地理學報　第五十七期：33-54 (2009)
JOURNAL OF GEOGRAPHICAL SCIENCE (57) : 33-54 (2009)

家屋與家的地理學轉移
斯里蘭卡鄉村女性移民對家的創造

Shifting Geographies of House and Home
Female Migrants Making Home in Rural Sri Lanka

歐芝蜜* 龍德兒**

Fazeeha Azmi Ragnhild Lund

Abstract

Gendered mobilities have become an intrinsic part of globalization and related economic restructuring. This paper focuses on rural women from Sri Lanka who have migrated to work in the Middle East and thereby contribute to making houses and sustaining livelihoods at the home place. We follow the transnational experience of some women migrants from the north-central region who subsequently returned to Sri Lanka. Our analysis of interviews with these women shows how social and cultural practices of creating house and home are embedded in the Sri Lankan community, despite being facilitated in a transnational context. The traditional image of women as homemakers is changing as female migrants have gained increasing authority and decision-making at the household level. This signifies a shift in authority structure and the emergence of various new powers: power over their own destinies and contributions, power in relation to family members, and increasing self-worth. However, it is pertinent to note that the sacrifices made by these women should not be

* 斯里蘭卡潘拉丹尼亞大學地理系博士
Ph. D., Department of Geography, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.
** 挪威理工大學地理系教授
Professor, Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway.

hidden behind the achievements and power they have gained. The politics of home is also changing spatially as female migrants work in both local and transnational spaces. Home cannot any longer be represented by a simple location or physical space, but transcends the local and the global, thereby revealing the dynamics of transnational lives.

Keywords: female migration, transnational lives, house and home, Solama, Sri Lanka.

摘　要

性別化的移動已經成爲全球化及經濟重構中重要的部份。本文主要探討因工作而遷移至中東的斯里蘭卡鄉村女性如何建立家屋與維持家鄉生計。在本研究中，我們傾聽一些回到斯里蘭卡中北部地區的移民女性的經驗。透過對於這群女性的訪談分析，我們瞭解了建造家屋與家的社會與文化的實踐，除了是在跨國脈絡中展開之外，也鑲嵌於斯里蘭卡的在地社區中。當女性移民獲得越來越多權力並在家中掌握決策權時，女性扮演家務勞動者的傳統角色則會轉變。這意味著權威結構的轉變與各種新型態力量的出現：這些新型態力量可以扭轉他們的命運與貢獻，與在家庭關係中的權力，以及逐漸重要的自我價值。然而，確切地說，這些女性爲獲得成就與權力而付出的各種犧牲與努力不應當被隱而不顯。當女性移民往返於在地與跨國空間中工作的時候，家的政治在空間上也開始轉變。家不能只是被簡單的再現爲地域或物質空間，而應該超越在地與全球，展現出跨國生活的動態性。

關鍵字：女性遷移、跨國生活、家屋與家、索拉瑪、斯里蘭卡

Introduction

Gendered mobilities have become an intrinsic part of the era of globalization and economic restructuring. The sustainability of rural lives in Sri Lanka is increasingly dependent on contributions from workers in foreign countries, particularly in the Middle East. Within this context, men and women have differential mobility. Various studies have documented that Sri Lanka is the only Asian country where the number of women migrating for work to the Middle East far exceeds the number of men migrating to work there (Hettige, 1989; Hettige, 1991; Gamburd, 2000). However, less has been documented on these women's subjective understanding and experiences of migration and working abroad.

This paper focuses on ways in which women migrants contribute to making homes and sustaining livelihoods at the home place. Empirical findings from the rural community of Solama in the north-central region of Sri Lanka indicate that at the heart of the most prestigious resettlement program of the country, the viability of people's livelihoods now depends on influxes of foreign capital rather than on the agricultural production for which this area was planned. We present the transnational experiences of some women through

their stories on belonging and the role of home, how they perceive home in relation to their new roles, how they articulate the sacrifices they have made, and how they assess their contributions to making a home.

Set against such a micro-cosmos, we aim to gain knowledge of female migrants' contributions to shifting geographies of house and homemaking. We study house and home as multifaceted dimensions in the society (political, cultural, social, and economic) which intersect and impact on different places and scales differently over time. The overall objective of our study is to find out how house and home are sites of change and contestation that impact on gender roles. We ask how new houses in the settlement scheme represent home for the migrant women and what their perceptions of house and homemaking are. In our interviews with migrant women in Solama, by using migration and work as sites for investigation, we aim to understand how the women contribute to making a home and sustaining livelihoods at their home places. The discussion is divided into two sections. First, we offer a theoretical discussion on house and homemaking. Second, we discuss subjective knowledge of the migration, work, and homes of the migrant women. Essential to both sections is the role of constructing a house in homemaking, and how the house has become a symbol of achievement, transnational identity, and a good life in the future.

A Geography of House and Homemaking

The Mahaweli project (1977 to date) was a major effort to reconstruct the rural economy of Sri Lanka more than thirty years ago whereby every settler was given an equal share of land (1 ha.) and a home (one-room mud hut on 0.2 ha. plot). The project may be regarded as the first structural adjustment program in the country. Since then, the Mahaweli area has developed into a highly differentiated society, as many settlers have succeeded in earning a good income and creating a good home, while others have failed in this respect (Lund, 1993; Azmi, 2007a). Today, many settlers work elsewhere in the nation as industrial workers or soldiers, or they work in the international diaspora, primarily in the Middle East. These movements impact on how people perceive and identify themselves with settlements or invest in their pioneer houses in the settlements, and how they deal with the vulnerable and often impoverished life situation prevailing today.

According to Mallett (2004), writing on the meaning of home has proliferated recently within the various social sciences. She has reviewed the literature on house and home and finds that home is variously conflated with or related to house, family, self, gender, and journeying (migration). Citing various scholars who have focussed on the experiences of migrants and refugees, she argues that ideas about staying, leaving, and journeying are integrally associated with notions of home. She shows how home, be it defined as a dwelling, a homeland or even a constellation of relationships, is "represented as a spatial and relational realm and to which they generally hope to return" (Mallett, 2004: 77). In our reviews of the literature, we find that most of the research on house and home is based on experiences from Western countries. There has been little study of the relationship between the construction of houses in settlement schemes and conceptions of home

in Asian contexts. Furthermore, there is limited knowledge of how conceptions of house and home shift over time and within the new globalized rural economy due to structural adjustments, the new market economy, and other conditions such as the present-day war-like situation in Sri Lanka.

Since one of the authors (Lund) did fieldwork in the area in 1978, she has observed a shift from the time when the pioneer settlers in the Mahaweli worked the land and created a home with very simple means, to the present-day situation where their children and grandchildren (primarily the women) contribute towards their parents' well-being to enable them to avoid the poverty trap by building good new houses for them and sending money home for the betterment of their daily lives. The way the second and third generation settlers strategize is thus linked with globalization and making a living in both the local village and abroad. However, most women work abroad without their dependants, and hence grandparents and young children have to manage without the work input and social contributions of the most active generation. As a consequence, often the grandparents have had to give up farming. Furthermore, households and families are split because of labor migration (Lund, 2007). These factors raise questions relating to the significance of house and home in a wider territorial sense, namely the global, the local and the transnational context.

The reality as described from the village of Solama in Mahaweli has led us to conceptualize globalization as time-space distanciation (Inda and Rosaldo, 2001; Lie and Lund, 2005; Lund, 2007). It tells us that the world is shrinking but at the same time stretching out. We may experience the world as smaller than before, because it is within reach, directly by fast transport and indirectly via new media. Still, the personal world is simultaneously stretching out because social systems are lifted out of the local context, in this case through family members migrating for work. People develop multi-local livelihoods and transnational networks (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005).

People in the Mahaweli area have become dependent on both their home country and foreign countries for their survival. In the process, all family members, especially the women, have become important actors in the global economy. Houses in the settlement stand as symbols of globalization. They have become a transnational element in society, but, as will become apparent in this paper, the value and esteem attached to them are grounded in local cultural values.

Such an approach sees house and home in economic, political, and cultural contexts. This fits well with more recent perspectives which argue that the study of the experience and use of home requires a more dynamic and context-sensitive focus. In citing the works by geographers Relph, Buttimer, Tuan, and Seamon, Moore (2000: 207) calls for a "greater focus on the context of home, and development of a contextual understanding of the concept of home which transcends the material characteristics of domestic space." This facilitates a more holistic interpretation of house and home and how they are entities that comprise inter-related qualities of people, environment, place, and time.

Two geographical concepts are relevant for this analysis of house and home: place and space. We regard place as a geographical and symbolic entity, an important locality of belonging for the people who live there. Space is a much more diffuse entity or dimension, but we insert the issue of scale to encompass local-global

interfaces, to capture the transnational spatial dimension. Mallett (2004: 63) defines home as a place, but also as a space that is inhabited by family, people, things, and belongings: “a familiar, if not comfortable space where activities and relationships are lived. In our account, home is a virtual place, a repository for memories of the lived spaces. It locates lived time and space, particularly intimate familial time and space.”

Furthermore, for us place is an intrinsic dimension of the settlements that we study and is a useful tool with which to analyze identity. To cite Rose (2001: 88), “Identity is how we make sense of ourselves, and geographers, anthropologists and sociologists, among others, have argued that the meanings given to a place may be so strong that they become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them.” Crucial to the argument in this paper are the meanings given to various places, namely “here”, which is the ancestral place, and “there”, the foreign place. When migrants live partly here and partly there, their identities change, so that they not only represent here and there but also hybrid forms of belonging to more than one place. Hence, identity may relate to different scales, in this case locally and transnationaly.

At the individual level, and with respect to domicile and diaspora, we explore the significance of Blunt’s (2005) concept of spatial politics of home. What constitutes home and belonging in the settlements today, as well as among settlers who are temporarily away? Are the Mahaweli settlements considered as “home” to people who work abroad? When living outside, do they identify themselves as Mahaweli settlers and what do they perceive as their “home”? Are there gendered differences supporting definitions of home in identifying what constitutes home and where one thinks one belongs? Inspired by the work of geographers such as Blunt (2005), Blunt and Varley (2004), Yeoh and Huang (2000), Little (2002), Massey (1995), and also other scholars such as Kottegoda (2006), Vimaladharma (1997), and Bowlby *et al*. (1997), we wish to contribute to the understanding of what constitutes the power geometries of making home, as these intersect all levels in time and space.

We also find that the vulnerabilities and livelihoods of settlers at the community level are affected by peoples’ mobility patterns. According to Carney (1998: 4), “a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for means of living a livelihood; a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks and maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future.” Livelihoods exist within the context of culture and tradition. Livelihoods impact on culture, and culture changes with new ways of living (Bourdieu cited in Lund, 1993; Carney, 1998; Ellis and Freeman, 2005). Rigg (2007: 77), however, argues that livelihood studies have not been particularly successful in understanding change. He asks: “[W]hy do they (livelihoods) change and what implications change has for different groups whether delineated geographically, socially, culturally or economically?” Furthermore, Rigg (2007: 78) states that “livelihood transitions operate at several levels of scales. Individuals age; households pass through a sequence of changes that have livelihood implications; economies evolve; and countries’ prospects improve; falter or decline.” Thus, with respect to house and home, people’s strategies depend on their status, gender and age, as well as external “conditionalities” such as structural adjustment and global influences.

In the Mahaweli settlement project housing was one of the most debated but also biggest material investments for most families when the project started in 1977. Today, many settlers still live in the mud hut that they were given by the Government because they have not been able to afford a better house. Migration is seen as a way to re-create home, to minimize people's vulnerability and to diversify their livelihoods. Homemaking thus depends on the agency of migrant women, and we argue that women authorize their power in the homemaking process: their power over their husbands and families in decision making, their shared power with husbands and family members in planning and constructing a house, and power within it in relation to making a home "here", which is good, sustainable and a dream fulfilled. Like Gamburd (2000), in her study of women who migrate from Sri Lanka to the Middle East, we consider women migrants as capable individuals who take an active role in their families' economic well-being and in making a home.

Our previous work in Sri Lanka has provided some insights into homemaking (Azmi, 2007a; Brun and Lund, 2008). Azmi (2007a) has sought to understand the change in meaning of what constitutes a good life and how women consider home as an important dimension of a good life. Azmi (2007b) also draws attention to how women consider having a home is an important contribution to the household's well-being as well as to that of the community. Brun and Lund (2008) have studied homemaking in post-tsunami villages in Sri Lanka and have argued that in exploring the relationship between house and home in recovery processes, the house is seen as something which is both material and imaginative (symbolic); house is an expression for, and homemaking involves, both identity and power (after Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Thus, house and home may facilitate a sense of belonging and togetherness, as well as the opposite, namely alienation and tension.

Making house and home thus has different meanings in different contexts. "House" signifies both material and symbolic aspects and is located between memory, identity, survival, and everyday life (Blunt and Varley, 2004). How houses are constructed in a particular context is of crucial importance and implies a need for specific local knowledge when building or rebuilding houses. Migrant women work in both local and transnational spaces, and we argue that transnational identities are embedded in women's capabilities and achievements at the local place.

Finally, we argue that the concept of "home" gains meaning through the absence of a home. Bowlby *et al*. (1997) note that during a person's life course he or she will change his or her own orientation and idea of home. For migrant women, home carries contradictory and ambiguous meanings as they negotiate life "here" and "there". This also shows that a home changes its significance when articulated from different locations. Although the migrants have been living in someone else's "home" during their contract period overseas, their real "home" may be in their place of origin and to which they return.

Solama

Solama is a small village situated within system H of the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project (AMDP),[1] which is the largest multipurpose development project in the country.[2] Solama is located in the

Anuradhapura district of Sri Lanka which is in the North Central Province. It was once considered one of the purana (ancient) villages in system H. The village was formed in the 1930s by a group of drummer caste people, who were discriminated against by other castes in the area due to their less privileged position. Initially starting with nine families, today the village consists of 329 families,[3] spanning three generations. The total population of Solama now is 1,389, of which 728 are females and 661 are males.[4] All villagers were Buddhists. Until Solama was incorporated into the AMDP, it hardly maintained any relationships with other villages in the surrounding area. Today, it is gradually losing its original characteristics, such as slash and burn agriculture, extended families within a tightly knit community, internal exchange of labor, food and other goods, subsistence production, narrow roads, and mud houses.

Upon their resettlement in the AMDP, the settlers were given homesteads and fields close to each other to enable them to maintain their family and community ties, and to continue the traditional clustered pattern of living. They were also introduced to permanent agriculture, something of which most settlers had no knowledge. After they were incorporated into the project the villagers faced multiple problems as they were forced to abandon their traditional lifestyles and adopt a new one which imposed restrictions on their perceived freedom. Today, with population growth, declining access to land, lack of water resources, and lack of employment opportunities within the village, many families are no longer able to derive adequate or acceptable living conditions. This situation has been aggravated further by external processes, such as changes in political power, market liberalization and globalization, all of which are beyond the control of the villagers. In 2006, 67 percent of the villagers were beneficiaries of government welfare and poverty alleviation programmes.[5]

Of the 329 families, only 121 families owned paddy land, and a large number of people did not have land to cultivate paddy. Also, most of the settlers who owned paddy land had given it to others for cultivation on a shared basis because they could not cultivate profitably due to escalating production costs. The number of settlers who have given out their land for lease or sharecropping has increased during recent decades. The majority of landowners and landless people in Solama can hardly survive with the limited income earning opportunities and therefore have had to seek employment opportunities outside the village.

Methodology

This article is based on primary data collected as part of a doctoral research project by Azmi that aimed to understand the changing livelihoods of settlers in a peasant colonization context. Secondary data were drawn from previous research by Lund on the topic and on the situation of women. The collaboration and bringing together of these sources of data have facilitated the study of changes that have taken place in the area during a time span of 30 years.

The doctoral research was conducted in three settlements in the Thambuttegama local administration division in System H of the AMDP in Sri Lanka. The three settlements are Solama (an ancient village

incorporated into the project), Maliyadevapura (a settlement for evacuees who had lost their lands due to the project), and Kongwewa (a settlement which mainly consisted of settlers from other parts of the country as well as illegal settlers). For this particular article, data were collected in Solama during March–June 2007. Solama village was selected because compared to other villages studied, it is a traditional, ancient village and only began to face poverty and few opportunities for paid work both within and outside the village in the late 1990s, prompting women to resort to migration to the Middle East as a conscious choice to break the vicious cycle of poverty.

In Solama we used snowball sampling methods to select the Middle East migrant women. We conducted five in-depth interviews with female returnee migrants in the village to gain an understanding of the migration, work and homes of migrant women. While two of the women had decided not to migrate again, the other three were uncertain as whether or not they would do so. The migrants interviewed were aged between 22 and 35 years, and had low educational qualifications (none had studied up to secondary level education) and skills. Three interviewees had worked in the Free Trade Zone of Sri Lanka before they had migrated to the Middle East (prior to marriage) and two had worked as agricultural labourers in the village. All of them had young children and/or children attending school. Their husbands were either unemployed or engaged in coolie work. Child care arrangements were negotiated between other family members and their husbands during the women's absence.

Clare *et al*. (1997: 92) think that qualitative techniques "can provide detailed understanding of socio spatial experiences." In our study we used in-depth interviews to explore the "subjective understanding" and "experience" of migration, work and home. Subjective understandings and experiences of migration, work and home are shaped by broader socio-economic contexts along with individual needs and preferences. At the same time, individual understandings and experiences can also differ considerably, as each individual has his or her own expectations, capabilities, and motivations. Further, despite the changes in well-being that the selected study participants had created in their families as a consequence of their migration, they have remained almost invisible having received little attention among researchers, policy makers, and planners. Our research is creating a voice for these women. When we approached the women, initially they were reluctant to share the experiences of their journey abroad which had led to such considerable changes in their lives and those of their families. However, when we explained the purpose of our research, they gradually consented to be interviewed.

Migration Context

In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere in a number of developing countries, global restructuring has created a new socio-economic landscape. The subsequent restructuring of regional economic landscapes creates different local, national and international contexts, stimulating the movement of people and capital. The introduction of industrial capitalism, post-colonial development policies, and land settlement programs has created similar

scenarios at the local level, involving the community, family, and individuals. As restructuring pressures intensify, generally poor families appear to be increasing their dependence on international migration as a survival strategy. Middle Eastern and West Asian countries have provided an avenue for many impoverished families, especially for women, to pursue a livelihood.

During the last two decades remittances from migrant workers in the Middle Eastern countries have become a major source of foreign exchange in Sri Lanka (SLBEF, 2005). With more international migration and temporary circulation expected, remittances are likely to become a critical resource for the government and individual families in many parts of the country.

Although many poor families in Sri Lanka have benefited from remittances since the late 1970s, migration for work has been accessed by Solama women only since the early 1990s. More recently, policy changes accelerated by market liberalization, along with increasing population growth and the changes in the conceptualizations of poverty and what constitutes a decent living, have forced many poor men and women in the village to seek new and more remunerative sources of income outside agriculture. Solama villagers have gradually moved out of the village in search of employment. Men have sought employment as agricultural laborers and construction workers and in the armed forces, while women have pursued different paths. Among the employed total female population, 15 percent of women in Solama have migrated to Middle Eastern countries, while 28 percent work in garment factories in other parts of Sri Lanka (fieldwork 2007). The majority of the working age women, however, are still engaged in work related to agriculture in Solama and neighbouring villages, and some are engaged in trade as well.

Initially, the women's decision to migrate was triggered by several factors related to different dimensions of poverty. Today, especially the second and third generations in Solama face problems of scarcity of land for agriculture and housing. Being a closely knit community in terms of religion, language and caste, the growing population tends to concentrate in the same locality. Consequently, the size of landholdings has also become very small as they are fragmented informally. This uneconomical land fragmentation has become a serious issue in the village. With the average size of landholdings falling below cultivable levels, the shortage and lack of commercially viable holdings have had an adverse impact in terms of poverty. Consequently, many households in Solama have become increasingly more dependent on transfers and remittances from family members working in urban areas, the security forces, and abroad.

Contemporary livelihood studies also emphasize that instead of being victims, people play active roles in securing their livelihood (de Haan, 2005). Yet finding livelihood opportunities through migration has not been without constraints. Such opportunities have largely been dependent upon the age, sex, and marital status of the migrants. In Solama, married women who have decided to migrate to the Middle East have based their decision on the lack of other suitable options at home. As a result they also have changed the traditional gender division of labor existing in the village context and the traditional household models which were dominated by male breadwinners. Little (2002) explains that the choice of jobs women undertake results from complicated and dynamic interrelationships between different elements of their lives and different

constraining factors that operate at various individual, family, and community levels.

Investment decisions relating to remittances depend on several factors, such as the economic situation of the recipient family, the migrant's marital status and position in the family. Furthermore, the priority given to investing remittances changes with life course, and in the case of married women from Solama, migration is associated primarily with building a house. Throughout our interviews, we learned that among this particular cohort of migrants, having their own home was their first priority or the main push factor that led to their migration. The women also stated additional priorities: most of them wanted to have a regular source of income and to escape poverty. It was apparent that escaping poverty was not only about earning money but also about having their own home, buying land, saving money, educating their children, and securing a better future.

Generally, migrants' initial contract abroad lasted for two or three years. After the first contract period, the interviewees had managed to lay the foundations and build the basic structure of their houses. Some then continued to migrate in order to complete their houses, while others regarded that building the basic structure was the most expensive part and that they would be able to complete their house with money they earned in the village. However, from observations and informal discussions, we understood that many families were unable to realize these goals, and hence the women had to resort to migration again. In some families, migrant women extend their migration contracts for up to five years in order to complete their houses, as well as to save a little or to buy or to invest in productive resources, such as buying a piece of land or renting land, buying a three wheeler or tractor that could provide income through hiring or investing in children's education and health.

In the following section we follow the transnational experiences of five married migrant women in Solama through their stories of their contributions to making a home, what they regard as the significance of home, how they sustain livelihoods, and the sacrifices they make in the course of achieving their goals.

Making Home

Migration is basically about having my own home

In order to understand the main factor(s) influencing women's decision to migrate for work, we asked "What are your priorities in taking a migration decision?" One woman responded:

> If living is only about eating, what we earn is enough for us. But it is not so. We should have a house to live in. Then one has everything. I know the pains of living in a poor house, that you have your walls built up with mud, roof thatched with palm leaves, and a mud floor. (Sanjeewani, aged 22)

Like Sanjeewani, other migrant women also found that they could not provide adequately for their

families from incomes earned locally; rather, they were only able to earn sufficient for daily subsistence. They were unable to save any money or spend anything on housing, weddings, funerals, health care, or education. The desire for good housing was stated overwhelmingly by all of the women.

All those who had migrated from Solama expected to be able to improve their living conditions. Prior to migration, either they were living with their parents or they no longer wanted to continue living in a poor quality house constructed of locally available building materials. The primary goal for most migrant women in the study was either to build a new house or to improve their present house. Similar findings have been made by other researchers who have conducted research on Middle East migration and its various impacts (Vimaladharma, 1997; Gamburd, 2000; Kottegoda, 2006).

Sustaining a Livelihood at Home

Despite low salaries, in general the migrant women of Solama send a large share of their earnings as remittances which their families use for food, health care, housing, repaying loans, and so on. The women interviewed said that they sent their money to a person in the family whom they trusted, as they were very concerned about alcohol abuse in the village. More than 90 percent of the local men were in the habit of consuming alcohol and many of them were alcoholics. We also heard stories regarding family break-ups among migrant women, especially due to their husband's addiction to alcohol which resulted in the waste of hard-earned money. In cases where the husbands do not work, the women have to send money for their family's subsistence and have to work abroad for far longer than they had originally planned. In families where the husband had a job, remittances were only used for daily consumption needs in critical situations:

> I send the money to my husband. He is also working in a rice mill. He carefully uses that money only to build the house. Unless I ask him to spend the money to buy good food and clothes for the children, he will not use my money for any other purposes. (Kumari, aged 25)

Somalatha (aged 28) had a different experience:

> My husband does not have a regular income source. So I send money to maintain the household expenditure. There is hardly anything left. As my husband does not have a job, I have been working in the Middle East for about six years. I don't know when this journey will end.

Thus, among the interviewed women, sending money for purposes other than building a house was highly associated with their husband's employment. Two of the women interviewed had managed to save some money in the form of gold jewelry, even after paying for the construction of their semi-finished houses because their husbands earned incomes that would only cover daily expenditures. Others had hardly managed to save anything other than some second-hand electrical equipment, given by their employers, which could be useful in times of crisis. In these families, the husbands had neglected their possible earning opportunities

through depending on their wives. Hettige (1991) noted a similar situation in his study of female workers who migrated to the Middle East from a Muslim village located in one of the irrigation schemes in north central Sri Lanka.

In general, remittances thus play a critical role in the economy of Solama. We observed an expansion in commercial activities (especially in small shops) in the village compared to a decade previously, which had resulted from the increasing circulation of money. Also, compared to males who migrate, female migrants who work as housemaids generally receive low salaries "there." According to the interviewees, this was one reason why they had not invested their remittances in productive resources. By contrast, male migrants (comparatively few in numbers in Solama) invested their money in trading activities or buying agricultural machinery or a three-wheeler.

Kottegoda (2006) notes that migrant women use remittances also to help their extended families, especially when the latter are in a critical situation. Although nuclear family models are increasing in Solama, caring for extended families is still customary. Given that Solama is a single-caste village, extended families are a common feature. All of the village women have continuously sought assistance from their extended families in decision making with regard to migrating for work, covering the cost of migration and child care arrangements. Accordingly, they have an obligation to look after the well-being of their extended families. In a discussion with a family member of one of the migrants, it was revealed that as many of the husbands in the village are addicted to alcohol, proper management of remittances is taken care of by other members of the extended family.

The Meaning of Home

Home had differing meanings for the interviewees which were not solely based on their identities as migrant women but also apparently influenced by their roles as mothers and wives.

It is a mirror of who you are

> Having your own home provides a new identity. In our society people who do not own a home are looked down upon. You might have heard some people saying, 'look at her, she doesn't have a house of her own, but she is wearing a nice dress'. (Vineetha, aged 35)
>
> Being in the Middle East as a housemaid for about four years, if I could not build a house, my journey will not become meaningful … Villagers will humiliate our family for not being able to build a house. Now I don't have that fear. (Somalatha, aged 28)

For migrant women, home plays a crucial role in maintaining personal identities in society, and their houses look more attractive or at least are in a better state compared to other houses. Thus, the success of migration is reflected through the ability to construct a house. Furthermore, beyond escaping poverty, what

others think of the migrant women is a major factor in motivating them to do what they do for a living and how much they want to earn.

Home as a place for immediate family and privacy

High fertility rates and socio-cultural factors have favoured the extended family system in rural Sri Lanka. Although families with larger numbers of members are the trend in the South Asian context, Sri Lanka has experienced a strong decline in the number of persons in a family. An emerging feature of the modern family system is the change in attitudes towards the number of children. Previously, more children were preferred as they contributed to the strength of the family in many aspects, particularly labor. However, the birth rate has declined during the last two decades. Hence, the structure of Sri Lankan society is gradually moving from extended families to nuclear families where the family model comprises a husband, a wife and their children (most often two). Married couples no longer tend to remain living in their family homes:

> I was living in my husband's home with his parents and other in-laws. I was always busy with cooking, cleaning, washing, and home gardening. At the end of the day, I felt tired and I always thought, if I can have my own home, I have to cook for only a few and I will have less work and more time to rest. I did not have time or could not enjoy my family life. I decided to migrate to build a house of my own. (Janaki, aged 30)

Home is also a space for family life (Blunt and Varley, 2004). Family relationships are located within the home and are where the spatial politics of home are articulated. The migrant women interviewed in Solama would like to have a nuclear family. Janaki's quote reveals that she did not have the life she preferred when she lived with her husband's family. She thought having her own "home" would provide this freedom and redefine her emotions, experiences and relationships. In extended families in Sri Lanka, tolerance and mutual understanding among family members are considered important to the unity of the family. However, recently media and teledramas are questioning this "unity", and have focused on women's subordinate roles in families and society, neglect of female education, and employment. In our view, this may have contributed to a more balanced view about the way people conceptualize home and family. Poor rural women from Solama are no exception as they too usually gather in houses with televisions to watch such programs.

I can conduct my own business at home

> Now I prepare sweets and sell them at the weekly market. My husband does the business. It is giving a reasonable profit. Earlier, we could not start a business, although I had the idea. It is because of the poor condition of our house. When you prepare food for sale, it should be prepared in a hygienic environment. The most important thing is I have water connection. (Janaki, aged 30)

Janaki's quote reveals that homes can also be placed in terms of a business context. She had actively

strategized her home as place for production in order to become an income earner, even after she had stopped migrating.

Reflects a sense of belonging

For migrant women home is no longer represented by just a simple location or physical space; it is much more than a physical dimension. Long absences have led the women to appreciate the comforts of their homes in a way they had not done before. Further, the attachment to place gives meaning to 'home' because relationships between people in a society have grown with time. Migrant women who work as domestic workers do not have any positive attachments to other people's homes where they do not belong permanently. Their relationship with the "new" society is also different from that with their place of origin, as it is limited to the family they are working for. Because most of them are expected to work from dawn to dusk, seven days per week, their social interaction is limited or sometimes even prohibited. Even if they are allowed to interact, it is mostly with other maids. Thus the spatial politics and social understanding of 'home' in their workplace relate to a temporary place of paid work. The following view of one migrant reveals her attachment to her own home at her place of origin and how free she was there:

> When I returned to Sri Lanka after three years and when I saw my 'home', I just felt like, oh this is mine. In my home, I can eat when I want, I can sleep when I want, I can arrange the household chores according to my interest, and I can have a happy life with my family. (Kumari, aged 25)

As mentioned, Bowlby *et al*. (1997) note that during a person's life course he/she will change his/her own orientation and idea of home. For migrant women, home carries contradictory and ambiguous meanings as they negotiate life "here" and "there". This also shows that home changes its meaning when articulated from different locations. Although they have been in someone else's "home" during their contract period overseas, the women's real "home" is in their places of origin to which they have an attachment to which they return. They feel "invisible and marginalized" in "homes there," whereas they are visible and empowered at "homes here." Further, many migrant women do not consider their workplace as a home because their socio-economic status is marginal there, they feel subordinate and they do not have any emotional bonds to the place abroad. At "homes there" the migrant women have a lower position which is constantly emphasized and articulated daily:

> How can I feel at home there? I am just a servant. I do domestic work for my madam. Nobody helps me. If I am doing household duties at home, somebody will help, at least when I am not well. I do all the childcare work there, but just for money, because those children do not show any affection or at least sympathy with me. In my home I feel like I am the boss. I feel satisfied when I finish my household work as there is no one to order me to work or to make complaints about my

> work. Caring for my children gives me real satisfaction. My children care for me when I am sick. (Vineetha, aged 35)

Blunt and Varley (2004: 3) define home as a space of belonging, "invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life." For Vineetha, "home there" does not fit with this definition. Her view reveals that the real meaning of home is also attached to connectedness and care, which cannot be expected when one works as a housemaid.

Home as Asset to Women's Agency

Home can be considered as an important dimension of livelihood which comes under the category of assets. Bebbington (1999) points out that a person's assets give meaning to that person's world. He further elaborates: "Assets are not simply resources people use in building livelihoods: they are assets that give them the capability to be and to act. Assets should not be understood only as 'things' that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation. They are also a basis of an agent's power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources" (Bebbington, 1999: 2022). The following narratives reveal how migrant women's contributions to "making home" have given them a degree of power and control which they otherwise would not have been able to enjoy.

Making home

The image of women as homemakers in the traditional sense has gradually changed in Solama, as elsewhere in Sri Lankan society. Our interviewees had made considerable contributions to homemaking after assuming their new role as economic providers. They were trying to bring order to daily family life which they had been less able to do prior to migrating. The children are expected to follow rules (which are not so rigid) to keep the "home" a beautiful place (physically) and to create a "homely environment." They are also expected to assist in maintaining the neatness of their home, and to eat, study, and worship at regular times. Women have more say than previously in introducing order into their everyday lives:

> When I was abroad, my husband could not maintain this order in the family. It is not his fault. The children do not listen to him. Now I have a home. Children have their own place in it. They are eating on time, doing their homework, and helping me with household chores. I tell them, and of course they know the hardships that I underwent to build this house. I make them understand they have a duty to make it a home, they should pray, study, and respect elders. Everything should start from home. (Vineetha, aged 35)

The quote reveals that the concept of homemaking in Sri Lanka is gradually changing and becoming a family responsibility. This finding fits with that of Gamburd (2007), who shows how labor migration has

changed conventional gender roles in Sri Lanka, giving women more control over money and in decision making. It also shows that “making home” is not only about cooking, washing and cleaning. It is also about maintaining a peaceful family, culture, religion, family values, and bringing up good children.

Home as a site of power

> I sent money to my father. My husband did not like this arrangement. It is not that I did not trust my husband. He spends a lot when he has money and he has many friends who expect him to spend money on their entertainment. So, I sent the money to my father. I also sent the plan of the house. I was particular about what it should look like. I wanted to build the toilet closer to the house, otherwise it is difficult if you want to use it in the night. There is a lot of other work to be done. My husband says now I have to stop going abroad again, and he will earn money to complete the house. But I don’t think it will be possible. I will wait for a year. (Sanjeewani, aged 22)

Migrant women’s success as family providers gives them greater control over the use of the money they earn and decision making at household level. Although Sanjeewani’s husband did not like the idea of her sending money to her father, she resisted and was eventually able to build a house with her father’s help. She also became more powerful in the process: when she said she would wait for a year to see how her husband was going to help her to complete the house, she was in a position to assess his performance.

Exploring women’s agency within the home

Migration has precipitated qualitative shifts in economic and social roles, changing the traditional roles that women had as caregivers. Although migration erodes family ties for a short time, it strengthens women’s gendered identifications (Yeoh and Huang, 2000). After returning from the Middle East, most migrant women have had to renegotiate the assigned meanings of gender roles and relations:

> After I married, I moved into my husband’s home. It was like hell for me because, the whole family lived there. My husband is an alcoholic. Many times he used to beat me and scold me in front of my in-laws. Then I cried a lot and did not speak against him. Now, I have my own home, he cannot do the same things, as I think it is my home and I have control over what is happening at my home. (Kumari, aged 25)

In Kumari’s case, it was the determination to migrate that ultimately led to her having her own home. Migrating for work increased her agency and also her status and power in her home. However, it is important to consider whether these changes are sustainable or not. Though limited in number, studies conducted in Sri Lanka reveal that migration as a livelihood option has not changed the position of women in society substantially (Jayaweera, 2002; Kottegoda, 2006). Many women are unable to continue to be income earners upon their return, or they are unable to invest in productive resources such as buying a piece of agricultural

land or starting their own businesses.

The Price Paid for Making a Home

Women also make large sacrifices to improve their families' living conditions at home. This happens in situations of loneliness, alienation and being poorly treated by their employers, as the following stories reveal.

Mothering from distance

> I left my son when he was just one year and two months. My mother took care of him during my absence. Now he is four years and I missed many things that a mother should have enjoyed of her son: how he started to walk, how he started to speak … (Somalatha, aged 28)
>
> I went to Lebanon when my son was three. Now he is seven and he still wants me to carry him … (Janaki, aged 30)

Like Somalatha and Janaki, many other migrant mothers who have left their children when they were very young seemed to have feelings of guilt, loss, or sorrow. The interviewed women had negotiated child care arrangements with their family members, especially when their husbands worked too. The tasks related to child care were automatically reallocated to the closest family member with confidence, generally a grandmother or sister.[6]

It is not my home

> I was not allowed to go out, except to throw out the refuse. I sent one letter a month. I was not allowed to use the phone … (Janaki, aged 30)

The family left behind was a constant worry for housemaids who felt isolated abroad. Some wrote letters to learn about their family's well-being. However, as many were unable to write, or did not have access to a telephone, they used cassette recorders and sent tapes to their families via friends returning home from the Middle East. Religious affiliation was another means of exclusion.

> I was not allowed to keep the statue of Lord Buddha. My madam asked me not to have anything like that at home. I had a postcard of Lord Buddha in my suitcase and I kept it secretly and I worshiped my god every morning before I started my work. It is really a pity that I did not have the freedom to worship my god. Yes, it is not my home. (Vineetha, aged 35)

They think we are bulls

Our interviews revealed that many of the migrant women had bad working experiences. They had to work for large families without any help. They had long working hours and very short periods of rest:

> I woke up daily at four. I had to work until midnight. I didn't have a break or free time. If they saw me taking a rest they would ask me to do extra work. If I complained, they said I could go home and they would take another maid. But I had a lot of expectations in my life. I couldn't go home empty handed. So I worked all day. They think we are bulls. (Vineetha, aged 35)

As most of the domestic maids in the Middle East are in a subordinate position they do not have any choice other than to obey their employer. Many of them are treated as slaves and some do not receive their salaries regularly, while others do not receive the proper amount:

> I asked for my salary only when I wanted to send money home. But they wouldn't give me my salary at once. I had to wait for about three to four months to get my salary. They said that they would give me the salary before I went home. But they did not give me the last six months' salary. (Kumari, aged 25)

Despite such stories, many women decide to work in the Middle East because of the higher incomes. Compared to the available coolie work in their own village, they believe that if they tolerate the hardships for a short time, they can have a good future and fulfil their various aspirations. Their sacrifices also mean they develop stronger attachments to their homes. The attachment is not the same as it would be to a house provided freely by the government or given as a dowry by their parents.

Contribution to the Local Community

In Solama village it is very easy to identify a house in which migrants from the Middle East live, and such migrants have become a source of inspiration for many people, especially the poor. The better housing standards, the affluent lifestyles and the consumption habits of migrant women have created a competitive environment among the villagers in the quest for a better standard of living. However, the situation has also created social discontent as some people are not tolerant of the new wealth acquired by poor people.

> People in this village are very jealous of us. They do not know what a hard time we went through abroad to save some money to put up this house. You know, as many women go abroad, men have benefited much in this village. Now many of them have started to work as carpenters and masons. (Somalatha, aged 28)
>
> Our villagers are like 'frogs in the well'. Most of them have not even gone to Colombo or Kandy. For them, it is hard to accept a women's journey to a faraway land. But, what is surprising to me is still some people do not understand the changes we are making and how we are contributing to uplift the village. (Sanjeewani, aged 22)

Through previous research that we have conducted in Solama we have been able to observe that many

villagers are not very receptive to new opportunities. Until the late 1980s or early 1990s, many villagers perceived migration to the Middle East as the worst thing a woman could do and migrants were highly criticized for breaking with village traditions. This attitude is gradually changing as the villagers are increasingly depending on external sources of income rather than on income from agriculture. Remittances have contributed to upward social mobility. Today many migrant families are able to afford the construction of a house, buy land or a vehicle and repay their loans, and some are even able to maintain saving accounts.

Concluding Remarks

We find that the conceptions of house and home among female migrants are embedded in their socio-spatial experiences at home and abroad. In homemaking they are constructing a house as a symbol of achievement, transnational identity and a good life in the future.

The traditional image of women as homemakers (limited to child bearing, rearing, cooking, cleaning) has gradually changed in our study area. The migrant women we interviewed had made considerable contributions to homemaking after assuming their new provider role. They had contributed to changing livelihoods and they had tried to bring order to everyday family life, which they had been less able to do prior to their migration. Hence, the politics of home are also changing, socially, economically and culturally. The present success of migrant women as family providers has given them greater control over the use of money and decision making at household level. This signifies a certain shift in authority structure and the emergence of various new powers among women: power over their own destinies and contributions, power in relation to other family members, and increasing power within themselves (self-worth, belief in their own contributions, and identity as important providers and agents of change). However, unless they can find a sustainable means to survive economically in the home place, they will return to the positions they held prior to migration (Azmi, 2007b). Still, it is also pertinent to note at this point, that the sacrifices these women have made should not be hidden behind the achievements and power they have gained. During their stay abroad, they might be subjected to different forms of harassment and abuses. They might also have suffered a lot due to dislocation and harsh working conditions. They have experienced loneliness and feelings of loss and sorrow at separation from loved ones and their own culture. They have tolerated all these hardships in their attempts to provide for the economic wellbeing of their families.

The politics of home is also changing spatially. The female migrant workers work in both local and transnational spaces. Their contributions enhance the ability of women as actors in the local place as well as in the international arena and are significant both at their “homes there” and their “homes here”. Compared to men’s contributions, those of women (remittances and savings) are channelled to cater for family welfare and needs. To construct a house is a key investment and to make a home – which provides a meaning to house and signifies a sense of belonging to a place and house – is a wider concern. The agency of women to provide a

house and make a home is essential, as is their willingness to sacrifice a lot to obtain their target of creating a safe home for their dependants and families. We draw the conclusion that transnational identities are embedded in women's capabilities and achievements at the local place as well as in foreign countries. We have also learned how livelihoods are gendered and shift over time, just as are female migrants' contributions to homemaking. Finally, to these migrant women – and albeit their preference to "home here" – home is no longer represented by a simple location or physical space but it transcends the global and the local, thereby revealing the dynamics of transnational lives and work.

Notes

1. The AMDP is a multipurpose development project, targeted at solving many of the socio-economic problems which the country faced during the late 1970s. Under this project, several thousand families were settled and resettled in the project area which was classified as different systems varying from system A-M. The main aim of the project was providing a higher standard of living for the settlers. However, today the settlers face a number of socio-economic problems.
2. Azmi has conducted her Ph.D. research work on Solama and two other villages since 2004, and Lund has been engaged in research in this area for almost thirty years.
3. Statistical handbook of the Thambuttegama AGA office in 2006, unpublished.
4. According to GN report 2006, unpublished.
5. In 1994 the Sri Lankan Government introduced a poverty alleviation program called "Samurdhi", using a higher poverty line than previously indentified.
6. Although many migrant women in the village want their own houses and a nuclear family, they are compelled to maintain the extended family at least temporarily.

References

Azmi, F. (2007a) Changing livelihoods among the second and third generations of settlers in system H of the Accelerated Development Project (AMDP) in Sri Lanka, *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift–Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 61 (1): 1-12.

Azmi, F. (2007b) Middle East migration, women's empowerment and changing gender roles of married men and women in peasant colonization scheme in Sri Lanka, *Journal of Modern Sri Lankan Studies*, 11 (12): 77-100.

Bebbington, A. (1999) Capitals and capabilities: a framework for analysing peasant viability, rural livelihoods and poverty, *World Development*, 27 (12): 2021-2044.

Blunt, A. (2005) *Domicile and Diaspora, Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Blunt, A. and Varley, A. (2004) Introduction: geographies of home, *Cultural Geographies*, 11 (1): 3-6.

Blunt, A. and Dowling, R. (2006) *Home*, London: Routledge.

Bowlby, S., Gregory, S., and McKie, L. (1997) "Doing home": Patriarchy, caring and space, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20 (3): 343-350.

Brun, C. and Lund, R. **(**2008) Making home during crisis: post-tsunami recovery in a context of war, Sri Lanka, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 29 (3): 274-288.

Carney, D. (1998) *Approaches to Sustainable Livelihoods for the Rural Poor*, ODI Poverty Briefing 2, London: ODI.

Clare, M., Raghuram, P., Skelton, T., Willis, K., and Williams, J. (1997) Methods and methodologies in feminist geographies: politics, practice and power. In: Women and Geography Study Group of the Royal Geographical Society and Institute of British Geographers Feminist Geographies (ed.) *Explorations in Diversity and Difference*, Harlow, England: Pearson, 86-111.

de Haan, J. L. (2005) Exploring the frontier of livelihood research, *Development and Change*, 36 (1): 27-47.

de Haan, J. L. and Zoomers, A. (2005) Development geography at the cross roads of livelihoods and globalisation. In: Nijenhuis, G., Broekhuis, A. and van Westen, G. (eds.) *Space and Place in Development Geography*, Amsterdam: Dutch University Press, 49-64.

Ellis, F. and Freeman, H. A. (eds.) (2005) *Rural Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction*, London: Routledge.

Gamburd, M. (2000) *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gamburd, M. (2007) *Home Wars: Gendered Consumption Struggles over Alcohol and Migrant Remittances among Transnational Sri Lankan Families*, AAS Annual Meeting, 22-25 March 2007, Boston.

Hettige, S. T. (1989) Migration to the Middle East, social stratification and social mobility: case studies from Sri Lanka, *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, 10 (1&2): 83-120.

Hettige, S. T. (1991) From dependent housewives to breadwinners: some aspects of migration of female workers to the Middle East at Duwegama. In: Centre For Women's Research (CENWOR) (ed.) *Women, Poverty and Family Survival*, Colombo: CENWOR, 12-26.

Inda, X. and Rosaldo, R. (2001) *The Anthropology of Globalization*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Jayaweera, S. (2002) Fifty years since political independence: an overview. In: Jayaweera, S. (ed.) *Women in Post-independence Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 15-40.

Kottegoda, S. (2006) Bringing home the money: migration and poverty in gender politics in Sri Lanka. In: Arya, S. and Anupama, R. (eds.) *Poverty, Gender and Migration*, New Delhi: Sage, 49-71.

Lie, M. and Lund, R. (2005). From NIDL to globalization: studying women workers in an increasingly globalized economy, *Gender, Technology and Development*, 9 (1): 7-30.

Little, J. (2002) *Gender and Rural Geography: Identity, Sexuality and Power in the Countryside*, London: Pearson Education.

Lund, R. (1993) *Gender, Place and Social Change: Towards a Geography Sensitive to Gender, Place and*

Social Change. Vol. 1, Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Geography, Norwegian Institute of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim.

Lund, R. (2007) At the interface of development studies and child research: rethinking the participating child, *Childrens' Geographies*, 5 (1 & 2): 114-131.

Mallett, S. (2004) Understanding home: a critical review of the literature, *Sociological Review*, 52 (1): 62-89.

Massey, D. (1995) The conceptualization of place. In: Massey, D. and Jess, P. (eds.) *A Place in the World?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 46-79.

Moore, J. (2000) Placing home in context, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 20 (3): 207-217.

Rigg, J. (2007) *An Everyday Geography of the Global South*, London: Routledge.

Rose, G. (2001) *Visual methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, London: Sage.

SLBEF (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment) (2005) *Statistical Handbook on Foreign Employment*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment.

Vimaladharma, K. P. (1997) Escape route or blind alley? Sri Lankan female migrant labour in West Asia and impacts on gender relations, in CENWOR: *Changing Gender Roles and Relations: Women in Traditional, Colonial and Contemporary Times*, Colombo: CENWOR, 39-58.

Yeoh, B. S. A. and Huang, S. (2000) "Home" and "away": foreign domestic workers and negotiations of diasporic identity in Singapore, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23 (4): 413-429.

Submitted: Feb. 22, 2008
Revised: Nov. 5, 2008
Accepted: Nov. 21, 2008