

For the Sake of My Family
Sri Lankan Female Return Migrants

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Abstract

Sri Lankan Female Return Migrants is a thesis that analyses the context of female migration in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka. The women who appear in this thesis migrate temporarily to the Middle East to work as housemaids in the homes of complete strangers. Many women spend as much as 10 years away from their family. Information has been collected throughout a six months fieldwork carried out in 2010. Participant observation and interviews conducted during fieldwork constitutes the basis for the empirical descriptions. The overall question that this thesis suggests an answer to is: What factors are in play when women on the East coast of Sri Lanka decide on domestic work migration? Throughout the thesis I will discuss the goals, the concerns and the priorities of the migrant women. That women migrate to make money is quite clear, however, one goal with this thesis is to discuss what the money is spent on. During the fieldwork dowry emerged as one of the most important factor of migration. The thesis therefore discusses the correlation between migration and dowry as it appears in this particular context. I will ask questions such as; why is dowry so important and what functions does it have in the society? I will also ask how migration affects relationships within the family. I argue that both invisible and visible structures are important in accounting for when analysing women's migration.

Several ethnographers have argued that migration cannot merely to be understood in economic and political terms, but also as a sociocultural process mediated by gendered and kinship ideologies, institutions and practices. (Kottegoda 2004:177; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Matsuoko and Sorenson 1991 referred to by Mahler and Pessar 2006:33.) This framework has been important for my analysis of migration. I have used a combination of migration theories and gender approaches as the analytical framework. The approaches opened up for an interpretation of migration as something that is connected with numerous other factors in the community, such as the family, the household and gender ideologies. I have found that women are encouraged to migrate as housemaids to a larger extent than before; this is shown through the expansion of training centres and a pre-payment that is not connected to the future salary. In Sri Lanka more than 50 percent of the international work migration is female; out of this almost 90 percent migrate as housemaids. This is a unique and a very large number of housemaids and make Sri Lanka a particularly interesting place for studying international female work migration.

Acknowledgements

When I arrived in Sri Lanka I was warmly welcomed and taken care of by intriguing and open people. Without them I could never have experienced Sri Lanka as I did. I am tremendously thankful for having met them and for all the things they have done for me.

Thanks to all the wonderful women at Suriya and at YMCA who helped me when needed, who took me on exciting trips and visits to all the places around Batticaloa that made my stay interesting, rewarding and worthwhile.

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INTRODUCTION

- It is very sad for us to leave our children. The money we earn is the benefit, but there we have to do very hard work. No time to sleep and we have to look after a lot of children.

- If we could have jobs here, we wouldn't go abroad.

- If my husband wants to go we need money to give the agency, so I went. We have a lot of needs, like to build a house and to pay for education for our children.

- I build a house for my daughter, and now she got married. I have another daughter and I need to build another house so again I want to go, [...] but it is difficult to leave the young girls alone.

Migrated women in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka

Theme and objectives

This thesis is based on six months fieldwork in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, where I met Sri Lankan women who take on quite extreme measures to improve their own and their families' quality of life and destinies. They leave the world they know, and often their husbands and children, to travel to the Middle East and into uncertainty. They travel from their homes where they are familiar with how they are supposed to act and be where they know the stage so to speak, through a system that is difficult to understand and end up in a new and unknown place where they are expected to fulfil new roles. Eventually, after they have earned enough or perhaps endured enough hardships, they return back to their homes in Sri Lanka. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the relationship between temporary female work migration and the family, between migration and social life back home. I will discuss how the women engage in this kind of work, not only because of their desire to satisfy material needs, but also to achieve social goals. In my opinion this particular work migration cannot be discussed separately from other aspects of the Sri Lankan society.

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At the time of my fieldwork there was a Women's Livelihood symposium arranged in Batticaloa. The symposium covered most of the livelihoods for women in the area. Research, interviews, photos and videos had been completed beforehand showing different livelihood activities. For example, various forms of handwork were shown as work available to poor women. Despite widespread domestic work migration among the women in Batticaloa, this was not included. International work migration was evidently not thought about as a livelihood activity. Apparently, work migration was not seen for what it could be – a livelihood strategy to improve the family's welfare and to reach social goals. I argue that it may have the same function as work at home, only the stakes are much higher and the consequences can vary. After all, the women remit their earnings to the family at home. These remittances are an expression of the wish to improve the lives of those left behind. (Haas 2010:249.) Many of the women I met explained at length that they had to migrate because there was not enough work at home. Here I take these women at their word and believe that, if there were work opportunities in their home area, they would not have migrated for work.

Work migration is not an unusual phenomenon in Sri Lanka. According to the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) there are currently about 1, 7 million Sri Lankans working abroad. Skilled work migration accounts for only a small part of this number. During the last decade, 70 percent of the Sri Lankan labour force that migrated belonged to the unskilled sector. Nearly 66 percent of these unskilled work migrants were female domestic workers. In 2008 the total number departed for foreign employment was 252,021 out of which 49 percent were female. 88 percent of these, 108,709 women, migrated as housemaids. In 2009 there was a decrease in total departures to 247,119, out of which 52 percent were women. Out of those 52 percent, 89 percent migrated as housemaids. That is 113,777 housemaids. In other words, about 311 housemaids departed Sri Lanka every single day in 2009 to work abroad. (SLBFE 2008, 2009) The case of Sri Lanka is unique in that such a large percent of the international work migrants are women. This makes Sri Lanka a particularly interesting place to study the phenomenon.

Labour migration from Sri Lanka to foreign countries began in the late 70s. At that time the government started to encourage both men and women to seek jobs abroad, as a way to reduce unemployment and to expand the source of foreign exchange earnings. (TISL 2009:7.) In that way, labour migration from Sri Lanka is not recent phenomenon for neither men nor women.

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This thesis is, among other things, a study of the relation between the global and the local. I do not intend to follow or expand upon this thread, but the stories that are presented within are valuable examples of how global and local processes affect one another and float into each other. I will focus on the local situation, but also refer to the global. We may imagine the world as consisting of two distinct worlds, one local and one global. However, these are not two different worlds; instead we live in one world. Anna Tsing writes that we should imagine a creek cutting through a hillside. “As the water rushes down, it carves rock and moves gravel; it deposits silt on slow turns; it switches courses and breaks earth dams after a sudden storm. As the creek flows, it makes and remakes its channels”. (Anna Tsing 2000:327) In this thesis the women are the creek, the communication they have with the people at home, the things they bring back, both physical and mental, the system that connects the Middle East with Sri Lanka and Batticaloa. And as they flow, themselves and their surroundings change and thereby they are all connected.

Today there are about 214 million international migrants worldwide. (International Organization of Migration 2011) Although many people emigrate, most people don't. Most research focuses on the migrants, and so will I. However, the way I will analyse the connection between migration and family in this thesis can not only be used to discuss why people migrate, but also why most people don't. Nevertheless, the focus here is on the women who migrate.

Research question

My research question is: What are the different factors in play when deciding on international work migration for women on the East coast of Sri Lanka?

It is obvious that women migrate to make money - what is interesting to consider however, is how the money is spent. One part goes for food and clothing, but the other part is to provide a dowry, such as buying land or house, or wedding expenses. Many of the women also mention dowry as the main motivation for migration. Since migration has become a relatively accessible alternative to earn money for this - see Chapter 3 - many have chosen this route. As a result, I argue that to understand migration in this context one must take account of the

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dowry system and its roles and function within society. Traditionally dowry has been the responsibility of the whole family, but the migratory working pattern is evidence that women have gained greater individual responsibility for this than previously. This can be explained by the many years of war - where many have lost land, jobs, assets and life's - but also as a result of natural disasters, and in particular the tsunami in 2004 which hit the East Coast with devastating force. I will show how the migration system is set up for migrant housemaids - both the costs and that it is gendered - I will also explain the dowry system and its relationship to marriage and kinship. Finally, I will discuss the impact migration can have on relationships within the family - something that women must take into account and which also shows the priorities of their choice to migrate.

As a whole this thesis shows the migration context of women in Batticaloa - the things they have to consider, their priorities and their goals. The fact that these three may conflict with one another is not so difficult to understand, but I will also discuss and illustrate some of these conflicts. When considering women's migration I will particularly look at the reciprocal relationship they and their migration have with the family. I will question how kinship ideology affects women's migration, and what effects migration can have on relationships within the family? To answer these questions I will use a combination of migrations theories, in combination with a focus on gender. I will analyse migration through a holistic perspective where I account for how structural and ideological factors play a part in the development of migration patterns.

I will use a combination of livelihood and household perspectives on migration. Although both perspectives are interconnected, the livelihood approach with a focus on the family is particularly valuable when analysing the importance of dowry. For families in Batticaloa it is through the dowry system that all the family assets flow. The household perspective, on the other hand, provides an opportunity to deal more explicitly with relations inside the household and what connection this has to migration. The combination of these two approaches allows an awareness of the heterogeneity that exists in migration: to be aware of the complexity involved when making the decision whether to migrate or not. I argue that these women's migration should be seen as a decision taken in a continuum with many intermediary factors that have contributed to their final decision. With respect to my own experiences here, I am of the opinion that the migration is induced by social and economic factors, which have been considered throughout this continuum.

Delimitations of study

I had to make some choices regarding my focus during my fieldwork. The first delimitation I made was to talk to women who migrate, and not men who migrate. This has made my study a study on women, but still gender presents itself as a subject in this thesis as I gained knowledge of some of the differences between men's and women's migration. These differences may be found at every step of the migratory process. For example the type of work, how the job is landed and the consequences of the migration back home all vary depending on whether the migrant is a man or a woman. I understand these differences as concerns related to gender divisions in the society. Included in this delimitation is the recruitment process. Most of the women I met migrated through agents and agencies. Therefore I will only discuss this particular channel of migration. I am aware that some women also find work through social connections and that the employment may be arranged without the agent as a middleman. However, this was not the case among my informants. During my fieldwork I met women who are single, divorced or widowed, but most women in this thesis are married women since the intention was to study the relationship between spouses.

The second delimitation is the location of study. I have only done fieldwork in Sri Lanka which is the sending country. I have never been to any of the destination countries of concern here. This makes my study limited to *stories*, and for the most part about the difficult situations the women faced while abroad, that have been subsequently upon their return home. The situation abroad is thus seen from Batticaloa. In other words, my thesis is a one-way perspective study when discussing experiences abroad. Still, considering the vast literature that exists on migration as examined in the receiving country I believe my thesis provides a valuable new examination of the matter at hand.

The third delimitation is the background of the migration. I will only write about the socio-historic circumstances that shape Batticaloa to a limited extent. The conflict has meant a lot for the development of the migration. In my opinion though, it cannot solely account for the current context of migration. For a more nuanced picture of the situation and in order to grasp the immediate and everyday experiences of the people involved in migration, I have focused on the household and the family, including gender ideologies.

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The fourth delimitation concerns the number of agents met whilst in the field. The initial intention was to meet recruitment agents to gain a better understanding of the system, and of the agent's role in the migratory process. This turned out to be a greater challenge than initially anticipated. It was explained that the difficulties were as a consequence of social stigmatization and corrupt agents. Eventually I managed to meet three agents and one representative of the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) thanks to a few influential connections in the area. The agents were from different levels of the system and this provided the basis for the discussion of the recruitment system, which follows later on in this thesis.

The fifth delimitation concerns the connection between migration and religious consumption. My focus mainly lies on dowry and livelihoods, and throughout my fieldwork I did not observe any clear differences between Muslim, Hindu or Catholic women in this respect. I do not intend to say that Muslim, Hindu and Catholic women are all the same in the area I studied, but with regards to dowry and livelihoods the similarities are more striking than the differences between them. The women belong to distinct religions with clearly different religious rituals and practices. Furthermore, the villages are mainly either Muslim or Hindu/Catholic, as they commonly do not settle in each other's villages. Still, the villages are very close to one another, the only division between a Muslim and Hindu/Catholic village was often a narrow sandy path. This means that the people live very close to one another and therefore can develop an understanding of each other's space despite their religious differences. As I will explain in greater detail, the Tamils and Moors¹ in the area share many features, especially regarding family structures and the dowry system. Throughout the thesis I will be explicit about each woman's religious belonging to make the similarities visible. Similarities, then, include the possibilities and constraints on each migration. Although I have observed these similarities, I am still aware that religion is an important differentiating factor. Differences I have noted have to do with previous migrations and the recruitment processes. Hindu women have told me that they previously were nervous about the receiving countries in the Middle East being Muslim, but that it was no longer a concern². Still, even today it would

¹ In common parlance, both 'Moor' and 'Muslim' are used interchangeably today to refer to indigenous Tamil-speaking Muslim Sri Lankans. (McGilvray 1998:434) Tamils are most often Hindus or Catholics.

² For example, one woman told me that in the 90s Tamil women migrated with false passports to make the impression that they were Muslims. But these days it is not problematic to not be Muslim, and Hindu women can wear sari and Puttu. (The red mark in the forehead)

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seem that being Muslim has its advantages, as some women (both Muslim and Tamil) have told me how Muslim women have been paid to migrate for a longer period of time and that the payment has been higher than for Tamil women. In closing, I acknowledge the importance of religious belonging and I believe this could have been an interesting focus, albeit a different from the one chosen. Further, Thangarajah argues that Middle Eastern migration for Muslim women has become a means to empower themselves through imported consumer goods and 'Arab' practices. (Thangarajah 2003:141) I was aware of this before I arrived in Sri Lanka, but I never observed it and therefore cannot discuss the subject within the parameters of this thesis. Again, religious consumption is not the focus of my thesis. Instead, this could be a very interesting subject matter for future research and further enquiries into the field. With regards to my focus, migration as a mean towards establishing marriage and secure food access or, in other words, as a strategy, does not seem to depend on religion in Batticaloa.

Outline of the thesis

Throughout this thesis therefore, I will argue that women's migration is influenced by many different factors. To be able to say something about the theme and to deliberate on an answer to the research question I will have to discuss the structures of migration and what I assume to be important factors for these women when they opt to migrate. The essay is structured so that I start from the top down, so to speak. I will start by looking at factors that lies furthest away from the women, and end in the intimate realm of the household. The context in which these women live and have lived is also important to acquire an understanding, and this I will do by dedicating a short chapter to the Sri Lankan society and especially to the Batticaloan society.

In chapter one I will present the theoretical and analytical framework for the thesis. The combination of migration and gender literature will be described. In this chapter I will also defined the methods I have used in the fieldwork.

The aim of chapter two is to describe the Sri Lankan and Batticaloan context. As said, I believe that it is important to know the conditions these women live their lives within and how these conditions create certain premises for the women in relation to the migration. The particular context of Batticaloa will be described in relation to other parts of the country.

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Religious composition will be mentioned, as well as the Sri Lankan conflict and its relation to work migration.

In chapter three I will deal with the migration process. The bureaucratic structure at the national level is so complicated that it excludes the women themselves. As a result, actors at different levels, in the form of agencies, subagents, and local subagents, have developed throughout the country. Because they are spread throughout the country, the system and the different actors are hard to control for the government, and the women experience a knowledge gap that is filled through media and friends, neighbours and relatives. In Sri Lanka today housemaids who have suffered physically have made the headlines in the main national and international newspapers. Poor working conditions including the Sri Lankan system for international work migration and a lack of working rights in the receiving country are the main reasons for the horrific stories that have surfaced.

The subject matter of chapter four is to explore kinship and family structures in Batticaloa. This includes the function and meaning of dowry. These components are of importance to the migration since these are important contributing factors women take into account when deciding whether to migrate or not. The chapter is important to an analysis on the relationship between women and migration in Batticaloa.

In chapter five I discuss how migration can affect relationships within the family. I will start with a discussion of gender roles and expectations and I intend to highlight connections between migration and changes in the family that I found in the field.

Chapter one: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

Here I will present theories and concepts that construe the theoretical framework for this thesis. I build on literature from qualitative research, mainly anthropology and sociology. The following presentation of theories on migration and gender will aid the reader to better grasp the discussion that follows.

Migration

Migration is an obscure and complex topic. Literature on migration concerns many different aspects and perspectives of mobile people. Different migration processes and migrants seem to fit into different categories concerning resident status (such as internal versus international, permanent versus temporary, and legal versus undocumented) and different modes of entry (as asylum seekers, refugees, low-income or highly-skilled workers, students and so on) (Samers 2010:8.) These categories make it easier to navigate through literature and help us think about the matter at hand, but at the same time they can be simplifying, generalizing and misconceiving. While shedding light on certain aspects of the migratory process and people, other aspects are concealed. To put a migrant in a specific category and conceptualizing him or her in light of this category can be problematic. (Turton 2003:3.) Variation and heterogeneity exists everywhere and therefore we should use categories carefully. My analytic concern is to examine which and how social factors effect migration.

My thesis concerns the women who migrate seen from the migrant sending country, the different considerations they make before they migrate and the consequences of their migration in their homes and communities. General migration research has focused mostly on migration processes or migrant receiving countries. (Haas 2010:228.) To emanate in the sending country has not been the most common perspective in migration research. According to Åkesson, this has a natural explanation in the fact that most migration researchers reside in

countries that predominantly receive migrants and not in the countries from which people migrate. Most researchers have been unable - or uninterested - to conduct research in the sending countries. (Åkesson 2007:93.)

My analysis starts with a holistic perspective of migration. Migration, then, is not something that can be seen separately from other parts of the society. I will understand migration as a social process, not just a matter of economic decision-making. (Ellis 2003:3.) Several ethnographers have argued that migration cannot merely to be understood in economic and political terms, but also as a sociocultural process mediated by gendered and kinship ideologies, institutions and practices. (Kottegoda 2004:177, Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Matsuoko and Sorenson 1991 referred to by Mahler and Pessar 2006:33.) I will draw heavily on this argument throughout my thesis, and use my own material to show how these processes proceed in Batticaloa.

A Household Approach Towards Migration

A household perspective on migration research has been criticized by certain authors. (Rodenburg, 1997; Carling, 2005 cited in Haas 2010:252.) The main criticism is that the household is understood as one unit and the dynamics inside the household thus become invisible. The research referenced, though, has been gender neutral. This is part of the reason to why I include a gender perspective in this thesis. Especially feminist migration research has aimed to unpack the household. (Silvey 2006:68) I will present material that considers dynamics within the household, including gender and power relations. I understand the household and the family as a sphere where the members can negotiate and bargain. Here again lies an understanding of each individual as a rational actor who acts within a set of values and aims to improve his or her situation. In other words, there is room for agency while bearing larger structures in mind. Focusing on the household as the primary unit of analysis can be seen as an optimum strategy or a compromise between agency and structure approaches (Haas 2010:246; Kottegoda 2004: 174.) As I will show in this thesis, my material clearly demonstrates that the women have agency although they have to negotiate and at times compromise with gender and power structures, which in practice often translates to negotiating and compromising their priorities with their husbands and other members of the family. In this thesis I intend to show how agency is current, but also how different structures can influence the migration. With structures I mean more invisible social structures, such as

gender ideologies and family structures, but also more explicit migration structures created by the government and global economic structures that propel work migration. These different levels must all be considered and analysed in order to gain some understanding of the migratory patterns as they have evolved in Batticaloa. Structural and ideological factors forming the contexts of migration is the core of my concern in this thesis. Analysing migration through a household approach has been a way to reconcile shortcomings in earlier perspectives on migration by taking account for collective or group action in decision making on migration in terms of social networks. (Kottegoda 2004: 174) Therefore, approaching migration through the household forms a study that accounts for social structures, such as family, kinship and internal household relations, as I do in chapter three, four and five.

A Livelihood Approach Towards Migration

The term 'livelihood' attempts to capture not just what people do in order to make a living, but the resources that provide them with the ability to build a satisfactory living, the risk factors that they must consider in managing their resources, and the institutional and policy context that either helps or hinders them in their pursuit of maintaining or improving their living. (Ellis 2003.)

A livelihood strategy can be defined as a strategic or deliberate choice of a combination of activities by households and their individual members to maintain, secure, and improve their livelihoods (Haas 2010:244). In my opinion, migration may be defined as a livelihood strategy. This is also argued by others (see Arya and Roy 2009 [2006]) where the editors have collected articles that discuss whether migration for the poor may be a livelihood strategy arising not from choice, but from compulsion of survival. In several places I have read that it is not the poorest who migrate (see Arya and Roy 2006[2009]: 24; Haas 2010:239, Skeldon 2003:71), but my material does not support that statement. Instead, the system I encountered in Sri Lanka encouraged also the poorest to migrate. Although many stated poverty as the reason for their migration, poverty is relative. Because of the importance, function and meaning of dowry in the Batticaloan context, I will argue that there is some compulsion of migration arising from the need for a dowry as well. Managing resources in this context also includes a successful marriage, since almost all the family assets flows through dowry.

Because of the Sri Lankan conflict, which I will return to in chapter two, there are several factors that influence people's livelihoods. Restrictions, resettlements and other devastating

Chapter one

incidents have put hard strains on less fortunate people for a long time. These and other factors, such as a national system that encourages women (and men) to migrate have created what may be seen as a migration boom where international work migration has become common and familiar to many people. The question of whether migration improves livelihood in this context is quite difficult to answer, most of the time it temporarily amend the family's access to food but this rarely continues more than 3 months after the migrant has come back. Still, women have the option to migrate from Sri Lanka and their remittances are of importance to their family, community and state. More fortunate migrants can invest in more long-term livelihood strategies, such as land or house that also functions as dowry. All the women I met sent their money back home while they were working abroad. A discussion of remittances is therefore in order. The meaning of remittances has been discussed in relation to migration and development since the 1950s. (Haas 2010:227.) This thesis may therefore be seen as a study of women and development. I will explore how their earnings were used. Then, I will use this information to partly describe the context of their migration. As I will emphasise repeatedly, the money the women earn abroad are primarily used for two things; daily consumption for the family and dowry. Following these two expenditures, education for the children was a goal for several of the women I met.

Pinnawala argues that the conventional approach to analysing migration as a livelihood omits the gender dynamics in a migrant household. (Pinnawala 2008:456.) This is something that I will try to avoid. The main income earners in the households in this thesis are the women. This changes the traditional household patterns and has consequences for the family operations. The income, I will show, is often remitted to a female relative instead of the husband and this was argued to me as a result of other women taking over the migrant's usual role in the household. The husband in each of these cases does not have control over the household finances, and this may further weakens his traditional role as the "bread-winner" of the family. Particularly, chapter five discusses gender roles and dynamics and their relation to migration.

In this thesis I wish to highlight how the context of the migration can be explained by social motives maybe even more so than by economical motives. The most important part of these social motives is the dowry. I will discuss how dowry is closely connected to marriage and kinship which further is closely connected to the social structure of the Batticaloan society in chapter four.

Gender and Gender Ideologies

I will exemplify how gender influences the causes and consequences of migration. It also influences the migration and recruitment process.

Gender is a vast topic. A thorough discussion of gender would also include a discussion of the body and sexuality. I do not wish to dwell on this for too long, but will instead summarize some of the main points made by some of the key theorists on this subject. My aim with this summary is to make my own understanding explicit. Debates concerning gender can be seen as debates between materialism and social constructionism. In the 70s social anthropologists took the lead in arguing that sex could not determine gender. Henrietta Moore summarized the debate at the end of the 90s and concluded that we should not seek to define a fixed boundary between sex and gender as they rather float into each other while, simultaneously, the separation between sex and gender can be useful for a better understanding of our way of categorizing the world. (Moore 2005: 151 - 171)

This also reflects Bourdieu's idea about the "internalization of externality and the externalization of internality" where he says that we structure the structures, and at the same time the structures structure us. There is a dialectic relationship between internal cognitive and motivating structures and external structures, and the internal structures are "history turned into nature" that could make us think that the structures are natural but in fact they are produced by us at an earlier stage. (Bourdieu 1977) Bourdieu gives a guideline on how we can analyse social practices and behaviour. Following him we could understand the notion of gender as a learned structure that in fact is a product of history that is embodied and believed to be natural. Language, concepts and ideas are part of the structures that construct gender identity. According to Fürst, Bourdieu suggests that the opposition between masculinity and femininity is important both when the self-image and when the world image are constructed. (Fürst 1995:189.)

Ideas about the feminine versus the masculine are constructed through different external structures, like concepts and language, at the same time as these are reproduced from internal structures in terms of how we think and perceive the world. The gendered focus in this thesis is mainly to explain how ideal male and female roles exist because of socially constructed ideas about gendered behaviour and roles. I believe that several social difficulties that these

women face, like rumours about bad moral, are partly consequences of broken ideals. I understand female ideals as particular expectations to the women shared by the community, which are expected by the women precisely because they are women. Certain gendered conventions rise from these ideals.

What is Gender Ideology?

Selvy Thiruchandran, who discusses ideology, caste, class and gender, also examines gender ideology. First she defines ideology and then she explores how it can apply for gender. She defines ideology as “the mental framework, thoughts, concepts and system of representations which find expression in law, in religion and philosophy, and which are disseminated through various channels like the mass media, books, and specific institutions. It explains, justifies, and legitimizes positions of persons and groups, of the institutions and customs, of the social order in general”. (Thiruchandran 1997:4.) She also agrees that gender (ideology) exists from both the material body and the social structures as Moore suggests and I also see a similarity in the dialectic relationship between external and internal structures as explained by Bourdieu, although Thiruchandran doesn't focus as much on their dialectics. Her point is that gender ideology in most cases is a production of the biological sex differences at the same time as they are influenced by socio-economic conditions. (Thiruchandran 1997: 6)

Gamburd examines the relation between migration and gender ideologies and sees how they are challenged by female migration. She defines gender as cultural knowledge about sexual differences and focuses on gender roles as learned behaviours based on culturally constructed views on how the world should work. (Gamburd 2000:22.) I find this a helpful way of looking at the issue of gender in regards to my field. Building on the theorists above and keeping Gamburd's observations of female work migration in mind, I find myself somewhere in between both constructionists and materialists. Still, my focus is on the social aspects of gender in light of female work migration and thus this will be where my following analysis departs from the discussion of how to account for sex and materiality. While not understanding gender as voluntary construction, I tend towards a more constructionist understandings as I see female ideals challenged and gender roles change.

Methods

I spent six months in Sri Lanka. These months I stayed in Batticaloa town living with a Sri Lankan family of four.

I came to know the field through a local women organization that works mostly with violence against women, assisting women in danger and providing some micro financing for small business. By participating in their work I got to know many people who helped me with contacts in smaller villages around town. They were a well-respected organization and I think my connection to them helped my "intrusion" into the family life of some of the women I met throughout my fieldwork. After some time in the field I also came in contact with the well-known organization YMCA. At their office in Batticaloa I met two wonderful women who also took me in and helped me navigate through an unfamiliar landscape.

One difficulty I faced was due to language as I don't speak Tamil. After some time in the field I knew some basic lines, but it didn't help me much in my work. The family that I stayed with knew some English and taught me some Tamil, and the friends that I made were all English speaking. Thanks to my family and friends I got to experience a lot of things that have helped my understanding of Tamil culture. Staying with a family gave me an insight that I could never have gotten staying on my own and. First and foremost, this gave me the opportunity to learn the daily routines of everyday life in a Tamil town. Having some influential and very knowledgeable friends provided a better insight into the structures of the society that I would not have gained otherwise.

After spending some time in the field, I decided that interviews would be the best way of gaining insight in the migrating women's stories. My primary data is thus based on interviews with women who were about to migrate for the first time, who had already migrated and come back and women who were about to travel yet again. I have also talked to a few husbands, mothers and children of migrant women, and I have also met a couple of recruiting agents and one officer in charge at the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment. All together I have had 30 individual in-depth interviews and 7 focus group interviews with between two to ten women. The seven group interviews that I had during my fieldwork were particularly useful at the time, and gave me insight into group dynamics and an impression of the shared perceptions on women's work migration. Specifically, the women who participated in the

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focus groups discussed how they the community treated them in light of their migration and what views they themselves had of other women and the community.

When I searched for women I had certain criteria for whom I wished to talk with. First of all, the women should have travelled recently and have been married during their travels. Still, I came to talk to some women who did not meet my criteria by either not being married, by being divorced or not having migrated for quite some time. I asked most of the women if I could meet their husbands, but was told several times that they wouldn't like to meet me. Even so I spoke to some of the husbands when the opportunity arose. Friends or acquaintances introduced me to some of the women while I met others by simply knocking on doors. These varying methods for meeting informants have their advantages and disadvantages. When someone introduced me to a woman I had to reflect upon whether or not the person who introduced us had some personal motive for choosing that particular woman.

I conducted the interviews in open form and never gave the women any answering alternatives. Instead, I kept in mind that I wanted as much information as possible to be able to get an insight into each woman's particular context. Therefore I also asked questions that don't seem to relate to migration at first sight. In retrospect I am very glad I included these questions as this information has proven itself equally important for later reflections on each woman's situation. My regret is that I didn't meet any of them more than once, but at the same time I know why this happened. I could never have talked to as many women as I did if I had focused on only a few, which was very difficult considering the limited information I had of the country, community, families and topic before I started. By meeting a considerable number of women I have been able to get an understanding of which issues are common and talked about overall. Meeting many women also granted me the opportunity to meet some women that have gave more than others. After all, not everyone of the women I met were able to talk openly and give me wholesome and truthful stories. To be able to compare the form and content of the women's talk, I think the many interviews were fruitful for my own understanding of migrating women in the North East of Sri Lanka. Since I don't have much observational notes and since I am aware that people don't always do what they say they do, I believe the extent of my interviews, allowing me to compare and contrast, helped me overcome this issue to some extent.

Analytical Framework and Methods

Although I realize I have some lacking knowledge due to lacking observations, I still can say that I have come to know quite a lot about the context of the women I met. This is not only because I have met many women, but also because I have had knowledgeable friends that have been very useful in helping me interpret the things I have seen and heard. Most of the information that I received I discussed with certain friends, and this undoubtedly helped me gain a better understanding. My participation in a family everyday for five months, also gave me means for reflection. Furthermore, in almost every case I visited the homes of the people I talked to and I think this made the discussions more personal and intimate. Being in their homes also gave me the possibility to ask about the material things I saw, which was helpful as several migration stories involved remittances used to build or maintain homes. By visiting all these homes I also had the opportunity to talk to other people in the village. The village “facilitators”, who worked for the two organizations I also worked with, were especially useful. They provided local knowledge of villagers’ interactions with one another, and this gave me the possibility to discuss the general views of the village on the women who migrated.

Most of the women I met did not speak English, so I often used an interpreter when speaking with them. To use an interpreter means that you have more to take account for with regards to the information that is collected. The first interpreter I worked with gave me certain challenges that eventually forced me to find another. Although her spoken English was fine, she had trouble understanding me. She also gave a quite hard first impression. The advantage with having her help was that she had worked with the women’s organization at an earlier stage, so many of the women positively recognized her. Despite that, I did not want to approach the women the way she did. Still, the opposite could be said of my second interpreter. She was perhaps too humble in some cases, which at times proved difficult as some of the women we met had a very strict attitude that could be explained by either high self-confidence or a hard way of life. To use an interpreter means that you can never be sure of what is said between her, in this case, and the people you are talking to. You have to trust the person to translate accurately, both questions and answers. When there were doubts, I always asked the question twice or in a different way to see if the answer came back the same. When sensitive issues surfaced, there can always be a question of truthfulness. If my interpreter came from the same village the straightforwardness of the person interviewed may have been less. What is more, the interpreter could, if she wished, cut down the answers to what she thought was appropriate. To overcome some of these issues I always discussed the

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interviews with my interpreter afterwards. Her opinions were very useful to my understanding of the women and their situations. It should be noted that all the quotes from the women that appear in this thesis are translations made by my interpreter.

Chapter two: SKETCHING THE FIELD

The historical and cultural trajectories are what form the community and the society as it appears in front of us, as it is understood by the people living in it who both produce and reproduce its path. Chapter two will put Sri Lanka on the map and tell the story of a country that has been in turmoil for a long time, although in a shortened version. Since Batticaloa and Sri Lanka had such dreadful history, its consequences have had impact on the women and consequently changed their life situation and their priorities.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is located off the southern tip of India, and is a relatively small country with approximately 20 million inhabitants. The country has varied environment, from sandy beaches along the coastline to steep green hills located in the middle of the country. At different stages it has been a colony of Portugal and Holland (1505-1796) and Great Britain (1796-1948) and the island became independent in 1948. (Tambiah 1986) The recent three decades has badly affected the country because of the civil war, a war which was declared over on the 16th of May in 2009. Throughout this period there were times of varying violence. The civil war has particularly been seen as a war between the LTTE³ and the Government, or even worse, between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. This is largely a simplified picture of the situation as it has evolved around the country. Many different political organizations have been involved in the battles around the island, and many civilians have been lost to bombs, disappearances, assassinations and massacres. In 2002 a ceasefire agreement (CFA) was signed between the government and the LTTE with the involvement of Norway⁴, but in 2006 the war broke out in full scale again partly as a consequence of the eastern LTTE breakout led by Colonel Karuna in 2004 although there are many more reasons

³ LTTE is an acronym for Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. A classified terrorist group which fought for a independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka but is said to have been defeated on the 16th of May 2010.

⁴ Norway's role was to be a facilitator, and the Sri Lankan Monitoring mission (SLMM) was set up where representatives from both the government, the LTTE and from western countries were included.

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as to why the war flared up again. Throughout the years of the CFA there were several things that finally led to the new full scale war.⁵

The majority (74%) of the population in Sri Lanka speak Sinhala, while approximately 26 % of the population speak Tamil. About 7 % of the population are Muslims and some of them are bilingual. (McGilvray 2008:9) According to the CIA world fact book the religions in Sri Lanka are divided as to Buddhist 69.1%, Muslim 7.6%, Hindu 7.1%, Christian 6.2%, unspecified 10% (2001 census provisional data). (CIA: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html>, 25.03.2011)

⁵ Further reading on the CFA see International Crisis Group (2006): SRI LANKA: THE FAILURE OF THE PEACE PROCESS. Asia Report N°124 – 28 November 2006.

Sketching the field



(Map 1: Sri Lanka. Source: <http://www.geographicguide.net/asia/srilanka.htm>)

People in Sri Lanka and Batticaloa

In Sri Lanka most Sinhalese people are committed to Buddhism. Tamils who are the biggest minority (including both the Indian Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils) in Sri Lanka mostly subscribe to Hinduism, but the Catholic Church is also vastly prevalent among Tamils. The Sinhalese Buddhism contains many elements from Hinduism; one of the most obvious is the similarity between the pantheons of gods and goddesses around the Buddha and the pantheon

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of the Hindu Tamils. (Yalman 1967:316) Batticaloa area has numerous Hindu temple, some more famous and some less, some bigger and some smaller. Many of the temples are Kannagi Amman, and/or Kali temples. The mother goddess (Kannagi Amman, Pattini) cult is one example of a shared belief among Sinhalese and Tamils. She is one of the most popular deities among the Buddhist of Sri Lanka and the Hindus on the east coast. (Obeyesekere 1984:3) Religion is connected to gender ideologies which I mentioned in chapter one. Different traits that women should share travel in the Sri Lankan society through different roads. One of these is the many myths and goddesses that have temples around the area. In different epics and Hindu Sanskrit literature the ideology became personified through the characters of the stories. Kannagi is a legendary Tamil woman that appears in the epic story of Silappatikaram. The goddess is par excellence the example of purity, chastity and virginity (Obeyesekere 1984:14.) There are also Pillayar and Siva temples, which are famous and well visited especially in the festival time of the year between May – August. In Batticaloa town there are at least four huge churches and several of my co-workers at Suriya where Catholics, showing a strong filiation with Christianity. The biggest Muslim towns have several mosques, which is one of the surest signs that you have entered a Muslim village. The Sri Lankan Muslims are the second-largest minority after Tamils. Most of the Sri Lankan Muslims are orthodox Sunni members of the Shafi school of Muslim jurisprudence. (McGilvray 2008:44)

After the conflict had reached its pinnacle, religion became a strong source of help and comfort. During late 1980s and early 1990s the faith to the local Amman temples became stronger. Because of the raging war governmental systems had collapsed, and the goddesses took increasing prominence in the villages inside the warzone. Oracles were often consulted and became increasingly important. (Lawrence 2000:180) People use symbols and in this case religion as a way to deal with traumas caused by the war. For the people in Batticaloa this was a way to overcome political silencing, because the ritual practices at the local Amman oracles embodied, interpreted, and acknowledged the injury of war. (Lawrence 2000:179) Even today, several years after the worst fighting are over people use religion to direct their emotions and to show that suffering is shared between them all. Still many people are missing from the war. At the time of my fieldwork, a quiet protest march was held every week to acknowledge the missing. Nothing was said aloud, rather, small notes were passed on to police officers and alike on the way. The walk always ended at a religious place, a church, a mosque or a temple.

Sketching the field

In the area around the town of Batticaloa where I did my fieldwork, there are many small villages which have either Muslim or Tamil majority. In Batticaloa district the population is constituted by three quarter Tamil, one quarter Muslim. (ICG 2008: 1; Census of population and housing 2001). The Moors which represent a quarter of the inhabitants in Batticaloa are considered to be more like an ethnic category, rather than a religious group, despite that the distinction is made mainly through religion. (Tambiah 1986:4) The resemblances between the Tamils and Muslims are many as a consequence of among other things their common history. “They share the same public space, history, language and matrilineal inheritance, but belong to different faiths in the historically diverse and culturally hybrid north-east of the Island. The matrilineal Kudi⁶ system of land and property inheritance is common among Tamil and Muslim families in the east.” (Rajasingam-Senanayake 2006:176) There is an old tale from Batticaloa which explains the connection between Tamil and Muslims, and Southern India. A long time ago seven Muslims with seven Tamils came over from South India to fight against the Jaffna Tamils who were in control on the east coast of Ceylon⁷. They won the war and the Hindu Tamils, who had their womenfolk with them, asked the Muslims if they wanted the land or the women. The Muslims, who knew that the Hindu Tamils were matrilineal, asked for the women, for in getting the women they also got land which descended in the maternal line. (Yalman 1967:283) Even though Muslims in Batticaloa are more extensively businessmen than Tamils, they also proceed with paddy cultivation. Presently, one concern in the area is the land distribution since much of the landownership has been recast because of the conflict. Some conflict rises as a consequence of many Muslim having to abandon its land because of the LTTE, who took over the western side of the lagoon were many had its cultivation.

The caste system in Sri Lanka differs from that of the familiar caste ranking system in India. In Batticaloa, the Mukkuwas who used to be a fishing caste, have had the highest ranking position within the society. In Jaffna it is the Velalars who had the greatest power and influence, as landowners. The Velalars are being perceived as a caste with higher ranking than the Mukkuwas and as a consequence of this the people of Batticaloa have been looked upon

⁶ “The term Kudi is used by all the Tamil-speaking classes of Batticaloa to mean every person who is related to one on one’s mother’s side only” (Brito cited By Tambiah 2001:9)

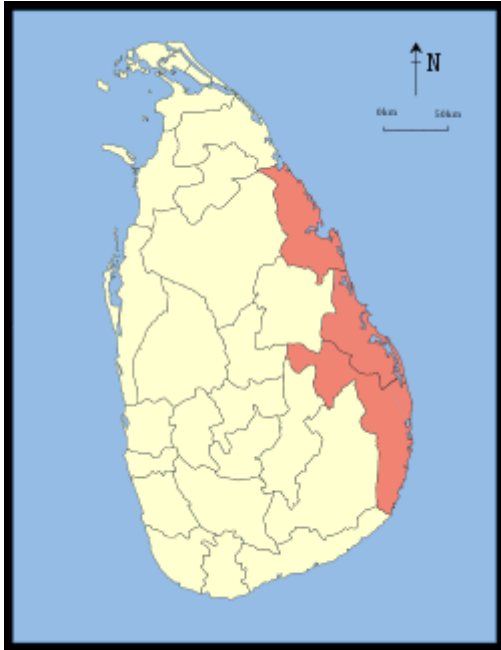
⁷ Ceylon was the name of Sri Lanka before 1972.

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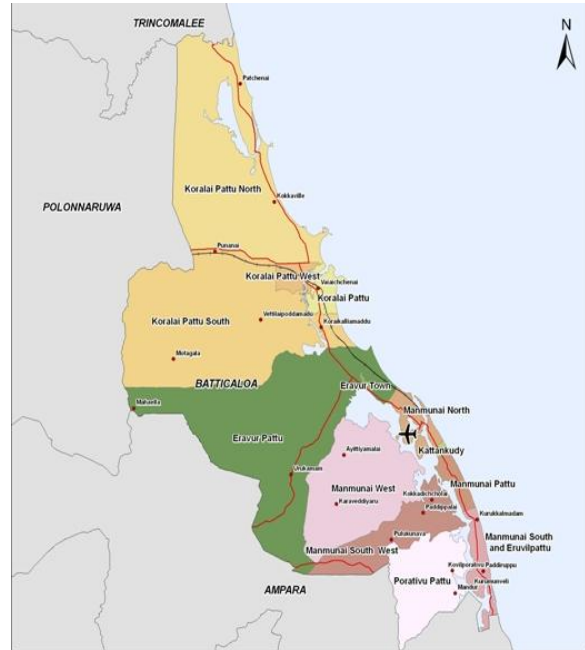
as “downwards” people, especially by the people in the North. McGilvray writes that he wishes to give his theory on how the society on the east coast grew out of immigration from different places. His proposition is that the Mukkuwas, who are a maritime caste from the matrilineal Malabar Coast of Kerala, became politically and economically dominant in the Batticaloa region in the thirteenth century. After the Arabs arrived with the European contact in the sixteenth century, they together moulded an atypical society that is distinctly different from the Northern Tamils. (McGilvray 2008:57)

These parts of the Batticaloan history are contributing factors to what has formed and are forming its particular society, which differs from the rest of the country’s Tamil communities. It also explains partly why the Muslims and the Tamils in Batticaloa shares so much with respect to family structures and inheritance systems. As a result of the conflict, the relationship between Muslims and Tamils in the east has been severely constrained, and after 1990 their relationship has been further restricted as a consequence of the LTTE massacre of Muslims during prayer inside the mosque in Kattankudi, and similar incidents in Eravur. Both villages are located in Batticalao district, and they are parts of my research area.

Sketching the field



Map 2:
(Eastern province includes Ampara
Trincomalee district in the north,
Batticaloa district in the middle and
district in the south.
Map source Wikipedia.com)



Map 3:
(Batticaloa district. Source: dmc.gov.lk)

Batticaloa

All fieldwork was conducted in Batticaloa district on the North-East coast of Sri Lanka. Batticaloa district is inhabited by approximately 586 803 people. (District Planning Secretariat, Batticaloa 2008/2009) In the whole Eastern province there is about 1, 5 million people. The town of Batticaloa is localized by the Batticaloa lagoon and is surrounded by water. On the eastern side the Indian Ocean goes as far as one can see and on the western side one can look over the huge lagoon with mangrove trees hanging down by the waterside. In local tongue they separate the land of the sunrise and a land of the sunset, which are located on either side of the lagoon. The sun rises over the Indian Ocean and sets over the lagoon. Fieldwork was conducted primarily on the eastern side of the lagoon, but the western was also

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visited on a number of occasions on excursions of personal interest. The western side was part of the administrative centre of the LTTE during the conflict and had been an “Uncleared area” which means it were under the control of the LTTE and needed to be “cleared” by the military. Now you can travel across the lagoon and visit old temples, see new or older tanks or just look at the landscape with the huge paddy fields covering the majority of it. On the eastern side most people survived on fishing and many faced devastating consequences when the Tsunami washed over the land in December 2004. In Batticaloa district alone, 2840 people died from the mass of water which flooded inland filling the lagoon. A further 61,912 people were injured, and 17,405 houses were damaged (Maunaguru & Emmanuel 2010.)

The town and its surrounding areas are inhabited primarily by Tamil and Muslim communities. In this area you find people of mostly Hindu, Catholicism and Islam faiths, although some Buddhist shrines have been erected especially in the vicinity of the police posts. The area is Tamil speaking, along with the northern part of the country. By and large, the eastern province is now known for its multicultural composition, but in the areas where I have lived this is not completely true because, as previously highlighted, the people in Batticaloa district mainly belong to the Tamil or Muslim population. In Sri Lanka, Batticaloa is a district on the periphery from the power centre of Colombo, which is the capital of Sri Lanka. It's location and religious traditions have meant that it has become known as the “backwaters “of the country.

Livelihoods in Batticaloa

Many of the coastal villages around Batticaloa are dependent on fishing. Fishing is very seasonal, and generates income according to the seasons. During high season it is possible to earn enough to sustain the family, but during low season this is very difficult. Agricultural work is also vital to the livelihoods as large swathes of land are covered by paddy fields. The lack of other realistic job opportunities has forced people to find other ways of making a living and consequently work migration has made up a large proportion of this “new” way of earning money. The economy of eastern coastal region of Sri Lanka is based primarily upon irrigated rice cultivation, although some communities are also significantly reliant on coastal and lagoon fishing, plantation crops (coconut, cashew nut), handloom textile production, and mercantile trade. (McGilvray 1989:193) People have faced numerous obstacles and difficulties around these activities because of many restrictions. Furthermore, many people

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have also lost land, and been resettled in new villages. Today people are trying to regain their land and livelihoods and a vehicle for this is to try and find migratory work. For women in Sri Lanka it has not been unusual to work outside the home, so women's migration is not unexpected in this regard. (Gamburd 2008:6) The reason for the majority of international migrants in Sri Lanka being women has much to do with the country's unrestricted female migration. Compared to other South Asian countries which do not allow women to migrate for work such as "...the governments of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh formally prohibited the recruitments of housemaids, due to religious values of the Koran and reports of many malpractices" (Eelens cited in Kageyama 2008:98) For uneducated women there are few possibilities to find work at home, but some are able to find employment and after the Tsunami some families were able to obtain assistance financing their own small business. Because of my cooperation with the women's organization Suriya, I have gained an insight into what kind of work or "livelihood activities" (Ellis 2003)⁸ these women do. For example, women work at the market selling vegetables, make mats, and sell eggs, cashew nuts or other types of handlooms.

A general migration pattern for Tamils and Muslims on the east coast has been observed and discussed by Øivind Fuglerud. He has witnessed a crucial difference in the migration trend. Muslims have a larger tendency to stay in Sri Lanka, even when Tamils are leaving. The discussion concerns different practices and spaces within the society, and Fuglerud shows how Muslims enclave themselves, stick together and expand their landholdings in the east. As a respond to the war, Tamils fled the country and the east coast, while most Muslims stayed put or even moved into the bigger Muslim villages in the area. (Fuglerud 2004:45) In temporary work migration, such different patterns were not visible to me. However, the income earned while abroad is a way to be able to invest in more land in Sri Lanka.

⁸ Ellis(2003) defines livelihood as consisting of three elements: outcome, assets and activities. This is more specified in the introduction.

The Eastern province: History of a conflict area

Witness

In the compound the bodies were scattered

On the veranda they laid in heaps

Inside they lay where they had fallen

I stood on a floor of blood

The bodies had not quite gone out

Light from their flash made a last dusk in the room

Death was busy, and I was in its presence

Why was I chosen Who am I to be alive

Later they came back and burned the bodies

Afterwards ash swirled up on the wind, and away

Still, I see the arms fallen open as though to give

I see the arms reaching as though to embrace

(Poem by Marilyn Krysl (1993))

In Batticaloa there were several conflicts running concurrently. The Eastern province has experienced Sri Lanka at its worst. “The eastern province has been at the hearth of post-independence conflict (...) Lying at the intersection of competing Tamil and Sinhala nationalism, the east has seen some of the worst of Sri Lanka’s inter-ethnic violence and remains at risk for more” (ICG 2008) In 1991 a massacre took place in Kookadicholai and 67 civilians were killed. The poem above is about that massacre, written by Krysl in 1993. At the time the fieldwork for this study was conducted - between January 2010 and July 2010 - the East was in the process of being rebuilt, roads were being repaired and widened, and a reduction in the number of police roadblocks was imminent. As soon as the war was officially over the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) opened their first office in Batticaloa town. It became possible to talk to them one year after the SLBFE office had been established in the area and they also told me about their plan to expand their space in that same ground. This was clearly one of the developments that were considered important by the

Sketching the field

government as the war was over. According to the annual statistics presented by the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign employment in 2009, 3388 housemaids from Batticaloa district departed to the Middle East. (SLBFE 2009)

Before the conflict people of the Eastern region had lived peacefully side-by-side and intermarriage between Singhalese and Tamil people was a common occurrence. In Panama, south of Batticaloa, Nur Yalman has documented intermarriage traditions and what he calls a “bicultural society”. (Yalman 1967:310) Today they share religious cults such as the worshipping of Pattini (Singhalese) / Amman (Tamil) / or the Mother goddess (English). The walk to Kataragama’s temple is yet another example of shared traditions between the people, although it has led to conflict as well. The Pilgrimage towards the temple is tradition for Singhalese, Tamil and Muslim people. (Tambiah 1986:59) They also have many things in common regarding social structure. After independence however clashes between them diminished their previous peaceful coexistence. For example the Gal Oya project became a threat towards their previous friendship. The Gal Oya was an irrigation, flood control and electricity generation schemes conducted by the government. It was the first post-independence development project and led to resettlements of Singhalese people on Tamil land. This was deemed to be unfair by the Tamils in the area because the new landholders were mostly Singhalese people. The irrigation schemes started in the 1949. (Tambiah 1986:100, 1996: 83) In the whole Eastern province the allocation of the three biggest ethnic groups is today about one third each. “For the Tamil-speaking communities who formed the majority of the population in the East, these government-sponsored projects were, in turn, viewed as state-driven colonization projects which favoured the Sinhalese from outside the Province, and dramatically impacted on the demographics of the region. Since independence, the Sinhala population in the East has risen sharply from 20.5 % in 1963 to 24.8% in 1981.” (Fonseka and Raheem 2010:26) In a conflict that accelerated because of spread rumours of social discrimination because of ethnicity the conflict created a very tangible divide between the communities. The incident in 1956 that started on the 11th of June in Amparai and that went on for four days had devastating consequences for people in the Gal Oya valley. Between 20 and 200 people were killed, depending on which side that did the counting. (Tambiah 1996: 85-94)

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The conflict disturbed and destroyed many livelihoods. “The heavy security apparatus creates other problems for Tamils. Restriction on fishing – particularly in and around Trincomalee harbor – hit Tamil fishing communities hard. Similar, more ad hoc, restrictions on cattle herding, firewood collecting and other traditional livelihoods are imposed in the name of security.” (ICG 2008:13) They lost assets and possible activities that are needed to sustain a decent standard of living. Partly because of the restrictions on their normal livelihoods, many women were forced to travel abroad for work. This had become an increasingly easy option as approaches were made to their doorsteps with suggestions, promises and offerings of assistance for migratory work. Not only did restrictions transform livelihoods, but also resettling and forced migration. “Modern nationalist violence results in forced migration of individuals, families and whole communities sometimes due to generalized fears and at other times due to destruction of livelihoods, identities and life worlds” (Rajasingam-Senanayake 2006: 176)

The border areas between LTTE and the Sri Lankan government territories have faced greater difficulties from the war because of their locality. Batticaloa is one typical border area. Here, not only did the LTTE fight against the government forces, factions fought between themselves, between outsiders, and when the LTTE attacked the Muslims in the area suspicion and tension rose between Tamils and Muslims. Much of this took place in Batticaloa and on numerous occasions this was enacted in the form of violence. The Sri Lankan conflict has had many facets which are not discussed as much as the conflict being an “ethnic war”. Ethnicity, though, has become an important part of it and the conflict has thus polarized the Sri Lankan society through it. In 1990 several bloody massacres took place in mosques in Kattankudi and Eravur, when 200 Muslims were killed by the LTTE. (ICG 2008:7) This year was explained to me as the most crucial year of the hostilities between Tamils and Muslims in Batticaloa district. The civilians were so very often the unwitting victims of the civil war. In Batticaloa there have been many reports of massacres and disappearances.

On 22 February 2002 there was a ceasefire agreement signed between the government and the LTTE, but “the east remained tense throughout the process, with the LTTE killing many dissenting Tamils, forcibly recruiting children and continuing their harassment of Muslims.” (ICG 2008) However, in 2006 the country was again in full-scale war, but it was not until

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January 2008 that the CFA was abolished by the Sri Lankan government. During the CFA the borders that had previously been closed between LTTE and governmental territories were reopened so movement became easier, not only for civilians. In March 2004 the eastern flank of the LTTE, with “Colonel Karuna” at its head, split from the Northern LTTE and formed the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) political party. From then on Karuna led guerrilla warfare with the northern Tigers. Eventually this also led to the breakdown of the LTTE in the east in July 2007 with Karuna offering help to the governmental forces. (ICG 2008:8) After 2006 the war raged again which resulted in further difficulties for the civilian population and in 2008 ICG writes that: “In the last year almost 200,000 people were displaced” (ICG 2008: i.)

The conflict has inevitably led to many changes in the very fabric Sri Lankan society. One of the effects which have been brought upon the country argued by Rajasingam-Senanayake (2006) is migration, forced or not. The migration has in turn led to many changes for example gender roles, and patterns of migration. I believe that the conflict has had an effect on the development of the migration, but I have not gained the impression that this could be the only valuable context for it. I also have the intention to explore the contemporary situation, without saying that history is invaluable, I believe actually that it is the opposite. History is very important when trying to understand communities.

In the next chapter I will take a look at the national and international migration system. I will analyse the system as if it were constructed of different levels. At the top tier are the international system, and the relation between Sri Lankan and receiving countries. At the lower level lie the middle men which are the agencies and the agents who work there. The lowest level is visible in the rural villages. Here works the local middle men, the agents of the agents. These agents are the ones who communicates with the women, and the ones who opens up the possibilities of migration to the women of the area.

Chapter three

Chapter three: THE MIGRATION PROCESS

The aim of this chapter is to explain the process for work migration. I wish to take a look at the institutionalized recruitment process and the local realities that unfold themselves outside the constitutionalized rules.

Sri Lanka has an organized system to handle international work migration. The system will be described in this chapter. The questions posed here will examine how the national economic system impinges on the local economic system that is not only governed by economic interests but also involves a great many moral rationalities and paradoxes.

Many of the women that I met have expressed their need to migrate. This need is a result of poverty, as money is needed to cover food and other living expenses and pay for dowry which will establish marriage and social relations. The system of migration in Sri Lanka is constructed such that female migration is, on a practical level a relatively easy option, it is however important to bear in mind that practicalities differs greatly from emotional.

Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE)

SLBFE is the main actor in Sri Lanka's system of international work migration. It was established in 1985 under the Act.20. Until 2007 SLBFE was under the Ministry of Labor when it was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion & Welfare (MFEPW) which at that time was newly created. "The bureau receives its power, duties and obligations from the Act of Foreign employment. (...) Its mandate encompasses promotion and protection of migrants by setting standards and approving or rejecting the contracts provided by foreign employers to Sri Lankan migrants, licensing recruiting agents, and operating programs to protect Sri Lankan migrants and their families." (www.slbfe.lk, 09.09.10)

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Labour migration from Sri Lanka began in the 1970s and the post 1977 governments have encouraged both men and women to seek jobs abroad since work migration is a major source of foreign exchange and an effective tool for reducing unemployment. (TISL 2009:7) In 2007 private remittances to Sri Lanka was USD 2.5 billion, which only include money transferred through the banking system and not money brought in by person. (National policy 2009:43) That makes foreign employment industry the highest net earner of foreign exchange to the country. (SLBFE 2009, annual statistics)

The economic benefits for the government are without doubt the reason to why they continue to promote and support foreign employment. This point is also made by Gamburd (1995). However, because of many registered incidents where housemaids have suffered physically and socially the government has taken some official measures to improve working conditions for migrant workers and their families in Sri Lanka. In recent years the government has worked together with the international labour organization (ILO)⁹, the UN¹⁰ and other national organizations to set standards which can help those who migrate. By working together with international institutions the state acknowledges that there are issues that need to be addressed with regards to the working conditions of its people. In this way the national system for work migration works with an official awareness of morality.

Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment is: “the umbrella organization responsible for the overall management, operations and regulating of the foreign employment business in Sri Lanka.” The Bureau is also responsible for negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with labor receiving countries and to registers migrants. They made the registration of migrant workers mandatory in 1995. (www.slbfe.lk) In short this means that they set regulations for agencies in Sri Lanka, for the employer and the employee. Every agency and employee has to register at the SLBFE to have a legal business or a legal migration. The government does not have the tools to control the work of subagents, even though they are considered illegal, as they don't have the requisite license.

⁹ Sri Lanka has not ratified the ILO conventions on migration but submits reports to the ILO in respect to the obligations deriving directly from its acceptance of the ILO Constitution (GOSL, 2008) and works within the framework of the resolution on a Fair Deal for Migrant Workers adopted by the ILO conference in 2004 and the non-binding 2006 Multilateral Framework on Labor Migration. In 2006, the state adopted the ILO-initiated National Policy for Decent Work. (TISL 2009:8)

¹⁰ Sri Lanka ratified the Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and their Families in 1996. (TISL 2009:8)

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According to the foreign employment Act no. 21 of 1985, article 15 is about the objectives of the bureau.

15. The objectives of the Bureau shall be:

- (a) to promote and develop employment opportunities outside Sri Lanka, for Sri Lankans;
- (b) to assist and support foreign employment agencies in their growth and development;
- (c) to undertake measures to develop overseas markets for skills available in Sri Lanka;
- (d) to assist licences in the negotiation of terms and conditions of employment with agencies abroad;
- (e) to regulate the business of foreign employment agencies and recruit Sri Lankans for employment outside Sri Lanka;
- (f) to issue licences to foreign employment agencies for conducting the business of recruitment for employment outside Sri Lanka and to determine the terms and conditions of such licences;
- (g) to set standards for and to negotiate contracts of employment;
- (h) to enter into agreements with relevant foreign authorities, employers and employment agencies in order to formalize recruitment agreements;
- (i) to formulate and implement a model contract of employment which ensures fair wages and standards of employment;
- (j) to examine the authenticity of documentation issued to Sri Lankan recruits going abroad for employment;
- (k) to undertake research and studies into employment opportunities outside Sri Lanka, for Sri Lankans;

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(l) to establish and maintain an Information Data Bank to monitor the flow of Sri Lankans for employment outside Sri Lanka and their return after such employment;

(m) to undertake the welfare and protection of Sri Lankans employed outside Sri Lanka;

(n) to establish a Workers' Welfare Fund ;

(o) to undertake in collaboration with licensees, the training and orientation of Sri Lankan recruits going abroad for employment;

(p) to provide assistance to Sri Lankan recruits going abroad for employment;

(q) to receive donations and contributions from Sri Lankans employed outside Sri Lanka and use such donations and contributions for the rehabilitation, guidance and counseling of, and the provision of information and assistance to, the families of such Sri Lankans;

(r) to undertake investments on behalf of Sri Lankan employed outside Sri Lanka;

(s) to undertake programmes for the rehabilitation of Sri Lankans who return to Sri Lanka after employment outside Sri Lanka.

(Source: lawnet.lk)

At this point I wish to explain how the legal process of recruitment in theory should be practiced. The recruitment process run by the SLBFE is shown by its different stages in table 1.

Table 1: Recruitment process

1. Family or company abroad reports vacancies →	2. Agency abroad receives vacancies →
3. Agency in Sri Lanka receives vacancies →	4. Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment →
5. Agency in Sri Lanka receives approval of vacancy →	6. Employees can apply →
7. Employee goes through medical check, training etc. →	8. Signed contract approved by SLBFE →
9. Employee can migrate	

When an agency has achieved the requirements that the Bureau set it can obtain the license. Every vacancy that the agencies receives from an agency or private company abroad has to be verified and approved by the Bureau before the vacancy can be advertised. Depending on the nature of work on offer people can apply for the jobs advertised. The agency should then help

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the applicant through the preparations and also conduct interviews if that is necessary. For housemaids there are no interviews. When this phase is complete, the contract should be signed and once again approved by the Bureau. If the contract is approved the worker will be registered and can migrate. The women who migrate as housemaids for the first time have to go through a two weeks compulsory training program that should prepare them for work in a Middle Eastern home. They should also have an air ticket, insurance, and a medical check-up. To help the women with these preparations there are legal agencies across the country. But even though the Bureau has closed down illegal agencies it is up to the worker to find out the status of that agency before they contact them. They can migrate without the agent but then the work visa has to be sent from the employer abroad. I have only encountered a few women who migrated in this way, so I will not elaborate further on that particular process in this thesis.

The SLBFE also have officers at the airport whose duties are to check the stamp in the passport on leaving the country, and to provide help when returning, as well as offer a variety of other services. They have a transit house which offer food and accommodation and function as a place to “prepare yourself” for the journey.

As alluded to above the employment of women as housemaids in the Middle East is a major source of foreign exchange for Sri Lanka. The Eastern province is one of the major beneficiaries of such flows and many villages in this area are dependent on remittances from women working in the Middle East. (Thangarajah 2003:145) The women whom I am focusing upon in this thesis have exclusively migrated to work as housemaids, so the process for these women is the main focus. The ways in which people obtain jobs in the Middle East differs between men and women, and between educated and uneducated people. This thesis is about women without higher education who all migrated as housemaids, but I will make some comparisons along the way.

SLBFE – promotion and training center

“The state recognizes that the ultimate protection to all migrant workers is the possession of skills.” (State policy 2008:10)

There are 22 training centres around the country, 6 regional offices and a head office in Colombo. (SLBFE 2010) The office worker that I met was the general assistant in the training

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and recruitment office in Batticaloa. Although I was able to discuss most of the activities with the general assistant at that office, he would not permit me to record the conversation, although extensive notes were taken for the duration of the interview. This office opened in June 2009, directly after the war had been declared over. The centre is only for women and conducts training for housemaids and they also do promotion in the villages in the area. Every training batch has 20 – 25 women and lasts for 15 days. The training days starts at 7.30 am and continues until 4.30 pm. They will have two tea breaks and one lunch break during the day. The training for general housekeeping is the same for everyone, irrespective of the trainee's work situation they will have abroad. It doesn't separate between countries, but only gives training for 'The Middle East'. In addition to training in laundry, cooking, care giving, gardening, table setting, and an introduction in Arabic, they also instructed on how they should behave when arriving at the airport in Colombo. When a women comes to the office for registration she they should have a photocopy of her passport, and a form has to be completed with name, age, husband, and children. The form also contains a, so called, general knowledge test - which consist of five pictures standing parallel to five words and these should be fitted together - her picture on a A4 paper with the name of the respective agency and that agency's license number should also be included. The information stated on these forms should correspond to the requirements that have to be fulfilled by the woman and the agency. The officers can easily check the agency (the agency on the paper must be registered at the SLBFE), but it is not possible to validate the rest of the information. He says that if a woman who comes here cannot read, the agent could help her in advance and tell her what to write where. *"We have to trust them"*, he tells me. *"The woman should be at least 18 years old, and her children shouldn't be less than three years old, but here we have to rely on the information they write in the form"*. This 'trusting' attitude has potential pitfalls however. The most vital is that the requirements might not be reached or followed adequately which are ultimately in the best interest of the woman and her family, so the potential for difficulties further down the line will be greater. I did meet women who had migrated when they were as young as 16 years old, and women who had migrated with children as young as a year old. I have also met women who had received help changing the name and age written in the passport. This is possible because the SLBFE does not have the capacity (nor the inclination) to validate the information they receive from the women and because of the existence of illegal agents. This office covers a population of 3 lax, i.e. 300,000 persons. The officer himself thinks that the migration from this area, and especially among the Muslim population

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(all though he sees a rise in the migration among the Tamil women as well), is higher than other areas. Since they opened this office one year ago they have trained almost 500 women, but since the office does not make any distinction between Tamil and Muslim women, he does not know how many there has been of each. The officer claims that there are more women applying for the training than they can handle and he explains that they wish to expand as soon as possible. These 500 persons include only women who have not migrated as housemaids before, since the training is not mandatory for other than first time workers. He claims that more and more women have migrated since the end of the war, and argues that this is so because now people want to make money. This claim is different from others that I have identified in this thesis. One of the agents told me that migration has decreased since after the Tsunami and one son of a housemaid said that he could see that the migration had become less. A village facilitator also told me that migration had decreased in her village. According to the national statistics from SLBFE the female migration has increased in numbers, but decreased in percent. At the time of my fieldwork a long line of women outside the SLBFE office caught my attention when passing by. The women were supposed to fill in a simple form with personal information, previous travels and future plans. The women had come from quite far away places, and when talking to them they expressed a belief that this registration would give them something in return, a compensation for filling the form. However, when inquiring about this to the general assistant officer he said that they would not receive anything for completing the form. The form, he explained, was part of a re-integration program run by the government, and the intention was to register the amount of migrating women. He told me how many forms they had received comparing to the nearest offices in Kalmunai and Trincomalee; covering 900,000 people Kalmunai had received 11,000 forms, covering 250,000 people Trincomalee had received 7,000 forms and Batticaloa covering 300,000 people had received 23,000 forms. This was all during a one month period of time. When I asked him about why so many people had registered in Batticaloa he said that they had done a good job informing people to come (although this begs the question as to why they thought they would receive payment?), and also that there was more migration in this area than the other two.

The training office also did some awareness programs and recruiting work by visiting the more remote areas. When I confronted him with information that I had read in the state policy for foreign employment; “Since 2007, the Sri Lankan Government has placed particular emphasis on increasing the migration of skilled workers and reducing the outflow of low

skilled workers (including women workers who are employed as housemaids).” (National Policy 2008: 1) (This sentence rhymes badly with a “promotion office” that only works with housemaids. The training is of course a good thing which might make the work easier, but why should they promote more?) He said that this might be so, but that it was only a policy. The answer is maybe obvious since the state receives so much money from the remittances sent and brought into the country by the housemaids in the Middle East to Sri Lanka. The fact that they conduct training concurrently might be a way of legitimizing them sending more housemaids as trained workers.

Agents and Agencies

In this text I distinguish between *legitimate agencies*, *sub-agencies* and *local subagents*. Agents can be seen as middlemen between a complicated bureaucratic system of the state and the village people. Their work is possible because of the distance between these two and because they are important tools for making money. They are aware that their roles might be considered immoral by the community, but they still keep doing their work because of economic benefits. I had huge difficulties making contact with agents and one explanation for this might be that they feel uncomfortable talking about their methods of income. On two occasions I was able to talk to agents who did not send women (because that kind of work gives a bad reputation). On only one occasion was I able to talk to an agent who sent women. She had a relatively good reputation because she treated the housemaids better than other agents. I was rejected by so many more than I was able to talk to. This does however lend itself to further analysis and exploration as to the interrelation between morality and economy.

Legitimate agencies

The *legitimate agency* is defined as such by having a recruitment license approved by the government. Their operations are controlled and surveyed by the government. These agencies are the official channel for people who want to work abroad. They are the actors described under the recruitment process of SLBFE. The agencies sometimes obtain help recruiting people for work. This help is provided by subagents who receive commission for each and every worker supplied. Subagents and the local subagents are here defined as an agent without a legal operation for working within the migration system. The license is given on certain conditions that are set to assure migrants of a safe and secure work abroad. To obtain a

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license as an approved agent is difficult and the requirements are high for smaller agencies. I was told by an agent, who owned an “air ticket office” in Batticaloa district that he could not achieve the requirements because they were too high for him. He told me that you had to have at least 7, 5 lakh in the bank, a certain amount of office space and so on. *“That’s why they all function as subagents”*, he said.

Subagents

In the official national policy subagents are defined as local agents of recruiting agencies. (National policy 2008:10) As aforementioned subagents can also have their own local subagents, so in this way there are three actors and not two, not excluding that there can also be only two lines of recruitment “There are over 580 registered agencies in Sri Lanka, and informed observers estimate that there are 10,000 – 20,000 subagents operating throughout the island to link migrant workers with these agencies. One licensed labour agent estimated that “75 to 80 percent of maids are channelling through subagents” (HRW 2007:25)

The existence of subagents seems to be extensive and a recurring pattern in the Sri Lankan system of work migration. So the question of why it is so should be a part of the discussion in this chapter. Ruth Gamburd writes in her book that: “The subagents position in a village society has grown out of older patterns of behaviour in which high-status people and respectable women interact with the outside world through male intermediaries.” (Gamburd 2000:60) In this respect you could say that the extensive use of subagents in the villages can be explained by looking on older cultural pattern that exists in this particular society.

Although this argument suggests that the subagents are only male, the local subagents might as well be a woman. Another reason for the extensive existence of subagents might be that there is a gap, both in form of space and knowledge, between legitimate agencies and the local villagers.

At the time of my fieldwork there were only five registered agencies in Batticaloa district, but the women that I spoke with had received assistance from both subagents and local subagents who helped them with practical arrangements and mentioned by name agencies not listed on the SLBFE website where one should find licensed agencies. These agents would co-operate with a legitimate agency, often based in the capital Colombo. The women have to know this, since at one point or another they have to have contact with the legitimate agency. Although

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training would be mostly done close by Batticaloa, the rest of the arrangements would have to be performed in Colombo.

The subagents usually have an office in the slightly larger towns in the areas and might work with local subagents by splitting the 10,000 rupees paid as commission by the legitimate agency which is more often than not based in Colombo. The local subagents are based in rural villages and are people known by the residents of that village. They might co-operate with the subagent or work directly with the legitimate agency in Colombo and thus receive the whole amount of 10,000 rupees. My assumption is that local subagent might have difficulties contacting legitimate agencies, and the easier way would be to work with a subagent who already has established contacts and who have an office close by. For the subagent it might also be more difficult to recruit people to migrate, then if you could go to the door and collect passport as local subagents might do. I have come across each of these arrangements in Batticaloa district.

One of the agents I met was running an air ticket office as he called it. He also had copy machines, computers and other technical tools that he let people use for payments. He had an office space and a name of his business. He told me that he co-operated with *local subagents* who worked with him. At this point the man who owned this air ticket office did not help women because he did not want to have a bad reputation which he claimed that he would get if he did. He worked in one of the bigger Muslim villages in the area, and could tell me a lot about the procedures around work migration concerning both men and women. The basics of migrating for work seem to be a bit similar for men and women with respect to the work of recruitment agencies, subagents and local subagents. The persons are found in the more rural villages and needs help from an agent to do all the preparations that are necessary to migrate. Many things differ between types of work and gender of the worker, things like training and personal costs. Men who works as carpenters, plumbers, drivers etc. have to pay a fee of approximately 100,000 rupees to the agent, as mentioned before women who migrates as housemaids now gets paid to leave.

This subagent has contacts in different legitimate agencies in Colombo, he says they might call him and ask if he knows about anyone who is in search of work, or he will call them to ask if they have some vacancies. He also informed me that every village has a subagent (which I here would call a local subagent). It is quite interesting that he also told me that the numbers of female migrants has fallen, although from the SLBFE I was told that more and

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more women are migrating in the wake of the conflict in 2009. He suggests that this is because of the education, which now is freely available and that most mothers prefer for their children to educate themselves. However, then he also said that in remote areas the tendencies are the same. How to define clearly what a 'remote area' is exactly in this context is difficult, but it can be presumed that this mostly has something to do with class. Poverty is of course the most important reason for people to migrate, especially in the cases where women go since the family now doesn't have to borrow money to send a woman, in contrast of sending a man.

In case of the procedures for the women, an agency or a private family in the receiving county will ask a local agency here in Sri Lanka to find a suitable woman for their house. The agency or the family will pay an amount of money to the local agency here, the subagent thinks this is about 100,000 rupees, and then they will also pay for expenses like ticket, visa and so on. This money will be looked upon as commission by the agent in Sri Lanka.

After a while the agent in question defined himself a 'facilitator for subagents' and told me that for two years, when he became the owner of the 'air ticket office', he has helped 50 people to migrate. He claims that his work in this only consist of contacting the agencies in Colombo. In his area he has about 10 people who he calls 'subagents' and that they will give him passports and papers for the person who likes to migrate. After that he says that he won't do anything more.

Another man that I met had previously worked in a *legitimate agency* in Colombo. He could tell me more about the procedures of these agents. He tells me that his responsibilities in that office were to bring the worker to buy a plane ticket, to get a visa and to do the medical check-up. He also said that his boss in that agency was a very religious man and that he did not send women unless he knew the family to where they would send her. He doesn't think it is good or should be promoted for, that's why he wouldn't send women. He explained to me that the agency will only receive separate commission if he sends a woman but not when sending men. *"For women they get ticket payment, medical payment, bureau and also the commission. For women it's much more commission. For men they only get some commission. The agency will receive, I think, about 50,000 for women and that includes all the costs in Sri Lanka. The subagents working here (in Kattankudi) are illegal, only two are legal. The others work without a proper system; they will find people by knocking on doors*

and telling people that they have work. After that they will search for vacancies and fax the papers to agencies in Colombo” (former agent worker)

Local subagents

The local subagents work in the smaller and often very rural villages. They don't have an office but only assist people in the villages with the arrangements surrounding the work migration. My conclusions for how they work are based on different women's stories, and also on an interview with one of these local subagents, who actually worked as a *subagent*, because she had direct contact with a legal agency, but lived in a remote village in the east and who owned an apartment in the capital. Every village has at least one local subagent. That person would live and work in a private house, and be known by everyone who resides there. The person I met was a woman and she was quite liked by the village residents. She was liked because: *“She helps with the arrangements and she has her own apartment in Colombo, where the women can stay when they go to take the training and get the visa, the medical examination, and visit the SLBFE head office. She doesn't put the women in hostels like everyone else.”* (Village facilitator, YMCA) The hostels can be quite horrible and food can be really bad, and in this way she had achieved a good reputation among the women in the village.

The woman explains to me how she works. For every woman that she provides to a legitimate agent she gets 10,000 rupees as commission from that agent. She does not knock on doors like some other subagents would do, she says that the women in the village know about her and when they want to travel abroad they can come to her. In the same village there are two more women who work as subagents, so she has some competition but she doesn't seem bothered by this and her argument is that she treats the women better than the other two agents who operate in the same village. She has herself worked as a housemaid for eight years, first in Saudi-Arabia and then in Lebanon. In short she explains that she had a good job with a good salary, so she had a good experience abroad. Because of an illness she had to go back to Sri Lanka and since then she has helped women to migrate as housemaids. In 2004 she sent her first woman, and altogether she says that she has helped about 20 women. The reason she states for working as an agent is that she had a good experience and was able to have her daughter married because of her own migration and now she wishes to help the other women in the village to succeed with the same thing.

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She tells me that since six months they had started to pay the women 30,000 rupees to migrate. They only have to pay the bus tickets to Colombo with that money, the other costs are taken care of by the agency in Colombo to which she sends the women. Since 2004 none of the women has paid for the migration costs, but it was only six months ago that they have started paying the women for it. The subagent claimed that she was unaware of why they had started to pay these 30,000 rupees. In one remote village where I was talking to a group of women I put forward this pre-payment and asked about their thoughts on the subject. They said that they were afraid that this kind of money would give them a disadvantage when migrating, because they saw it as a kind of pre-payment of salary which gave them even lesser power towards their employer abroad, although this did not seem to be the general view. This was the only time I heard anything negative about the pre-payment, but since neither myself nor anyone else appears to know exactly why they have started to receive this amount of money or where it comes from it is difficult to offer a theory on that belief. How these payments are done and where they come from is difficult to know exactly because the women don't really know and the representative from the government that I met does not recognize this practice. When I was talking to him I asked about his opinion on this, since many of the women who had travelled recently informed me about this practice, but he seemed almost surprised as he said: *"Who told you that? Well, if they do it's a good thing."* After talking to a couple of subagents I have found out that it is the agencies who will pay to the women, which seems to be between 30 - 50.000 rupees depending on ethnicity and experience and of those they have to pay for some expenses in Sri Lanka. Still there would be some money left when these are paid for and one important aspect in this is that the highest costs, like flying ticket or education, is not included in this amount. However, the result from this is that the women will get paid money just to agree to migrate.

So what does she do more exactly for these women? When someone approaches her wishing to take employment as a housemaid in the Middle East she helps them to arrange passports, she goes with them to the training centre, and she takes them to Colombo to arrange visa, do a medical check and she also accompanies them to the airport. In Colombo she has contact with one agency, whose office is close to her apartment. She tells me that she has known that same agency since 1993 and believes that he does a good job and is reliable. Since SLBFE have opened the training centre in Batticaloa, she now takes the women there instead of a training centre in Colombo as she did before.

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When she has received the passport to the woman wishing to migrate, she gives that passport to the agency in Colombo. When the work visa has been arranged they will call in the women for a medical assessment. If no problems are found, they can proceed with the arrangements. When the women have completed their training, medical check-up, the visa and air ticket is arranged and the legitimate agency will bring the women to the SLBFE head office. There they receive a stamp in the passport which is pre-requisite for boarding the plane.

Not all the subagents or local subagents are as honest as the woman above seems to be. I also heard stories from women who had been told glorifying and exaggerated descriptions of the life and work that awaits them. This usually has to do with salary, quantity of housework, number of children and so on. One woman left with a belief that she would work until 6 pm. every day, but she faced a reality of a normal day with work from 4 am to 1.30 am. The two women whose story I will portray in chapter 4 said that they received less salary than stated on their contract. However, it seems difficult for them to do something about it; one of them could not do anything because her husband had taken all her papers away from her, but the other women hadn't tried to do anything about it. Once when talking to a group of women I asked them how they found the jobs in the Middle East, they explained to me that: *“There are some agencies in the village, they come to our houses and tell us about the work abroad. But they say lies like; it is very good houses, it is only 1 or 2 children in the family, the salary is good etc.”* For some of them these things were not true and some of them faced harder work than what was promised to them at the outset. After a discussion with some other women I wanted to speak to the facilitator of the organization from whom I had received help in that village, she had good insight because she was a local resident and worked with all these women. She also told me that the agents not always are honest: *“Some agents do some fraud passport work also. They have arranged so that all migration works well and they also give 30,000 per housemaid to go abroad. For an example; there is a lady who came for the discussion, who has some disease and a “wising” problem also. But the agent has hid that in the medical report and now the lady is almost ready to go abroad”* Several of the women that I have met expressed their antipathy for how the agents had described to them a very different scenario, something they learnt while abroad. Because the women gain the information from the local subagent, or subagent, their words are important. That they lie about these things to the women, or for the women as said above, can have devastating consequences. “When the state fails to regulate employment agencies’ and subagents’ recruitment practices, migrant workers are at greater risk of becoming trapped in exploitative and abusive work situations

that may rise to the level of trafficking in forced labor.” (HRW 2007:38) I have seen a national system which is regulated, but not successfully.

The system abroad

The situation that the women face when they arrive in the Middle East is very often difficult for them. Even though many people migrate to the same countries, information about the work abroad is hard to obtain at home. In this situation, the media, family members and friends are the main source of information on what to face when arriving in the foreign country. This chapter is valuable because it gives a context about what conditions they have to work in at the time of the migration.

The media is full of horrific stories about housemaids being abused in The Middle East. Last year there was especially one particular story that was covered extensively in the media, both in national and international news. A Sri Lankan housemaid who came from Saudi Arabia had 24 nails and metal particles hammered into her body by her employer. These kinds of stories are what make the news. The stories that women are told by the media creates an image of migration that affects their reasoning in a decision to migrate. For those who have never done migratory work, the media and the result that they see at other families who have migrated, creates an impression of what they will be confronted with while abroad.

Successful migration

Below I wish to give the reader an insight into some of the stories I have heard about the women’s experiences abroad. I will start with Fathima¹¹ and her family.

Fathima lives with her extended family on a large piece of land close to the sea. The family has put up fences around the premises and there are four houses close to each other. The area looks very proper and clean, and three of the houses are polished brick houses while the third one is still under construction. After the Tsunami some families received houses from UN

¹¹ I have designated all the women in this thesis by pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

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Habitat and other organizations that came to help people in the area. One of the houses standing on the land was given to them as a Tsunami-house. But they tell me that that house is not in use because it doesn't have electricity. Most of the members in this family works or have been working in The Middle East. The younger sister have worked in Dubai for five years, and married a man from Colombo that she met while abroad. They also have a daughter who at the time was with the husband in Dubai. She is only in Sri Lanka for a visit and is going back soon. The plan is to work for a while and then return back home with the husband and the child to finish the house and to live there.

Fathima who is 36 years old and Muslim told me that she has been working abroad for a total of almost fifteen years, in Dubai, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. She had returned only a week before I met her. Her husband has also worked abroad, in Qatar.

Last time I migrated I had a very good job. I only worked three hour per day cleaning their small house. It was only three rooms so I finished early every day. The family was nice and gave me a good salary, 19 500 rupees every month. I received that much because I have a lot of experience as a housemaid and I can speak Arabic. The agent also gave me 50 000 rupees before I migrated¹². I had to leave from there because my cholesterol is too high, they didn't want me to leave but I lied and told them someone in my family had died. They sent me home with a return ticket and a visa, but I will not go back. My husband wants me to stay in Sri Lanka. Both I and my sister have saved money from our migration and with some of this money I want to open a fish shop here in the village.

The second example that I wish to outline is Dhursha. She now works as a housemaid in Sri Lanka.

I had helped from an agent in the area. He sent me to Jordan with eight other housemaids from here. We migrated at the same time. When we arrived we stayed in a room. Then Madam and her husband came. It was like they were shopping for a housemaid, they came to look at us. The Madam told me; - You look good and you have very good teeth. She told me that when she saw me, I looked ok. After that we agreed with the agency and I went to their house. The first time she asked me; - How do you wash your hands? I showed her and I knew because before I helped in UNICEF in Sri Lanka and they taught us how to wash the hands. Now she was happy with me. I was only 22 years old then. The Madam was a retired teacher; the rest

¹² She says that Muslim women receive a bigger amount than Tamil women.

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of the family was all doctors. At cooking times I helped in the kitchen, cutting things. And I also cleaned the house, her room and the bathroom. After that I cleaned the windows. In the morning I opened the door to get fresh air inside the house. She really liked that, because she told me; - Now this is your house! I worked in that house for three years and then I came back to Sri Lanka. I brought some money home, before the roof of my house was coconut leaf. I built the house with bricks. No polish, because it is too expensive.

The third example is Arusha who also tells me that she feels happy with her migration, since her goals were accomplished.

First time I migrated to Saudi Arabia. The first two years I worked in Riyadh and the last three years I was sent to the house owner's brother in Jizan. They had five children whom I took care of, my job was also to clean and wash. My working hours were between 5 am – 12 pm and the first years which was in 1997 I earned 4500 rupees. The last year I earned 9000 rupees. In the beginning it was difficult because I couldn't speak Arabic but when I had learnt that there was not much problem. I could call my daughter and talk to her, so we always stayed in touch while I was gone. Before I left to Saudi my husband left me, and I took up a loan to be able to buy food. That loan had 10 percent interest and I had to pay it back. With the migration I expected to earn money for my children and to pay back the loan and I managed that, so I am happy. Second time in Jordan I worked at a Christian family. I cooked the food and took care of an elderly woman. Every day I worked between 6 am – 8pm. The money from this work I spent on my children's education and my daughter's dowry. I paid for her wedding and bought jewellery and household tools. In the beginning of the migration it was sad to leave my children, but when I started to receive my salary and could send money home they became very happy, and because of that it was ok for me too.

Domestic work and 'The Kafala system'

In the Middle Eastern countries of concern the housemaids work in the private market for employment and they are not included in the public sector. This can have devastating consequences for those who end up with problems or difficulties. Human right watch writes in their report "Exported and Exposed" that: "The labor laws of Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the UAE categorically exclude migrant domestic workers from protection." (HRW 2007:113) The women migrate through a sponsorship system called the *Kafala*. This typically means that the employer pays for visa and other expenses and that the worker's visa

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becomes attached to the sponsor, the *Kafeel*. The housemaid usually lives in the house where she works, which as an effect excludes her from the employment market and she becomes bound to the household rules set up by the family. The *Kafeel* becomes responsible to the authorities if the worker changes residency or employment. The characteristics and consequences of the sponsorship system have been described in many places in the literature of migrant workers in the Middle East. (Calandruccio (2005:278), Frantz (2008), HRW (2007)) The families often possess the passport of the worker to prevent the housemaid from escaping and they also have the power to send her back to her home country at any time. Since they pay quite a large amount of money to employ a housemaid this rarely happens unless sympathy is gained from the employer. When the employee is tied to the employer in such way their relationship becomes very unequal, and the employer has huge power over the housemaid and her situation. “Because migrant domestic workers’ visas are tied to a specific employer, if a domestic worker flees an abusive employer, she loses her legal immigration status and faces the risk of detention or deportation”. (HRW 2007:116)

Anh Nga Longva has studied the effects of the Kafala system and in the following section I will lean on those elements of her arguments which are relevant here. According to her research the definition of *Kafala* is: 1) to feed, to provide for; 2) to vouch for, be responsible for; and 3) to be legal guardian of (Wehr, Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic). She also explains that it has been suggested that this socio-cultural institution originated from the age-old Bedouin custom of granting strangers protection and temporary affiliation to the tribe for specific purposes (Beaugè 1986 cited by Longva). (Longva 1997:78)

In Kuwait the work migrants traveling as domestic servants travel under visa Nr. 20. This visa is under the Ministry of Interior who are responsible for internal security. This means that people traveling with this visa is not included in any work rights, but rather regulated by the law. Visa Nr. 20 concerns the domestic sector “which means domestic servants and like” and since the Ministry of Interior was responsible for the maintenance of internal security and law and order, and was unconcerned with labor matters, problems arising in connection with the work situation of holders of Visa No.20 were automatically classified and dealt with as “law and order problems” and not as “labor conflicts” (Ibid 1997:91)

This has the consequence that the worker does not have any working rights, but if they end up in trouble they simply have to plead to the employer. Given their legal constraints on their status, the workers classified in the category of “domestic servants and the like”, had indeed

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no other options than those outlined by the lawyer: ask for their embassies' assistance or to appeal to their employer's sympathy (Ibid 1997:93)

The system that operates in these countries has an outcome in which migrant domestic worker that faces difficulties are put in a challenging situation. If they escape from their employer the embassy will have to arrange an exit visa so they can travel back to Sri Lanka.¹³ HRW writes that in Lebanon migrant domestic workers can seek refuge in shelters run by the embassy or NGO: s but the places are limited and the possibility for movement is restricted because of the immigration law. (HRW "without protection" 2010:2) Human right watch also reports that the situation in the shelter is difficult for the women who have fled the employer. They write that Sri Lankan missions in the countries of employment typically receive several complaints each day and shelter more than one hundred women at any given time. (HRW "exported and exposed" 2007:101-102) In Saudi Arabia, the Indonesian, Sri Lankan and Philippine embassies handle thousands of complaints of unpaid wages, physical or sexual abuse, or poor working conditions each year. (HRW "slow reform" 2010:11) Elisabeth Frantz writes that in Jordan in 2008 as many as 100 housemaids run away each month. (Frantz 2008: 623)

The following is a short account of the Muslim woman Sithy's story. She had one terrible experience in Kuwait and her narrative shows how she solved the issue at that time.

I met Sithy in the two room house where she lives with her extended family. When I and my interpreter arrived at the house we were invited inside to sit where the fan could give some cooling relief from the hot weather. Sithy sat down on a chair opposite the interpreter and I. Her mother sat on the floor leaning her back against a steal closet. Now and then a curious face was visible in the doorway. At the time Sithy was only 29 years old but had already migrated on five different occasions. The first time was in 1994 when she was only 15 years old. At that time the family didn't have a house, or money to buy food and land. When we were talking about their story the mother starts to cry. Sithy had decided on her own that she would migrate to Dubai. The mother had told her not to go, as she had had some bad experiences of migratory work herself. But she finally agreed because of their situation. The father had left the family in 1982. He was a heavy drinker and had married another woman. The mother told us that he behaved badly. Sithy's older sister had migrated prior to this with her husband and left their child in the care of the mother. Now they are back in Sri Lanka and

¹³ This happened to "Eravur women" whos story appear on page 53.

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she has opened a small shop close to the house. Sithy herself is married and have two children that are four and one and a half years old.

The first time Sithy migrated to Dubai, where she worked in two houses and only got a few hours' sleep each night. She stayed there for two years and her salary went to food for the family at home. At the same time her sister was also working abroad and her salary paid for the house we were sat in. In 1997 she left for Kuwait, where she worked for only 8 months. *“The situation there was also very difficult. I didn't have a room and slept in the hallway. They would never let me rest and if I finished one type of work they would always come up with something more. I worked between 4 am – 2 am and I could never go out of the house. They would also verbally offend me. My sister gave money for a plane ticket to the agent in Kuwait. The family didn't want to send me home but I cried and told them that I would kill myself if I couldn't go home. Finally they took me to the agent who sent me home. They only paid me for two months work and told me I would get the rest when I had come back to Sri Lanka, but I never got the money.”*

Sithy's other experiences were not as bad as the first one, and in the future she have plans to migrate again. Her wish is to expand the house which is too small for the whole family.

Facing migration

Sri Lanka has a system that could function in a more efficient way, reducing the risk of abuse. At the same time it is the “in-house” work situation, in combination to the *Kafala* system that has created the most problems for the women who face difficulties while abroad.

The system seems to be in flux, both the regulated part and the unregulated part of it. Especially the pre-payment, which was not acknowledged by the one official SLBFE worker that I met, I believe can increase the migration of domestic workers to the Middle East as long as there is a demand for them. To gain an instant relief from poverty, I believe, can persuade, maybe even the most reluctant, women to migrate. It changes the conditions.

The fact that these women work in the homes, travel with visa that is policed by the law, and that the visa is attached to the employer through the *Kafala* sponsorship system puts them in a

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very vulnerable situation. If they escape from an abusive employer, they can be accused of breaking the law and be put in jail.

Eravur Woman

Portrayal of a Migration Experience: Eravur Woman

Ummu is a Muslim woman who lives with her family on the piece of land she bought for her daughter as dowry. Her story is an illustration of what a woman and her family have to take into consideration before the migration. The issues that this woman has dealt with will also be further discussed in the two coming chapters. Ummu decided together with her husband that she would migrate to the Middle East and work as a housemaid, the decision was based on family needs and priorities.

Ummu is 46 years old. She came back from her last work migration only three months before I met her in June 2010. She has worked abroad as a housemaid for a total of ten years divided over three different trips. She got married in 1982 and was married the first time she migrated in 1988. The first time she went abroad was to Kuwait. At that time she worked in the same family for five years with a short break after three when she went back to visit her family. After the first five years in Kuwait she stayed in Sri Lanka for eight years. Then she migrated again, this time to Saudi Arabia where she stayed for three years. In 2007 she migrated the last time, also to Saudi Arabia.

Ummu tells me about her experiences abroad, why she chose to migrate and explains the issues that have come up as a consequence of the migration. We sit on plastic chairs under a tree to get some shade and avoid the hot sun. The house next to us is her daughter's which was built out of money from her work abroad, from her husband salary and some contributions from her relatives. She herself lives in a small hut next to the polished brick house that is her daughters. We are not alone during the interview. She has a 24 years old daughter, one who is 19 years and one who is 13 years. Her oldest child is a 26 years old man. He is not there, but the rest of the family lives together on the small plot of land where we sit. The youngest children run around on the ground always keeping close to us. After a while her husband also joins in our conversation.

The first job she had in 1988 was with a family that lived in an apartment. Together with three other maids from Kandy, Sri Lanka, that also worked in the same building she had some help learning the work that was supposed to be done. *“They were experienced and were sharing*

with me how to work. They gave me the knowledge that I needed to do a good job. I managed with their help. In that family I worked between 5 am until midnight everyday". It was from that salary she bought the land that we sat on, and that she had given to her daughter. She earned 12,000 rupees a month in that family, which was a relatively good salary at the time. I have met women who earn little more than that in the recent years. When it was time to migrate to Kuwait the children and the husband stayed behind with her mother and husband. Their household consists of four generations (mother, mother's daughter (Ummu), mother's daughter's children, and mother's daughter's, daughter's children). Even if Ummu had some security for her children with her mother and the husband, she didn't see them for many years. She says that the money she earned she sent back home to her mother and husband who managed the day to day expenses at home and they also bought the land for that money. The husband has a job in Sri Lanka where he is selling fish at the local market. Early morning he goes to the coast and buys the fish which he then resells at the market. The income from this is not enough for the everyday expenses of the family, and her father is not alive so the household are struggling with the small and insecure income from the husband. Her husband also has some asthmatic problems which she states as one reason to why they struggle with poverty. *"I went abroad to be able to build a house, and to pay for the education for the children and to be able to buy them cloths."*

The second time she migrated as a housemaid, she went to Saudi Arabia. At that time she had a sister in law who was working in the country and she helped her to find the family where she worked for three years. *"It was a very good family"*. At that time her sister was going to marry and since her father is dead she says that she had a responsibility to help with the finance of the sister's wedding and dowry. The salary from that migration all went to her sister for whom her mother bought land and prepared the marriage.

The last time she migrated in 2008 was a terrible experience for her: *"I was thinking after I arrived back to Sri Lanka: I don't have enough money to the family but I will never go again. What can I do? There is no meaning at all, after facing all these problems I didn't even receive salary. I am willing to find a job here, but it is very difficult."* The family she worked at was not treating her well. She worked with them for one year and four months, but for eight months she didn't received any salary. *"They had my passport; they didn't give me any food or clothing so the money I did get I had to spend on these things. They did make proper food, but I could only eat if there was some food left. 'Mama' was ready to beat me anytime, if I*

had some headache or if I took a rest. She told me I was cheating them and hit like that. Four houses away from mine there was a Sri Lankan woman from Nuwara Eliya who worked as a housemaid. I went to that house, and she helped me to the Sri Lankan embassy. I stayed at the embassy for three months and after that they sent me back home here. The embassy made new paper document like passport for me and then I could go home. The time at the embassy was very difficult. After I came there I couldn't wash myself or my clothing for ten days." She explains that she stayed at the embassy together with 3 200 Sri Lankan women. Close by housemaids from other countries lived, together they were 7 000 women. According to her all the women ate and did other activities together.¹⁴

The last time she migrated, she went through a subagent in the village. They introduced her to a legal agent in Colombo. *"They also live in this village. They came to the door and they told me; If you want to go abroad, please come. Give me the passport. When I had given them my passport, they gave me 20 000 rupees. I received 10 000 after they had finished the visa and all the paperwork. On the way to the airport I received 10 000 more. They told me that if I had any problems they could help me, like that they said."*¹⁵

When I asked her if she feels that her family faced any special problems because of her migration she tells me: *"We don't have any problems because my mother....my son got into some trouble without me being responsible for him here. Because of my absence he was here and there, he didn't go to school regularly. But he finished A-level only after that he found a girl and he got married. Because of my absence he got married."*¹⁶

At this point her husband also joins the conversation. I had asked her to mention some positive things about migration and he said: *"They are only expecting salary, but that was also a problematic issue because she didn't receive salary."* And she filled in: *"Foreign life is like that, they don't care about us they only care of our work. They are always treating us like a worker. We are facing problems because we went there. If a young woman went abroad there will be other problem, not like no meal or so, but some kind of harassment. I experienced all bad things within a ten years period and even though, I don't have a proper shelter to live in."*

¹⁴ The system abroad is also talked about in chapter three.

¹⁵ The migrations system and its different actors are described in chapter three.

¹⁶ This is also discussed in chapter five.

Eravur Woman

The husband has a clear idea of what kind of reputation women who go to the Middle East will get when they come back to Sri Lanka. Still they took the decision of P: s migration together. *“If women face problem in one country, the next time they will go to another one, but there is no meaning. There are so many talking about these women, talking about malpractices from the women who go abroad, this is a village setting. If they don’t have any abroad experience, they are talking the other way around. They say this is not good women. But they are not telling it openly, they are talking behind closed doors.”*¹⁷

The plan for the future is unknown. Ummu doesn’t know what to do, but she knows that her youngest daughter won’t be migrating. She doesn’t want to send her abroad. Ummu’s story clearly illustrates the importance of her family when considering migration. Her responsibility and obligations towards the family (including children, mother and sister) directs her income towards their needs and as she takes care of those she also earns her epithet as “the good relative”. I think it is quite intriguing that Ummu ends our conversation with a quite negative conclusion. Despite her being able to help both her sister and daughter to establish marriages, and despite her being able to provide for the family whilst she was away, she was disappointed. Her personal goal was not achieved. The way I interpret Ummu’s narrative, she migrated not only with considerations for her family, but also for herself. My conclusion here, then, is that this woman didn’t only migrate because of the family’s welfare, but she also migrated for her own winning.

¹⁷ This citation also appears in chapter five.

Chapter four: ENCOMPASSING MIGRATION: KINSHIP AND DOWRY

The Family and the household

The theoretical framework that I have established for this thesis pay regards to the interrelation between social factors and migration. It is important to address how the family is constituted, structured and how the chores are divided in the household in this thesis. This chapter deliberates on the relationship between kinship, dowry and migration. Dowry took a huge part of the use of income from the migration. I will establish the connection between family, marriage and dowry and I argue that the women's migration is a means for reproducing family and its relations and that "[...] personal obligations do not provide a satisfactory understanding of the kinship-nexus" (Fuglerud 1999:142) This chapter, then, moves down from the national level and focus more on social structures within the community. Firstly, two households will be described, as an illustration of the issues to be explored later. A definition will follow. Secondly, matrilineal patterns, which are particular to the east coast of Sri Lanka and of great importance to the migration of the female population, which is the central theme of the thesis, will be addressed. Thirdly, I will discuss the meaning, function and importance of the dowry system.

The Household

Patuma is a Muslim woman who married in 1989. She has three children, two girls who are 14 and 8 years of age and one boy who is 20 years old. Her husband has a job delivering and selling diesel to fishermen at the coast. Today he can earn up to 15.000 rupees per month, which is relatively good. In 1998 he earned about 4.000 for the same thing and 1998 was the first time she migrated to Saudi Arabia, and immediately after she came back from that trip she went once more. Altogether she was away for four years. During the period she was away her sister cared for the children. When asked why her husband hadn't she replied: "*Yes, but he cannot cook, he cannot clean, do the laundry or take care of the children*" She smiles as she lines up all the things he can't do. "*He thought it was difficult when I wasn't here to take care of him. He always bought his lunch and ate out. The only household thing he did on his own*

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while I was gone was some of his own laundry.” When asked if it would be possible to meet him on his return from work she refused, explaining that he would not like her to be interviewed and therefore a meeting would not be possible. “*Anyway, she continued, he would have said that it was hard for him.*” Patuma brought about 50.000 rupees back home, for these she bought household articles such as a fan and they built a wall around the house. The house they now live in, was given to them as dowry, by Patuma’s mother when she married. The family also received a house in the wake of the Tsunami, which stands adjacent to the main house, but the roof leaks and there is no electricity so they weren’t using it at the time.

The household that I stayed in during my fieldwork was a Hindu household and consisted of four members, two children, one girl and a boy, husband and wife. They were not rich, but neither were they comparatively poor. Both the mother and the father worked. They live in a house that they received from the wife’s father when they got married. It was much smaller at that time, but now it is a two level building. The father has relatives who live abroad and many things in the house were gifts they had received from them. He works outside Batticaloa and comes home in the weekends and during holidays, so the mother maintains and runs the house and cares for the children. She has a full time job, and she cooks, cleans and takes the children to tutoring every day after regular school has finished. When he was home the father sometimes helped, but most of the time he sat on an uncomfortable chair watching TV or was out of the house, visiting friends. The mother always prepared huge lunches at weekends. Once I asked him why he didn’t help more, preparing meals or cleaning the house when he was at home, to give her a bit of a rest. He said that he was very tired from working all week, and that he needed his relaxation. He smiled while he said it. He told me that he could make the best curry, and that he was good at cooking, but in six months I got the opportunity to try it once, keeping in mind that I ate with them every day. I think that he knew it would be nice of him to help, but still he did very little. Once in a while he went to the market, drove the children or even did the laundry on a couple of occasions, but little else, as he did not consider it to be his work.

Using the two case studies I wish to briefly illustrate how a household can work and how the roles are divided between the husband and the wife. These two are households, which differ in economic strength, but still provide a good insight into the average running of a house in the area, and allow the possibility to make both comparisons and highlight the contrasts

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between a family whose mother has worked as a migrant and one who has not. The primary focus is also on the role of the women within the two families.

It is first important however to provide secondary definition of the local household. The clustering described below does not always apply to every household, but is rather generalization and provides an impression of the ideal household. Since many factors determine living location, such as the size of a compound and availability of land, this section should be viewed as an ideal rather than a constantly fulfilled reality. “A Tamil or Moorish household consists of the people who live together within ‘a house or compound’, *vitu valavu*, but houses and agricultural land are transferred as a wife’s dowry and the matriuxorilocal residence rule results in a clustering of daughters’ dwellings.” (McGilvray 1989:192) This definition describes most of the components in the Tamil and Muslim families, which will be discussed in greater detail below. Additionally, there is the matrilineal inheritance, which also works in conjunction with the dowry system, the system of uxorilocality, and the clan system (not the focus here).

As mentioned in the introduction, I will understand the household as a place for negotiation. For example; Hafsa told me that her husband had not agreed on her migration. But after she had explained to him that it was necessary because of a loan she had taken before their marriage, and that she needed to pay back he had agreed. This shows her agency, at the same time as it shows how the final decision was based on a mutual agreement. The household as a decision maker is evident, at the same time as the migration was a consequence of Hafsa’s agency. When I met her she told me that she wanted to migrate again, but this time she would not because her husband still did not want her leave. During her first migration the children had stayed with her sister. Her husband had helped some by walking the children to school and he also had done some of their laundry. I will discuss the connection between internal family relations and migration further in the next chapter. Below, I will focus more closely on larger family and marriage structures, and its connection to migration.

Kinship, Matrilineal inheritance and Dowry

In this section I will reflect on a central aspect of the society in eastern Sri Lanka. Fulgerud writes that “[...] marriage, and the transfer of property with which is it connected, is the main mechanism through which traditional society as a social formation was, and to some extent still is, reproduced.” (Fulgerud 1999:142) Marriage is highly connected to the reproduction of

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the family line. I will return to the importance of marriage further down, but I believe that his statement can support an argument that the family is of great importance in the social world for people on the east coast of Sri Lanka. To understand the connection between migration and kinship on Sri Lanka, it is vital to be aware of the connection between family, marriage and dowry. The women in this thesis migrate to earn money for dowry. This could therefore be understood as a means towards securing the future of the family and maintaining family relations. Here I will look mainly at the family and its structures.

In the east and north of Sri Lanka they have a matrilineal system which means that the daughter inherits from her mother. The matrilineal kinship pattern in the Batticaloan region has much in common with matrilineal castes in Kerala, India, but differs distinctly in its performance. The similarities support a common history, but show a contemporary disparity. The Batticaloan developments has according to McGilvray led to the contemporary matrilocal residence and dowry system, giving Tamil and Moorish women more domestic influence and economic security than in most traditional South Asian family systems. (McGilvray 2008:16) That the family structures and the matrilineal system have made women more influential in the home is not agreed upon by other scholars. Particularly Thiruchrandran argues that despite the notion of the female power, *Shakti*, which exist in the Hindu society in Southern India and Sri Lanka, women are subjected to subordination “by a common ideology” (Thirucherandan 1997:xi) one that also applies in the Batticaloan context.

The people in Batticaloa have also developed a system of uxorilocal marriage which means that it is very common for the husband to move into his new wife’s residence, which is also quite often the old house of the wife’s parents or a newly built house on the parent’s yard or as close as possible. The matrilocality is connected to the cross-cousin marriage because the understanding is not that the daughter is given away through marriage, rather that the man is reunited with his mother’s kin. (Fuglerud 1999:147) In the family where I stayed during fieldwork the mother’s sister was married with her cross-cousin, which is either her mother’s brother’s son, or her father’s sister’s son. One could say that this system puts greater emphasis on the importance of the extended family. The mother’s sister’s children and father’s brother’s children would be called brothers or sisters and are not considered acceptable for marriage, but the traditional cross-cousin marriage would be defined as the preferred arranged marriage. [...] marriage is seen as reproducing the already existing kindred. That is the explicit reason to why cross-cousin marriage is valued. (Fuglerud 1999:147)

Encompassing Migration: Kinship and Dowry

Sri Lanka has a national law which applies to everyone, but at the same time there are other local laws and customary laws which also need to be taken in consideration, for example when buying or inheriting land. In Batticaloa the society is widely acknowledged to be more matrilineal than in the Northern Province, and because the Batticaloan Mukkuwar customary law is not codified and the land categories that exist in the north of Sri Lanka do not in Batticaloa the result is often that most of the land and assets are given as dowry, leaving little or nothing to inherit. These local customs and laws have many implications on women and are therefore important to consider in relation to migration.

Eastern Tamils and Muslims have deep and longstanding cultural ties, particularly in the neighbouring Batticaloa and Ampara districts. The two communities share the same matrilineal clan structures and marriage patterns, as well as other cultural and religious patterns. These are specific east coast cultural patterns that have helped to reinforce the distinction between eastern Tamils and Tamils from the Jaffna Peninsula whose high caste leadership generally looked down on Batticaloa Tamils for their lower caste and inferior Sanskrit Hindu rituals. (ICG 2008:7)

The matrilineal structure in the area has been weakened because of the vast resettling of people, where this process has transformed the landowning patterns in the area. Although some of the women encountered lived in coconut fibre houses or houses with tin walls, many had received new houses from different aid organizations, the UN or the government as a consequence of the conflict or the Tsunami. Some who had not received houses had managed to build one, and some had not. When people received new houses from different organizations the local traditions were not respected, and many men ended up being the owners. (Maunaguru & Emmanuel 2010) The report of Maunaguru and Emmanuel focuses on the Post-Tsunami resettlement and acknowledges the effect the disaster had on women's rights to land and failures by the government in recognizing local customs regarding matrilineal inheritance. This emerged again in the course of the research done for this thesis, where several women said that they had been legally the owners of their house, but the new house was either written in both the husband and the wife's name, or only in the name of the husband. Logically the inheritance system should keep the mother and father comfortable until death but dowry, functioning as a pre-mortem inheritance, is so important that the assets are given away before such time.

Dowry and its *Doing*

Firstly, I feel that it is important to explain how dowry is defined and what it can consist of. The short definition by Tambiah will provide a suitable introduction. Secondly, an illustration of the importance of dowry will be given, with the example of Tavameni and a following discussion where the definition from Tambiah will be specified and deliberated upon in further detail.

Dowry is defined by Tambiah as “wealth given with the daughter at her marriage for the couple to use as the nucleus of their conjugal estate” (Tambiah 1973:63.) To understand dowry properly he writes that you have to consider the two main principles that support it. The first is that dowry connotes female property or female right to property which is transferred as a sort of pre-mortem inheritance, and second that dowry connotes, in complementary fashion, that property is transferred together with a daughter so as to enable her to enter into marriage. (Tambiah 1973:64)

Portrayal of Jayanthini

Jayanthini married in 1979. She has two daughters and one son who are now 29, 28 and 24 years old, she is a Tamil women and a Hindu. When she left for Bahrain in 1998 she planned to build a small house for her oldest daughter. At that time her oldest daughter was about 18 years old and had finished her studies. Jayanthini would have liked her daughter to continue her studies, but as she explained that she wasn't able to afford it. It was the oldest daughter who took care of the household in her absence. Her experiences there however, turned out to be very nasty. She faced great hardship during her six month stay. *“I was beaten and they locked me in my room. At first they didn't give me salary, but I cried and cried. After that I got money for three months work. One day I escaped from the room and ran to the police. For the three months' salary I bought a ticket back home.”*

In spite of her experiences on that initial trip she was determined to arrange dowry for her daughter and so she decided to try once more, but as other women also said; if women have a bad experience in one country, the next time they will go to a different one. Thus, this is what Jayanthini did. She left the second time to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. She stayed there for two years (1999 – 2001) and returned for a short time to Sri Lanka before she left to the same

country once more. She came back the last time in 2004. In Saudi-Arabia she earned about 13,000 rupees which (in 2010) is about 80 Euros, which is considered to be a mid-range salary in Sri Lanka. She always sent everything she had earned to the family at home. At first it was her husband who received the money, but as he proved to be unreliable in dealing with the money Jayanthini sent the money to her daughter. She explains that her husband used all the money for drinking. As she said this she formed a fist with the hand leaving the thumb pointing towards the mouth and raised the arm - the sign for drinking.

When I stepped onto her yard I could see the house that was built for the daughter and her husband, it's about 3*3 (meter). My first thought when I saw it is that it must be the kitchen, since that had been the case in other homes that I had visited. As it transpired it was not the kitchen at all, and the daughter and her husband already lived in the 'shack' as you must call it when you look at it. It consisted of three walls, and although it was built with bricks, which is deemed an indication of wealth, it was not yet polished, and the half built fourth side was covered by a tarpaulin. The money had not been enough to build the whole house. "*My daughter's husband's mother is working abroad now, she is sending money so that we can finish the house*" she tells me.

Her husband has a good job but since his friends come and drink at their house every night (and dance as she shows me waving her arms in the air) she has developed a strategy of making him give money to the family for food. By shopping on credit, her husband is forced to pay of the bill once a month. She smiled as she explained but it was easy to imagine how hard it must be for her. Her responsibilities towards their family when she was away for five years also came to mind. At first he didn't only have his salary, but also hers, now he is used to having access to quite a lot and he is always buying drinks for his friends. Now the daughter's husband's mother has to finish building the house because of this, even though her husband could have paid for this if he was not spending his money on liquor. At the time we were talking Jayanthini's son stood close to her chair. While the behaviour of the husband arose in the conversation she did not display any obvious emotions regarding his irresponsibility, but at the same time, she shook her son's shoulders and said "*my son would never drink alcohol because he has an education. My husband is uneducated and that is why he drinks.*" She looks proud of her son as we talk about it. I felt that she distanced herself from her husband as she talked about him and his friend's grouping. She was actually saying that during the days he is working and during the evenings he is drinking and dancing with his

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friends, so he doesn't spend time with her and the rest of the family. Furthermore, he does not contribute to the family's wellbeing, which is obvious since she even has a strategy plan for how his income will pay for the food of the family. She described their lives as very different and distant, despite them being married.

The story of Jayanthini illustrates that the dowry for her daughter is tremendously important. She jumps into uncertainty and possible difficulties because of that. Her experience is an example of the sacrifices that these women feel they must make in order to secure their daughters' futures. Not only did she leave her family for almost five years, she had to leave them with her alcoholic husband. Although it cannot be stated with any certainty as to whether he was drinking before she left, there is enough evidence to suggest that this could be the case. In group discussions with women from several villages, the issue of the men drinking was evident every time. Although not many were candid enough to discuss their own issues, they would happily discuss those of others. The attitude was that husbands, who were left alone at home, often took other women and/or started drinking while his wife was away. The women were always quick to discuss the stories of others, even naming the other women, while the other women nodded their heads in unison. Gamburd writes that "Alcohol, as a quintessentially masculine beverage, provides an avenue for reaffirming shattered self-esteem." (Gamburd 2008:5) If the husband's drinking is because of a lack of self-esteem in this case it could be a consequence of his wife's migration, making her beyond his control or it could be a consequence of other factors, which were not disclosed. Jayanthini herself blames his drinking on a lack of education, as mentioned above. At the same time Gamburd establishes that the relationship between men and alcohol might not only manifest itself when or if the wife travels abroad, but rather that: "Although male alcohol use correlates in part with female migration, both phenomena have their roots in local poverty" (Gamburd 2008:6) So his behaviour could be explained by many things, but my own material shows a recurring connection between female migration and male drinking. For women drinking is not publicly acceptable in Batticaloa. Men on the other hand often gather for drinking the local toddy which is abstracted from the Palmyra tree or from the coconut tree.

So why is dowry so important? And how does the dowry system function in the Batticaloan context?

In Sri Lanka the dowry system has a lot in common with the system in the rest of South Asia, but it also differs in some important respects. Typically in South Asia dowry does not infringe

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on the rights of sons to inherit land and immovable property. In Batticaloa, however, practically all of the family property – including paddy lands – is transferred to daughters in the form of dowry at the time of marriage, leaving very little wealth for sons or daughters to inherit when their parent die. (McGilvray 2008:39) Since sons usually do not inherit land because of this, the significance of receiving dowry should logically be higher. As a consequence it could be argued that it has become more important to present a dowry with the daughter, for her to be able to marry at all.

Dowry is an expression for arranged marriages; it is the agreement between families concerning marriage benefits. (Fuglerud 1999:99) It is important to understand that it is through dowry all the family assets floats. Most marriages in Sri Lanka are arranged, the rest of the family then wants to be a part of deciding who will be welcomed in the family and secure its future. The preferred marriage is the cross-cousin marriages, as I have mentioned previously, but women can also represent a possibility to incorporate new members into the kindred whenever this is found to be opportune. (Fuglerud 1999: 145) Dowry, then, expresses the responsibility to sustain and reproduce family relations through material assets. The whole arrangements surrounding marriage is an expression of structures that are larger than the individual woman or household, and in that way the responsibility that is put on the migrating women is quite extensive. This explains many of the sacrificing stories I have heard and told here, for example in the case of the Eravur woman who now lives in a shed despite her many years abroad. The women go through a great deal for their family's future.

There are differences in what dowry consists of if you compare the dowry between the South Indian Nangudi Velalar caste, the Jaffna Velalar caste and the Batticaloa Mukkavar caste. For the South Indian Tamil caste the dowry consists of movable things like household tools, whereas for the Jaffna Tamils it consists of land. (Tambiah 1973:68) As my own material also shows, for Hindu Tamils and Muslim on the east coast a house is a big component in a bride's dowry. (Tangarajah 2003: 154) "Without it, or without at least the promise of a future house, it can be very difficult to get married". (McGilvray 1989: 201) In Batticaloa, and in Sri Lanka in general, there has been an inflation of dowry prices, due in no small part to migration. This may be a result of the dowry institution itself where the "market value" of men has increased with more money and status. And as Tambiah says; "most men marry, not because of girls, but because of dowry" (Tambiah 1973:113.) The amount of dowry varies to a great extent according to the status and profession of the future husband and the wife. Men in high status

jobs demand not only a house and land, but also a large amount of money, expensive cars and maybe a flat in the capital Colombo. The description of dowry above is also confirmed by my own material. The quality and amount of the components of the dowry will vary between families, but even the poorest hope to build a house for the salary they have earned whilst abroad. If the daughter is too young for marriage the house would be the resident of the family until the daughter was old enough to get married. Or if the money was enough the house could be built on the yard for the future marriage of the daughter.

When reflecting on female migration in Batticaloa and when being aware of the connection between family, marriage and dowry, it is easier to understand how the women have an obligation not only towards themselves or their children, but to the whole future of their family. The aforementioned women, who migrate from Batticaloa, migrate for daily subsistence and for dowry, which they need to support the marriage of their daughters, or their own marriage. Without a dowry a woman might be unable to marry which can most certainly be considered as an unusual thing that could lead to stigmatization in the society for the unmarried woman and the whole family.

Conversion of different value

There is a possibility to marry into a higher status family by collecting a large enough dowry. This conversion of values from money to status may then be transmitted to the brothers of the wife, and in that way they can in turn demand bigger dowries at their time of marriage. (Tambiah 1973:64). However, what will be evident from this text is that the way one makes this money is a determining factor for hypergamy; which means marrying into an equal or superior social group or caste. It seems that migrating as a housemaid lowers the status of the women and maybe even of the whole family.¹⁸ There is also another way of increasing the demand of dowry and increasing the status, in the case of education. “Educating a son means that his parents feel that their ‘investment’ should be ‘recouped’ upon their marriage” (Tambiah 1973:63.) They can expect their son to marry a wealthier wife, than they could have expected if he had received a lesser education. Education can in this way also be considered to be a form of dowry. In some cases a woman can marry without having a dowry if she has a good education that has increased her status, although this seems to be quite unusual. In a

¹⁸ This is expressed through facing difficulties finding husbands for migrated women. Mainly, bad reputation is cause of this difficulties. This is also discussed in the next chapter.

conversation with a friend in a Muslim village we were talking about the possibility to marry without dowry. *“There could be some volunteers, one or two, in small numbers. If you are a beautiful girl with some education you could marry without a dowry”*, he stated.

Following Tambiah above I understand dowry as *‘The way’* to get married and through that reproduce the family. Dowry as one or several objects is only material. However at the same time, the symbolic value of dowry is more than it being just a pre-inheritance or a gift. The interesting thing here is to consider the meaning of dowry. Dowry establishes relations and it extends the family. It connects people and families by making marriage possible it can also establish alliances. Depending on the amount of dowry it is also something that reproduces social hierarchies. In this way, the things that dowry *does* is more important than the dowry itself. It is important because of the things it leads to, which is in my understanding here, the marriage.

Marriage and The Auspicious woman

“We are going because of poverty. Main reason is that we want to build a house, to get married we need a house. The income earned here is not enough to build a house. My parents gave me a small shelter house made by coconut leaves, no toilet, no well facilities. I have four children now and all of us use the neighbours well to have water. So, I went to build a house and other sanitation facilities. My husband is not bad, but he always drinks alcohol so no income from him and when he drinks he damages the house goods and all. Once he hit me so badly that I was admitted to the hospital.”

(Hindu woman explains her goal and the context of her migration)

Among my informants the goal for migrating is almost unanimously to build a house, buy land, jewellery, pay for a family wedding, pay for education for the children, and/or to be able to afford everyday life by buying food or household articles. However, one of the most important goals of migration is to collect money for dowry to be able to secure the family's future. As I have expressed previously the dowry is a main component in marriage, it is a

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facilitator for marriage, and the female's family is responsible for presenting the dowry to the couple when marrying.

The marriage is a highly valued arrangement in Sri Lanka. As the house or land is the main component of a dowry many women have the goal to build a house or to buy land for the money they earn while they are abroad. The whole family is responsible for making a prosperous marriage possible. This includes the men in the bride's family who also contribute to the dowry. For the men in the family marrying a sister is also an investment in their own future because all the family's assets float through their sister's marriage. Furthermore, a higher status husband can raise the whole family's status. Therefore, many men will also spend some of their salary for dowry on their sister's marriage. Through the wedding the women becomes attached to the husband. This is symbolized through the 'Tali', which is the necklace with a pendant tied around the bride's neck at the wedding, and the 'Pottu' which is the red mark on the forehead. The 'Tali' could be of gold or of a more simple thread depending on the wealth of the family. It is a sign of an auspicious woman. An auspicious woman, a *Sumankali*, is dependent on a husband and is conferred by the husband on a woman [...] Moreover; the auspiciousness conferred on a married woman is also due to the chastity she is expected to adhere to. (Thiruchandran 1997:55) At the time of the marriage the bride also receives gifts from her husband. These gifts are usually the Tali, the wedding Sari and toilet articles such as scents, comb, mirror, soap, and powder. (Tambiah 1973:121) So the marriage makes the woman auspicious, and the several different qualities she ought to have follows the marriage. *After being married*, the wife in the house I lived during fieldwork told me, *the husband and wife are stuck together*. She crosses the fingers in her both hands and pulled them in each direction without letting go. *No matter what happens she should stay in the marriage, even if they don't go along*. I asked her what a woman should do if the husband hits her or other such things. *Then it might be ok, but she should try to stay anyway*. *In Sri Lanka we don't get divorced as you do in your country*.

Chastity or 'karpu' as mentioned by Thiruchendran above, is a very important quality that a woman should possess. A woman possesses 'karpu' if she before marriage is a virgin and in marriage is faithful to her husband. According to the tradition chastity is very important for a number of reasons. Pfaffenberger writes that: "A woman's chastity renders her fertile, and brings prosperity to her family; controversially, a "bad woman" brings infertility and opprobrium" (Pfaffenberger 1982:108) He further writes that "The effects of the "bad

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woman” on the village as a whole is equally devastating; it is thought that, as long as there is a single “bad woman” in a village where rice is grown, the rains will not fall” (Pfaffenberger 1982:109) I believe that the ideals of how a woman should be can be the reason for many of the challenges that migrant women face at home, such as the ones that will be mentioned below.

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Chapter five: SCRUTINISING MIGRATION'S EFFECT ON THE FAMILY

In this chapter I will more explicit try to analyse and illustrate what migration does with the family and the relations within it. Here I will move down to the realm of the household. The women who migrate are aware that their migration might have destructive consequences for the relations within it and therefor this is a priority they have to make before migrating. Throughout these pages I will argue that migration can be understood as a change factor for the household and for the family. I will base my argument on my own material as well as secondary material which deals with the same issues.

Firstly, I will discuss some contradictions that arise from migration. I will then discuss gender roles and ideologies that exist in Batticaloa. Secondly, I will tell the story of two female relatives who both migrated as housemaids. Their example will support my argument and illustrate some effects that the migration can have on the relationship between spouses, and at the same time describe what seemed to be a not so unusual migration experience for women in Batticaloa. Thirdly, I have the intention to support my argument with less detailed examples and following discussions.

Migration and Marriage

Women can find themselves in contradictive situation when deciding to migrate. These contradictions, I believe, emerge as a consequence of gender ideologies that exist in the community. To look at the marriage is a fruitful approach to understanding how these situations materializes. The women find themselves in a contradictory situation as their personal virtue tells them that they *have to* migrate to help the family, at the same time as the community's virtue tells them that they *should not migrate* because they could be exposed to vice conduct.

The first time I heard about this contradiction for women migrating to the Middle East as housemaids was when I met an agent in the Muslim town of Kattankudi. He was quite explicit

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on the subject because he himself said that he would not send women abroad to work as housemaids. His first statement also shows that gendered ideologies shape employers (in this case intermediaries) decisions and consequently migrations streams. This is because gender is so deeply implicated in people's notion of male versus female work. (Mahler and Pessar 2006:48)

Firstly he told me that: *“If a subagent is sending housemaids he is not perceived well by the community. It is not welcomed by the community to send women to the Middle East”*. He was not sending women because he did not want to be perceived negatively by the community that he lives in. His statement could also explain the fact that I encountered difficulties in finding agents that sent women, and that also would talk to me. I received help locating agents who sent women, but several times my contact could not talk them into seeing me. One day I was in a village with my interpreter and a local village facilitator that worked with YMCA in Batticaloa. She knew about three agents in that village and had arranged for me to talk to one of them¹⁹. I had asked her if she could help me to establish contact with the other two. One of them had gone to the capital, she was told. The other one, though, it was explained in the morning by a relative, had gone to the hospital. In the afternoon when we knocked on the gate to see if she had come home, another relative informed us that she was in Colombo -they were obviously deliberately being evasive. The difficulties encountered when trying to meet agents, can therefore, be explained by the aforementioned statement. The agents know that the migration of housemaids is perceived negatively within the community and sometimes the agents will cross the law and deceive the women about the working conditions, which in turn, can also result in their evasive nature. If they feel that they do not follow the existing morality of conduct, this could very likely be a reason to their avoidance.

When questioned as to why an agent might get a poor reputation his initial response was an intriguing one: *“If a girl goes to the Middle East, and goes there for a while and then comes back here she faces a lot of hardship afterwards. Like getting married, it becomes difficult for her to find a suitable partner because partners would not like to marry someone who worked in the Middle East.”* (Agent) At first this sounded very strange to me. Before I met him I had met women who stated that a reason to why they migrated was because they wanted themselves or their daughters to be able to marry. Why wouldn't they like to marry a woman

¹⁹ The information I received from the agent is discussed in chapter three.

who had worked in the Middle East? The explanation for this was (not very uplifting for me) that *“it was due to cultural things”*. What are these ‘*cultural things*’ though? In what way can it become more difficult to find a husband because of migration? By exploring the gender in the Batticaloan society I hope to illustrate some reasons as to why anyone can say this, and also how women who migrated as housemaids themselves experience these ‘*cultural things*’. I also wish to discuss the consequences that arise from migrating, what they are and how these women experience them. My argument is that this contradiction (that women migrate for dowry, but then finds it more difficult to get themselves or their daughter's married) arises as a consequence of gender ideologies. I assume that the consequence of these rumours of women behaving “badly” comes from what is considered being “bad” as a woman.

Gender: as part of the ‘Cultural things’

After hearing about this I wanted to focus more on the woman's role in the household, by asking and by trying to be more aware of how women act. Specific examples of women that I met are the chosen method of analysis here. So firstly, how gender is perceived at the individual level will be discussed. I intend to show through my own material the role that women play in the family.

Gender roles in discussion

At one point I met a group of Tamil mothers and wives in Morokontanchenai, a small village that is reached from the main road by a bumpy sand road, who had all gone to the Middle East to work as housemaids. I asked them what they thought were the responsibilities of the wife and of the husband in the family. They agreed that for one or two years, or as long as they were gone, it was to earn money for the family. Nonetheless, after that *“life long, until death, husbands should be earning for us”*, they said. At the same time they made excuses for their time away earning money for the family by telling me that in their village it was very difficult to get a job for them or their husbands and many of the men were fishermen. *“Our husbands have no proper jobs here. If jobs were available here, we wouldn't go to the Middle East to work. We could be with our family and look after our children”* they explained. In this discussion it was quite difficult for me to interpret what they were actually saying because sometimes it seemed like there would be no problem for women to work in their village, and

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at other times they said that it was ok for them to work for a short time, but that the husband should earn money to the family for the rest of their life. As a consequence it seems like poverty gives the women more freely a part of the public space since it is understood as a necessity for the family's survival and comfort. This was also said explicitly to me:

"Husbands also allow us to go to the Middle East, because of poor income and poverty. We only go to earn money; we don't like to leave our children and family. Because of our poor income, life expenses make us go abroad for work. But we face a lot of difficulties there."

For me it appeared as though they knew what the expected role of the wife in the family was, and earning money was something they could do because of poverty, although, that was not what they were really supposed to do. They said that after those years abroad, the husbands should be the ones who were earning income and not them, "lifelong".

This same point also came up in another conversation. The woman said that: *"It is good to satisfy with the husband's income, she have to know how to manage the family with that income, even if it is only enough for one meal, and also a woman has to be with the children and the family."* This of course applies to the married woman. She expressed her view of how a mother should act in the family and what kind of role she should be satisfied with. On the background of these and other comments it can be argued that there exists a common understanding of the wife's role in the household and the family. Although I also know of other opinions as well, not everyone's are the same and thinks the same. Still, what this indicates is a collective understanding, even though it is not shared by everyone. However, to demonstrate contrary perspective, another woman's comment was very illuminating. The woman whose husband had migrated was utterly convinced that she should not migrate and stated that the reason for her to stay at home was that men could not take care of the children. *"It is not right as a woman to leave the children with the husband. The men cannot take care of the children and that is why I don't want to migrate"*, she said in front of the other women. The rest of the women who were there, had not left the children in the sole custody of their husbands, they had all left the children with female relatives.

Gamburd also gives an example that is enlightening with respect to how gender divides the household chores. In her example she mentions a man called Lal who had taken up some household chores while his wife was away on work. He kept the house, cooked, did laundry and shopping. To the rest of the village his doing was a figure of some astonishment and amusement. (Gamburd 1995:60) So the villagers had a definition of what a man should be

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doing and what a woman should be doing. By not following these expectations, he was worthy of mockery.

One day a friend and I were at one of his former students for lunch. We were invited by them to lunch in their new house on a previous visit we had made to congratulate him and his newly wed wife. It was clear that the visit was important for his former student as the lunch that was served was to say the least grand.

What I wish to show here is commonplace gender roles in the home, and although there are many factors at play, I think it is relevant because of the how the lunch was played out.

We were invited into their new home. The house was brand new and bright colours adorned the walls, the floor was tiled and shiny rails followed the stairs to the second floor. After we had been sitting a while in the usual reception room we were invited into the dining room. Lunch was prepared by the wife and her mother, and they had been cooking for many hours. It was set for four around the table and as we sat down (my friend and I) it became apparent that it was his wife's role to serve us food and drink. The husband first said that he would wait to eat until we were finished, but sat down pretty fast when he was asked to do so. The wife did not. While we ate, I tried to invite his wife to sit down and eat with us, but in despite of several attempts, she remained standing close to the table ready to refill our plates as soon as the food began to run low. She never once sat down with us.

To take care of their guests are of course part of this behaviour, but furthermore it demonstrates how roles are divided between husband and wife, as she would not sit down and eat despite my objections. To be visited by outsiders such as myself and by persons of high status may not be commonplace, but the division of tasks in this situation can still shine some light on the line of argument about the division of tasks in the home. Her duty here was to serve the husband and his guests, and she could obviously not eat until we had finished.

The division of tasks in the home and household are quite explicit in Sri Lanka. This was not something that I only saw and heard but something that I also read about. "Most of our religion tells us that the father is the decision maker, the 'bread-winner' and the disciplinarian. The mother is the nurturer and carer – who unconditionally and overtly show love and affection towards her husband and children. The mother mostly stays at home and 'keeps house'. Prepares tasty meals, mends clothes, and ensure that 'the family' is comfortable in all respects". (Kottegoda 2006:11) In almost every household that I visited throughout the

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fieldwork the women were preparing the meals. In many of the times that I paid visits to their homes we were interrupted by cooking chores. If the wife was working her mother would cook. There are as always exceptions, but generally this was the case. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the illustration of Leilatumas household also shows how the men are believed to be incapable of managing the household chores. They are ascribed to the females.

During Women's day Suriya had organized a small gathering. It was both to celebrate the day, but also to promote their new poetry book in which the poems were all written by women. I feel that one of the poems would be very fitting here. It is written by Hildarubini who is a young woman from Batticaloa.

*Your knowledge damned;
you have become a pawn
washing pots and pans,
smarting with kitchen smoke,
seeing off your husband,
running errands for your in-laws:
your daily routine.*

(Part of the poem "Itinerary of Dawn" by Hildarubini, *Let the poems speak* (2010))

The poem is about women's roles, and I believe that it can be used as an example of the expectations on women especially in Sri Lanka, but maybe this is also similar other places in the world. How does she perceive societies expectations on her as a woman? Is she happy with the way it is? She starts the poem by writing "woman, [...] why is this society like this?" She obviously questions the role of women in this poem.

One other thing that was a cause for surprise with regard to the gendered perception was in a conversation I had about who received the money that was sent from abroad. Normally the money that was earned abroad was sent to the one who took care of the children. This was usually the daughter if she was old enough, the mother or some other female relative. This Hindu woman told me that she had sent the money to her mother and so I asked her why she hadn't sent it to her husband, who lived with the family while she was away. She laughed and said that: "*Men can't handle money, they can't bargain at the shop and so that would end up*

with us paying more for the food. It is always the women who go and buy the food. Men cannot do it because are inexperienced in that." In this family it was never the husband who bought the food items, and so that's why she affirmed that men are inexperienced with such tasks. It could also be interpreted that because she didn't specifically state that she were talking about her and her husband's experience with this it extended her own family. Some women that I met though sent money to both the mother and the husband, so again there are exceptions.

Broken Ideals

Above I have highlighted some examples of the roles women play, and are expected to play, both in the household and in the family. As briefly mentioned previously under 'migration and marriage' women who migrated might face difficulties finding a "respectable" husband because of their migration as a housemaid. Some of these difficulties are due to rumours that have developed of housemaid's behaviour while being in The Middle East. It is not impossible for women to get married after they have migrated, but it can become more difficult. This is quite a dilemma that has revealed itself throughout my fieldwork. In this part I therefore wish to talk about the community's view of migrating women. Why does it become harder to find a husband because of migration? Shouldn't it be the opposite because of the earnings for a better dowry, or for being able to get a dowry at all? I would also like to discuss the contrary feelings that emerge for the women. They do get to send money home and help the family, for the most part, but suspicion is also cast upon them from within their own communities.

As a result of the perception of women and the gender ideologies that exist in the society, a woman is required to behave in certain ways and she should treat her family in certain ways. When the women migrate as housemaids they do not play the role that women in general should be fulfilling. I'd like to therefore mention some of the rumours that circulate about the women. In a group discussion that I conducted in a small village the women expressed concerns such as: *"They often say that the women who went to the Middle East for work got married or have relationship or sex with Arabian house owners. Still that perception is like*

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*that. So, if young girls go to work in the Middle East it is very difficult to get married after. Sometimes husbands have doubts on their wife, as like; she may have had sex with that house owner, so family problems arise in some families.”*²⁰ Virginitly in a bride is highly prized both by the Tamils and by the Moors; it is not easy for a divorced or widowed woman to find a second husband, although both Islamic and local Hindu norms do allow it. (McGilvray 1988:109) The fact that it is believed that the husband should control his wife means a woman’s migration is a challenge to this socially prescribed perception.

This therefore raises the issue concerning both married and unmarried women. What kind of problems a husband and wife can face is illustrated in the first portrait where the two related women both faced problems in their marriage, partly because of their migration. I will return to this further down in this chapter.

One comment has to be made concerning this issue. In at least three of the villages that I visited, they had experienced women coming back pregnant. In one of these villages they said that it was a big problem, and that seven women had come back impregnated from working as housemaids in the Middle East. These villages were places that I had the possibility to get an overview of the pattern since I met the village coordinates for YMCA there. They could tell me things that other individual women would not, and I suspect that the issue was present in most villages. In that particular village she told me that there had been 57 women migrating as housemaids. In the village there are 437 families altogether. There was also one case where a woman I met had divorced her husband in Sri Lanka and married a man in Kuwait.

However, even if things like this happen, how it is (miss-) interpreted by the community, is also a thing to bear in mind. Suspicion is cast upon all the women because of a few incidents.

The women gain a bad reputation as a result of migrating as housemaids, and this was often commented on by the women whom I talked to, as one negative aspect of migrating to the Middle East to work as housemaids. One woman told me that: *“Because of being below the poverty line we have to go to abroad; whatever they are saying”* That these rumours develop can be an indicator of norms being violated, and not only because it has actually happened in some cases. When the community talks about women as “bad women”, maybe especially when men talk about women as “bad women”, it can say something, not only of norms. It

²⁰ Quote from a group discussion.

might also be used as a strategy for men to uphold their masculinity, as the family's breadwinner. Rajasingam-Senanayake gives her impression of changes in a Muslim family in North-east Sri Lanka. The granddaughter had been working in the Middle East and brought a new custom into the household, the wearing of *hijab*. The Muslim customs have become stronger in Sri Lanka as a consequence of the extended work migration to the Middle East the last decades. Rajasingam-Senanayake gives the reader her interpretation of this development: "She seemed to assert that she was not *haram* (impure), even though she had travelled overseas, and had gone outside the home without a male escort, because she was veiled." (Rajasingam-Senanayake 2006:193.) Younger women in the Muslim communities in eastern Sri Lanka have begun to wear the *hijab*, it is not just for this particular family but also something that I both heard and saw during my fieldwork. This was mentioned to me as a consequence of Middle Eastern migration. What had they thought about her if she had not worn that *hijab*? I believe that this is one way for the woman to negotiate with the bad rumours that develop of the women who have migrated to The Middle East as if to say; just look at me, I have done nothing wrong. That the Hijab would function as a tool for establishing moral superiority is also discussed by Thangarajah (2003), who writes that housemaids employ 'Arab' practices as a means to empower themselves. What exactly is being said about these women was difficult to clarify. One husband told me that: *There are so many talking about these women; they are talking many different ways, talking about malpractices from the women who go abroad: this is a village setting. If they don't have any abroad experience, they are talking the other way around. They say this is not good women. They are not telling it openly, they are talking behind closed doors.*²¹ (Husband of a migrated woman)

The things that seem to be of most concern are the relationships that are said to develop between the women and Arabic men as expressed by the group above. However, other issues that are also discussed are that these women are bad mothers, abandoning their children and their family. Discussing the same issue but regarding women as wives Gamburd writes that: "While men felt shame for living off money their wives sent from abroad, blame often fell on the absent woman, without whose control a man drifted helplessly into bad habits and bad company. Women bore the responsibility of disciplining the family and regulating household

²¹ The story of this man's wife is the portrayal of "Eravur woman" in page 53.

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finances; village discourses held the wife largely responsible for any misadventures that might befall her husband during her stay abroad. (Gamburd 1995:57) In this case the woman is considered to be a bad wife, abandoning her duties in the family. These kinds of “reputations” and general discourses could be interpreted as consequence of a failure to reach expectations as a woman. The reason for mothers to migrate is predominantly for their children and their family’s improvement. Only once did I hear one woman say that she was disappointed with her many years of working in the Middle East because she herself hadn’t been able to gain any wealth. Everything she earned had gone to her family, and they had benefited through weddings, land and a house. Even so, even though she obviously had hoped to end up with a better economic situation, she had put herself as the last to benefit from her own hard work. The moral reasoning for the women is based on the obligations towards the family.²²

Being a “bad wife” is connected to being a “bad woman” and so is being “a bad mother”. These three all arose while talking about consequences from the migration. At the same time as some of the women told me about how they felt happiness because of the migration. To be able to earn money that buys food and shelter to the family gives a positive feeling. Also Gamburd writes that she can see how, by recognizing the worth of their labour, the women came to a certain self-worth and dignity through their jobs. (Gamburd 1995:66) Almost everyone that I talked to mentions this as the positive aspect of migrating. They also mention things such as becoming familiar with foreign way of life, and being able to experience things like flying and so on. Conversely however, at the same time, they also talk about the hardship that they face when they come back.

As I have discussed work migration it is related to other factors in society that work in conjunction with moral and obligations. I have recognized that examples of these factors might be the family, marriage, and economy. As expressed by Velayutham and Wise, moral economies are reproduced through codes of responsibilities and obligations and these can be policed through affective structures of shame and guilt and fear of ostracism. They are a kind of social control over social relations, from close family or fellow villagers. (Velayutham and Wise 2005:34) This could also be an explanation for the kind of rumours that circulate in the villages. As a mother you have the responsibility to take care of the children. As a wife you should remain in the marriage and you should take care of your husband. I believe all these

²² This woman is portrayed as “Eravur woman” in page 53.

“should dos” as a woman to be part of the moral system which regulates the community and that they are challenged when women migrate as housemaids.

One trait that is connected to the religious images of women is the female power of *Shakti*. *Shakti* is the female power embodied in the goddesses and in the women. “Women, who like the goddess are feared, must, like the goddess, be kept under male control” (Wadley 1980: xii.) The idea of the goddesses is part of the gender ideology that exists in the society. If the general view of women is that they have to be kept *under control* because they have a power in them that can become *out of control*, this could also give some indication as to why migration provokes repercussions for the women. By leaving the husband he is unable to control her behaviour.

The women risk not only their wellbeing while abroad, but also at home because failure to conform to expectations can result in ostracism, enduring and shameful stigma and loss of status for the individual and their family. (Velayutham and Wise 2005:35) Still, even if they can be a subject of gossip I am not sure that every woman feels that it is fair to be thought of in these terms. Many of the women that I met held their head high, talking about their experiences with confidence. Not conforming to the general features ascribed to women. Most did not show any shyness or modesty as might be expected from them as women by the community (this might not be an expectation that apply towards foreign women such as I am myself). In this respect I believe that experiences gained through migration also can raise confidence by additional experience and gained knowledge of the outside world.

When writing about morality there must be a definition of what morality is or can be. Karin Sykes talks about moral reasoning, but at the same time separates the two words and says that moral and reasoning is contrary to each other. People ground their morality in sentimental life and try to isolate what is happiness from what is good. Moral does not base itself in logic. (Sykes 2009:23-25) The women always state that concerns for the household economy and the family, and for her or her daughters to get married, are the reason for the migration, it could be said to be a combination of virtue and self-sacrifice. In my understanding this is a kinship-based morality which involves needs of marriage. To be good wife/mother/women is motivated by emotional ties and responsibility. The morality and the social control, which can be said to work through religious figures and norms, have a dual role to play by motivating migration as well as motivating women not to migrate. If the family can see any other solution than to migrate to make a livelihood they would probably do that, although there are

exceptions where women go because they want to gain experience of something different or escape from difficult situations.

There are two factors that are powerful in shaping decisions to migrate. These two are subsistence for the family, such as food, housing, electricity etc., and dowry for marriage. Through migration it becomes possible to achieve these goals but there are often harsh conditions to handle and there is no guarantee that the migration will be successful.

Portrayal of two migration experiences: Chandima and Harmitha

The following two case studies have been included in order to illustrate some of the women's goal with migration, what they take into consideration when deciding on migrating and their arrangements at home. The aim is to emphasise the way this kind of work migration works as a factor of change on their family situation and their close relation. The case illustrates how the relationship between the migration and the family can be. I wish to illustrate that the migration can lead to both wanted and unwanted changes.

Chandima and Harmitha belong to the same family; Harmitha is married to Chandimas brother. I met them together in a hot living room provided by our mutual friend who works in a renowned women's organization in the area, and she had arranged for us to meet in her house. We made ourselves comfortable around her low table close to the entrance and were provided with a cold drink. Chandima is Hindu, 36 years old and has migrated on four different occasions. First time she left was in 1997 when she was 23 years old, and she went to Kuwait where she stayed for two years. Immediately after she came back from Kuwait in 1999 she migrated for the second time also for two years, but at that time she went to Saudi Arabia. The third time she left was also to Saudi Arabia, but this time she ended up in a house where she was treated poorly and came back to Sri Lanka after only seven months. She travelled to Saudi Arabia once more in 2008 and came back to Sri Lanka in May 2010.

When I asked her how the situation was in the third house and why it made her leave earlier, she told me that: *"It was very hard work there; I started at four o'clock in the morning and*

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had to work until one o'clock in the night. There were seven children in that family and I was supposed to take care of them all. I didn't get enough food, and was always hungry. I cried because I was hungry. These conditions made me very stressed and the little food I received I couldn't eat because I was always worrying. I became weak and ill because of this, besides, since I had other houses to compare to I was very sad because the other families had treated me like I was a daughter of the family" (Chandima) Chandima still considered herself lucky because even though the 'Madam' in that house treated her badly, the 'Madam's' brother was a good man and she told me that he helped her to buy a ticket back home to Sri Lanka.

Women who face abuse when they are abroad do not have any power to negotiate their working conditions with the house owners. AS they don't fall under the regular employment law in either country in the Middle East, the employer acts as the "owners" of the housemaid. It is normal conduct by the employer to possess the passport of the housemaid, and if she is thought to break the rules set by the employer she can face jail in that country. Many women solve this problem by escaping, and end up at the Sri Lankan embassy in the respective country without any legal papers. One of the women that I had previously talked to escaped from her employer and found shelter at the embassy in Saudi Arabia.²³

Chandima had three brothers, but two of them died when the conflict escalated in 1990 and the third one got married. Since she is the eldest one in the family she thought that she had to take responsibility for herself and her elderly father that lived with her at that time, and that's why she migrated the first time in 1997. *"We were very poor and that's why I left to Kuwait"*, she explained. In 2002 she got married but her husband turned out to be an abusive man. She tells me that he drank heavily and that he sometimes beat her. *"He doesn't give money to me and our children either; we now have a six year old son and a three year old daughter. When we got married I received land and a house from my father as dowry, but my husband has sold everything. I have made a complaint at the police office, but it is difficult to get enough help. Now I live with my sister."* In 2008 she left her two children with a female relative, her husband's sister, and left for Saudi Arabia, her daughter was at that time only one year old and she shows me a picture of how she looked when she left. According to the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment a mother cannot migrate if she has children younger than three years old, but because of a lacking system for validation of the information the women

²³ Working conditions and situations in the Middle East are discussed in more detail in chapter three.

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have to provide before they leave and with help from sub-agents, women can either lie about their children's age or just leave them out of the application form.²⁴

She tells me that she felt that she had no choice but to migrate because her husband was so bad and didn't give the family any money. I asked her if she feels that their relationship has changed because of her migration and she replies: "*I don't think that that is the main problem, but when he is angry and scream at me, he always says; - you went abroad and you might have done some things there....he accuses me of terrible things. That's why I left him, because he drinks.*" She tells me that the first time she went; she went because of poverty, but the other times she migrated because of her husband's misbehaviour. One has to be aware that there are many different factors involved in a decision to migrate.

When she left the last time the subagent²⁵ gave her 25,000 (about 160 euros, which corresponds to a normal monthly government employed salary) rupees just to go. When I ask her why the subagent paid her last time, she doesn't really know the reason. Chandima and Harmitha think it is because a Sri Lankan housemaid is cheaper and that the perception of Sri Lankans in Saudi Arabia is better comparing to for example Indonesian housemaids. "*They talk a lot with men, but we don't, and also Indonesian women look at men's faces, if the house owners tell us not to do it we don't, so they like us better*". As I have discussed in chapter two this pre-payment has only started recently and the reason for it is as yet somewhat unknown. The consequences though can be discussed. Because it is only the poorer segment of the community that migrates as housemaids, it could increase this kind of migration since it can give instant economic relief for the family in Sri Lanka.²⁶ The disadvantage of having to take up a loan to be able to migrate is also gone. This was also explicitly said to me during one discussion I had with a women who migrated three times and who wanted to migrate again. I asked her if she wanted to look for a different job this time. In her opinion however, it was not

²⁴ Read more about this in chapter three.

²⁵ In chapter three the different actors in the recruitment system are discussed and described. The subagents acts as a middle men between villagers and the complicated bureaucratic system run by the government. They both recruit and 'helps' the housemaid to prepare for the migration.

²⁶ I have only come across one woman who was skeptic about this pre-payment; because she believed that it was a pre-payment of salary which would put her in an even more exposed situation. Information from several other sources though has made me believe that this is not the case, particularly one subagent who denied that this money was taken from the housemaids coming salary.

good: *“If we apply for a different job we have to pay, so that is why I want to go as a housemaid”*.

In relation to how she found the work and how she made the agreements and preparations for the migration, she says that she went to a subagent that one of her relatives had used before her and had told her about. The first times she had paid around 10,000 rupees to migrate, but the last time she got paid. In the last trip she had made about 550 riyal, in spite of her contract saying she would get 650 riyal. She wanted to do something about this, but tells me that her husband has taken her contract and other papers so that she wouldn't go again. The last time she was abroad she sent money home to her husband's sister who took care of their children in Sri Lanka. She is one of the few that I have met who actually managed to save some of her earnings, about 100,000 which is about 660 euro, and these she now lends out to different people and it receives repayment with interest. The income she receives from that business is not enough and when we talk about the future she says that she would like to go again but because of the problem she faces with her husband she is afraid of what will happen to her son while she is away. *“I want to go again, because 6000 from interest is not enough. But I have some problem because of my son who is six and his father will come and take him away if I am not there, and the relatives also are not ready to look after the children because they are afraid of the father, because he come and fight with them. So because of that I am thinking, what to do? My 'Akka' (big sister) is also abroad, and in October she coming to Sri Lanka. After that I want to rent a house. So income is not enough. Earlier I had that kind of problem with my husband. Once he took the son and because of that he didn't go to school. Because of the problem with my husband I went to court, to a women's organization and to "Village of hope"²⁷. My husband came there and made trouble as well.”*

Harmitha is Hindu and 50 years old, and was married to Chandima brother. She has worked in Saudi Arabia for a total of seven years in the same family, divided into two trips. She ended up with a good family in Saudi Arabia. They took care of her and treated her with respect, she explained. But in the situation back home in Sri Lanka she didn't have the same luck. During her first trip in 1999 – 2002 her husband married another woman while she was gone. Before she left they had started a lorry business together, which didn't go well because of a loan that they had taken in the beginning. The interest had been too high and they couldn't pay back

²⁷ A live-in center for women who experience troubles at home.

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and that was why she had left the first time. She did manage to pay the loan back but she lost her husband. It was after two years abroad, she found out that he had married another. *”After I had come back from Saudi Arabia he came home to me for a month, but we didn’t speak to each other and he left again, back to his new wife. The family in Saudi Arabia called and asked me to come back again but now my son won’t let me go because I have a heart condition. I had that before as well but now my son works with an NGO in the area and makes enough money to look after me.”*

Both of these women said that they would rather not have migrated, but as a result of the poverty in which they found themselves, felt they had no choice for the sake of their children. They said that women who migrate as housemaids face some repercussions afterwards. They will be perceived as bad women. The good thing with migration is that it helps them to take care of their family in Sri Lanka, by sending money. It can solve different economic difficulties. That Chandima could help her elderly father made her happy, she says. And Harmitha says she is happy that she was able to pay of the dept.

After the interview my interpreter tells me that she thinks it is because of Chandima’s migration that her husband beats her, she had already migrated twice before she had married and it was her earnings from those trips that paid for her wedding. My interpreter tells me that: *“Her husband does not realize the fact, and that’s why he is torturing her”*. I wanted to know what she thought about this because she has great insight into the community where she lives. I value her opinion because she has heard how Chandima expressed herself, the words she did and did not use. Because of language barriers, I myself cannot understand these things.²⁸

When I ask these two women to summarize things that can be negative about migrating as housemaids they tell me that the way society perceive them is bad for them. My interpreter tells me that: *“Their men have left them, but they don’t tell the reasons out right”*. I asked them what has led them to believe that society’s perception is negative and they told me that no one tells it to their face, but when they were married to their husbands, the husbands told them that they heard a lot of bad things about women who migrated. These bad things are related to sexual affairs.

²⁸ I have discussed issues regarding my use of interpreter in “Methods”.

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They also told me that other bad things about working as housemaids in the Middle East was that they had to work so hard, that was ok, but they both wished that they could have had some more time to sleep. Both of them had working hours between 4 – 5 am until 11pm. What is perceived as 'good work', must be considered relatively and contextually. For them that the particular thing didn't seem to fall under too bad working conditions, all though they both agreed that it was hard. Their goals for migration were valued higher than the means to that end. These two women didn't only sacrifice their comfort, but in the end they also sacrificed their marriages. Whether the changes that have happened in these two women's lives are because of the migration is quite difficult to say for a fact, but indeed the migration has contributed to some of it.

I believe that it cannot be considered presumptuous to assume that migration can affect the relation between spouses. I argue that this can happen because of gender ideologies as I have discussed in the previous chapter. As I wrote earlier it is most common that a female relative substitute for the migrated woman in a household, and that this can be because of gender expectations. This is also discussed by Pinnawal who writes that: "If the husband in the process (of role substitution) gives up work, either by choice or because he has no other alternative, and becomes a *house-husband* then the downgrading of the husbands social status becomes more visible. Therefore, the migration of women results in the change of status and power not only for women but also for men, but in the case of men the change sometimes can be for the negative as it may lead to downgrading of their social status" (George 2000 and Lan 2006 cited in Pinnawala 2008:448) Women take on a role that is not expected from them – that of the 'bread-winner' - and they are also not present in the household for the duration of the migration. This is a change that affects not only the woman's role, but can also affect her husband's role. The role substitutions that are inevitable can also affect other female relative's roles, such that they become the runners of a household which is not really theirs, or child carers to children which are not theirs.

Other examples

Some examples that will support my argument in this chapter are already mentioned previously in this thesis. I have for example established that there is a connection between alcohol consumption for men and migration, alcohol as a way to be masculine (only men can drink in public) also makes alcohol a possible way to reaffirm self-esteem through masculinity, as argued by Gamburd. Women who become the ‘bread-winner’ of the family could threaten the role men have in the family. Following the argument by Kottegoda, a common understanding is that it is the father who is the decision maker, the ‘bread-winner’ and the disciplinarian. These changes represent a loss of self-respect and dignity for men. (Gamburd 2000:175) I have also mentioned that this kind of migration might lead to suspicion between spouses as argued by one of my informant who is mentioned previously. Ummu from Eravur²⁹ tells me that her son married young because of her absence.

Below I will illustrate a different aspect of the effects from migration. I have here examples from two Muslim women that can give some indication as to some of the consequences migration can have on the relation between husband and wife. It happens that husbands marry other women during or after the wife’s migration. This has been mentioned to me multiple times, for example as in the story above. It should firstly be noted that Yalman writes that polygyny is non-existent when he wrote his book in 1967. He writes that he had been told that this was never the custom among Muslims in Batticaloa because villagers would think about it as immoral and unacceptable. He further writes that the real reason for this is because of the dowry system. The son-in-law falls under definite obligations towards his father-in-law by the very fact of his marriage and his acceptance of marriage. (Yalman 1967:297) If the earlier reason for Muslim men not to marry several women was the dowry, this might still be a valid interpretation because of the continuing importance of dowry. That polygyny is rare in Sri Lanka seems to have been supported by different writers throughout the years. McGilvray writes in 1988 that: “Although polygyny is allowed under Muslim law, it is rare among Moors in the Batticaloa region. The matrilocal residence pattern virtually rules it out except in cases of sororal polygyny (such as two sisters married to one man in the same house). I found a few marriages of the latter type among the Tamils as well as among the Moors. Leviratic and

²⁹ Her story appear on page 53.

sororatic marriage is approved by both groups". (McGilvray 1988:122) Even as late as in 2008 I found this to be present in the literature. "Monogamy is established by civil law with the exception of the Muslim population, but even here the incidence of polygamy is very rare." (Rajan, Risseuwi, and Perera 2008:140)

My interpretation of the two examples here is firstly based on what the women's told me, but with knowledge of the customs described above I believe that I can argue for the impact of the migration in these two cases. Patima who is a Muslim woman have migrated as a housemaid on three different occasions. The first time she left to Bahrain because the father of the family was irresponsible and couldn't take care of the family so they needed money. *"I come from a poor family, and I had to drop out of school to migrate and earn money for the family. After I came back from my second trip I got married but only eight months later my husband found a new wife, we are Muslims so he can marry four women, but he left me. A while after he had gone to his new wife he came back to me, but we didn't speak to each other and after six months he left again. I would not take him back if he comes here again."*

Despite that Muslim men are allowed to marry several women, Patima expressed herself as if she was disappointed with her husband's behaviour. They did not get along anymore, and he didn't treat her as she expected. In the last sentence she clearly express that he did something wrong. She does not want to live with him anymore; she doesn't even want to speak with him. Their relationship had changed after he had left her and when he came back from his second wife. She did not explicitly express this as a consequence from the migration, but I believe that there is a connection because of how she talked about it and because of the mentioned rare multiple marriages even among Muslims in Batticaloa.

A similar thing happened to Sithy's younger sister, who was in Dubai when I met Sithy³⁰. *"Her husband doesn't treat her well. They got married three years ago and six months after they had married she found out that she was the second wife. They have a two year old child. Her husband agreed for her to migrate, but while she has been away he has married a third wife. She doesn't know about that yet"*, Sithy's mother explains to me. Even though Muslim men can marry several wives, he is supposed to treat them equally. Sithy and the mother seem angry at his behaviour. *"He is never here to see their child, he is supposed to take care of his child"*, she tells me.

³⁰ Sithy's story appears in chapter three.

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The statements above can therefore explain why the two Muslim women were negative about the husband's behaviour. If it is considered unusual, and maybe even immoral to enter multiple marriages then for me it is even easier to understand their behaviour as a consequence of external factors, such as the migration. Because I also have come across and heard about Tamil husbands who married other women because their wife's had migrated, I believe that even for Muslims this can be a consequence.

Migration can have many different effects on families. I met a woman, who had earlier explained to me that the women should be with the children and the family, also told me that she had learnt her lesson from her family's misfortune that happened as a consequence of its female migration. *"My older sister Nagama who is 54 years old migrated to the Middle East for five years because she wanted her daughter to have a good future. She went abroad as a housemaid and when she was gone her husband raped our younger sister. She became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. That daughter is now three years old and there is nobody to look after that small girl, so because of the migration both of my sisters were affected. Our younger sister is mentally ill and Nagama has also become ill because of all this. The case has been reported to the police."* The middle sister who tells this story blames her sister's migration for their family's destiny and even though I would suspect that it is not only the migrations fault, these kinds of devastating incidents are blamed and attributed to the migration. So in that way I could argue for how their story can be a story that is connected to migration in a terrible way. The relations inside this family have changed a great deal, and because the migration probably was the biggest intruder in everyday life it has to take the blame.

During my fieldwork I also cooperated with the local YMCA organisation. Through their work with children and young people I received some help locating mothers who had migrated. The issue for them, and also for me, was how migration of women affected children. Their job in this was related to other issues as well, but they saw a clear connection between female migration and children who ended up with problems. The concern for children and younger adults was also something that was shared between the women. *"We go with worries"*, as one woman expressed it. The relationship between the mother and her children also become more distant. As the grand mother told me (see below) that she would not tell her daughter when the children fell ill, to shield her from any extra worries while she was abroad. In this case the grandmother who is the female relative that takes care of children

while the mother is away in this family, even withhold information of the children's welfare from the mother. But even though some children can end up badly i.e. fall down from trees (see below), be treated badly by relatives, or marry to young etc. not everyone does. In her article "*Milk teeth and Jet Planes*" Gamburd write that the claims the media makes of how children are neglected is not supported by her study. She writes that; "Rather migration can lead to reduction in education, shifting marriage patterns and paternal alcohol consumption". (Gamburd 2008) One woman who discussed the negative aspects that can happen to the children because of the migration blamed herself for the fate of her daughter. "*I have 4 children. When I was abroad, my eldest daughter, who studied in grade 10, got married to a relative. If I was with her this hadn't happened, now her studies also collapsed. Now the other children tell me not to go abroad again, they want to be with me because they faced problems when I was in abroad, so they are afraid.*"

In the debate about migrated mothers there has been an emphasis on women 'deserting' their families, being bad mothers and so on. (Gamburd 2008) This idea also surfaced in one of my group discussions. We were discussing the negative things that result from migration for children, when one woman said: "*For example; there was one boy named Pradeep who climbed a coconut tree to pick coconuts and he fell down and broke his arms and legs*" In that context this incident was understood as something that happened because his mother was away. Other thoughts also arose concerning difficulties faced by the children of migrated mothers. There was one story that the women talked about related to the children's welfare. One woman whose husband had migrated said that she didn't want to migrate because if she did her children won't go to school. "*And sometimes those children go for work here, they may also face abuses. One mother left her child with a distant relative. That relative burned the child's legs and now that is a police case that everyone talks about in the village. In some families both the mother and father are abroad, and their children are facing very much trouble here. Mostly husbands get married to another woman here and so these children are affected very much. After a new marriage the father doesn't care for those children anymore.*"

An elderly woman sat down with us and joined in the conversation. She sits with a young girl and a boy and tells me that she is the grandmother of the children. Her daughter is at the time abroad working as a housemaid. "*I don't want my daughter to migrate again. I have raised her children while she has been away. If they become sick I take them to the hospital, but I don't tell her about it because I don't want to worry her when she is not here.*" I ask the boy

if he feels sad and worried because his mother is away. He says that he is not worried about that, but the grandmother's report is contradictory: "*It is not completely true; when his mother was preparing for the migration he cried and cried. –Please don't go, he begged her. But she told him that there was no other choice because there are no jobs available here.*" In cases like this the 'distant mothering' becomes weakened. Pinnawala argues that women who migrate manage their household from abroad through phone calls and letters. (Pinnawala 2008) In this family that arrangement does not seem to function as discussed by her. The grand mother is trying to protect her daughter from becoming extra worried. As mentioned above, mothers who migrate leave their family and children with worries about how they will manage while being away.

Migration's effect on the Family

As shown in this chapter women's migration affects the family and the relation between family members. Duties are reshuffled within the family, roles are substituted and power and status relations are transformed. Women's, and particularly a wife and mother's, migration have a higher impact on the family than a man or husband and father's migration would have. This is so because it is the women who runs the household, takes care of the children, cooks the food and cleans the house, buys the food and so on, as I have discussed here and in the previous chapter. Due to the extended family structure many families can, in despite of this, handle the big changes that result from migration, even though not everyone manages so well. Here I have mostly mentioned families who have not succeeded perfectly but with that I do not mean to say that everyone doesn't manage well. I have also met women who insisted that their migration didn't affect their family and its relations, with the argument that they arranged it all very well and that their husband's didn't mind their migration. Despite of this, through the information collected and secondary literature reading I have come to the conclusion that domestic work migration can have many consequences for the family and its constellation.

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The most part of the literature on changed gender roles in the North East conflict areas focuses on women-headed households and widowhood. (Ruwanpura 2006, Rajasingham - Senanayake 2006) All though I recognize these “new” forms of womanhood, my focus is mostly laid on changed roles when the women are in marriage. I acknowledge that there might be a connection between the effects of conflict, to changes in family structures, to further effect migration patterns, and this is also included in my thesis. The conflict is discussed as a part of the context and not as a single factor of migration, one which is, of course also very important, but can be read more thoroughly from other sources.

Throughout the thesis I have been engaged to answer and examine the initial question that started the thesis. What are the different factors in play when deciding on domestic work migration for women on the East coast of Sri Lanka? In this final part of the thesis I will bring the different elements together.

I have argued that these women’s migration should be seen as a decision taken in a continuum with many intermediary measures that contributed to their final decision. With respect to my own experiences here, I am of the opinion that the migration is induced by social and economic factors that has been considered throughout this continuum. By looking at migration through a household and livelihood perspective as I have done here, these factors can become more visible in the discussion. I have used my material to show and support my argument that the household dynamics influence the migration. However, I believe that it is important to not forget the agency of the individual, even through this kind of approach. Also, the motivations for migration as they have been explained to me must be valid but at the same time one must consider how the women legitimize their own migration. To migrate for the family can be considered more legitimate than to migrate for themselves only. My material, though, gives small evidence that it is so, I interpret the use of income as an indicator of the importance of the household and the family.

When studying migrant women in Batticaloa I was quickly notified of how the migration system assists women who migrate as housemaids. Agents who work from top to bottom in the system recruit women to migrate. I have shown how this system will pay women to migrate as housemaids, at the same time as men have to pay quite a lot to migrate as drivers,

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construction workers and so on, and that almost 90 percent of the women who migrate are traveling as housemaids. As a part of analyse of how different factors inflict on a decision to migrate, chapter three has not only described but also discussed and analysed parts of the context of migration. Because the system reach all the way down to the most local, rural village setting it is also influenced by family and household structures. The practices of the agents and agencies are undoubtedly gendered. Different types of work are expected from different gender, and the different expectations are clearly visible. In this way, my initial gender approach is valuable to unravel gendered recruitment processes.

The second thing that also becomes quickly apparent is that women's migration is motivated by commitments to family. I have shown that women who migrate justify their migration with poverty. I have also shown what poverty can mean. The money the women earn goes mainly to two things – daily subsistence and dowry. That the money will be spent on food is perhaps not so remarkable in itself, but why do women sacrifice so much to get dowry? By showing how kinship in in the east of Sri Lanka is structured and by discussing how it reproduces both society and kindred, and by showing how the marriage reproduces the family and also maintains relationships, I have discussed the importance of the dowry. Wife and husband fulfil each other as members of society. The women who migrate carry a great burden on their shoulders, as it is they who have gained great responsibility to arrange marriages. They often become bread-winners in the household. This responsibility means that many may not see any other alternative but to migrate as housemaids. This could be discussed as a consequence of existing cultural values “[...] current versions of an existing culture contribute to the definition of what is a problem in the first place. (Having no sons or being an abandoned wife is a problematic situation because of the way in which values and resources are already structured). Cultural values also help people to rank the various possibilities available to them when they are obliged to make a choice.” (Sharma 1989:53) In chapter four I have deliberated on the connection between kinship, marriage, dowry and migration. I have discussed how the income, in the form of remittances, is used for dowry. By presenting several cases that illustrate the importance of dowry I have shown that women go through constraints to arrange marriages. Throughout I have analysed the meaning of dowry. Because dowry is where all the family assets go, marriage is about maintaining resources and securing the future of the kin.

Migration brings with it changes. Relationships within in the family may change, and problems may arise between the wife and husband. I have argued that problems may arise

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because of rumours about sexual affairs women are said to have had while they were away. I have also argued that gender ideology underlie much of the rumours spread. I have also discussed the relationship between female migration and male alcohol consumption. This correlation was discussed by the women in Batticaloa. Alcohol use, or that the husband marries another woman has been blamed on the absence of the women, but I discuss it as a consequence of gender ideals. The relationship between mother and child may also be altered, and children may encounter difficulties. These things are something that women must reflect on and consider before they decide to migrate. Chapter five is influenced by the household approach towards migration. In the chapter I argue that how the household function through gender roles, expectations and ideologies have an impact on the migration and decisions to migrate for the women in Batticaloa. Overall, the impression is that those who migrate and for what is greatly a result of gender dimensions in society as well as in the family. What the migration can do with the family as I have come to know it through my fieldwork is discussed there. When women, and especially wives and mothers, migrate from the family it has consequences, be they great or small. Children are sometimes not looked after as well as they could have been if their mother had been present, husbands blame their misfortune on absent wives, and grandmothers or other female relatives takes on double responsibility. These sorts of situations occur more often when women migrate, than when men migrate.

As a whole this thesis put forward and discusses different factors that are involved in a decision to migrate. Following theories presented in the beginning of the thesis I have analysed socio-cultural processes encompassing migration, and understood them as the migration context for women on the east coast of Sri Lanka. Important factors to account for when studying migrant housemaids in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka is as stated above: consequences of the Sri Lankan conflict, the migration system at all levels, kinship and dowry, and the consequences migration can have on the relationships within the family.

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