aim and Objectives

This research aims to identify the major factors contributing to parental disengagement in low-income urban families and explore community-centered, culturally rooted opportunities to strengthen parent-child relationships in such settings.

1. To analyze the key causes of parental disengagement in Siribara Manikepura.
2. To investigate potential intervention strategies that reflect the community's cultural and social context.

**Table 1**

*Research Questions and Objectives*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Research Objective</b>
1. What are the major factors contributing to parental disengagement in low-income urban families?	To analyze the key causes of parental disengagement in Siribara Manikepura.
2. What opportunities exist for community-centered or culturally rooted interventions to strengthen parent-child relationships in such settings?	To investigate potential intervention strategies that reflect the community's cultural and social context.

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## II. Literature Review

Low-income urban communities in Sri Lanka face complex socio-economic challenges that significantly impact family dynamics and child development. Poverty, overcrowding, and limited access to resources create an environment where parental disengagement is often observed, affecting children's emotional, social, and educational outcomes (Jayatillake et al., 2023). In these settings, parents frequently struggle with economic instability, which reduces their capacity to provide adequate supervision and emotional support (Perera, 2021). Single-parent households, increasingly common in Sri Lanka's urban areas, face added burdens, with studies indicating that children in such families experience lower academic performance and personality development difficulties due to reduced parental involvement (Jayatillake et al., 2023).

Research by (Mayadunne & Kariyasekera, 2021) highlights how disparities in educational resources exacerbate inequalities, as children from low-income families often cannot compete with peers from wealthier households due to financial constraints limiting access to supplementary learning materials and tuition. This discrepancy contributes to higher dropout rates and lower school engagement among urban poor children (Mayadunne & Kariyasekera, 2021). Furthermore, cultural stigma around family disorganization, such as divorce or separation, affects children's emotional wellbeing and their willingness to seek support (Jayatillake et al., 2023).

Parental involvement is closely linked to children's academic success and social adjustment, yet many low-income parents face barriers including work demands, limited education, and stress, which hinder active engagement with their children's schooling (Perera, 2021). These challenges are compounded by environmental factors common in urban slums—such as overcrowded housing and lack of safe play spaces—that restrict positive parent-child interactions (Jayatillake et al., 2023).

One of the learning and design theories that provides a meaningful framework that can be used to understand these issues is Constructivism. It emphasizes that individuals construct knowledge and meaning through social interaction, experience, and reflection (Piaget, 2009; (PDF) *International Journal of All Research Writings 10 VYGOTSKYS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY*, n.d.). In low-income urban contexts, children's development is deeply shaped by their lived experiences within families and communities. Therefore, interventions must not only provide material solutions but also create opportunities for co-learning, sharing experiences, and agency in meaning-making.

This constructivist perspective directly informs participatory design, which seeks to involve users. In this context it is the parents, children and community members – as active collaborators in the design process. Rather than imposing top-down solutions, participatory design aligns with constructivist thinking by valuing local knowledge, lived experience, and collective creativity as foundations for social innovation (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Through this lens, design becomes a

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tool for empowerment, enabling participants to reimagine their social realities and co-create interventions that foster engagement, trust, and positive behavior change.

Overall, the literature stresses the need for community-centered, culturally sensitive interventions that support parents and empower children within these marginalized urban contexts (Jayatillake et al., 2023; Perera, 2021). Although Sri Lankan urban poverty studies discuss family stress and child neglect, only few apply participatory design or constructivist frameworks to co-create contextually relevant interventions.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **A. Philosophical paradigm**

This research is developed and based on the constructivist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction with the environment and that reality is subjective and shaped by individual experiences. Particularly, the constructivist approach is appropriate to the principles of participatory design, where children are seen as active co-authors of their learning environments. A rich, interactive data collection is encouraged by facilitating collaborative engagement between children and parents through a qualitative approach.

#### **B. Research Design**

A qualitative participatory design research approach was adopted in this study. The study is guided by constructivist theory, which informs both the design and implementation of participatory activities, ensuring that participants actively construct knowledge through shared experiences. Participatory design was chosen to actively involve both parents and children as co-researchers to ensure that the research was grounded in their lived experiences and cultural context.

#### **C. Participant Selection**

Participants were purposely selected from Siribara Manikepura to represent diverse family experiences within the community. A total of 32 individuals from 14 households participated, including parents and children. Additionally, the Grama Niladhari of the area was interviewed to provide institutional perspectives. The selection prioritized families willing to engage in depth, considering constraints such as participant availability and willingness to openly share experiences.

#### **D. Data Collection**

Data collection centered around two participatory design workshops, each lasting one to three hours. Constructivist theory informed the design of these activities, ensuring that participants actively created and reflected on their own knowledge. The workshops included two main activities:

- **Community Mapping:** In here the participants co-created visual maps of their living environment, highlighting overcrowding, lack of play spaces, and community landmarks.

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This activity provided spatial data and revealed how environmental constraints impacted family interactions.

- Story Sharing Circles: Parents and children shared narratives about daily life, parenting challenges, and relationships in a supportive group setting. The circles facilitated emotional and social insight into disengagement patterns.

Apart from the workshops, detailed information was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Also, the context was thoroughly observed by visiting multiple times to the context.

## **IV. Data Analysis**

### **A. Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used as it suits the qualitative methods. All workshop outputs, interview transcripts and observational notes were systematically examined for recurrent themes related to spatial limitations, socio-economic hardship and patterns of parental involvement or disengagement. Themes were refined iteratively, ensuring that emerging categories closely reflected participants' realities and prioritized community voices.

### **B. Analysis Approach**

The analysis followed a thematic framework, which is well-suited for uncovering patterns in qualitative data. The coding process began with open coding, where raw data from transcripts, workshop outputs and field notes were examined line-by-line to generate initial codes reflecting meaningful units of information. These preliminary codes captured salient issues such as spatial constraints, economic hardship, parental supervision and children's play behaviors.

Subsequently, axial coding was performed to group related codes into broader themes. This process helped in linking spatial, social and emotional dimensions of family life while highlighting underlying causes of disengagement. Selective coding refined these themes to focus on core issues directly addressing the research questions.

### **C. Use of Workshop Data**

The activity which was on community mapping provided rich spatial contextualization with visual maps demonstrating how homes and communal spaces are allocated and used. These maps illuminated the physical barriers to parent-child interaction, such as the lack of private spaces and children's exposure to unsafe street environments.

Story sharing circles offered deep insight into emotional and social aspects, capturing lived experiences of hardship, resilience and family dynamics. Quotations and shared stories illustrated how daily struggles impact relationships and underscored participants' desire for supportive communal activities.

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**Figure 1**

Participatory workshops done with the communities



To enhance credibility, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing interview data, observational notes and workshop findings. Member checking was conducted informally during workshops, allowing participants to clarify and validate emerging insights. Reflexivity was maintained through memoing by the researchers, who actively considered personal biases and their influence on interpretation.

#### **D. Scope of the Study**

The core data collection activity was a two-day participatory design workshop held in the context. Also, a total of 32 participants from 14 households were interviewed during the process. The Grama Niladhari of the area was also interviewed. Each day's session lasted from 1 hour to 3 hours, allowing sufficient time for parents and children to engage meaningfully without becoming

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fatigued. The workshops were designed to integrate activities where children and parents were able to get together and engage in.

### ***E. Limitations of the Study***

A smaller sample size was selected because the research focuses mainly on depth over breadth. Parental involvement was low in the context. The resource limitation was a main limitation faced while engaging in the sessions. As the research was done in a specific context, sometimes the findings may not apply to all the low-income urban communities in Sri Lanka.

### ***F. Significance of the Study***

This study highlights the impact of poverty and overcrowding on parent-child disengagement in Siribara Manikepura, offering critical insights for culturally sensitive, community-driven interventions. Its findings can guide policy and design efforts to improve family relationships and child development in marginalized urban Sri Lankan communities.

## **Findings/ Results**

Out of many different themes, three overarching themes emerged from the analysis.

### ***A. Spatial and Economic Constraints***

Participants consistently emphasized how overcrowded living conditions and limited outdoor space restrict parent-child interactions and children's play. The economic pressures faced by parents were also linked to reduced supervision and prioritization of income-generating activities over parenting. The 6<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> participants were constantly worried about their limited living spaces and how it effects they behavioral patterns of their children. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> participants said that they were not getting enough time to be with their children as they must go to work .

### ***B. Patterns of Parental Disengagement***

The data revealed common patterns of disengaged parenting characterized by minimal monitoring, emotional distance and inconsistent discipline. Factors such as unemployment, substance abuse within the household and societal stress contributed to these patterns. While the 5<sup>th</sup>,7<sup>th</sup>,14<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> were facing substance abuse in their households more than half of the participants were not having a consistent household income which led to many of the issues.

### ***C. Community and Cultural Opportunities***

Participants highlighted the need for community-driven solutions that respect cultural practices and spatial realities. The workshops themselves surfaced ideas for shared play spaces and storytelling activities as possible avenues to enhance engagement.

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## Conclusion

This study investigated parental disengagement within the low-income urban community of Siribara Manikepura, highlighting how intertwined spatial, economic, and social challenges impact family dynamics. A participatory approach was used here. The findings reveal that severe overcrowding and limited outdoor space significantly restrict parent-child interaction, while economic hardship forces parents to prioritize survival over engagement. Patterns of disengaged parenting, often compounded by substance abuse and early employment among children, contribute to negative emotional, social and educational outcomes.

Through participatory design workshops, the research emphasized the value of community involvement in identifying barriers and co-creating culturally sensitive, space-aware interventions. The active participation of parents and children demonstrated community willingness to engage in problem-solving and highlighted opportunities for shared play spaces and storytelling activities. These insights point to the importance of empathy-centered and context-specific strategies tailored to the realities of marginalized urban families.

This study contributes important knowledge on the complex factors driving parental disengagement in Sri Lankan low-income urban settings. It underscores the need for integrated approaches combining design, education and policy to foster stronger parent-child relationships and break cycles of poverty and social risk.

Limitations such as the small sample size and contextual specificity suggest caution in generalizing findings but also highlight the depth of understanding gained through qualitative methods. Future research should build on these results by testing intervention efficacy and exploring scalability across similar communities.

Ultimately, this research advocates for equitable, participatory methodologies that empower marginalized voices and inform stakeholders committed to enhancing child welfare and family wellbeing in urban poverty contexts.

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