

MENTAL HEALTH BEHIND WALLS: EXPLORING BARRIERS TO COUNSELLING IN SRI LANKAN ORPHANAGES

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KWDHH Prasangika¹ and RKND Darshani^{2#}

¹*Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.*

²*Gampaha Wikramarachchi University of Indigenous Medicine, Sri Lanka.*

#niroshidarshani@kln.ac.lk

Children raised in institutional care face heightened risks of emotional and psychological difficulties due to inadequate caregiving, limited stimulation, and weak attachment relationships. In Sri Lanka, institutionalisation is primarily driven by poverty, parental loss, abuse, and neglect, yet mental health support for children in orphanages remains scarce, with only a small proportion receiving treatment. This study examines the psychological and social factors influencing the readiness of orphanage staff to introduce counselling services, focusing on knowledge of psychology, social stigma, subjective social support, and motivation for counselling therapy. A quantitative design was employed with data collected from 322 staff members across government orphanages in the Western Province, selected through stratified proportionate random sampling. Participants completed a structured questionnaire assessing readiness to implement counselling alongside the four independent variables, measured on five-point Likert scales. Data were analysed using SPSS with descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests, correlation analysis, and multiple regression. The results reveal that all four factors significantly influence readiness for counselling adoption, with motivation for counselling and psychological knowledge emerging as the strongest predictors. Social stigma also plays a critical role, acting as both a barrier and determinant of willingness to engage with mental health practices. The findings emphasize that enhanced knowledge and intrinsic motivation can strengthen readiness, while stigma reduction and supportive institutional environments are essential to sustain implementation. The study concludes that successful integration of counselling in Sri Lankan orphanages requires targeted training, stigma-reduction initiatives, and strong leadership advocacy to create emotionally supportive care settings for vulnerable children.

Keywords: *Institutional Care, Counselling Services, Mental Health Readiness, Social Stigma, Orphanage Staff*