A Journey to New Narratives: How Sri Lankan Migrant Women Challenge Perceptions through Resistance

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A Journey to New Narratives

How Sri Lankan Migrant Women Challenge Perceptions through Resistance

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For the women whose resilience is incomparable
Abstract

This thesis draws on ethnographic research carried out with a group of returned Sri Lankan migrant women who migrated for employment to the Middle East. This retrospective ethnography, based on their time working abroad, brings forth ideas of silent resistance and hidden weapons of women from developing countries, and intends to work against dominant discourses like the human trafficking framework which deems migrant women ‘victims’ of the system of migration, largely ignoring the agency that they exercise throughout the process. The ethnography argues that resistance and resilience are better frameworks with which to characterise the experiences of migrant women. The women in this study showed that through resilience, resistance and agency, they were able to navigate through an immensely oppressive system. They used resourceful and courageous modes of resistance within constrained social situations. The thesis looks at their experiences in the three chronological stages of their migration: pre-departure, life in the host country, and the return to Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Resistance, Agency, Resilience, Women, Migration, Structural Violence
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Soft power?

“Soft power, perhaps,” I said, as I explained my research focus to Ramani Jayasundere, an experienced researcher in the fields of law, justice, gender and migration in Sri Lanka and a seasoned activist. I had gone into the research process thinking my focus would be the intensity and hardships that migrant women face abroad, but three weeks into my research, I had realised that the stories that were being shared with me were of resourcefulness and resistance in the face of those very hardships. I met with Ramani to get some advice on my framing. As a complete novice in an immensely important field of study, I needed my thought process to qualified by someone like her. With a slight amused expression on her face, she pointed out that these women’s power was, “not so soft.” This was something I needed to be reminded of.

Although a subtle reminder, this was wildly important for me to realise. What I was learning about the women who informed this study was that the ways in which they operationalised resistance to oppressive forces was powerful in the traditional way that power is understood, and by softening their power, I was denying the impact of their resistance.

This ethnography addresses the ways in which migrant women from Sri Lanka navigate the complexities and resist the challenges of the transnational system of labor migration. It focuses on a group of women who went abroad to the Middle East seeking employment as domestic workers. This thesis intends to foreground the resistance and the agency that they exert during every step of the process, making it a retrospective ethnography as it is based on the memories of the experiences of the migration process. I argue that these women, through their narratives of the process, find resilience and mobility in the most constrained, intimate social conditions.
The work that this thesis intends to do is show that the resistance and resilience of migrant women is a better framework than ‘human trafficking’ for migrant workers who find themselves within systems of oppression. It is a call for a change of lens to the ways they navigate the system and resist, and thus it highlights their need for support as opposed to ‘saving.’ This thesis intends to dispel the conflation of their struggles with victimhood and trafficking. They make difficult decisions not only for themselves but also for the mobility of their families and communities. Throughout the process of the project, I found that the greatest lessons for me were taught by the women who informed this study. For that reason, I hope this paper can contribute toward the reframing of the conversation surrounding migrant women, and that the lived experiences and truths of migrant women become the new theories and frameworks.

All of the quotations from the women that I interviewed were translated from Sinhala by me, and so I apologise for any discrepancies that may have been caused by what gets lost in translation. If I had more time I would have included the Sinhala script with the English beside it. All of the names and identifiable details have been anonymised for the purpose of the safety of the women (IRB # 2016-11-016). Bear with me for all that is missing, there is so much more that I wish I could have addressed.

From Shore to Shore, and Back Again

This ethnography retrospectively details a group of Sri Lankan women's experiences of labour migration, from Sri Lanka, to the Middle East and back to Sri Lanka. The first chapter contextualises the study and lays out the theoretical frameworks for the analysis of the experiences of Sri Lankan migrant women. The second chapter details the methodology
used for the ethnography. The next three chapters depict the experiences of navigating the chronological stages of migration. The pre-departure stage foregrounds the variety of impetuses for migrating and the arrangements that have to be made before departure, such as childcare arrangements and choosing the mode of migration. Next, life in the host country depicts the immense structural challenges that the migrant women faced while abroad, in an alienating environment, and underscores the ways in which they exercise agency and resistance within extremely constrained social conditions. Finally, the return to Sri Lanka enforces certain challenges of immobility back home. On the other hand, the women shared how their migration was beneficial for the social mobility of themselves and their families.
Chapter 1

Understanding the Context of the Study

The complexities of the migration from Sri Lanka to the Middle East, and back, cannot possibly be summarised in brief. It is important to acknowledge that each individual’s experience of the process will be different. Thus, this analysis moves out of the ‘push/pull’ framework that is usually used.¹ In this case, the impetuses for migrating, staying in the host country and returning to the country of origin are affected by a number of factors, some expected, while others are unplanned. Obviously this ethnography cannot possibly address all of these possibilities. Therefore, to approach an understanding of the process and challenges along the way, this chapter will start by detailing the systems in Sri Lanka and the Middle East in which migrant women operate, exploring the policies and laws that affect their lives and experiences. Then, it identifies a key discourse, which is interlaced with the topic of female labour migration—human trafficking, and the inclusion of female migrant workers in the human trafficking discourses. This can often be a forceful conflation that unfairly denies the fact that migrant women possess agency and choice in their process of migration. The chapter goes on to outline more concepts that help to frame aspects of the experiences of the migrant women in this ethnography, and which are key to understanding the modes of resistance, resilience and agency employed by the women.

¹ The push-pull framework emphasises the ‘pull’ factors in the host country and the ‘push’ factors from the country of origin. It largely focuses on economic factors and has been criticised because the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors mirror each other and lack a nuanced view of dominant causes and origins.
Leaving Sri Lanka

From around 1973, the oil exporting countries, all a part of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), experienced a boom as oil prices hiked, transforming these countries into open markets for migrant labour due to the resultant labour shortages (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 3). The booming markets in the Middle-Eastern economies after another hike in 1979 further encouraged the migration of people from labour surplus countries like Sri Lanka. Moreover, with the global economic restructuring and liberalization of economic policies since the late
1970s, there was an increase in female labour force participation as well as demand for female labour overseas (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 13). The demand was particularly for domestic workers and thus there has been a shift of care work engaged by Sri Lankan women from the domestic to the international labour market (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 13) over the past few decades.

Sri Lanka’s foreign employment market has been dominated by the demand for female domestic workers in the Middle East region; 94% of Sri Lanka’s female migrants employed as domestic workers are employed in Middle Eastern countries (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 14). Furthermore, since 2007 50% of Sri Lanka’s total migrants have been female (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 14) and 81% of all female migrant workers were employed as domestic workers during the year 2015 (SLBFE, 2015). However, the growth in female departures from Sri Lanka has slowed during the last few years. According to the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, this comes as a result of more domestic work opportunities (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 14). The last few years have also seen a steady growth of male departures for jobs in the construction and manufacturing sectors (2008). It is estimated that there are over 1.7 million Sri Lankan migrants abroad (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare).

**Effects on Society**

The largest source of Sri Lanka’s remittances is the Middle East (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 33) and over the past two decades 50 – 60% of the total private remittances have been received from migrant workers in the Middle East.
The total value of private remittances from the Middle East has grown to Rs. 827,689 million (US$ 6,407 million) from Rs. 18,311 million in 1991 (See Figure 2).

Remittances are a major tenet of the functioning of the Sri Lankan economy. Moreover the money earned by migrant women often goes towards improving the standard of living of their family and community members with a particular emphasis on health care and education (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare 2013, 17). Their earnings are a source of social mobility, which may not have been possible had they pursued domestic employment. However, there has been extensive attention in past scholarship on...
the social disadvantages of this migration on the personal lives and experiences of the women (e.g. unfair contractual binds, abusive employers etc.), as well on their dependents that are left behind. The perceived care deficit that occurs in Sri Lanka as women travel internationally to take up caring positions abroad (Ukwatta, 2011) and the wellbeing of families left behind have become increasingly important issues to the state and policymakers, and thus there has been an increasing recognition of the migrant woman as inseparable from her family unit. This preoccupation has resulted in a revision to the National Migration Policy that has proven to be an unjust and challenging obstacle to the migration of women, especially those who are mothers.

*The Revision to the National Policy of Migration and Labour*

The fixation that past research has had on the effects on the family left behind has made for misinformed policy decisions. The research fails to consider the changing structure of caretaking for families of migrant women. An example of this is the Family Background Report, a mandate of the Sri Lanka National Labour Migration Policy instigated in 2013. This Circular mandates that female migrant workers must complete a comprehensive Family Background Report to be eligible to leave the country. The aim of the report is to minimize the harm that comes about to the family of the migrant worker during her work abroad. The FBR prohibits women who have children younger than 5 years old from migrating, promotes migration of women with children older than 5 years only if they have arranged satisfactory arrangements, it restricts women older than 55 years from migrating, and it requires that the migrant woman obtain the consent of their husband for overseas

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employment. Both of these requirements, particularly the latter, deny female migrant workers a great amount of agency in their choices surrounding migration.

The problem with the report is that its standards exclude a lot of women from eligibility based on arbitrary measures according to the authors of the important report titled “Deciding for Sri Lanka’s women migrant workers: Protection or Denial of Rights?” (Jayasundere et al. 2015). The researchers find that the new FBR requirement, which does not apply to male migrants, places the onus of “family unity” on the woman alone thereby denying her equal access to migrant employment and perpetuating patriarchal and paternalistic state structures. This circular was really a “response to moral panic about the vulnerability of families of female migrants” (Jayasundere et al. 2015, 7) and instead of strengthening “family bonds” the circular likely dissuades migrant women from seeking state support in their desire to find employment abroad. This policy encourages inequalities to be reproduced in family structures even though the family structure has been changing dynamically over the past few decades as a result of female migration occurring since the 1980s.

The FBR is the sort of requirement that forces female migrant workers to choose a more informal route of migration in order to avoid having to wait until they gain permission from their husbands or the state. A study by Ukwatta (2011) found that one third of the 400 migrants who were surveyed used informal networks when seeking employment abroad. The choice to use informal channels can make the process faster, easier, and seemingly safer when referrals from friends and family are involved. However, the use of informal channels can result in a weak support system in the host country. Weaker than what is already within formal channels. This is for the most part due to the kefala sponsorship system, which renders the migrant workers completely attached to their employers. Hence, without any sort
of formal support from agencies or organisations, the migrant women may find themselves socially isolated and with no support structure.

**Kefala System in the Host country**

The *kefala* system is the sponsorship system in place in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which is an intergovernmental economic and political union of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (K.S.A), and the UAE. This sponsorship system ties the migrant employee solely to her employer or sponsor. Put in place in the 1950s, the *kefala* system came out to regulate the increasing flows of labour migrants in and out of the GCC countries. As a means of controlling and regulating these migrants, legal residence is tied to their sponsors and thus migrants are dependent on their sponsors for everything (Mahdavi, 2016, 49). Thus if a migrant worker were to break their contract they would become an illegal worker immediately. Moreover, for a female labour migrant contracted as a domestic worker and residing in the “intimate” sphere, this system makes their experience even more precarious (Constable 2014). They are dependent on their employers for not only their wages but also their residence and accessing services such as healthcare (Mahdavi 2016, 50).

This system perpetuates structural inequalities because of the steep power and agency differential established between worker and employer. “With no labor law protections for domestic workers, employers can, and many do, overwork, underpay, and abuse these women” (Begum - HRW 2014). Within this system there is more likelihood that migrant workers will encounter intense and difficult working conditions with few resources to rely on.

Migrant women in the GCC countries are excluded from the protection of labour laws. Domestic workers’ lives do not fall into the category that the government oversees.
Changes in policy or bilateral agreements may be passed but whether change occurs is highly uncertain. The system is built on uncertainty and fluidity. For example, it is illegal in the GCC countries for the employer to confiscate the domestic worker’s passport but this phenomenon is one that occurs on a regular basis. This system of structural inequalities does not necessarily change with an improvement in the legal framework.

Given the uncertainty of the system and the resultant opportunity for employers to exploit and abuse the rights of their workers, human trafficking is brought to mind. It is often that the hardships of migration are thought to count as forms of human trafficking, given that migrant women often face immense structural violence. This conflation may do more harm than good because it works around the assumption that migrant women do not have agency and the potential to control their outcomes. In the next section, I discuss the dominant human trafficking discourses and the ways in which those paradigms can lead to the said conflation.

Against a Narrative of Trafficking

Human trafficking today is cast as one of the “three evils that haunts the globe”, according to trafficking scholar Kamala Kempadoo (Kempadoo 2005, vii), alongside terrorism and drug trafficking by political leaders. It is the subject of much research and policy work but there are discrepancies with regard to the scope of what counts as trafficking practices. The legal definition of trafficking highlights the qualities of “force, fraud and/or coercion” (Mahdavi 2011, 13). The preoccupation with trafficking has long been associated with the bondage of the bodies of women and children. There is often a conflation of sex work and sex trafficking, even though in reality, forced prostitution only counts for 22% of human trafficking. The majority 68% of human trafficking today occurs in sectors such as domestic work, agricultural work, and construction. (Thrupkaew, 2015).
This preoccupation with sex in trafficking discourse originated in the nineteenth century when social panic broke out over the perceived “White Slave Trade” as a result of the growing number of women who travelled abroad for work and opportunities (Kempadoo 2005, x). It was suspected that these women were being enslaved and violated sexually by the male, “non-Western Other” while abroad. This fear and desire to protect women and police their sexual lives was perpetuated by the Western European middle-class and elites. By the twentieth century, the anti-white slavery crusade became synonymous with an anti-prostitution campaign by “Western-European and U.S. middle class reformists who sought to “save” their “fallen” sisters” (Kempadoo 2005, x). This subsided in the midst of the twentieth century but reemerged in the 1970s propelled by Western feminists concerned with exploitation of women in Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the Vietnam war. “Sex tourism, mail-order bride arrangements, militarized prostitution, and coercions and violence in the movement and employment of women from poorer to more affluent areas at home and abroad for work…were paramount in early campaigns” (Kempadoo 2005, xi).

The war on trafficking today is largely believed to be perpetuated by non-western men, who target and “enslave” vulnerable women and children, largely. For instance, Middle Eastern men become these ‘perpetrators’ in the case of migrant women travelling to the Middle East for work. The conversation lacks a nuanced understanding of the dimensions of trafficking. For example, the issue of the male trafficking is often ignored. Without an accurate conceptualization and understanding of the trafficking problem, Kempadoo argues, “much of what is pursued in the name of a war on trafficking has troubling consequences for poor people around the world” (Kempadoo 2005, viii). This is because of the way measures are taken to end the trafficking problem. In reality this effort of intervention serves only to create a “Push-down Pop-Up effect”, according to Phil Marshall and Susu Thaun
(Kempadoo 2005, xvi): “interventions serve to suppress trafficking in one geographical location or community and cause it to resurface elsewhere.” (Kempadoo 2005, xvi). Thus with Sri Lankan migrant women, for instance, the more regulation put in place as a result of the fear of trafficking, the more likely it is that these women will be forced to choose more informal routes of migration, or more dangerous paths, so as to avoid being prevented from migrating.

**Conflating Migration with Trafficking**

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, partnering with the EU in 2015, launched a joint initiative to address “Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants (GLO.ACT). The smuggling of migrants “involves the procurement for financial or other material benefit of illegal entry of a person into a State of which that person is not a national or resident.”

Human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants are two phenomena that are easily combined. This combination can be problematic because it promotes the intervention in the lives of labour migrants. In the experiences of my interlocutor, some of them used informal channels which might fall under this category of “smuggling” because of the informal route they took and the fees they paid to the informal agency that assisted them. Jyoti Sanghera critiques this “absence of a critical distinction between trafficking and migration”, which she argues, is a tenet of the dominant trafficking paradigm (Sanghera 2005, 10). Equating trafficking and migration and attempting to tackle them together, as in the UNODC example, leads to unproductive solutions pertaining to labour migration. Sanghera writes, “Even when curbing migration is not a stated programmatic focus, an inadvertent impetus is to dissuade women and girls from moving in order to protect them from harm” (Sanghera 2005, 11). This conflation can lead to problematic policies, which cause the movement of
female labour migration to go underground so as to dodge unnecessary obstacles. Moreover, this notion operates against the fact that migrant women make calculated decisions as opposed to have no say in what happens to them in the migration process.

A central aspect of the trafficking discourse is the notion of the trafficked woman as “victim”, used by second wave feminists\(^3\) to highlight the injustices of patriarchy. What this does, however, is “dismiss any conception of will and agency” (Kempadoo 2005, xxiii) of the women themselves. They are reduced to ‘victims’ who are not in control of their outcomes. Migrant women, both in the host country and home country, experience force, fraud and coercion, the tenets of trafficking, but they also exert agency, resistance and resilience, which this ethnography will portray through the stories of a few Sri Lankan migrant women.

To illustrate the problems that occur with this conflation, take the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, which is an annual report on international trafficking, created by the U.S. Department of State. Trafficking scholar, Pardis Mahadavi writes in \textit{Gridlock} that the TIP report, “essentially functions as a global scorecard that ranks nations…based on the perceived severity of human trafficking within state boundaries and the perceived adequacy of responding domestic policies” (Mahdavi 2011, 19). The TIP report has “rocked the foundations of trafficking policy worldwide” (Mahdavi 2011, 19). It incites moral panic by ranking countries on a three-tiered scale. Countries on the list then scramble to eradicate the problem, which leads to policies that affect labour migrants who are “at risk” of being trafficked. This often does not produce successful results. The reality of the situation is that migrant women are constantly finding that they have to choose from a “series of limited options” (Mahdavi 2016, 25). Further, this ethnography will point out that one of the major\(^3\) Beginning in the 1960s, the Second Wave of feminism demanded societal and political solutions to the personal problems of women and the violations that they faced. The movement brought to light the various forms of violence that women faced in their daily lives (Mandle). The constraints of this movement was the emphasis on women as ‘victims’ to this violence, diminishing the agency that women possess and use, in reality.
constraints of a migrant woman’s process is her own intimate life (Mahdavi 2016, 25). Thus instead of focusing on how to address migrants’ rights within the problematic structures of the kefala system and the system in place in Sri Lanka, there is a worldwide preoccupation with eradicating the trafficking of labour migrants. This is the effect that a report like the TIP has on a country like Sri Lanka.

According to the TIP report, countries on the Tier 2 Watch list, such as Sri Lanka, are not “making ‘significant enough’ efforts to combat trafficking but do not merit the heavily stigmatised designation of Tier 3” (Mahdavi 2011, 19). The global frameworks of trafficking do not work productively towards better conditions for migrant workers. With reports like the TIP, countries like Sri Lanka are scared into taking immediate and drastic measures to improve in the eyes of the U.S state department. What then occurs is a push for stronger bilateral agreements, which have proven, in the past, to not be very effective. If the home country pushes the host country, only the home country and its migrant workers will suffer, not the host country. The preoccupation with trafficking distracts from the fact that migrant workers have agency and merely need support.

Framing This Study

The following concepts lay out the theoretical perspectives that frame the study and the experiences of the informants of the study. These concepts work to support the themes of resistance, resilience and agency within constrained social conditions, and contextualize the systems within which the migrant women operate in the host country and country of origin.

Migrant Women’s Weapons

The notion of the “third-world woman” as socially, culturally, religiously, and politically oppressed is built on the historical treatment of the “ethnic” or “oriental” female
body as an Other, meaning one that is separate from the self, in the Western colonial imagination. This body has been historically othered and exotified, and in today’s world this effect manifests in various ways, one of which is the prescription of the ‘oppressed victim’ narrative imposed on these women. As Edward Said writes, the Orientalisation of this body was “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (Said 1978, 9). Said goes on to argue that cultural hegemony gave this othering treatment of these bodies its durability (Said 1978, 15). This treatment persists today in the way “third-world women” or women from developing countries like Sri Lanka, are perceived.

Chandra Mohanty in her *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* critiques the lumping categorization of the “third world woman” as the “oppressed woman” (Mohanty 1991, 80). She writes, “This mode of feminist analysis by homogenizing and systemizing the experiences of different groups of women, erases all marginal and resistant modes of expression” (Mohanty 1991, 80). The bunching together of these women, into a category of “oppressed” or “veiled” denies them their agency and individuality, and makes invisible their resistance.

The powerful resistance that groups like migrant women operationalize in the face of structural violence may be invisible to the dominant discourses on power and subversion because of the lack of physicality or visibility of these resistance efforts. The women are most certainly, however, powerful in their silent but consistent resistance to problematic systems4. These silent forms of resistance are what James C. Scott refers to as *everyday weapons* and *weapons of the weak*. These hidden weapons, as Scott goes, are found when marginalized

4 There must be emphasis placed on how each of these onerous settings may differ greatly from the other. To group all of these ‘systems’ or settings together is as problematic as the lumping of “third-world” women together.
groups resist with “ridicule, in truculence, in irony, in petty acts of non-compliance... in the steady grinding efforts to hold one’s own against overwhelming odds” (Scott 1985, 350).

Furthermore, Lori Heise stresses the ways in which women exert agency subtly “even within the most constrained social conditions” (Heise 1997, 125). She uses numerous examples of women around the world who use powerful but hidden means of exerting control over their sexual lives and health. For example, “extremely poor women in India... have been known to exert control over their sexual lives by declaring extended religious fasts, a socially sanctioned activity... that even violent men are reluctant to violate” (Heise 1997, 125). Of course as Heise affirms, “this is not to say that women do not deserve broader choices than these examples imply” (Heise 1997, 125). She argues that these acts do underscore a “creativity and resourcefulness in the face of powerful social forces.” (Heise 1997, 125). These acts of creativity and resourcefulness are powerful *weapons* used by women in constrained situations, and are ways in which they employ their agency despite not having many options.

The utilization of these hidden weapons in a silent form of resistance is a strategy used by migrant women to survive constraining situations in which overt retaliation may cause insurmountable danger to them. The narratives of resistance of the women in this study illustrate the ways in which these ideas are put to practice. To understand the power of their resistance, it is also necessary to understand the social forces that they are up against in systems that perpetuate structural violence.

*Structural Violence*

*Structural violence* is a concept that comes up often when analysing the experiences of female migrant workers. Johan Galtung introduced the concept of *structural violence* in 1969.
He argued that the conceptualisation of human rights “often suffers from the deficiency that they are personal more than structural…they refer to distribution of resources, not to power over the distribution of resources” (Galtung 1969, 188). His argument was a call to consider the structural causes of violence because of varying power differentials and unequal distribution of resources.

Paul Farmer, an anthropologist-physician, was one of the early adopters of the theory (Weigert 2015, 72). Farmer was a strong proponent of considering structural violence in epidemiology and suggested its use as a tool for understanding the circumstances under which certain groups of people are more likely to become infected with the HIV Aids virus (Weigert 2015, 72).

Farmer expands on Galtung’s theory by arguing that it is the poor who suffer from the most violence because they “are more likely to have their suffering silenced” (Farmer 1996, 280). He challenges the medical field with the need to include structural violence in analysis: “the task at hand…is to identify the forces conspiring to promote suffering, with the understanding that these will be differentially weighted in different settings” (Farmer 1996, 280).

 Mostly referring to extreme suffering, Farmer posits that this sort of suffering “is structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire…to constrain agency” (Farmer 1996, 263).

Although Farmer considers the effects of race, class and gender in his analysis, he does not fully assert the way that these factors intersect and affect the experience of certain groups, such as women of colour. His focus on poverty and class differentials as the key factors influencing structural violence negates a whole realm of intersecting factors that heavily affect the experience of certain groups of people. What Farmer misses by way of
intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw elaborates on. *Intersectionality* refers to the idea that an individual may have several social locations pertaining to his or her identity and this should be taken into account when understanding the individual’s position within power differentials. Crenshaw, focusing on male violence against women such as battering and rape, argues that “because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both” (Crenshaw 1994, 8). She goes on to put forward *structural intersectionality* with which she shows the “ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape and remedial reform qualitatively different from that of white women” (Crenshaw 1994, 8).

Putting Crenshaw and Farmer in conversation draws attention to two factors: the first is that the concept of structural violence through Farmer needs to be developed because of the distinct experiences of certain groups with intersectional identities. Second, both Crenshaw and Farmer refer to a certain type of violence, which is an overtly physical type. What is missing from both theories are the hidden and subtler forms of violence, which occur on a daily basis and which particularly, affect women of colour. For example, migrant women from the Global South face these varying degrees of violence, from overt and physical, to hidden forms of violence embedded in the system. Therefore, when considering the structural violence that migrant women face, it must kept in mind that the violence may be invisible, subtle and long-term, as opposed to overt and immediate.

To further the case of migrant women, we also have to comprehend the systems that they navigate during the migration. Particularly while abroad, they find that they are treated
as ‘second-class citizens’ or all together ‘noncitizens.’ They are excluded from the various aspects of the host society and find their lives are steeped in uncertainty.

**Differential Exclusion and Precarity in the Host Country**

The precarity of the lives of migrant workers in host countries is a central aspect of the experience working abroad. Anthropologist Anna Tsing writes that, “Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others…Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages,…We can’t rely on the status quo; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive” (Tsing 2015, 20). Particularly in the case of the GCC countries where the *kefala* sponsorship system is in place, the livelihood of migrant women is often in the hands of employers and precariously out of their own. Host countries tend to impose a process of “differential exclusion” on migrant workers, as Stephen Castles and Alastair Davidson (2000) posit. These countries “welcome unskilled migrants, including domestic workers, as laborers but not as persons, and as temporary sojourners, not long-term residents” (Parreñas 2015, 24). Thus migrant workers are not afforded the benefits of citizenship despite doing needed work for the nation-state building project. The “neoliberal governmentality ensures the availability and precarity of cheap, flexible migrant workers for privileged citizens” (Constable 2014, 13).

In addition, Aihwa Ong (2006) argues that neoliberalism fosters an interactive mode of citizenship that organizes and benefits people according to their skills and knowledge instead of basing it on their membership in nation-states. Within this system, female migrant workers tend to fall through the cracks because of how little marketability and value is assigned to their skill-set. They become vulnerable to exclusionary practices. Despite their role in reproductive and care labor, mobile foreign women are not considered attachable to
moral economies and are seen as a threat to host societies (Ong 2006). They are often tied to a contract of sterility, which means they cannot partake in romantic or sexual relationships and are tied to complete abstinence while on contract “to ensure that she will have no biological recourse to citizenship” (Ong 2006, 199). To that end, drawing on Jasbir Puar’s ideas in Homonationalism and Biopolitics, in this case we see an example of “gender exceptionalism” (Puar 2007, 5) in which these women and their bodily and sexual freedom in host countries are deemed unimportant and ignored by the host state. By not offering the same freedoms to certain migrant women as citizen women are offered, the host state perpetuates structures of inequality.

Given this system of exclusion and exceptionalism, migrant women find they are often maneuvering through forces of mobility and immobility concurrently.

**Intimate im/mobilities**

*Intimate labour*, coined by Boris and Parreñas refers to the selling, performance and work of emotionally involving care, touch, attention, love, and healing. *Intimate labour* considers the domains of sex work, care work and domestic work as sharing commonalities in the nature of the work involved in each (Parreñas and Boris 2010). It includes a wide range of activities, including personal and family upkeep, caring for children and elderly people (watching, cleaning bodies, conversing, etc.), cleaning hotel rooms and more. It involves any work involving “bodily and psychic intimacy” (Parreñas and Boris, 2010, 3). The work of female migrant workers falls precisely into this category. Labour migrants perform a great deal of care and love (and are expected to do so) in the home of their
employer. They also usually live in the intimate space of their employer for the duration of their work there.

The concept of intimate labour calls for equal recognition of the nature of their work, which is generally under recognised and under compensated. This call for the recognition of this type of work is in line with Marxist-Feminist thought, which is a combination of two major emancipatory projects (Mojab 2015), challenges structures of patriarchal capitalism and all forms of oppression and exploitation.

Pardis Mahdavi, in *Crossing the Gulf* (2016) expands on the conversation on intimate labor, looking beyond it to emphasise the importance of avoiding the trivialization of the intimate lives of these workers (Mahdavi 2016, 32) with the preoccupation on their labour alone. In the scholarship of intimate labor, the focus on just the intensity of the labor, glosses over the other intimate challenges and experiences of migrant workers.

Mahdavi coins the trope intimate im/mobility to highlight the ways in which “mobility and immobility are mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive forces” (19). Given the intimacy of the nature of migrant women’s work, Mahdavi chooses to combine the concept of intimacy with the trope “im/mobility to emphasise “the ways in which the intimate lives of migrants enforce and challenge their mutually constitutive mobility and immobility” (Mahdavi 2016, 22). Migrant women are constantly encountering the contrasts and mutual reinforcements of mobility and immobility within the intimate spaces of the host country as well as in their home countries. One of Mahdavi’s examples to illustrate this trope is the way in which migrant domestic workers, in their desire to provide for their families back home (i.e. create social mobility) may remain in hostile working conditions (i.e. immobilized to the host country) to help their families. The confinement to their intimate working spaces does not necessarily suggest that they were “physically immobilized by any locks or laws,”
(Mahdavi, 2016, 19) but rather that various factors, ranging from personal to systemic, made them feel their movement was restricted (Mahdavi 2016, 19).

Conclusion

The complexities of the lives of migrant workers are far-reaching and deep-rooted. These women are constantly navigating various structures and systems in order to survive, and remain mobile. The operationalisation of their resistance and agency challenges the ‘victim’ narratives that they are ascribed. From Sri Lanka to the Middle East, and back, the women in this ethnography were confronted with numerous such obstacles. In resistance, they wielded immense weaponry, and eventually navigated through the system. This will become clear in the narratives of the informants of this study.

Before that, to give an illustration of the tenets of the ethnographic process, the methodological proceedings are described next.
Chapter 2

Methodology for this Project

The fieldwork for this project took place between December 2016 and January 2017 in Sri Lanka (IRB # 2016-11-01, see Appendix A) in, and the overall research process, combining ethnographic and archival research, took place over a period of nine months. In total, I interviewed twenty-two women who had all spent at least two years working as domestic workers in the Middle East. Eight of the interviews were conducted over the phone while the remainder were face-to-face. Three of the participants were Tamil (second largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka), one was Moor Muslim (third largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka), and the rest were Sinhalese (majority ethnic group). As a group, their departure dates ranged from 1985 to 2015. All of them, by the time of the fieldwork, were mothers. Four of them were grandmothers.

I followed a targeted sampling method at first, in which I made contact with people who I knew had worked abroad. From there I was referred to more migrant women through informants’ connections. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted up to about an hour each. I also conducted one focus group discussion, which consisted of five participants. I did not use all of the interviews, particularly the ones that took place over the phone, for the final project.

The research took place in three sites: a local school in a town in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka, Harini’s house located in a suburb of Colombo, and the rest of the research took place in various places in Colombo or over the phone.

Site 1: Arts Programme in the School
Fieldnotes: January 7th, 2017

Aunty Sonali, a friend, invited me to come to a town in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka with her on the weekend to meet with mums at the schools that she runs her Arts programme at. The “harmodurwo” of one of the schools says that around 40% of school children have their mothers working abroad. We went to Kurunegala on the day that Aunty Sonali had organised to meet all the parents at one the schools to discuss with them the upcoming orchestral tour. It would be here that I would take the opportunity to chat with some parents who had been abroad. As I got there I met a few mothers and I was sitting and chatting with them. It was interesting because we had an informal discussion about all those kids who have been left without their mothers and they shared stories of friends who were abroad. Then we moved into a more general conversation about illness and death: it is a very funny habit of Sri Lankans to find the most natural point of conversation to be ailments. One by one each person tells of some illness they heard about or a scandalous death or a tragic death and so on. This went on for quite a while until finally Sushan, an employee of the Arts Project, asked me if I was ready to meet one of the mothers who had gone abroad. I went with him to a classroom. It was an open-air classroom with a desk at the front and tiny chairs and tables for the kids. It was small and colourful, very cheerful.

Shalini, Latha, Indrani and Kamala, the four women who I interviewed here were mothers or grandmothers of children attending the afterschool and weekend arts program hosted at a local school but run by arts teachers from all around the country. The women were very supportive of their children’s (all teenagers) participation in this program. I would sit adjacent to my interviewees at little desks that are used by students in a Grade 3 class. In the background, loud music, played by students, clanged on through the duration of the interviews. Throughout, the noise was constantly acknowledged and referenced by the mothers and thus seemed to be a source of pride and a symbol of their children’s success.

Site 2: Harini’s house

Fieldnotes: January 9th, 2017

At the bottom of a narrow lane off the main road stood Harini’s house, a bright yellow and orange cottage with a twin cottage just next to it, to be rented out. Harini built this house with her savings and with help from some of her former employers. Harini, a bouncy, robust
woman in her 50s, was most definitely house proud. As she should be, having made her house happen all by herself, with little help from her husband. Her husband, Chintaka, with bright, reddish eyes and pearly whites, had gone through strings of alcoholism, leading to his being violent with Harini in the early stages of their marriage. As a result (of the drinking) he had been unemployed for the most part of their marriage. According to Harini he was most settled now, with a few part-time jobs, and would never lay a finger on her. She was a tough woman and he knew that he could not do without her so he would not dare for he would be given the boot, according to Harini. Harini had gone abroad to work in Saudi in the 80s. At the time she left because she wanted to get away from Chintaka and his violent tendencies. She has a burn mark on her leg to show for it.

In Saudi she found herself with a family that did not treat her well and she hated working for them but could not leave by her own volition. After about a year of work there she fled and went to the police who dropped her off at the Sri Lankan embassy in order for her to get sent home. After returning home, she found herself a job working as a domestic worker in Colombo. She spent as much time away from home and her husband as she could. Slowly he realised that she was not to be messed with. She did not need him and was happy to be without him. Independently, Harini saved up for her houses and eventually got Chintaka to build them, and he did, all by himself.

The identical house next door was being rented out, and this was a subject of great excitement. I would soon meet the brother of a ‘famous singer,’ who, with his family, resided next door. Harini was very happy to have found such tenants. The brother of the singer was a real booster to the neighbourhood’s clout, and was a great source of pride.

Harini ushered me in and made me sit in the living room. She and her husband, who supposedly should have been a chef as opposed to wasting his time as a mason, had prepared a huge meal for me. The meal was a Sri Lankan-style Chinese meal — fried rice, kankung, flower-shaped, papadums, chicken curry and cutlets.

Harini, one of my key participants, after chatting to me about her experiences, invited me to her home to spend the day. She did this so that she could introduce me to all of her friends in the neighborhood who had also gone abroad. Having been abroad, herself, she felt strongly about my project and wanted me to hear the stories of her friends. She was immensely helpful and generous, and without her I would not have been able to get my project off the ground. Harini also connected me with eight more of her friends over the phone. It was at her house that I met Lasanthi, Sanduni and Premawathie, and I had a focused group discussion with her friends: Pinky, Ranmali, Asha, Dhewni and Kanthi. As Harini’s home was a relaxed and friendly environment to have the interviews. The interviewees seemed to feel at ease being there. All of the
interviews here took place over a piece of cake, a banana, and a bright pink fizzy drink endemic to Sri Lanka, called necto.

Site 3: Various locations in Colombo

Fieldnotes: January 11th, 2017

When we chatted, Jamila was after a long day at work and was rushed to get home to sort out her children and make sure all homework had been done. She was dressed in her black abaya, the one she wears when out in public. The education of her children was a priority especially because she was not given the opportunity to go to school when she was growing up, and was illiterate.

The interviews with Jamila, Annmarie, Kalyani, and Daisy took place in Colombo in locations near the homes of their current employers. I arranged to meet with them by contacting them over the phone, and by finding a location that was near their workplace so that getting there after their day at work would not be too complicated. Both Kalyani and Daisy stayed the nights at their workplace so it was convenient for them to meet me in a neutral location close by.

Methodological Constraints

The major constraint of all of the interviews was the limited time that I was able to devote to the interviews and the participant observation. Also, because of the limited time frame, I was not able to find informants from a range of geographical locations. If I had more time, I would definitely have expanded the study to other regions, especially the northern and northeastern regions of Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, because of the diversity of departure years of the women in this study, making conclusions about the system in the present day is not as easy. In terms of drawbacks of the locations, in the school, the classroom was a neutral location but as it was open-air and there were passer-byers, it may not have been fully conducive to comfortable
conversations for the interviewees. Moreover, even though Harini’s house had a welcoming and relaxed environment, I am sure that the presence of men such as Chintaka and Premawathie’s husband may have affected what was shared in the interviews (see fieldnotes below).

Fieldnotes: January 9th, 2017

Before I met Premawathie, Harini had told me about the people who were renting her second house. Harini took great pride in the fact that the man next door was the brother of a famous singer. This brother, who I soon met, was also quick to let me know the famous connection, and through what seemed to be an alcohol-induced moment of elation, he broke into song to prove to me that he did indeed come from a family of great musical ability. I met him and heard his gay harmonies after the FGD had finished.

I was waiting to meet the last woman of the day, a friend of Harini’s, who I was told had a very bad experience abroad. At some point during a long and confusing conversation with the man with the famous brother, Premawathie, came from next door, revealing that she was his wife. She was a slight woman of around fifty something. She had her black hair tied back in a low ponytail, a few front teeth missing and a noticeably crooked nose. The whole time we were chatting her husband sat in the adjacent room, talking belligerently and falling in and out of song. It was an interesting dichotomy to hear about Premawathie’s trials and tribulations abroad while in the background her husband roared in drunken delight.

Note on Positionality as Researcher

Growing up in Colombo, and having attended university abroad, I acknowledge that my position was one of privilege in the dynamic with my interlocutors. None of my experiences can even begin to equate with the ones of the interviewees. I come from a different sector in society and this could most certainly affect how the interviewees felt about me. Luckily, because in most cases I was introduced through someone they knew, or I already knew them, most of the women seemed not to feel too uncomfortable. All of my interviews took place over a piece of cake or some other food, which was definitely a useful means of easing the atmosphere.

Many of my interlocutors also asked me many questions about myself and I tried to be as open and honest as possible. A significant portion of each interview was spent talking
about each of our lives and experiences. We covered an array of subjects, including my status as an unmarried woman, which was honed in on, by a few (see fieldnotes below):

Fieldnotes: January 7th, 2017

…Indrani recounted her experiences extensively until at some point she switched to asking me questions about my life, which I was happy to answer. We spent a fair amount of time discussing my disappointing (to her) state of unmarriedness, and we ended our conversation with great encouragement from her to hurry the process along.

January 9th, 2017: During an interview with Lasanthi

We had a long conversation about her time abroad, and then about her daily life; she had many questions about my life as well. In the end, as we bid farewell after a long, emotional conversation, she advised me to get married soon, as I am pushing 23.

I critique my position as a young woman from Colombo with an academic “project” as a source of the augmentation of a power differential between the interlocutors and myself. I was conscious of this effect, and was very careful about not pressuring the interlocutors in any way that would make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. I tried to be as honest about myself as possible while detailing the impetus of the project so as to highlight the ways in which we shared meanings and understandings of the issue. I am aware, however, that even with these efforts my positionality to my interlocutors remained the same, so I do not intend to convey that I was somehow able to dispel the effects of my position.

It did seem that the fact that I was a young, Sri Lankan woman pursuing this project was a source of contentment for the women, who felt that migrant women today need more support. For example, Harini, whose experience in K.S.A was very challenging, fervently supported and promoted my research. She took me under her wing, and felt that her contacts would definitely be a useful addition to the project. She both wanted to help me and have their stories told. Many of the interviews were tough and emotional for the
interviewees and I am so incredibly grateful for the sharing of their stories and their time. It was, by no means, easy for them, and I fully recognise that.

Overall, the research process was challenging and exciting. In such a small frame of time, I met so many incredible women, and experienced fully their generosity with their sharing and their support of the project. The unfortunate time constraints meant that a lot was not shared, but what little was shared was a wealth of information.
Chapter 3

Difficult Decisions and Resilience in the Pre-Departure Stage

The pre-departure stage is made up of a number of different challenges and decisions for migrant women. Each of the women in this study had a unique experience, but many shared similarities in the challenges they were up against, and the decisions they had to make so as to ensure a successful migration. Navigating this stage seemed to be immensely difficult because of the limited options that the women had to choose from and the pain of leaving behind families. With little support, and much uncertainty, my interlocutors showed they had great resilience through the way they navigated this stage, and managed to get to their host country safely, leaving the care of their families in good hands.

Deciding to Leave Home

The process of getting abroad reinforces a cycle of im/mobility. For example, immobility in the intimate settings of life in Sri Lanka, such as poverty and lack of opportunities, may constitute the decision to migrate abroad, whereas once abroad, that mobility may be limited. Amongst the women in this study, it came up often that it was the immobility in the homestead as impetus for the migration. The most obvious form was a lack of work opportunities in the domestic market and thus when domestic issues, such as illness in the family, occurred the women found that the labour migration was one of their only options. This was the case with Kalyani; she found that because of her mother’s chronic illness she had no choice but to become a second source of income in her family so as to care for her mother. There are many different reasons why women in Sri Lanka choose to
migrate for employment. The experiences of my interlocutors are specific examples that help to map out the precarious process of getting abroad.

Premawathie’s impetus to migrate was the poverty she and her family were living in. She wanted to give her children a good life, and her husband and his alcoholism was only getting in her way:

Fieldnotes: January 9th, 2017. At Harini’s house

…. Ironically her [Premawathie] husband was sitting on the porch with another man, chatting and singing loudly in all of his drunken glory. Close enough to hear what we were saying but clearly not close enough for Premawathie to feel the need to censor her words about him.

As I chatted with Premawathie in the adjacent room to the porch, she told me about the hardships that she and her family faced in the period before she migrated. Her husband had just begun to drink at that time and there was no way he was going to help to care for and educate the children. She was stuck without any support from him. For this reason, she decided to leave her children and go away for a few years so as to support them.

Quite differently, Jamila, who at 24 years old was unmarried and living under the thumb of her older sister (who raised her since she lost her mother when she was an infant), felt that going abroad would be an opportunity to be free from the tedious unpaid labour that she was doing for her sister’s family. She wanted to earn money that she could call her own and thus be independent:

“I wanted to go abroad because when I was at home doing house work, there is no salary for that no? I was helping my sister out with her kids. I brought up her daughter, who sat like a “Madam”. I looked after her children and brought them up. I washed their clothes and all. Now my sister was by that time sick so I had to help her too, and I did her catering business. So I washed everyone's clothes...[She starts crying]....
... I had to get water from the well in the morning at 3 [am] while her children just slept. I had to bring huge barrels. It was so much work. She would only wake her children at about 5 [am]. Farya [her sister's daughter] used to go about with her friends while her [own] children were at home with not even milk...So for that reason I told my sister ‘no, I want to earn my own money. I need a salary.’ So I fought with her and left, she was not happy...” - Jamila

Jamila, Premawathie and Kalyani experienced very distinct forms of immobility that pushed them into deciding to migrate for employment, in the hopes that their decision would help to create greater opportunities for themselves and their families. Most of my interlocutors felt there was a lack of work opportunities at home, in Sri Lanka, and thus migrant labour was the most obvious option for them.

Choosing Between Formal and Informal Arrangements

“I would go again now but there is an age limit! The agencies won’t allow! If you are older than 53, you cannot go. I tried recently to go. You can’t tell my age from looking at me can you? (Moves vigorously and shows off her figure). Only from the identity card could you tell my age!” - Daisy

When deciding the mode through which to go abroad, migrant women usually choose between a formal arrangement including a local labour migration agency and an informal arrangement, with either an unofficial “agent” or agency, or through a friend’s referral. Formal arrangements are generally thought to incur higher costs because a migrant would usually have to pay the agency a high fee. Furthermore, going through these agencies will often mean that one will have to get past regulations such as the ones that come about with the FBR requirement (e.g. husband’s consent, age limit, appropriate age of children). This is what Daisy was complaining about (above). She felt she was still fit to work abroad but could not get past the age-restrictions that are enforced in the more formal channels. For those reasons, sometimes people prefer to go through a more informal route. Both routes are precarious in that they are both subject to changes and exceptions and they both come with their own sets of challenges.
Several of my interlocutors went abroad without the help of an agency but rather with the help of a friend or relative based in the host country who managed to find them a place of employment. Lasanthi took this route: “I didn’t go with an agency. My Akka (female friend/relative) who was in Kuwait sent me a ticket. She was at their relatives’ place and she set it all up” - Lasanthi

All of these female friends or relatives organised for a ticket to be sent to Sri Lanka for the prospective migrant. My interlocutors were not sure how their friends did it but assumed that somehow through their networks there, they found employers who wanted a Sri Lankan helper and arranged for those employers to send a ticket. One major theme of these arrangements was female friendship and solidarity. This showed through the trust and reliability that was placed on this informal arrangement because of the fact that their female friends or relatives had organised it. This was not unlike the trust placed in female relatives at home for the caretaking of their children. Thus, this support system showed itself to be an integral part of the migration process. Furthermore, it seemed that the women in this study who used these connections felt safer because these contacts would be in the host country when they arrived and thus they would have some source of support in comparison with not knowing anyone there. This female-to-female support system was an impetus for their migration. In the social organisation of risk factors, these women found that going through known connections seemed the most reliable for the sake of their well being.

The only problem with going through informal channels is that if anything unexpected and difficult were to happen while abroad, the women would find they have no support from agencies or organisations in the host country because they are officially unaccounted for. That said it is important to note that even the women who went through
agencies reported that they got little to no support from the agencies. The system as a whole is steeped in precarity and uncertainty, and there is no way to say which option is better from the limited ones available. This emphasises the need for more systematic support for migrant workers as opposed to limitations.

The agency route is thought to be the more expensive and complicated one. In the past people have gone into debt paying back their agencies after getting to their host country. They spend the first few months or years of their employment paying back their agencies as opposed to saving money or sending money back home as they hoped to do. However I heard from quite a few of the women that I interviewed that the system is fast changing and increasingly people are getting paid by agencies to go abroad, money that is coming from the host countries to encourage more workers to migrate. This inflow of capital is changing the experience of migration, and for several of my interlocutors, in a good way. This is also because of the added bonus of pre-departure training, which three of my interlocutors said helped them immensely.

Dhewni, who was a part of the group discussion at Harini’s house, went abroad in 2013 and went through an agency that paid her more than she had to pay them and took part in a training course that was organized for her:

*D: I didn’t pay. The agency paid for everything. The agency paid for the course, the medical, the passport. When I went they gave me Rs. 25,000 and after a few months they gave me another Rs. 50,000…They gave me a uniform and I did a course there.*

*K: What kind of things did you learn in the training?*

*D: They taught us how to make tea, how to cook all of their [host country] food, the housework, how to speak in Arabic and Arabic numbers, they taught us everything.*

*K: Ah wow! How long was the course?*
Asha (Dhewni’s cousin): For me 15 days

D: For me 21 days! I was there in a hostel in Kurunegala (town in the northwestern Province) for 21 days. They gave me a uniform and apron in training.

K: What kind of uniform?

D: A white t-shirt and a black trouser

For Dhewni and her cousin Asha, who also went abroad recently and did a similar course, these training courses were a source of mobility and agency because of the tools they were equipped with. The older women in this study such as Kamala and Lasanthi reported that when they went abroad, they went completely unprepared by way of training, and it was their generation of migrants that found they were paying high costs to their agencies even in this early stage of the migration. There are clearly improvements occurring like with this improved training, but as only Dhewni, Asha and Kalyani experienced this level of training, it is clearly not accessible to everyone.

Dhewni and Asha shared that the language education through the training was immensely useful. The language barrier that many migrant women experience when they first migrate can be incredibly restricting. They are thrown into a system in which they have integral role but have no way to communicate their needs and opinions. Moreover, they are expected to somehow pick up the language as soon as they arrive there. This is a form of structural violence. Their silence as a result of the language barrier makes them easier to be objectified and controlled in their lives abroad.

This structural violence shows up in a number of ways one of which is the system of contractual signing in which migrant workers are given only the option of signing a contract in Arabic, thus they are unable to know what they may be signing away.
Even Kalyani stated that the training in Arabic during her course helped her when she went abroad. It seems these tools can equip migrant women with a form of mobility in a system that is so very promotional of their immobility and differential exclusion within the host country. The language and training becomes a mode of resistance to the challenging system of the host country.

The decision between informal and formal arrangements is clearly not an easy one nor is it possible to know which one works better. The women that I spoke with all made distinct decisions for their own specific reasons, and some proved to be more successful than others. This is the case as well for the nature of their decisions to leave home. What is clear in both decisions is how precarious the process is; it is certainly a difficult process. To further the illustration of the complexity of this stage in the migration, the women shared another significant arrangement that some of them had to make: childcare arrangements.

**Transnational Mothering: Arranging Love and Care**

One of the biggest challenges of leaving home to work abroad for mothers is figuring out childcare arrangements. The childcare networks have changed immensely in migrant communities since the 1980s in Sri Lanka. There was a period of time in which a lot of literature focused on the inability of the husbands to be the sole caretakers of the children because of their demoralisation as a result of losing their position as the breadwinner. It is often thought that women cannot rely on their husbands because of the high levels of prevalent alcoholism in Sri Lanka that leaves many men unemployed, aimless, unreliable and a further liability to their wives and families. Thus this may inform one’s decision to partake in labour migration while also making childcare arrangements difficult. Michele Gamburd (2003) finds, through ethnographic research in Sri Lanka, that the large-scale female
migration, at the same time, reconfigures male gender roles within the household, leaving many men feeling a “loss of self respect and dignity when their wives become the breadwinner” (Gamburd, 2003, 190).

In this present moment there seems to be a changing landscape. This comes at a time of a general change in caring networks in Sri Lanka as a result of the continuous movement of female migrants since the 1980s. This has happened in two ways: the first is that the notion of a female-headed household has gained increasing normality thus leading to what seems to be a lower prevalence of spousal alcoholism and desertion by the husband. Secondly, a change in the caretaker landscape has come about with structures of established care networks over time for children whose mothers have gone away. The migrant women look to female relatives to share the burden and to meet certain needs of children, particularly daughters. This was salient in my fieldwork.

The Family Background Report (FBR) which is a part of Sri Lanka’s revised Migration Policy perpetuates the idea that migrant women are not capable of finding suitable childcare for their children and that their husbands cannot be relied on to handle childcare, even though ironically their consent is needed to go and work abroad. The lived experiences of migrant women, who arranged successful childcare for their children in the pre-departure stage effectively resists these notions of their inability to look out for the well being of their own children. This works against ideas perpetuated in trafficking discourses and through policy directives like the FBR that migrant women and their families are rendered worse off as a result of the migration.
Finding Suitable Childcare Arrangements

“When my son was nursing, I went abroad. But those days it was a little hard, we had a lot of problems at home, illness and so on, so I went abroad. I left the kids with my husband and my mother and I went…” - Kalyani

Most of the women I spoke with, who were mothers, went abroad while their children were still young, leaving them in the care of family members. This strategy was based on the idea that those primary years were the best years to be away before they began their formal education. On the other hand, if their children were already in school, their needs were put in the hands of family members.

Shalini, who went to Kuwait in 2012, left her children in the care of her husband and her children’s two grandmothers:

“So there were two mothers to look after my children and my husband. The three of them looked after the children and the children were looked after well. There wasn’t a problem at home… I sorted out the house and got everything ready and left, so my husband … did whatever work there was and kept the place well until I came.”

The support of the two grandmothers is an example of the mobilization of the extended family in supporting migrant women. Several of the women I interviewed felt at ease leaving the children with their husbands knowing that they would be supported by their mothers and other family members. Similarly, Kamala who left the country in the late 1990s now is a full time caretaker for her two grandchildren while their parents work in the garment manufacturing industry. She had similar support from her relatives for her own children when she was away in K.S.A for two years. This underscores the way this dynamic care system also has a cyclical nature.
Others chose to arrange their children into a specifically gendered structure in which the sons stayed in the care of their father and the daughters in the care of female relatives, such as grandmothers and aunts. For example, Latha, who went to Dubai in 2013, left her two sons with her husband, and her daughter with her mother. This was a way to divide up the burden but also to potentially address sex-specific issues with care, as Daisy found was an advantage of leaving her daughters with their father’s sister:

“*Their aunt... looked after them beautifully. When my three daughters grew up, I wasn’t there, so that aunt was the one who did everything!*”

‘Growing up’ in this context refers to her daughters’ first menstrual period. In Sri Lanka, this event is important and depending on the religion and community, there are various rituals that will be carried out to celebrate the coming of womanhood. For that reason, Daisy was relieved to have a female relative carry out those coming-of-age processes for her daughters as opposed to leaving it up to their father. These various arrangements emphasise the changing landscape of childcare and arrangements of kin.

Rhacel Parreñas (2005) takes on the effects of transnational mothering. Her studies generally emphasize the losses that occur during the separation of migrant workers and their children. In particular she found that children experience more emotional problems when their mothers migrate in comparison to when their fathers migrate. This is due to traditionally gendered norms related to care (Parreñas 2005). Helma Lutz (2011), on the other hand, in *The New Maids*, critiques Rhacel Parreñas’ take on the effects of transnational mothering. Lutz highlights, instead, the potential of transnational families as involving constant mobility and networking among community members and caretakers, which can be maintained as a functional cohort and form a collective identity (Lutz 2011). For example,
Lutz cites Mary Chamberlain (1997), who finds that the arrangement in which grandmothers or female relatives care for children of Caribbean migrant workers allows for great mobility within the communities, in general, and sets itself up for the mobility of future generations. Lutz goes on to emphasize that how this issue is viewed involves how ‘motherhood’ is understood in specific cultural contexts: “motherhood is understood in a broader sense… what is meant by motherhood is not just direct care for a child where the natural or the social mother is responsible for the child’s daily care and upbringing” (Lutz 2011, 113). The arrangements I found my interlocutors had set emphasise the structural adjustments, which come with the dynamic experiences of families of migrants. This is something that is not taken into account in the new migration policy of the Sri Lankan government.

These caretaker arrangements also bring to light the solidarity and trust established between female family and community members. It was clear amongst my interlocutors that the help of their relatives was crucial during their time abroad:

“Yes the fact that their aunt was there was good. She took them to school and did all the school stuff and gave them food and all.” - Latha

Indrani, Lasanthi and Kalyani all expressed similar feelings of relief that their mothers, sisters or female in-laws were around to look after their children, particularly their daughters, and no one expressed any regrets for the arrangements that they set for their children. It was also the case that some of these women feel now that since their children are older and need their support with education, extracurricular activities and so on that they would not go abroad at this stage of life. Therefore they stood by their decision to go when their children were still young. Having returned and being with their children for their adolescent years, many of them were very proud of their children’s achievements, and
themselves for providing for them. This is not to say that the migration of these mothers is necessarily directly beneficial for their children but rather, the ability of these mothers to make these arrangements work while they carry through the trying task of migrating as domestic workers must be emphasized. Their childcare arrangements and identification of suitable caretakers are not short of strategic. Moreover, it could be said that the ability to trust and rely on family members to attend to the needs of the migrant women’s children is a form of resistance to the immense challenges of the migration process.

“To leave your children is sad. I went so that I could build my house. If not for that I would not have gone. I did not go because I wanted to! It was sad to leave the children. But I eventually managed to build my house, so it was worthwhile.” - Lasanthi

The decision to go abroad is obviously not an easy one, especially for the migrant mothers and thus having a support system for the care of their children is immensely helpful. Their reliable childcare network is a hidden but powerful weapon.

Conclusion

The challenges of labour migration for women in Sri Lanka clearly begin in the pre-departure stage. With each step it takes to get abroad, these women make difficult decisions and sacrifices for their families and their own wellbeing. Whether deciding how to set their children up for the next two years, or how to find an employer to work for abroad, there are multiple structural obstacles to encounter and overcome before taking the step of migrating abroad and the system remains precarious and uncertain. Moreover, the fact that in retrospect, the women in this study, for the most part, felt they made their arrangements work, is a testament to their resilience and sheer ability. This emphasises how able these women are and thus the ill-fitted nature of state regulation such as the Family Background
Report, which attempts to control these very arrangements. This type of regulation denies migrant women their agency and their ability to make calculated decisions for not only their own, but also their children’s well being. They receive limited systematic support but as discussed, their networks of family and friends, particularly the relationships between women, are their tools of resilience and safety. The stories of the migrant women in this study underscore the immense resilience and strategy that they operationalised in this stage, which works against the dominant narratives of their inability to make the right decisions for themselves and their families, as is suggested by the FBR circular. For those who are mothers, they ensure their own safety as well as their children’s. That takes great strength.

Once the women depart from Sri Lanka, the journey very much becomes about their survival and resistance in a system of inequalities, in the host country. Even though oceans separated them from home, my interlocutors stressed how much they thought of and worried about home, and their children throughout their time abroad. Their position as temporary overseas workers meaning to make a life for themselves back home, for most, meant that throughout their time abroad, part of their consciousness was at home, in Sri Lanka.
Chapter 4

Navigating the Host country

With the *kefala* system in place, female migrant workers are effectively tied to their employers and, thus, are excluded from the labour rights protections of the host country. The sponsorship system renders migrant women attached to the homes of their employers, which becomes the proxy host country. The employer oversees the wellbeing of the female worker, and this can result in a myriad of violations. This chapter looks at the structural violence that the Sri Lankan migrant women, whom I interviewed, experienced in the host country, the countless abuses and exploitation of their labour and finally, the ways in which they navigated and resisted these constraining conditions. To do so they used various creative and resourceful strategies, and exercised their agency within stifling situations. This supports the idea that through their resistance and agency, these migrant women underscore the ways in which their narratives move outside the framework of trafficking. They are resilient through extreme hardship, resist using their resourcefulness, and still find opportunities in which to exert their agency so as to improve their circumstances.

The House as Host Country

Many of the women that I interviewed felt that their lives abroad were confined to the limits of the house. Most were not allowed to leave the house, others could leave within a limited timeframe, and some chose not to leave the house at all because of their uncertainty about the dynamics of public spaces in the host country.
Latha expressed satisfaction with having been in Dubai, as she felt it was a peaceful place unlike some of the other Middle Eastern countries. However even within Dubai, she admitted that her mobility was very limited:

“If you leave the house, you could run away right? So you have to ask permission. There are police around and you have to have a pass. You can’t just go peacefully. It is like the ID we have here. There is a number on it and they look at that to see who you are.”

In this case Latha expressed the idea that if she were to leave, she would be surveilled. This illustrates the effect of Castles and Davidson’s notion of ‘differential exclusion.’ In effect, even in locations that might be considered as neutral and open to the public, such as a mall or the streets, migrant workers might find that their bodies are not accepted in these spaces. Their invisibility in the host country, largely due to their confinement to the home, is a purposeful component of the functioning of the host country, despite their integral support of this daily functioning.

When she was in Kuwait, Lasanthi found that she was invited to go out with her employers but was never allowed to go out alone:

“They didn’t allow that. They said that our Sri Lankan women when we come there, we go and do this and that, with boyfriends and all that stuff. So They don’t like that and so they said, “when we go out we will take you!”

In this case, her employers believed that letting her go out alone would risk her engaging in unwanted liaisons, emphasizing the exclusion of migrant women from the host society and the threat of the breakage of the contract of sterility (Ong 2006, 199). The confinement to the employer’s home is one such strategy of exerting control over the migrant women and limiting their involvement in the host society. Within this structure, it is more difficult for the women to exert agency to protect themselves in the face of challenging structural forces.
Facing Structural Violence

“Well when I was abroad, the agency would call the house but my employers wouldn’t tell me. They would keep it from me. The agency was friendly with the family so there was no way for me to confide in them. With the salary problem, I told the agency here (in Sri Lanka) but they couldn’t do anything to help. That agency said if there is a problem, tell my employer, but that wouldn’t do anything no… “Tell them and they will give it”… Now if I told them they wouldn’t give it to me. I didn’t know the language and I was scared to do that”. Shalini

Although laws regulating labour in the GCC countries vary, generally domestic workers are not afforded consistent protections. Given the domestic workers’ tied status to their employers they often cannot seek assistance over violations of minimum working hours, safety standards, salary agreements and other similar abuses. Drawing on Shalini’s words above, those who face problems like a violation of the salary agreement, a very common phenomenon, can barely rely on the very agencies that set them up in the host country. They often have nowhere to turn.

Sanduni, despite having an overall satisfactory experience with her employers, found a discrepancy between the salary that she was offered and the one that she received in Lebanon. However, she understood that because of the nature of the kefala system that she was in, there would be no redress:

“No what we signed it here they didn’t give there. That happens to so many people. I was supposed to get 150 dollars but when went it was only 100. There is no agreement no? Only the signing at the agency but no agreement. So we can’t complain and all no?”

This deep-rooted system of structural inequality is not affected by an improvement in labour laws and bilateral agreements. For instance, although the confiscation of passports by employers is illegal in the GCC countries, it is a regular occurrence and employers are rarely penalized for doing so. For employers, the confiscation of the passport ensures a ‘return on their investment’ in that their employee is not able to leave when she desires. It is a small
measure taken to prevent a serious inconvenience. On the other hand, for the migrant worker, no access to her passport can mean years of enduring abuse and hardship, inability to return home in case of an emergency, and an utter lack of control. To one party, the withholding of this document is a minor measure, while to the other; it can be the source of excruciating isolation.

All of my interlocutors had their passports taken immediately upon arrival in the home of their employer or by their agency. The setup of the system of female labour migrant employment in the GCC countries rendered these women unable to refuse and, in most cases, unaware of their rights to do so. Harini found a way around the system so as to protect herself. She made photocopies of her passport pre-emptively so that when she was forced to run away from her employers to escape the abuse, she was prepared with the photocopies that granted her mobility. Harini strategically supported her safe escape with an understanding that the system would not allow her to leave the home of her employer against the employer’s will. This emphasises how the actions of migrant workers in situations resembling dominant perceptions of trafficking, move out of this frame using strategy and resilience.

A Dangerous Language Barrier

Most women experience a language barrier, which proves to be a component of structural violence. Having to work for an employer whose language is incomprehensible can most certainly make the overall experience very challenging. Pinky, who was a part of the focus group discussion at Harini’s house, spoke about how difficult it was to navigate her employer’s home without knowing the language. She said when she was told to bring a food item; she would grab as many things as she could from the fridge, as she did not know
exactly what her employer wanted. She described the experience like, “being a child, when you first go abroad...we didn’t know anything of the language.”

The employers also clearly expect their workers to pick up the language immediately and reportedly become very frustrated when that does not happen. This is an experience that Jamila had at the beginning of her employment in Dubai. She had a serious altercation with her employer’s son. According to Jamila, the child of six years became frustrated because he could not understand what she was saying to him. He grabbed her by the head and hit her. When she went and told his mother, or tried to, his mother sided with the child and hit Jamila too:

“He didn’t understand what I was saying and I didn’t understand what he was saying” - Jamila.

This unwarranted attack was undoubtedly unfair and abusive. The glaring source of the problem was the lack of comprehension that rendered Jamila seemingly as culpable as the child in the eyes of the employer. She could not defend or explain herself. Moreover, Jamila believes that her employers’ treatment of her improved immensely once she began to learn the language and, collectively, they began to understand one another:

“They soon began to understand me; it was much easier when I learned the Arabic language. I told them my story and about how I had lost both of my parents when I was young. They understood and liked me a lot” - Jamila

The act of picking up the language, which is linguistically challenging for all, equipped Jamila with agency and more control over her situation. The language became a hidden weapon with which she was able to communicate more about herself and her hardships. As a result, she effectively protected herself against further violence. Her learning of Arabic opened up the opportunity structure in which she could express herself and share her stories with her
employers. This led to their improved treatment of her. This outcome was an opportunity created completely by Jamila.

The ability for some of these migrant women to pick up a foreign language at such a formidable pace is a testament to their strength. Many of these women had limited education in their childhoods. For instance, Jamila told me that she was illiterate because she was never sent to school as a child. Yet, she was able to learn enough Arabic to communicate informally with her employers within a year in Dubai. She was able to use the hidden weapon of language to create opportunity structures, and exert agency as a means of self-protection.

Rigorous work

To compound the isolation and immobility of the experience abroad, most of my interlocutors found the work to be extremely rigorous. They worked long hours, got very little sleep, and barely had any time to themselves. Kamala and Lasanthi describe the work intensity:

““There wasn’t really much time to sleep. 1-2 hours of sleep maybe. I would go to sleep after 12am and then have to be up really early again. So no sleep there really isn’t much peace when you are there.” - Kamala

“Then those saucepans we had to scrub so shiny we had to be able to see our own faces in them! That’s impossible no! They scolded us so much!...So much work. To even write a letter was very hard. I had to write it bit by bit, go back to work and then write a bit more later. No peace in that house.” - Lasanthi

These accounts show how the intensity of the work creates an environment of hostility, without peace. To make matters worse, the house constitutes the entirety of the experience of the host country. The work is unbearable and most freedom of movement is barred.
Enduring this hostile environment with little to no respite was very challenging for many of my interlocutors. Kamala and Shalini both described the countless nights in their rooms where they would cry themselves to sleep thinking about home and their families. The isolation of the house made many of my interlocutors feel terribly lonely. Both Shalini and Lasanthi likened the home to a prison:

“For two years I was imprisoned between four walls” – Shalini

“It was just like being in a prison! The walls (thaapa) were so tall you couldn’t see outside: - Lasanthi

Moreover, a few of my interlocutors who did not want to stay in the host country and complete their contracts or agreements, found they were actually barred from leaving by their employers. Lasanthi’s employers told her that she could not leave because, “we have put money into this!” Because of the fees they might have paid to get her into their home, they used the power of the kefala system to make it impossible for her to leave prematurely. They were waiting for a return on their investment, and in doing so, effectively commodified and controlled Lasanthi’s movement. Similarly, this effect was experienced by Asha (from the focus group discussion), who found that when she wanted to return home immediately because of a family member’s health crisis, her employers in Kuwait, made her wait for an entire month until they finally let up.

Relief, Resilience and Resistance

One interaction that served as a relief from the work rigor was the help of the female employer with the workload. A few of my interlocutors found that some of the burden was taken off them because of the help that they received from the employer. In this exchange there is an obvious power differential at play between the two individuals. However, it is
important to note that these unions between employer and worker were a form of relief to the workers, despite the fact that the employer ascribed the work. For example, Sanduni’s employer recognised that Sanduni would not be able to handle all the work singlehandedly:

“Madam was very helpful. She would tell me and do it with me because I was young. In that way, it was very good. It was like being at home” – Sanduni

Similarly, Kalyani appreciated the help she received from her employer:

“She helped a lot. I remember one day, she helped me lift the clothes put them in the washer and hang them out. She helped me wash the clothes. Other employers do not help like that… that is why I remember her fondly now.”

These unions do not defy the power hierarchies that are in place in those households, but rather, exhibit exceptional instances in which the migrant workers were assisted and, thus, relieved of some of the rigorous work that they had been tasked with. These were exceptions to the norm that made the experience of the women a little easier.

**Friendships Between Female Workers**

One of the questions that I repeatedly asked my interlocutors was, “how did you find some sort of respite or happiness during this time?” Many responded that there simply was no way to feel better in the intense situation. However, some found respite and strength in different outlets. One of these outlets was the important comfort of female friendships, a theme that came up in the pre-departure experiences of my interlocutors as well.

“It was good that those two Sinhala women were there. That was a good thing…if you are alone it is hard” – Latha

Having other female workers in the same house brought some form of relief to the solitary, intensive experience of the house in the host country, especially, like in Latha’s case, where both women were Sri Lankan. Similarly, Daisy, in Dubai, shared the work with another Sri
Lankan woman and a Filipina woman, and she too felt that it helped the experience immensely: “The three of us were there, so we couldn’t get lonely!” – Daisy

Certain friendships deemed to be crucial to the wellbeing of some of the participants in the study. Premawathie found that the help of a Sri Lankan migrant friend was crucial to her survival when she found herself abandoned by her employers and locked in their house. She had been working for her Kuwaiti employers for a while, and was fairly fond of them, when one day she woke up and found them gone. According to Premawathie, they had disappeared because of the war, and had left owing her three months of pay.

She soon realised that she was trapped in the house, and stayed there for eleven days until she ran out of food. She had made friends with a Sri Lankan domestic worker who worked in the apartment upstairs, and, through the window, she told her not let herself starve and to break down the door and go to the police. Premawathie was not physically able to do that. So she went downstairs and waited by the window, looking on to the road, and called out for help. Luckily, another Sri Lankan woman worker that she knew passed by and heard her:

“I met one of the Lankans that I knew. She said, "what has happened to you?" I told her that they had left me. She said she would go and tell the police.”

Soon the police came and broke down the door, and she was able to get to the embassy and was eventually sent home.

For Premawathie, the help and encouragement from two female friends enabled her to mobilise and find a way to escape a harrowing situation. She was able to escape a structural immobility in which her opportunity to do so would have been slim if not for the support she received. Her connections in the worker community, in effect, became a strong structural support system for her. The strength of this type of connection or friendship
works similarly to a labour union or an activist’s group, just in a less visible way.

Similarly, Lasanthis, who worked abroad in K.S.A for a second time, found that she was extremely isolated and lonely in the home of her employer, and was not allowed to leave the house, nor speak with anyone. On the top floor of the house there was a rooftop balcony where she would hang the laundry up to dry. One day she caught a glimpse of a woman who worked as a helper in the house next door. This woman happened to be Sri Lankan as well and in need of company. The two struck up a friendship, from one balcony to the other, and Lasanthis was relieved to have found some form of company.

It soon became clear, however, that her employers would not condone such a friendship and she began to find that whenever she went upstairs with the laundry, her employers would watch her to make sure she would not make contact with her friend: “The bosses would be looking to see who I was talking to! They don’t let! They hit you if you do!”

So instead of calling out to her friend, which was now an act that would put both herself and her friend in danger, she decided to write short notes expressing her feelings on small pieces of paper, which she would scrunch up into tiny balls and throw over to her neighbour’s balcony:

“So I would wait to see if anyone was around! And then throw. I had to wait till Madam went into the bathroom to throw it over. If not they would be watching me. That’s how much they watched me always (ass dbeka magey langama).”

She even went to the extent of inserting a tiny stone, found on the balcony garden, inside the piece of paper in order to ensure that her note would travel the distance, which we approximated was about 13 to 15 feet.

Lasanthis’ pursuit of the friendship with her neighbour was essential to her wellbeing. Through the creative way in which she pursued her wellbeing, she was effectively resisting the controlling forces of her employers whose means of control was a tactic of isolation for
Lasanthi’s display of resistance was a silent challenge to the problematic system.

**Silent Resistance**

The examples of Lasanthi and Premawathie not only show the benefits of social connections for wellbeing, but also, the ways in which these silent forms of resistance can in fact mobilise these migrant workers and show their exertion of agency in escaping dangerous and uncomfortable situations. These forms of silent resistance or hidden weapons, as James Scott frames it, are often literally invisible or very subtle but they do the work of what hegemonic discourse frames as powerful resistance.

Another instance of courageous and powerful but subtle resistance was an action taken by Jamila to stop the efforts of her employer’s 8-year old daughter who came after her with a knife:

> “I tried to get away and I told her ‘how can you do this? I have come from Sri Lanka to work for you and I lost my parents when I was young. I am here to help you.’ Like that I told her and then I said, ‘you must not do bad things because Allah Kareem is watching.’ When I said that she got scared, because they are very religious no? When I mentioned Allah she backed down.”

Here her strategy was to reason with the child’s understanding of religious morality and the consequences of misbehaving, and it worked. This strategy not only saved her from a potential injury but also from some form of violence from her employer. As was described before, Jamila’s earlier attack by the employer’s son resulted in Jamila getting further abused because the employer took the side of the child.

Through silent modes of resistance, Jamila protected herself with this strategic method of appealing to morality. There were a few instances in which the women appealed to their own sense of morality and desire when offered difficult choices. They eventually chose the less apparent path, exercising their agency and choosing what was right for them from the
limited options.

Jamila received a proposal for marriage from a relative of her *Baaba* (male employer) through his mother, who approached Jamila with the proposal at the house that she was working in. Jamila knew that she would not be happy in this union and made her decision to turn down the offer. This offer had the potential to provide Jamila with a life in K.S.A, and an escape from her domestic issues in Sri Lanka. However, she knew it was not what she truly wanted, and despite what might be the advantages for someone in her position; she exercised her agency and went against the expected:

“As long as I have water and food I will be happy, but I knew I would not be happy living in Saudi” – Jamila

Similarly, when Premawathie refused the opportunity to amass a fair amount of valuable items from the home of her employers in Kuwait who disappeared, she was exercising her agency in line with her moral values. Despite the obvious pros and lack of consequences of taking up the offer, she knew that the option was not of her character.

When the police helped her get out of the house that she was locked in, they told her that she could take whatever she wanted from the house, as the family had disappeared and abandoned her. She told them that she needed nothing from the house:

“I didn’t want any of their stuff. I just needed the clothes on my body. Lots of people after that scolded me saying, ‘you are crazy, you should have taken some things!’ But at the end of the day, I am the one who has to live with my conscience and I didn’t feel right bringing it. It wasn’t a good thing to do. I am Christian. It didn’t make me happy to do that.”

Both Jamila and Premawathie exerted their agency against the expectations of the people offering them seemingly attractive options. Despite the limited choices that they were given, they identified what exactly they wanted and decided for themselves definitively.
In Conclusion: Against Trafficking Narratives

These silent but powerful modes of resistance and resilience in the face of immense challenges emphasise the ways in which the experience of the migrant woman can move outside the trafficking framework because of the agency that they choose to exert, their strength through hardship, and the hidden weapons that they operationalize in structures of violence. They are subjected to force, fraud and coercion, in many cases, which points to ‘trafficking’. For example, as was discussed, Premawathie, was locked up in her employer’s home, Sanduni and Shalini did not get the salary that they were promised, and Lasanthi was prohibited from speaking to her friend. What this chapter shows, however, is their ability, through the most unexpected means, to resist and exercise choice within these harsh conditions. They are provided with a very limited set of options and are still able to overcome aspects of the system. The use of the trafficking framework to characterise their experiences would deny the use and worth of all of these strategies that they operationalised in order to survive. This highlights the need for a change in the framework under which migrant women are perceived.

The phase in the host country was by far the most challenging of the three stages of my interlocutors. However, the return home, also brought with it a new set of challenges in addition to the benefits that the women felt were the product of their migrations. As will be seen in the next chapter, the women tend to let their ordeals abroad fade into the past fairly quickly as they embrace their roles back in their home country. This is another show of resilience.
Chapter 5

The Return Home

Flying back to Sri Lanka, the women are usually met by droves of family members at the airport, teeming with excitement. Through certain agencies or under specific circumstances, transport will be organised for the returnees. Premawathie, who flew back to Sri Lanka from Kuwait with the help of the Sri Lankan embassy, was provided governmental transport home because of her challenging ordeal in Kuwait. The others will usually have their family members pick them up, and often, everyone wants to come. Once the novelty of the return has worn out, and the gifts from abroad have been distributed, life as it once was begins to take over, and the experience abroad quickly dissipates into the past.

A study by the Women and Media Collective, based in Sri Lanka, titled “Transforming Lives: Listening to Sri Lankan Returnee Migrant Women” places its focus on the reintegration of migrant women back into their communities and homes in Sri Lanka. One findings claims that the contentment with earnings and the ability to provide for the family takes precedence over the hardships experienced abroad. It posits that the women seem to let their tough experiences abroad “fade in the presence of improved living standards” (Kottegoda et al. 2013, 59). This is an effect that I noticed in the women I interviewed.

This ability to not focus on the past is another weapon of the weak. It takes great resilience to quickly heal from such intense experiences. Their weapons and scars from abroad become invisible once again. Moreover, through this process of moving forward the returnees perform wellbeing for their families in order to avoid concern regardless of how emotionally and physically taxing their work abroad was.
The process of reintegration is a complex one. The experiences of the post-migration phase differ widely for migrant women in Sri Lanka. In terms of work, some women seek employment on return while others take up the role as primary caregiver of the family. For some the experience of reintegration is seamless, while for others, it is very challenging. In this study, I found that in the experiences of my interlocutors, cycles of im/mobilities were created once again upon return to the home country.

Immobility at Home

After several years abroad as independent individuals who ventured out, leaving behind families and dependents, often the return home brings about a complete contrast in experience for the migrant women. In this period of return, some of my interlocutors found that by taking up their duties within the homestead, they became confined to the domestic realm, and most did not seek overseas domestic employment again. Many of the women welcomed the opportunity to get fully involved in the lives of their children and families once again. For some, however, there was a desire to be an income earner once again.

With the exception of a few who took up domestic work once back in Sri Lanka, most of my interlocutors, on return, became a full-time caregiver in the family for a number of reasons. Several of them returned home to care for elderly or sick relatives and children, or to simply raise their children once again. For instance, Asha came home to look after her youngest child who fell ill while she was abroad. Kalyani had to do the same for her mother, and Jamila chose to take care of her older sister, who had developed a heart condition. In addition, Daisy’s husband died soon after she returned home from Dubai so she could not leave her children again, and Kanthi lost her brother, which stopped her from returning
abroad. This highlights the centrality of their caring role in the system back home, not unlike the system that they left abroad.

Some of the women wanted to return to the Middle East but were not allowed to for various reasons. For example, Premawathie’s children did not want her to go back, and Daisy was held back because of the age-restriction. Jamila, who preferred to work abroad for a few more years rather than at home working for her sister’s family, found her sister burning her passport so as to prevent her from going back. She had intended to return to Dubai after her short break in Sri Lanka but was never able to. There was clearly less of an eagerness to take up the role of the primary caregiver. Restrictions at home rendered them immobile and attached to the home country.

Social Mobility

The women that I spoke with endured multiple forms of structural violence during migration and once abroad. It would be easy to assume that with all the issues and inequalities that they faced, their gains from the migration were not formidable. On the contrary, many of my interlocutors expressed a great deal of pride in what they achieved for themselves and their families through the migration process. The experiences of the returnees delineate the ways in which the migrant women created social mobility for themselves and their families despite the structural challenges they faced in the process. Moreover, most expressed that even if they wanted to take up employment locally the opportunities to do so were limited.

Gifts from Abroad
One of the initial achievements was the selection of gifts that the women were able to bring from abroad for their families. For example, Jamila was able to buy a television to take home to Sri Lanka. A television is the sort of gift that, in the early 2000s, was a special commodity especially if it was brought home from abroad.

In another case, before returning home, Daisy’s family wrote to her to ask her to bring home a fridge. Her boss, on hearing this, offered to get her one to take with her:

“So they came with boxes… and I saw a fridge this size (shows me the size with her arms). And that is the fridge that we still have in my house.”

Her employer’s gift of a fridge remains a part of her livelihood at home, and simultaneously symbolises her achievement of providing for her family. Similarly, Sanduni, Jamila and Ranmali received multiple gifts from their employers that they were permitted to take home and share with their families:

“Every year they gave me money to send to my mother and them, like for Christmas”. Sanduni.

Sanduni received a gift of money to send to her families as well as gold for herself. Jamila also received gold earrings and necklaces, and many other gifts. Ranmali said that she liked her employers because of all of the gifts that she received. Interestingly, all three of these women had previously complained of issues with the salary. They claimed that it was too low or that it did not fulfill what they were promised. In some ways the gifts made up for this shortcoming of their employers.

As I see it, it is certainly wrong to excuse the blatant underpayment of these workers because of the gifts that the employers gave their workers. However, it is fitting that these gifts were shared with their families and are categorised as fruits of their own labour in addition to what they earned monetarily. Given that their labour is generally under
recognised and undercompensated, these gifts should be added to their tally of achievements.

*A Roof over their Heads*

Another achievement met with the earnings from abroad was the building of a house, or at least improved living conditions, the ultimate means of providing a safe and healthy environment for their children. For instance, Harini’s house, glowing in shades of bright orange and yellow, was a symbol of this. Her pride in her house, that was the product of her labour, was an undoubtable source of great happiness and most certainly a great impetus to invite all of the women to her house to meet with me.

In addition, despite how unsatisfactory Kamala’s experience was abroad, she was able to build herself a small house, which she believes, made the experience worth it:

“I managed to make the house, a small house, somehow I made it. That’s why I went abroad.”

Although Jamila used her time abroad as a way to get some respite from the laborious life that she led in her older sister’s home, throughout her time abroad she continued to send home money until her sister was eventually able to buy a piece of land in a central province of Sri Lanka. This highlighted the sense of duty that she felt toward her family and the need to provide for them:

“When I went back my sister was very sick, she had sugar, cholesterol, heart problems everything. At the end of the day I loved her. She was the one who brought me up.” Jamila.

She took care of her sister and her family all the way up until her sister passed away in 2008.
From the interviews with the women whose children were enrolled in the arts program, it became clear that the education of their children was an important factor in their lives. While they were abroad, they ensured that their children were in the hands of family members who would help them with their school life, and on return they continued this commitment to their children’s education. From the group, Shalini admitted that searching for a job now would be difficult because of how busy she is with the children and their activities. Latha, also finds no time to take up a job because of how much time she devotes to her children. Indrani was the same: “No, I can’t go. While my son is studying. No one at home no? My mother and that’s it. No one to do my son’s work with him.” Moreover, Jamila was determined for her children to move up in the world through their education, as she was not given the opportunity to go to school as a child.

The education of their children was a great source of pride for them, and continues to be one of their main commitments since returning. The women from the arts program and others such as Jamila and Lasanthi, valued the education of their children over many other things and were, in part, able to do so, because of the gains of their migration.

Those who were older like Daisy, Lasanthi and Kamala, had the pleasure of seeing the progression of even their children’s children, not to mention the success of having children that were married. Both Lasanthi and Daisy were very proud to inform me that they had grandchildren in university.

Changing gender roles

As was discussed in the chapter on the pre-departure stage, for many of my interlocutors, their husbands took on a significant role as caregivers for their families while
they were away, often sharing the burden with other relatives, but involved nonetheless. For some of the women, this reconfiguration was temporary while, for others it became more permanent. Jamila, Kalyani and Harini, eventually took up domestic labour in Sri Lanka, after they had spent a few years looking after their relatives. They continue to be the primary earners of their families. Harini and Jamila are both certainly the matriarchs and make all of the executive decisions in terms of their children’s affairs. They both funded the building of their homes, and got their husbands to do the construction work. While I was at Harini’s house, Chintaka expressed his pride at having been the builder of his own house. For him, this house may be his accomplishment but Harini with her income through years of work, created the opportunity for him to do so.

**Conclusion**

The social gains and pride in their achievements since returning underscores the benefits that the migration process and employment had for the women, in most cases. In “Transforming Lives” the researchers find that their interlocutors too expressed a “fierce sense of pride in their contribution to helping the family rise from poverty” (Kottegoda et.al 2013, 59).

Thus this goes against the idea of these women as “victims” of the system, whose migration puts them and their families in dire situations. As we have seen their contributions to their families, communities, and to the country through the remittances, is a testament to their achievement as migrant workers, and not as downtrodden, ‘enslaved women’, as popular discourses argue. What ties together all of these achievements is their love for their families and their perseverance to create mobility for themselves and their families within systems that can easily render them immobile.

The social mobility in the final stage, is not an experience that is universal, but it was salient in the lives of my interlocutors and it emphasises the way the migration for
employment, which is seen as largely negative, can reap benefits and wellbeing for these women. The process of migration is steeped in challenges and obstacles, but on the return home, there is the possibility of social mobility, which represents the overcoming of those challenges, and the movement towards new narratives.
Final Thoughts

During this process, whenever I shared with anyone that my project was based on the experiences of Sri Lankan migrant women, I could almost always expect a response that went something like, “Oh yes, that is very important, those poor women.” In these situations, a great deal of sympathy is evoked, as well as an almost scandalised feeling towards the perceived brutality that these women face. This of course, comes about because of the dominant discourses of migrant experiences, perpetuated by the media and so forth. I myself first became interested in the subject because I could not believe how hard the experiences of migrant women sounded. I was forced to reevaluate my perceptions of migrant women after the duration of the fieldwork because of the narratives of strength and agency that I heard. What I hope, this thesis has dispelled, is the notion that migrant women are ‘in need’ and are stuck in a cycle of which they have no control, despite how challenging their situation may be.

I have tried to highlight how the women that I interviewed found ways to navigate the system, which was so ill equipped to support them, particularly in the host country where they faced oppressive practices with no structural protections. They shared with us the challenges of making the initial arrangements before departing; including the difficult process of ensuring their children would be taken care of. The women underscored the ways that even in the most challenging environments, they were able to resist and choose the paths that suited them from limited options, with the support of their networks of female friends and relatives, and using resourcefulness and creativity to overcome challenges. Finally in the last stage, although they are faced with more challenges when they return home with limited choices for their life back in Sri Lanka, they highlighted how proud they were of their achievements and how they benefitted from the process of migration, against the odds.

The narratives of these women effectively work against their portrayal as ‘victims’ of a complex system. Through their great resilience, they highlight the fact that they occupy a space outside the trafficking framework. They move themselves out of the trafficking narratives through resilience, resistance and agency. There is no denying that the system is flawed and oppressive but there is denying that the women are without agency and mobility within the system. Along the way, some of the narratives highlighted the ways in which the system is seeing improvements, like with the benefits of thorough training pre-departure.
However, as these resources are not accessible to everyone, the system is experienced differently by different individuals.

The stories of the women in this project demonstrate their overcoming in the system not structured for them to succeed in. Thus the purpose of this project is to highlight their need for greater support in tackling the transnational system of migration. They do not need to be restricted against their will by way of policies that aim to ‘protect’ the women and their dependents like the FBR requirement and trafficking interventions. These women clearly do not need ‘saving’ but need structural support such as educational resources on rights and laws, more training that will benefit them like Dhewni and Asha felt with the training, and more support and resources in the host country.

In the way the older generation of women in this group supported the training of the younger generation, as they explained how in their experience it was so difficult not having training in Arabic, there is a great opportunity in ethnography to figure out the limitations and advantages of the current system. To that effect the generation of workers who are in the system now and who have just returned are the most apt to advise on how the current system is functioning. Kalyani, at the end of her interview, stressed that,

“They (the government) need to support the workers that go abroad. That support is not there.”

Her call for change, as a woman who was in the system recently, is far more valuable than any recommendation that I could possibly make.

This ethnography is an example of how in order to change the frameworks used to understand this area, the questions must first be taken to those operating within the system. For the field of migration, in which the systems are so precarious and unstructured, this is a call to further use lived experiences to inform theory.

Reflecting on the Process

The process of this ethnography was challenging and at times, frenzied because of the limited timeframe within which I conducted the research. That said, even within such
short periods, my experiences meeting and getting to know the women in this study were very special to me. They were unimaginably affectionate and generous and shared so effortlessly their stories of hardship, love and happiness, injecting humour into their stories as often as possible. The women shared moments of intense pain as well as great happiness and pride. I am so very grateful for their generosity.

If I have the opportunity to expand on this this, I will interview more of a geographically and ethnically diverse. I also would try to stay away from such a large range of departure dates so as to focus on specific time periods. Finally, during this research I was a ‘remote’ researcher, living away from home, and returning with an ‘academic project’. That certainly disadvantaged my opportunities as a researcher with what was accessible to me, and I felt it was also unfair to the people who informed my study as I was in and out within a month.

With this project I, in now way, wish to imply that I have the answers to the problem, or that this is comprehensive and complex enough to answer those questions, but rather, I hope that this ethnography and its findings can be seen as an example and impetus for the need to change our frameworks of understanding so as to move towards an improved support system and system for migrant women to migrate and return safely. I hope this also highlights the benefits of these person-level analyses to get a greater eye into the workings of the system.
Appendix

A:

IRB letter (CMC)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Office of Institutional Research
Bauer Center – North, 1st Floor
500 East Ninth Street
Claremont, CA 91711

Dear Kimaya de Silva,

Thank you for submitting the following research project for IRB review:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Title</th>
<th>An Ethnographic Look at the Intimate Labour of Sri Lankan Female Migrant Workers Abroad</th>
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<tr>
<td>IRB Protocol #</td>
<td>2016-11-016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
<td>Kimaya de Silva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Sponsor</td>
<td>Pardis Mahdavi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Type</td>
<td>Expedited</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approval Date</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expiration Date</td>
<td>11/23/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes/Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your submission has been approved as indicated above.

Noted Policies
- No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
- All unanticipated or serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB within 5 days.
- All protocol modifications must be IRB approved prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce risk. This includes any change of investigator, or site address.
- All protocol deviations must be reported to the IRB within 5 days.
- All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.

It is the responsibility of the PI (and sponsor, when applicable) to maintain compliance with these policies and to initiate proceedings with the CMC IRB when changes or unanticipated events do occur.

Please visit www.cmc.edu/IRB for more information on CMC IRB policies and procedures.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the CMC IRB at IRB@cmc.edu.

The Institutional Review Board of Claremont McKenna College wishes you well in the conduct of your research.
The following will be read to participants at the beginning of each interview, and oral consent will be recorded.

I am a student at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont conducting a research study about the experiences of migrant domestic helpers from Sri Lanka. For this project, I am interviewing women over the age of 21 years who have experienced working abroad as migrant workers.

I have a series of open-ended questions for the interview, and I anticipate this taking between a half hour and one hour. With your permission, I will be recording the interview and I am currently recording this consent process.

You, as well as all other participants, will be personally identified only to me, and I am the only person who will be able to associate you with your interview. The digital recording of this interview...
will be stored in a password-protected folder on my password-protected computer. The interview transcription will also be password protected and will not include your name or other identifying information. I will not include any identifying details in the write-up of this research project or in any of my presentations that result from this project.

Your participation in this project entails no direct benefit, cost, or compensation to you. There is no risk of injury associated with participation in this project. Claremont McKenna College cannot provide any financial compensation or support for injuries or distress occurring as part of research participation.

Your participation in this project is voluntary, and you may discontinue and withdraw your consent at any time, for any reason, and without penalty. If for any reason you would like to stop, please just let me know. You may also refuse to answer any questions that I ask, and either stop the interview or ask to move on to the next question. You may also ask that I destroy all records of your participation, including deleting email correspondence and deleting audio recording files and written documents.

Do you have any questions regarding the study or your consent to be interviewed?

Do you consent to this interview, based on the information I have just provided?

My contact information: Kimaya de Silva; +94-773867639 ; kimaya.desilva@gmail.com

Confidentiality: Participants will be personally identified only to the PI. The PI is the only person who will be able to associate participants with their interviews. No identifying details will be included in written work or presentations based on this research. Digital recordings of interviews (including recorded consent) will be stored in a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer. All transcriptions of interviews will also be password protected and will not include participant names or other identifying information. No identifying information will be included on printed documents.

Interview questions for Semi-structure interviews

1. When and where did you go to work abroad?
2. What made you go abroad?
3. Did you have kids here when you left?
4. If so, how were they?
5. Did you want to go or did you feel you had to?
6. Tell me about the experience in [country of work]
7. What were your employers like?
8. If they had a child, what was he/she like?
9. How did you feel towards the child?
10. How did you feel about home when you were there?
11. Did you complete your contract?
a. If not, why?
12. What was your quality of life like while there? How did you deal with loneliness?
13. Did you get to know any other migrant workers who were there?
14. Did you make friends?
15. Do you feel you were taken care of by the agency that set you up?
16. How did you find relief from the difficult conditions you were in?
17. How were you received when you returned home?
18. Are you happy to be back?
19. Would you go back?
20. What is life like for you now?
21. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience/yourself?

C:

Codes for Atlas T.I.

2. Familial love 14. Kind employers
3. Resistance 15. Intimacy
5. Tension between duty and 17. Education of children
  family
6. Immobility 18. Pride in Achievement
7. Mobility 19. Agency Arrangement
8. Call for Change 20. Pre-departure
9. Hostile work environment/
  violence
10. Female friendships 21. Rigorous work
11. Female solidarity 22. Riches from abroad
12. Loneliness 23. Domestic issues
24. Language barrier
25. Happiness/freedom
Bibliography


Constable, Nicole. 2014. *Born Out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labor*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.


