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Investigating the Factors Influencing the Social Mobility of People Living in Low-Income Settlements in Kandy, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing vertical social mobility among residents of Poornawatta West, a low-income settlement in Mahaiyawa, Kandy, Sri Lanka. It examines the intergenerational differences in education, occupation, income, and assets ownership to determine the barriers and driving forces of upward mobility, comparing low-income and non-low-income communities. A total of 368 participants were selected using stratified and systematic sampling. Data were analyzed using SPSS, NVivo, and Excel, employing Multinomial Logistic Regression Independent T-Test, and correlation analysis. The results indicate that respondents' education, ownership of assets, and parents' service category significantly influence vertical social mobility. Independent T-Test analysis revealed significant disparities in upward mobility between loa-income and non-low-income communities, primarily driven by unequal access to education and financial resources. The findings highlight the importance of parental socioeconomic status, economic stability, and intergenerational wealth in shaping mobility outcomes, providing evidence to guide policies that enhance educational opportunities, financial support, and social services for low-income populations in Sri Lanka. The findings highlight the importance of parental socioeconomic status, economic stability, and intergenerational wealth in shaping mobility outcomes, providing evidence to guide policies that enhance educational opportunities, financial support, and social services for low-income populations in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Vertical Social Mobility, Low-Income Settlements, Integration Mobility, Socioeconomic Disparity

1. Introduction

Globally, nearly one billion people live in low-income settlements, which typically lack infrastructure and resources, limiting residents' capacity to improve their living conditions independently (Payne, 1997). Low-income settlements are a persistent feature of urban areas in Sri Lanka, often characterized by inadequate access to essential services such as water, sanitation, and housing (Niriella, 2010). In Sri Lanka, most low-income settlements are concentrated in Colombo's northern, central eastern, and southern regions, with government initiatives such as regeneration projects aimed at improving housing conditions and land-use efficiency (Lanka,

2002). Despite these efforts, these communities continue to face challenges, including residential encroachment, environmental hazards, and social problems. Social mobility, defined as the movement of individuals or groups within a social hierarchy, encompasses changes in socioeconomic status, education, occupation, or property ownership (Quarterly, 2013; Pinkster, 2007; Samiksha, 2001).

Despite the global interest in social mobility, there is limited empirical research on mobility patterns within low-income settlements in Sri Lanka. Existing studies often focus on poverty alleviation rather than the specific institutional, social, and economic barriers these communities face (Rains & Krishna, 2020). Few studies provide longitudinal insights or examine the effects of current economic conditions, such as inflation and employment instability, on mobility patterns. Moreover, access to quality education for children, a key driver of upward mobility, remains understudied; Kapferer (1977); Silva and Aathukorala (1991); Neville (1994); Thorbek (1998); and Niriella (1999).

Addressing these research gaps is essential for designing effective policies and interventions. This study aims to identify the main factors influencing social mobility in low-income settlements in Sri Lanka, focusing on upward mobility and the challenges residents face. It examines the socioeconomic status, occupation, and the educational attainment of individuals and their parents to identify systemic obstacles and inform targeted policy solutions.

Understanding social mobility in Sri Lanka's low-income settlements, such as Mahaiyawa in Kandy, is particularly important. Here, vertical social mobility is often limited, leading to generational stagnation within the same community. Economic constraints, lack of education, and social problems such as drug abuse and harassment restrict residents from moving to non -low-income communities perpetuating settlement expansion and social stratification (Zhao & Yu, 2020).

This study provides insights for urban planners, policymakers, and social development organizations to implement targeted interventions that enhance education, employment opportunities, and social services, ultimately promoting upward social mobility, reducing poverty, and limiting the growth of low-income settlements.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Low-income settlements and their characteristics

Low-income settlements are a persistent feature of urban areas in developing countries, including Sri Lanka. UN-Habitat (2014) defines settlements as areas where residents face one or more social inequalities, such as lack of adequate water, sanitation, or shelter. Globally, nearly a billion people live in such settlements (Venter & Cross, 2011). In Sri Lanka, low-income settlements are often characterized by limited access to infrastructure, poor housing quality, and vulnerability to social and environmental hazards (Niriella, 2010).

2.2 Concept of Social Mobility

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals, families, or groups within a social hierarchy, reflecting changes in socioeconomic status, occupation, or education (Pinkster,2007). Factors such as economic inequality, access to education, and occupational opportunities significantly influence social mobility, especially in low-income communities (Rains & Krishna,2020). Individuals are motivated to improve their social standing by seeking better employment, education, and living conditions, but structural barriers often limit these opportunities.

2.3 Social Mobility in Low-income settlements

Empirical studies indicate that upward mobility in low -income settlements is limited and often risky without external support (Rains & Krishna,2020). Residents frequently work in informal, low skilled occupations with minimal prospects for income growth. Generational persistence in these settlements contributes to social stratification, as children inherit the socioeconomic constraints of their parents (Zhao & Yu,2020). Research in Indian and Sri Lankan contexts demonstrate that educational attainment, occupational training, and social networks are critical factors influencing residents' ability to move upward socially.

2.4 Intergenerational social mobility

Intergenerational social mobility examines the relationship between the socioeconomic status of parents and that of their children as adults education, income, occupation, and social class are key indicators (Wong,2019). The degree of mobility reflects how strongly parents' status influences their children's outcomes. Societies with tight links between parental and child status are considered less mobile, highlighting systematic barriers that perpetuate low-income conditions. In low-income settlements, these barriers include limited educational opportunities, restricted access to high -quality employment, and social constraints, which collectively hinder upward mobility (OECD, 2013).

2.5 Factors Facilitating Social Mobility

Education, occupation, and income are widely recognized as the primary determinants of social mobility (Nunn et al.,2007). Skills and knowledge acquired through formal education directly affect employability and income potential, enabling residents to climb the social ladder. In Sri Lanka, studies in low-income settlements such as Wasanthamulla, Borella, and Dematagoda indicate that employment patterns, education levels, family demographics, and social networks significantly influence mobility outcomes (Subasinghe,2010).

Research from the Netherlands and the UK further highlights the role of social networks, neighborhood environment, and cultural factors in shaping mobility opportunities (Pinkster, 2007; Nunn et al., 2007).

2.6 Research Gap and Study Rationale

Although the literature identifies key determinants of social mobility, few studies examine these factors specifically within Sri Lankan low-income settlements. Existing research is largely descriptive, with limited attention to the interaction between education, occupation, income, and social networks. Moreover, intergenerational mobility and the influence or current economic challenges remain underexplored. Theoretical frameworks linking neighbourhood characteristics and social mobility are also underdeveloped.

1. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the factors influencing social mobility in low-income settlements in Kandy, Sri Lanka. Specifically, it aims to identify the socioeconomic, educational, and occupational factors affecting upward mobility.
2. Examine intergenerational mobility patterns and systemic barriers to social advancement.
3. Explore the role of social networks and neighborhood characteristics in shaping, mobility outcomes.

By doing so, the study provides a foundation for targeted policies and interventions to improve social mobility and living conditions in low-income settlements.

2.7 Study area

The study was conducted in Poornawatta, Mahaiyawa, a low-income settlement in Kandy, Sri Lanka. Mahaiyawa was selected due to its long-

standing low-income population and its contrast with adjacent non-low-income communities, which allows for comparison of social mobility patterns. The area exhibits typical challenges of low-income settlements, including limited access to education, health services, and formal employment, making it a suitable context to investigate vertical social mobility. Additionally, its proximity to urban employment centers enables assessment of mobility opportunities within the same city.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Measurement of Vertical Social Mobility

Vertical social mobility in this study was operationalized as the change in socioeconomic status between generations, considering key indicators such as; Educational attainment of respondents compared to their parents, Occupational status and type of employment, Household assets and livings conditions.

Each respondent's mobility score was derived by comparing these indicators to those of their parents, yielding a composite ordinal variable representing upward or downward mobility.

3.2 Sample Size Determination and Sampling Method

The total population of the study area was N=4550. The sample size was calculated using taro Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1973) with a 5% margin of error and 90% confidence level.

$$(Equation\ 1)\ n = \frac{N}{1 + N\ (e2)}$$

Were,

n = Sample size required

N = Number of people in the population

e = allowable error (%)

e = 0.05

$$n = \frac{4550}{1 + 4550(0.052)}$$

n = 367.7

n = 368

3.2.1 Stratified Sampling Method

Stratified Sampling was applied to ensure proportional representation of low -income (1260) and non-low-income (3290) residents. Systematic random sampling was used within each stratum. The sampling frame consisted of household lists obtained from local administrative records.

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Settlement type

Type of inhabitant	The Size of the layer		Size of the sample
Low-income inhabitants	1260	1260/4550*368	102
Non-low-income inhabitants	3290	3290/4550*368	266
Total	4550		368

Source: Compiled by Author, 2024

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Comparison of Social Mobility Between Groups

$$(Equation\ 2)\ U = n_1 n_2\ + \frac{n_1(n_1+1)}{2} - R_1$$

Where:

- n_1, n_2 = Sample Sized of the two groups
- R_1 = Sum of ranks in group 1

4.2 Relationship Between Social Mobility Indicators and Vertical Social Mobility

Spearman's rank -order correlation(p) was used to examine relationships between specific indicators (education, occupation, household assets) and vertical social mobility:

$$(Equation\ 3) P\ = 1 - \frac{6\sum d_i^2}{n(n^2\ - 1)}$$

Where:

P presents the correlation coefficient,

d_i is the rank difference between variables?

n is the number of observations

. The statically significance of correlations was determined using a 95% confidence level ($P < 0.05$).

4.3 Workflow of Data Acquisition and Analysis

A workflow figure (Figure 1) was prepared to illustrate the research process, from sampling and data collection to statistical analysis, providing a clear roadmap of the study.

4.4 Ethical considerations

The study adheres to ethical principles, including informed consent from all participants confidentiality, and anonymization of survey responses to protect participants identities.

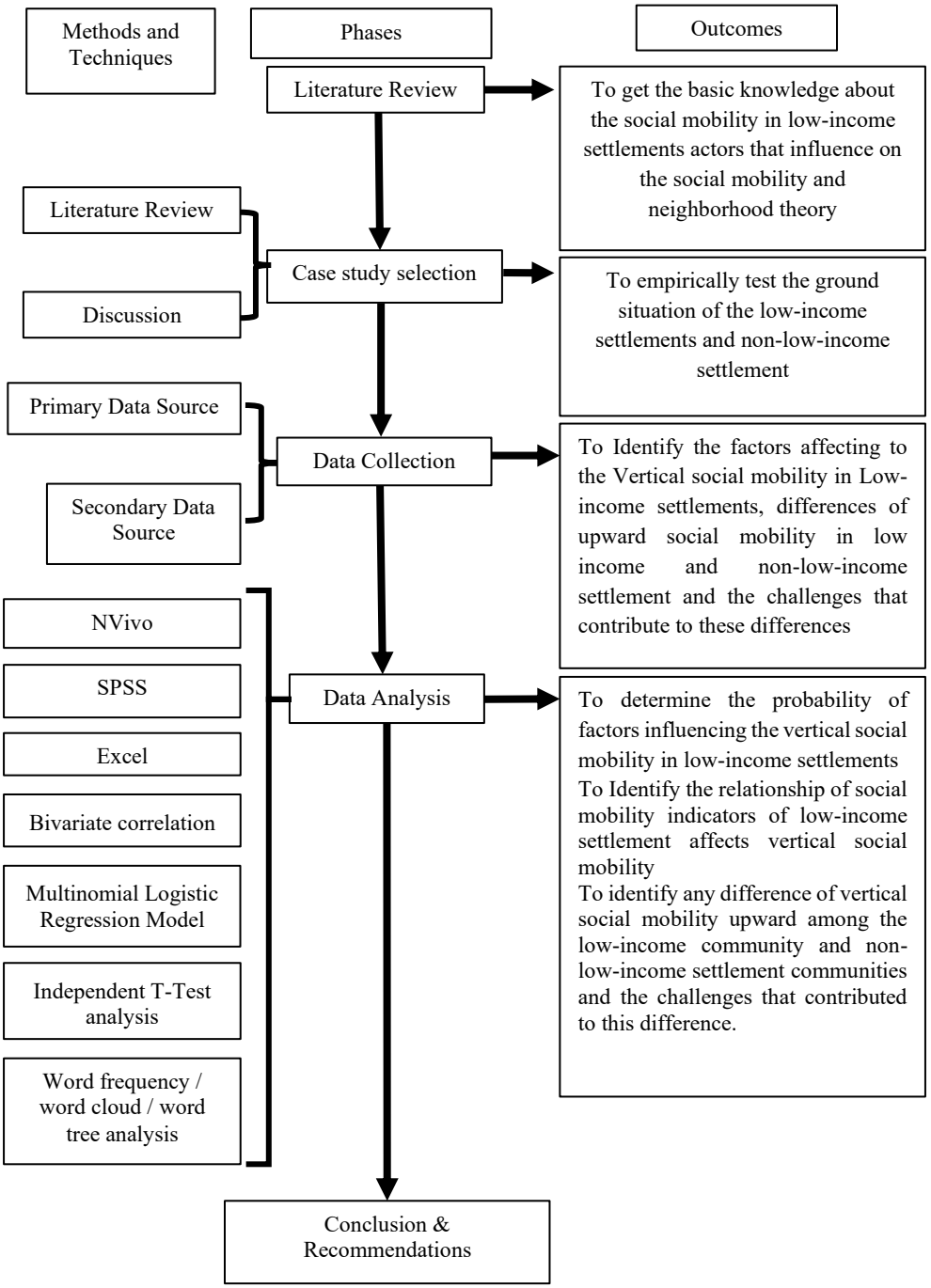

Figure 1: Workflow

5. Results

This section presents the results of the study aimed at assessing differences in vertical social mobility between low-income and non-low-income communities in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and identifying the relationship between key social mobility indicators and vertical social mobility. The analysis includes both descriptive statistics (to summarize intergenerational changes in education, occupation, health, and assets ownership) and inferential tests (to determine statically significant differences and relationships).

5.1 Comparison of vertical social Mobility between low-income and non-low-income communities

This subsection examines whether there are significant intergenerational differences in education, livelihood, assets ownership, and service category between low-income and non-low-income residents.

5.1.1 Intergenerational Education Difference

Educational attainment is a critical driver of social mobility. The study compared respondent's educational levels with those of their parents to assess upward mobility trends.

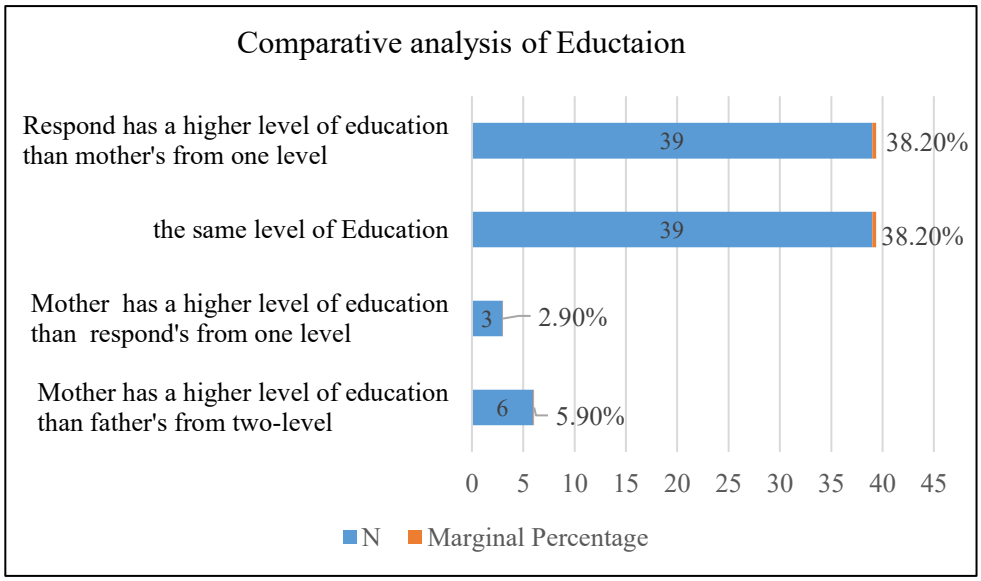

Figure 2: Case Processing Summary of Father's Education
(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

Approximately 64% of respondents reported having equal or higher educational attainment than their fathers, indicating a general upward education trend.

However, 25.5% had lower education levels than their father, suggesting persistent inequality among some groups. To determine whether these differences were statically significant between settlements, an independent-samples t-test was conducted.

Table 2: presents the results for educational differences between respondents and father

Type of settlement	Mean	SD	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Cl (Lower-Upper)
Low-income	0.25	0.9	-10.85	127.4	0	-1.033	-0.376
Non-Low income	1.28	0.5					

Source: Compiled by Author, 2024

Results show a significant difference($p<0.001$) between low-income and non-low-income settlements in intergenerational educational mobility, with the latter demonstrating higher upward movement.

Similar trends were found when comparing respondents' education to their mother's education, as shown in Table , again indicating significant differences ($p<0.001$) between settlement types.

Table 3: Educational differences between respondents and mothers

	Type of the settlement	Mean	SD	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
				F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
											Lower	Upper
Difference between mother's education	low income	0.53	0.982	20.616	0.000	-8.861	137.7	0.00	-0.934	0.105	-1.142	-0.726
	non-low income	1.46	0.654									

Source: Compiled by Author, 2024

Education remains the strongest contributor to upward social mobility, with non-low-income households showing higher gains across generations.

5.1.2 Intergenerational Livelihood and School Category Differences

This section assesses the intergenerational differences in livelihood outcomes, including school type and access to health services.

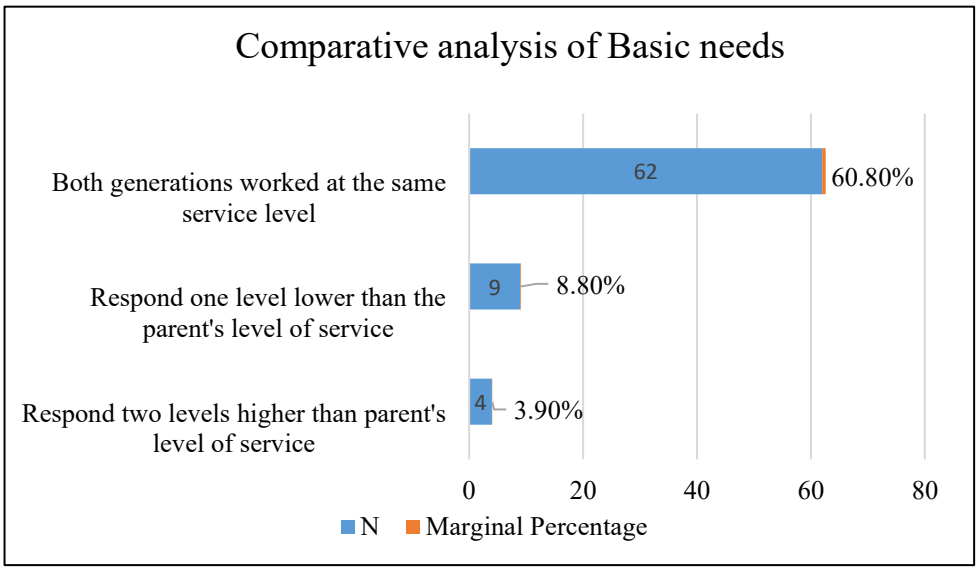

Figure 3: Comparative analysis of basic needs
(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

Descriptive analysis Figure shows that 67.6% of both generations could manage financial means to meet basic needs, while 25.5% of respondents' families reported fewer financial means than their parents. This suggests that some intergenerational improvements exist but remain limited in scale.

Table 4: school attained difference between generations

Type of settlement	Mean	SD	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Cl (Lower-Upper)
Low-income	0.37	0.5	-0.055	234.9	0.956	-0.003	-0.125,0.118
Non-Low income	0.38	0.6					

Source: Compiled by Author, 2024

H1: There is a significant difference in the category of school attained between low-income and non-low-income settlements.

The t-test revealed no significant difference(p=0.956), meaning the type of school attained is similar across settlement types. This could indicate the positive impact of educational reforms and equitable public-school access in Kandy. Hence, H1 is not supported for this variable.

5.1.3 Comparative Analysis for Health Service

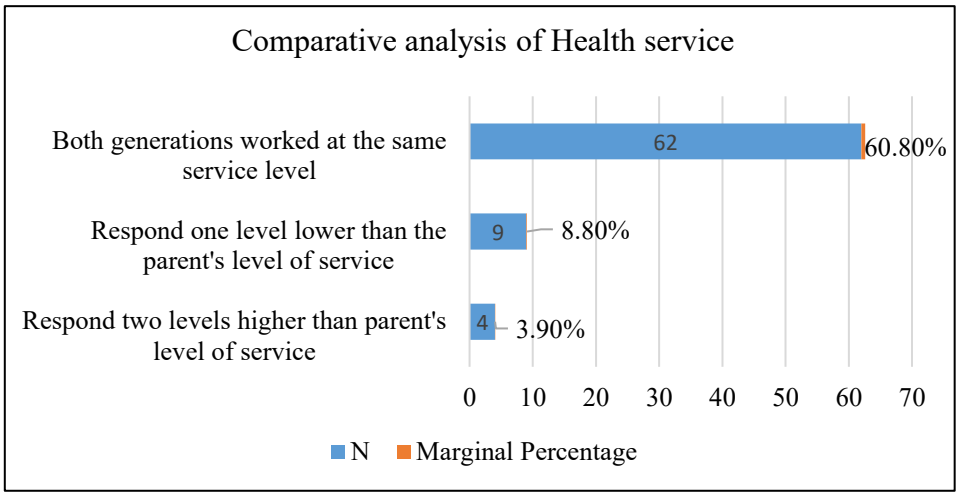

Figure 4: Comparative analysis of Health service
(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

According to the above Figure , 67.6% of families in low-income settlements continue to access the same category of hospitals as their parents, while about 28.4% of the younger generation have shifted from regional to national hospitals indicating incremental improvement in healthcare accessibility.

Table 5: Difference in Accessing Health Services

Type of settlement	Mean	SD	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Cl (Lower-Upper)
Low-income	-0.25	0.52	-5.31	366	0.135	-0.45	(-6.68, -0.31)
Non-Low income	-0.25	0.88					

(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

H1: There is a significant difference in achieving health services between low-income and non-low-income settlements. No, statically significant difference was found (p=0.135), suggesting that public healthcare access is relatively uniform across communities, though qualitative disparities (service quality, distance) may still persist.

5.1.4 Intergenerational Asset Ownership Differences

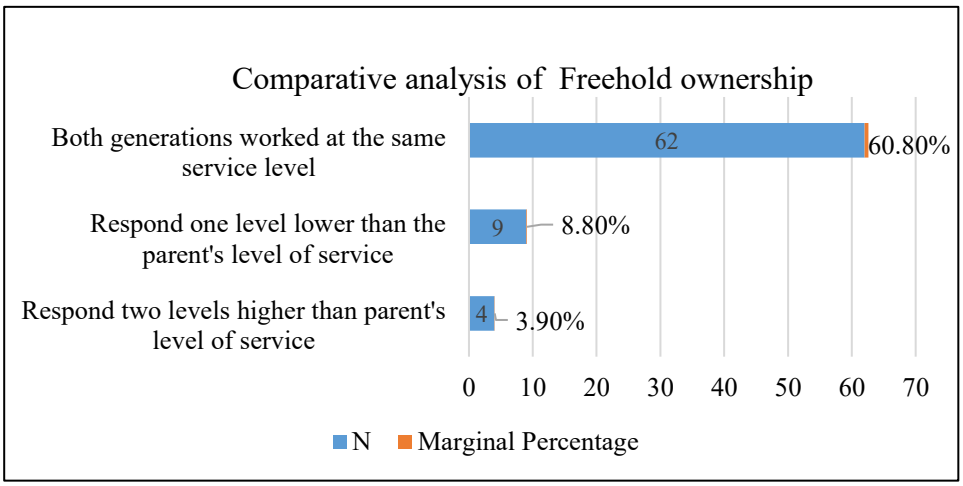

Figure 5: Comparative analysis of Freehold Ownership
(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

Results indicate that 83.3 of both generations in low-income settlements do not possess freehold ownership, while a small portion (2%) of respondents have newly acquired property. This shows that asset accumulation is stagnant, though marginal improvements exist due to state housing schemes.

Table 6: Difference of having freehold ownership

Type of settlement	Mean	SD	t	df	sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Cl (Lower-Upper)
Low-income	1.7	0.72	20.73	120.3	0	1.54	(1.39,1.69)
Non-Low income	0.2	0.35					

Source: Compiled by Author, 2024

The difference is statically significant ($p<0.001$), showing that freehold ownership is more common among low-income residents, primarily due to government land distribution programs such as urban housing regularization. This result may appear counterintuitive but reflects the state -led redistribution policies targeting vulnerable settlements.

5.1.5 Intergenerational Service Category Differences

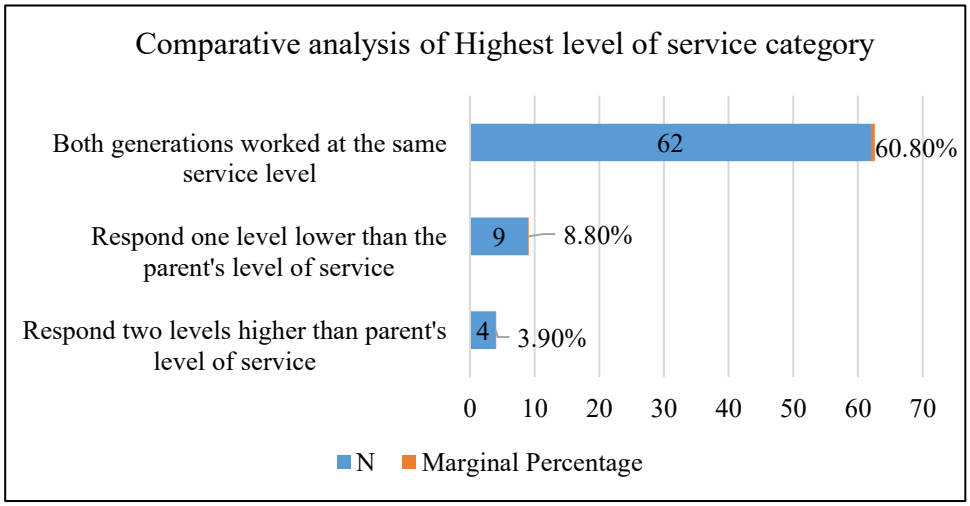

Figure 6: Comparative analysis of the highest level of service category
(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

Findings show that 60.8% of respondents remain within the same service category as their parents, and 26.5% are two levels lower-indicating limited occupational upward mobility and persistent structural barriers in accessing formal-sector employment.

Table 7: Difference of highest level of service category

Type of settlement	Mean	SD	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Cl (Lower-Upper)
Low-income	0.4	1.09	3.93	345.18	0	0.69	(0.34,1.03)
Non-Low income	-0.3	2.23					

(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

H1: There is a significant difference in the highest level of service category between low-income and non-low-income settlements.

The t-test confirms a significant difference($p<0.001$), meaning that service level upward mobility is more evident among non-low-income residents. Hence, H1 is supported, indicating occupational stratification between settlements.

5.1.6 Relationship Between Social Mobility Indicators and Vertical Social Mobility

To examine the interrelationship between key determinants of mobility, Spearman's rank -order Correlation was employed. This non-parametric method is particularly suitable for ordinal data and was used to identify monotonic relationships between intergenerational variables, including education, assets ownership, financial means, and occupational status.

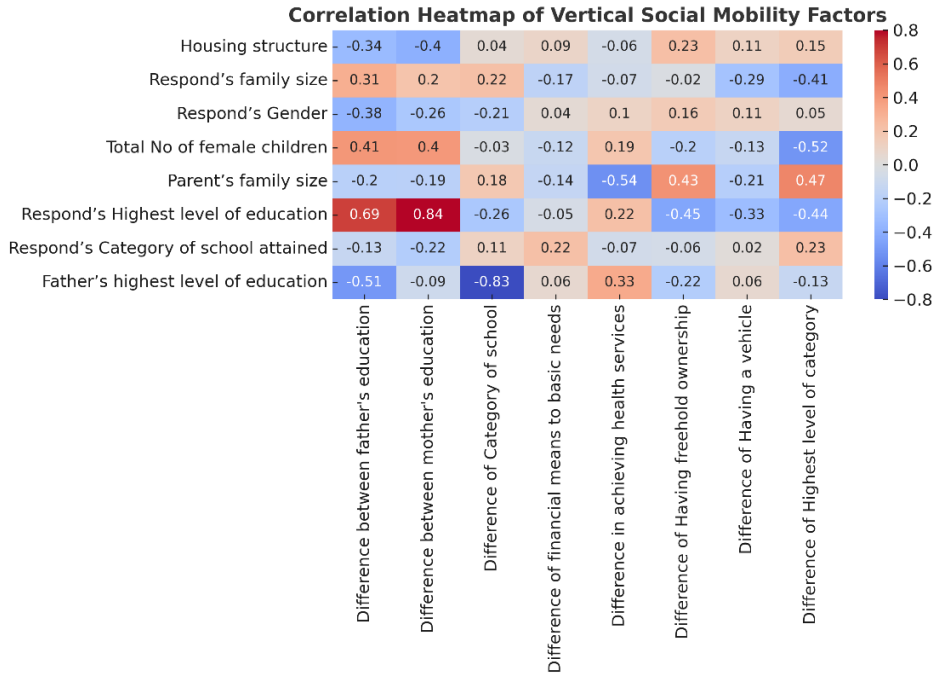

Figure 7: Correlation of Social Mobility Indicators

Spearman's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between key social mobility indicators and inter-generational differences in various socioeconomic factors.

5.2 The results indicate the following key findings:

Table 8: Summary of Key Correlation Relationship

Variable Pair	Correlation	Strength	Direction	Interpretation
Father's vs Respondent's Education	0.69	Strong	Positive	Higher parental education improves respondent's education
Mother's vs Respondent's Education	0.84	Very Strong	Positive	Education is highly inherited
School Category vs Parental Education	-0.21	Weak	Negative	School type weakly related to mobility
Financial means vs Financial Stability	0.43	Moderate	Positive	Economic stability supports mobility
Health Access vs financial Status	0.19	Weak	Positive	Financial resources improve health access
Freehold ownership (parents vs respondents)	0.45	Moderate	Positive	Indicates intergenerational assets transmission
Vehicle ownership (parent vs respondents)	0.33	Moderate	Positive	Reflect moderate wealth inheritance
Service category vs education	0.47	Moderate	Positive	Higher education leads to better occupation

6. Discussion

6.1 Overview

This study examines the factors influencing vertical social mobility between low-income and non-low-income settlements in Kandy, Sri Lanka. Using intergenerational data on education, livelihood, asset ownership, and service category, the analysis sought to understand whether upward social mobility is occurring, and which socio-economic forces drive or constrain it.

The findings reveal persistent disparities in educational attainment, occupation, and asset ownership between settlement types, suggesting that while limited progress has been made, structural inequalities continue to restrict intergenerational advancement.

6.2 Educational Mobility and Socio-Cultural Factors

Education emerged as a strong determinant of upward social mobility. Respondents from non-low-income settlements has significantly higher educational attainment than those from low-income areas, and both father's and mother's education were strongly correlated with the respondent's educational level (r_s =0.668 and r_s -0.838 respectively). This finding aligns with Krishna (2013), who emphasized that education is a key ladder for mobility but is often constrained by inherited disadvantages. Similarly, Pinkster (2007) highlighted that socio-cultural environment such as parental aspirations, exposure to social networks, and attitudes toward schooling shape educational outcomes.

In Kandy's low-income settlements, social capital is limited, and educational aspirations are often secondary to short-term income needs, thereby constraining generational progress.

Cultural expectations also play a role. Many low-income families prioritize early employment over extended schooling, particularly for male children, while female may face gendered barriers to secondary or tertiary education. These socio-cultural constraints perpetuate limited mobility and align with patterns observed in other South Asian urban contexts.

6.3 Livelihood Mobility and Economic Constraints

The study found that livelihood indicators, such as school type and health access, showed minimal integrational change. While access to health services improved slightly, financial stability remained largely stagnant. The strong positive correlation between financial ability and upward mobility (r_s = 0.881) demonstrates that economic capital continues to determine social progress.

However, persistent intergenerational inequality in financial means (r_s = -0.428) indicates that wealth and employment disparities are reproduced rather than diminished. This supports Krishna's (2013) argument that economic barriers especially unstable employment and informal sector dependence limit opportunities for low-income populations to achieve sustained upward movement.

In the context of Kandy, limited formal employment opportunities and high dependence on daily-wage labour reduce income predictability. Rising

living costs, combined with inadequate access to credit, further hinder asset accumulation and upward mobility.

6.4 Asset Ownership and Environmental-Political Context

One striking and counterintuitive result was that freehold ownership was higher among low-income respondents (M=1.69) compared to non-income respondents. This finding appears to contradict conventional expectations, where higher-income groups typically have grater property ownership.

This anomaly may stem from context specific policy interventions in Sri Lanka, particularly in Kandy. Over the past two decades, government-led urban resettlement and regularization schemes (ex: Divi Neguma and UDA land grants) have transferred ownership rights of small housing plots to long term low-income occupants. Consequently, while the land parcels are small and often located in environmentally vulnerable or congested areas, they are legally titled, inflating freehold ownership statistics within these communities.

Therefore, the finding does not necessarily indicate higher wealth but reflects state – driven asset redistribution shaped by political and environmental factors. In contrast, many middle-income families in non-low-income settlements may reside in inherited or leased properties without formal titles. Hence, this result is not a measurement error, but a contextual phenomenon linked to Sri Lanka's urban housing policies.

6.5 Service Category and Occupational Mobility

The analysis revealed significant differences in occupational service categories, with low-income respondents generally maintaining or dropping within the same occupational mobility. The lack of mobility reflects structural constraints in the local labour market, particularly the absence of higher skilled job creation in Kandy and the dominance of informal work among low-income households.

These findings correspond with Pinkster (2007), who noted that spatial and social segregation limit access to high status occupations, even when education levels improve. Thus, mobility opportunities are curtailed by a combination of spatial inequality, skill mismatch, and low job diversity.

6.6 Recommendations

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations are proposed:

I. Enhance educational support for low-income households through scholarships, mentorship, and early childhood programs.

II. Expand formal employment opportunities in peri-urban zones in Kandy through skill development and public-private partnerships.

III. Regularize urban housing titles alongside infrastructure improvement, ensuring ownership leads to real economic stability.

IV. Promote inclusive urban planning, integrating low-income settlements into mainstream economic and service networks.

V. Encourage longitudinal data collection to monitor mobility trends beyond two generations.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the intergenerational dynamics of social mobility in low-income and non-low-income settlements in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The objective was to determine the extent of upward mobility and the key factors influencing it across education, livelihood, assets, and occupation. The findings reveal significant disparities between settlement types, with education, assets ownership, and service category showing the strongest differentiation. Parental education and income exert substantial influence over the next generation's outcomes, confirming patterns found by earlier scholars such as Krishna (2013) and Pinkster (2007). However, the unusual finding regarding high freehold ownership among low-income respondents reflects politically mediated assets redistribution rather than genuine economic upliftment. The study contributes to understanding how context specific policies and structural inequalities interact to shape intergenerational outcomes in developing urban regions.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The cross-section nature of the data limits the ability to establish causality, and reliance on self-reported information may introduce recall bias. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and qualitative interview to explore mobility experiences in greater depth and across more diverse regions of Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, while there are indicators of modest upward mobility, deep rooted socio-economic and structural constraints continue to hinder equitable social advancement in low-income settlements. Addressing these requires integrated interventions spanning education, employment, housing, and governance to create more inclusive urban development trajectory.

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