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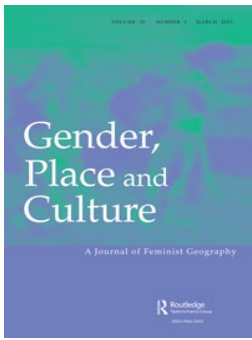
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## 'The Buddha in the home': dwelling with domestic violence in urban Sri Lanka

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## 'The Buddha in the home': dwelling with domestic violence in urban Sri Lanka

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how home is produced by women under conditions of violence. It contends why domestic violence (DV) is not a disruption, but a 'condition of possibility' in the production of the ideal home. Drawing on cultural aphorisms the paper highlights the role of gender norms in simultaneously idealizing the mother and normalizing DV in Sri Lanka. The veneration of the mother in all ethno-religious communities, the paper argues, is conditioned upon a woman's capacity for nurture and her absorption of violence through the embodiment of feminine virtues: selflessness, forbearance, and long-suffering. The paper contributes to discussions of home and domestic violence in three ways. First, it illuminates cross-cultural meanings of home and the gendered labour that produces it. Second, it describes how women dwell with DV by embodying gender norms through acts of care and repair. Finally, the paper aims to underscore the materiality of gender norms in creating a 'moral-economy of care'; that is, the ways by which cultural truisms – in postulating a triumvirate of woman-home-suffering – emotionally tethers woman to home compelling her to produce it under conditions of violence.

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This paper examines how home – ideologically constructed as a place of refuge – is produced by women under conditions of violence. It considers why reading domestic violence (DV) as a disruption of the idealized home may be missing how violence is a 'condition of possibility' in its production (Foucault 1970/1989). Drawing upon cultural aphorisms that idealize the maternal as moral, I highlight how the veneration of the mother across all ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka is conditioned upon a woman's capacity for nurture and her embodying the feminine virtues of selflessness, forbearance, and

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long-suffering. The Sinhala-Buddhist phrase – ‘the mother is the Buddha in the home’ – circulates widely as does the Tamil-Hindu equivalent – ‘there is no better temple than a mother’ – the Muslim saying – ‘the entrance to heaven lies at the foot of the mother’ – and Christian references to the virgin mother. These aphorisms reify normative gender identities by fusing woman-mother-home, and foregrounds homemaking as inherently challenging, requiring the temperament of a Buddha. A mother becomes the Buddha in the home, I argue, by reproducing family and home under difficult even oppressive conditions that threaten her integrity as a person.

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork in a low-income community in Colombo to describe how women inhabit and produce the home under conditions of DV. Conducted during the first two years of the pandemic when home became synonymous with safety, women’s experiences highlight a central paradox: the expectation that women produce safe and peaceful homes under conditions of violence. I draw on Ramamurthy and Gidwani (2021) concepts of ‘the moral economy of care’ and ‘the gendered regime of value’ to describe how women are simultaneously domesticated into the rituals of caregiving and habits of absorbing violence and come to embody the ‘sacred duty’ of homemaking. I use the term ‘domesticate’ to draw attention to how women come to expect violence in their everyday by learning to dwell with its unpredictable and cruel nature, and to highlight how women come to accept violence as part of their role as caregivers.

Ramamurthy and Gidwani’s (2021) conceptual framework of ‘punctuated violence’ considers how interconnected forms of gendered violence unfold in working-class lives especially in the demanding and denying of care. They discuss how violence is corporeal, eventful, ordinary/everyday, structural, and epistemic (551). For my interlocutors DV was a significant life-event that punctuated their life-stories; it was experienced as an intensely physical and interpersonal ordeal. DV was also an everyday event made ordinary by its absorption into the rhythms of daily life. Violence was also deeply inscribed in the social institutions of family, state, and economy. In the way DV remains unrecognized in the gendered reproduction of home its violence is epistemic. Drawing on Rachel Pain’s (2014a) comparison of global terrorism with DV as an everyday form of terrorism ‘understood by its capacity to instil fear through coercive control’ (536), I draw attention to how, despite its embeddedness and normalisation, DV imbues the everyday with fear compelling women to adopt ‘forms of comportment and bits of behaviour that are neither quantifiable nor even easily describable’ (Price 2002, 43). I insist why tolerance must never be read as being immune to DV by describing the multiple ways my interlocutors resisted. However, as Pain observes, changes in the victim’s behaviour ‘are not necessarily successful in challenging violence’ (543).

A critical geography of home is important in locating the ‘processes of oppression and resistance embedded’ in the notion of home, and in

delineating its spatial, emotional, and politicized meanings (Blunt and Dowling 2007). Katherine Brickell (2020) asserts the personal is political, and the political is also personal when she locates the home as the epicentre of national crises. The impacts of conflict and violence, she demonstrates, are ‘multi-scalar [...] but experienced intensely at the personal scale and articulated through everyday fragilities of family life’ (7). Pain (2004b) offers a visual motif of DNA’s double-helix to help conceptualize how the geopolitical and the everyday are neither distinctive realms nor hierarchical, but are ‘equivalent strands’ in discussions about the politics of fear. The focus on the relationship between the everyday and geopolitics is important to scholarship on home, and calls for a closer look at the violent conditions of social reproduction and capitalist production, specifically the gender norms that shape women’s responses to DV.

This paper contributes to the discussion of home and domestic violence in the following ways. First, by describing the culture-specific meanings of home in Sri Lanka, and the expectations underlining how women must produce and inhabit the home, the paper illuminates how home and the gendered labour that produce it are variously understood across cultures. Second, this paper describes how women come to dwell with DV by embodying gender norms. By illustrating the ways in which violence is folded into women’s daily tasks of homemaking and absorbed into everyday routines and habits, the paper illuminates how DV reconstitutes women’s subjectivities and redefines her life-projects. Finally, by bringing together meanings of home, its gendered reproduction, and DV, the paper aims to underscore the materiality of gender norms; that is, the ways by which cultural truisms – in postulating a triumvirate of woman-home-suffering – tethers women to homes, compelling her to produce it under conditions of violence.

I begin by comparing meanings of home as conceptualised in European contexts with that of Sri Lanka followed by an overview of the feminist critique of the ‘home as haven’ thesis. Next, I summarise the key issues of DV as discussed in anthropology and critical geography. I then provide an overview of DV in Sri Lanka, followed by a discussion of gender norms relating to women, home, and violence. After describing my fieldwork, I present my findings through three case studies.

## Reproducing home

The home is a powerful metaphor for our sense of being and belonging. It permeates our collective imagination as a place of refuge, providing the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing, and our existential needs for care and companionship, safety and security. In the *Poetics of Space* Bachelard (1994/1969) places the home at the centre of his phenomenological exploration of space and its relation to ‘intimate being’ and becoming. For Bachelard, the home is at once shelter and dreamworld – a space of intimacy and

memory that nourishes the body and ‘cradles’ the soul as it dreams of possible futures. Writing on the phenomenology of *place*, Relph (1976/2008) describes home as ‘the foundation of our identity’ and ‘the dwelling-place of being’. Where ‘space’ and ‘world’ can be abstractions, the experience of home, according to Relph (2016), makes it ‘the heart of place’.

In Sri Lanka home has been theorised mainly in the context of ethnic conflict and in relation to Tamil claims to a homeland (Spencer 2014; Thiranagama 2011). Daniel (1984) theorises how *ur* – the Tamil term for home – evokes a person’s sense of being and belonging by simultaneously referencing a person’s place of birth, natal village, and community. Thiranagama (2011) describes how *ur*, for both Tamil and Muslim communities, evokes a sense of homeliness because its meanings are produced through social relations with kin and community. To underscore the devastating impact of displacement on Tamil and Muslim senses of self and belonging, both writers emphasize the dense meaning of home as a place of residence and origins located in a specific geographical place. The attachment to place has implications for why victim-survivors of DV are reluctant to leave their home and community.

Thiranagama’s (2011) ethnography also illustrates why Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war that resulted in the chronic displacement of Tamils and Muslims was not merely an external event with devastating consequences on civilian lives, but an existential condition that reconstituted women’s identities. For women who experienced it first-hand, and for the subsequent generations who live under its long shadow, Sri Lanka’s civil war, Thiranagama shows, redefined notions of home and ‘[inaugurated] new forms of subjectivity, [by giving] life and voice to particular kinds of biographies, bodily regimes, manners of coping’ (12). Violence on the scale of civil war is an embodied experience in the way it reconstitutes home and the gendered bodies that live within it. In my essay I show how DV at the personal scale has similar effects.

Feminist scholars have long been critical of the home’s powerful ideological force in our collective imaginary (Blunt and Dowling 2007; Brickell 2014; Warrington 2001). Marxist-feminists have illuminated how its sentimental construction as an intimate and private space separate from the public sphere of work obfuscates the gendered labour of reproduction that produce home (Kandiyoti 1988; Mies 2014). By asking ‘Who does the work of nourishing and nurturing?’ and, ‘at what cost?’ scholars have revealed how global capitalism and patriarchy are contiguous in the way they take for granted, command, and exploit women’s unpaid labour as homemakers (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2020; Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021). My fieldwork with working-class women revealed the political economy of reproductive labour and DV. Women’s homemaking, I found is valorised (Federici 2020), yet women as subjects are treated as worthless and disposable (Wright 2013) – a theme not adequately explored within the scholarship on homemaking.

Second-wave feminist scholars explored how marriage produced gendered identities, roles, and the division of labour, and demarcated homemaking as a woman's sphere (Yanagisako and Collier 1996). Scholars have traced the idealisation of home as a spiritual sanctuary and homemaking as a woman's sacred duty as taking shape during the social transformation of Western Europe from the eighteenth century onwards (McDowell 2003; Taylor 1989). In South Asia women are regarded as 'domestic goddesses' for maintaining the sacred space of home through cooking, cleaning, and childcare (Donner 2008). The domestic focus of women's religious and cultural rituals shapes normative representation of women by exemplifying the moral values of femininity, i.e. beauty, domesticity, hospitality, and fecundity (Hancock 1999/2019). In fact, nationalist movements in South Asia were articulated through the gendered axes of the material-spiritual where women were situated within the home as the apotheosis of tradition whose duty was creating a refuge from the privations of modernity (Chatterjee 1989). The 'moral-mother syndrome' also characterised nationalism in Sri Lanka (de Alwis 2004) in the way '[women were] transformed into a pure and ahistorical signifier of inter-iority and tradition (de Alwis 2002, 19).

More recently, the discourse on moral mothers came to a head when the state issued a circular, banning women with young children from migrating to the Middle-East for work (Abeyasekera and Jayasundere 2015). That remittances from domestic workers are the primary source of foreign exchange earnings for the Government did not deter the state from defending its ideological stance: child protection and preventing family disintegration. Hewamanne's (2020) recent work examines how former workers from the Free-Trade Zones restore spoilt identities through marriage and exemplary household management. Women carefully balance their need for financial independence with gendered performances of nurture, hospitality, and charity to justify their continuing engagements with the disreputable Free-Trade Zone as independent contractors working from home.

More critically, feminist scholars have dismantled the 'home as haven' thesis by drawing attention to DV, which transforms the home into a place of danger and entrapment (Copelon 2012; MacKinnon 2007; Warrington 2001). Critical geographers in particular have argued that DV is neither private nor apolitical, but a form of gendered political oppression (Brickell 2014; Dobash and Dobash 1998). Pain (2014a&b) draws parallels between DV, militarism, and terrorism to challenge why state funds prioritize national security over domestic safety. In a direct critique of Bachelard's idealization of the home, Price (2002, 40) argues that the 'ideological scripting of home as intimate and safe makes violence against women difficult to see'. More critically, the 'home as haven' thesis not only conceals DV, but it obscures how 'the peaceful home is often produced under the threat of violence' (40). The point Price makes about homemaking being enmeshed with DV is critical. It gestures

towards violence against women as a condition of possibility in the reproduction of the ideal home (Foucault 1970/1989). That DV not just disrupts the ideal home, but is implicated in its production presents a conundrum that has not been adequately explored in feminist writings.

### Enduring domestic violence

DV is now firmly established as a global phenomenon affecting women across all socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts (WHO 2005; UN Women 2022). It is widely accepted as an unequivocal signifier of gender inequality that fundamentally undermines a woman's freedom and her life-choices, (MacKinnon 2007). Many countries in the Global North and South have introduced laws relating to DV and established support services to victim-survivors (Fulu 2013; McCue 2008). Regardless of the growing body of research and activism, DV continues to be low on the list of research agendas and national priorities because it is framed as 'private, apolitical, and mundane' compared to the 'spectacular' forms of violence that war and terrorism engender (Pain 2014a, 534).

DV is disregarded in post-conflict transition (Brickell 2020), the geo-politics of national security and the global war on terrorism (Pain 2014a&b), and human rights discussions of torture (Copelon 2012). Warrington (2001) combines scholarship on the geographies of home and fear to establish how DV imposes spatial restrictions on women who cannot escape out of fear or, when they do, continue to live lives that are socially and spatially constrained. Brickell (2014) describes how in post-conflict Cambodia peace at the national level does not translate to peace at home on account of high incidents of DV. She argues why explanations dismissing men's violent behaviour in the home as a 'side-effect of transition' is dangerous to women's wellbeing and gender equality.

These absences and silences are buttressed by cultural attitudes that promote tolerance of DV. Women endure DV for the sake of marriage, family, children, and home (McCue 2008). Finding alternatives to the marital home is predicated on women's economic dependence on men and severely limits women's choices about leaving abusive relationships (Pain 2014a; Stark 2009). Silence is a common response to marital abuse (Gammeltoft 2016; Tonsing and Barn 2017). In South Asia in particular, women feel shamed by DV fear stigma and isolation because they are often blamed for provoking violence by not fulfilling their wifely duties (Tonsing and Barn 2017), or for refusing to tolerate what is considered a man's prerogative (Kodikara 2012). Women, therefore, stay in abusive marriages to avoid moral judgement.

Ramamurthy and Gidwani (2021) illuminate the ways in which poor women's care work and resourcefulness in maintaining the household is entwined within hierarchical patriarchal relations. They theorize how 'violence knits a double-edged moral economy of care: marriage affirms moral relations



between care providers and the cared-for by 'demanding' care work from women through the power of social expectations and rights of reciprocity; marriage also 'impels' acts of caring through the affective logics of 'empathy, love, pity, guilt' (553-54). More critically they argue that 'the intimate coupling of violence and care sustains a gendered regime of value' that operates in two interwoven registers: the economic and ideological (554). The fundamental measure of a woman's worth, they assert, is the work of care and repair; therefore, even when confronted with the deprivation of care in the form of neglect and violence, they argue, a woman is morally compelled to counter it with care.

Udalagama's (2018) ethnography of marriage in rural Sri Lanka illuminates how the double-edged moral economy of care operates in sustaining a gendered regime of value through the mutual constitution of women and home. A 'good woman' keeps a 'good home'. A 'good house' is judged by a woman's capacity for nurture and impression management. Women describe a good home as a place where there is loving intimacy, mutual care, and financial stability achieved through a husband's financial provisioning and a woman's household management. The gendered regime of value is maintained through the expectation that women must produce a good home without blaming her husband even when he fails to provide. By characterizing men as weak and vulnerable to suffering and criticism women show remarkable insight in recognizing DV as a deliberate exercise of power especially in instances where men feel worthless. The moral economy of care, however, demands that women absorb violence, and counter it with care and repair without the expectation of care in return (Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021, 549).

The home as a peaceful refuge helps to obscure acts of abuse and violence precisely because women are tasked with the labour of its maintenance (Price 2002). The home, constructed as a place of safety and security in contrast to the dangerous world outside (Phadke 2007; Warrington 2001), is at once a desire and an ideal that women must produce. Homemaking is a set of moral tasks, and a way of being that creates the home's affective atmosphere (Das 2007; Mattingly 2014). Given the heavy investment of the self, any sign of rupture is experienced as personal failure. Women are, in fact, deeply ashamed by DV because they blame themselves (Gammeltoft 2016; Stark 2007). Price's emphasis on how the normative ideal of the home as an intimate and safe place '*excludes* the possibility of violence against women *at the level of the meaning* of 'home' is important (Price 2002, p.40 *emphasis in original*). Rather than debunking the myth of the ideal home, DV, Price argues, is aided, abetted, and enabled by the normative.

### Domestic violence in Sri Lanka

DV is a critical social issue in Sri Lanka. The Women's Wellbeing Survey 2019 confirms what was already known through smaller studies (Perera,

Gunawardane, Jayasuriya 2011). According to the survey, one in every five (20.4 per cent) ever-partnered women have experienced physical and sexual violence in their lifetime, while two in every five women (39.8 per cent) have experienced physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence, and/or controlling behaviours by a partner in their lifetime (Department of Census and Statistics 2020). Evidence from smaller studies suggest underreporting of IPV.

The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No.34 of 2005 (PVDA) marked a milestone for feminist activists in Sri Lanka. The Act did not create a new offence, but rather drew attention to acts of physical harm including sexualised violence - already recognised in the Penal Code - as crimes explicitly taking place in the intimate sphere (Kodikara 2012). The PVDA introduced 'emotional abuse' in its definition as 'a pattern of cruel, inhuman, degrading or humiliating conduct' - a crucial step in recognising IPV as a form of control and a means of instilling fear and helplessness in victim-survivors. The Civil Protection Order of the Act ensures the safety of the plaintiff by providing legal means with which to protect herself from future violence. Taken as a whole, the PVDA provides women with a civil remedy to protect and safeguard herself while preserving her right to seek criminal redress (Kodikara 2012).

Prior to the PVDA, a Children and Women's Bureau was established in 1979 to respond to the problems of child abuse and family conflict (Jayatilaka et al. 2019). In 1993, the Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse of Children, Young Persons, and Women was established under a Senior Superintendent of Police. The following years witnessed the Bureau's expansion all police divisions, and 'Children and Women's Desks' set up in all police stations to handle cases of DV. National help-lines and a GBV desk in all national hospitals were also established.

Studies into the impact of the PVDA, and the infrastructure supporting victim-survivors, point to several outcomes. The number of women seeking institutional assistance has steadily increased (Jayatilaka et al. 2019). However, very few use the PVDA to prosecute their former partners (Kodikara 2018). The lack of prosecution, Kodikara argues, does not indicate the failure of the PVDA. The increase in help-seeking behaviour, and the large numbers of women publicly speaking out about GBV, points to the PVDA opening up a counter discourse to the culture of silence and tolerance that has prevailed for decades in Sri Lanka.

## **Women-home-suffering: gender norms in Sri Lanka**

### ***Only until the rice is cooked***

Domestic violence in Sri Lanka is trivialised lasting only 'until the rice is cooked' - a cultural axiom widely used to indicate the transitory nature of domestic disputes with reconciliation taking place with the return to

everyday forms of intimacy, i.e. the family meal (Kodikara 2012). Kodikara (2018, 907) explains why even law makers and enforcers are ambivalent about the PVDA; the police and the judiciary often dismiss cases of DV and encourage reconciliation because they are anxious ‘that the PDVA is undermining marriage, the welfare of children, and promoting divorce’. The ideology of the family – the foundation of society as enshrined in the constitution – is prioritised over individual rights of women who are expected to tolerate violence as part of marital life.

‘Home fires must not be seen outside’ is another maxim commonly used to caution women against public disclosure. Opposition to the PVDA invokes privacy exemplified in the cultural emotion *laejja-baya*. Glossed as shame and fear of ridicule, *laejja-baya* a powerful social emotion that makes people keenly sensitive to the perception of others (Obeyesekere 1984). For girls *laejja-baya* prescribes modesty, reticence, propriety, and restraint (Spencer 1990). Speaking publicly about domestic grievances, therefore, draws attention to the self; it can risk one’s reputation and dishonor one’s family. de Alwis (1997) illustrates how under British colonial rule, the interpellation of Victorian norms of respectability, domesticity, and suffering with older ideas of shame and feminine virtues shaped gendered subjectivities. The triumvirate of home-mother-suffering that defies gendered norms of patience and long-suffering is, therefore, both cultural and historical illuminating how the moral economy of care and the gendered regime of value operates in Sri Lanka (Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021).

The culture of shame that undergirds women’s silence has had a profound influence on how women seek legal redress. Kodikara’s (2018) study of the judicial system reveals why women circumvent the PVDA. Of the thousands of cases being filed under the Maintenance Act of 1999, a majority are by women victim-survivors of DV. Although the Maintenance Act, by introducing the concept of shared responsibility for children, does not automatically assume the woman as economically dependent on a male breadwinner, Judges are more sympathetic to women who are seeking child support. The focus is a father’s duty to his children – not why the mother no longer lives with the child’s father – and the court can sentence men to rigorous imprisonment if they default on payments. Kodikara notes that regardless of the patronizing and patriarchal timbre of the judiciary’s sympathy, women find the Maintenance Act a critical resource with which to leverage the legal system. Without naming the crime, victim-survivors can free themselves of violence. ‘The price women pay for legal relief is silence’ (Kodikara 2018, 907).

### *The Buddha in the home*

A culture that venerates the mother as ‘the Buddha in the home’, but, in reality, subjects her to exploitation and violence may seem paradoxical. Asking

'how can women be venerated and violated at the same time?' is to underestimate how gender norms operate. I reference the Buddhism-inspired phrase here because it was invoked even by my non-Buddhist interlocutors in our discussions about motherhood and homemaking. Women repeatedly mentioned the qualities of patience, forbearance, and long-suffering when talking about housework, children, and husbands. de Alwis (2018, 155), building on Walter's scholarship, describes Sri Lanka as a multi-religious community where religious practices and beliefs do not fall into 'neat, mutually exclusive categories', but are characterised by dynamic meetings between different adherents who sometimes inhabit the same space. Indeed, women from different ethno-religious backgrounds drew on Buddhist ideas of *karma* (or fate) when explaining women's suffering, and the four Buddhist virtues when describing a good mother: *mettā* (lovingkindness), *karuṇā*, (kindness, compassion), *upekkhā* (equanimity), and *muditā* (tenderness). Enduring pain, disappointment, and ingratitude, according to many women, was integral to a woman's everyday experiences as a homemaker. To endure these privations is a 'woman's fate'.

The Sinhalese expression – 'only until the rice is cooked' – further illuminates how women's homemaking is enfolded in violence. Rice is the staple diet in Sri Lanka, and cooking rice symbolises a woman's nurture. 'Cooking and eating together' also denotes sexual intimacy – a euphemism for having sexual relations (Abeyasekera 2021). If domestic disputes last 'only until the rice is cooked', then women are expected to endure violence *even* as she cooks. That she must cook *and* be available for sex amidst violence is significant here. It points to how women's homemaking is a form of pacification. In other words, a man's violent behaviour will last until he is fed and sexually gratified. Several women who described being subject to extreme and regular forms of physical abuse from their early years of marriage, talked about returning home from work in time to cook meals and wash clothes for their husbands; a few pointedly talked about getting pregnant even after discovering his 'not being a good man' – indicating sexual relations continued despite abuse.

## Methodology

The life-stories in this paper are drawn from an ethnographic study of women's homemaking and access to services. (All names are pseudonyms, and I have changed any obvious markers of identity.)

From November 2020 onwards, my research assistant and I connected with and followed the lives of twelve women living in a low-income tenement community in Colombo's historical neighbourhood of Slave Island. Respondents were identified *via* a leader of the women's committee whom my RA knew from her activist engagements, and selected to represent Slave Island's ethno-religious diversity. Of the six Muslim women, three identified as Malay-Muslims, three as Moors. Of the rest, half identified as ethnic Tamils

(two Hindus and one Christian), while the others were from the majority Sinhala-Buddhist community. The youngest was 32-years-old while the oldest women were in their early 60s. All of them were employed: daily-wage earners working as domestic workers, office cleaners, and assembly-line workers in small factories; others were self-employed doing catering, sewing, or piece-rate work at home. They were all married with children. Two women were single – one widowed and another divorced; several others had separated - a status that changed a few times over the course of fieldwork.

The study, originally intended to investigate the nexus between women's homemaking and access to services in contending with eviction and precarity in the wake of the state's aspirations to make Colombo a 'world-class city' became, after March 2020, a study about women's homemaking amidst the devastating consequences of COVID-19 on urban livelihoods, schooling, and health. First contact was made *via* phone when we described the scope of the study, and explained our ethical obligations, namely voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Initial interviews were conducted *via* phone. Relationships deepened when lockdowns lifted, and we could visit women at home. Interactions continued during lockdowns through WhatsApp chats, phone check-ins, and photo-diaries. The life-history interviews were conducted between October and December 2021 when we spent approximately 2-4h in each woman's home. Aided by a life-journey map on which they marked the significant events of their lives, women recounted their life-journeys across different homes.

Domestic violence was not part of the interview guide but emerged in women's life-stories as part of their everyday experiences of home. While many mentioned DV, the three case-studies were chosen because violence was the central narrative marker of their life-stories. As Ramamurthy and Gidwani observe (2021, 550), violence 'punctuated' their life-histories with 'intensely emotional moments' that were recalled, overwhelmed, and eventually folded into the ordinary. 'It is by listening to how violence modulates [the] telling' that I apprehended how 'violence embodies memor[y]' (ibid).

### **Dwelling with violence**

The three stories I present in this section capture how gender norms relating to marriage and motherhood, suffering and shame, love and caring shape how women come to dwell with violence in the home and downplay the spectacular violence that characterises domestic violence.

### ***Compassionate wives, suspicious husbands***

When we first met Vasukhi in November 2020, she had separated from her husband in October 2019. During our initial conversations about children's

education, finances, and health, Vasukhi rarely mentioned her husband except to emphasize that he did not contribute to the children's expenses. Vasukhi was 38 years-old, the mother of twin girls (10 years) and a son (5 years), and lived in her parents' home, which they owned. She worked in a tea-packing factory nearby and struggled with making ends meet. We enjoyed talking to Vasukhi. She was warm and had a sense of humour even when sharing her difficulties. Her light-hearted demeanour had given us no indication of DV. It was during the life-history interview that we came to know what she had endured for ten years. After a brutal episode – 'she was bleeding [...] we had to take her to hospital' – Vasukhi's mother with the help of the police had asked Vasukhi's husband to leave the house.

Vasukhi described her marriage as 'the end of her happiness [...] a punishment', implying that, even though she had loving parents and a happy childhood, it was her fate as a woman to suffer. As with many women, Vasukhi related her suffering to her compassionate nature illuminating the affective logic of the moral economy of care. She had married her husband because she 'felt sorry for him'. Vasukhi contrasted her childhood with the neglect her husband had suffered as a child. 'There was no one to make him his milk [...] and I was drinking orange juice'. Vasuki told us that she felt compelled to take care of him, indicating that compassion and nurture is integral to being a wife.

Vasukhi portrayed her younger self as outgoing and accomplished. 'I had a lot of fun. I had so many friends'. She had played sports in school, passed her GCE Ordinary Levels exams, and worked as a nurse for ten years. Marriage punctuated her life with violence. Her husband asked Vasukhi to leave her job 'because he was suspicious of me [because] I had so many friends'. Vasukhi and her mother used 'suspicious' several times when recounting the violence. The term 'suspicious' – in Sinhala *sākaya* – is commonly used by women (and men) in Sri Lanka to describe a negative form of possessiveness in romantic relationships. Possessiveness *per se* is not regarded as a negative characteristic; in fact, possessiveness denotes love in Sri Lanka (Abeyasekera 2021). Possessive behaviour – such as monitoring a partner's movements and imposing rules – is described as a form of deep caring; an outward manifestation of passion. *Sākaya* is when possessiveness, motivated by irrational suspicion, transforms into an abusive relationship. In my fieldwork, women used *sākaya* to explain a range of men's controlling and violent behaviour, namely: restricting women's mobility; flying into a rage at the mention of household finances; turning abusive when they came home. It was also a way of saying that women were innocent, and that men's violence is provoked by feelings of inadequacy when faced with women's capabilities. In Vasukhi's case, she had a steady income and friends in her workplace, whereas he did odd jobs and was a loner. *Sākaya* is an irrational expression of a man's passion. *Sākaya* is a way of relating to women and a means of control through which unequal

power relations are reproduced within intimate relationships. (Men describe women's *sākaya* as manifesting in scolding, nagging, surveillance, and withdrawing affection.)

DV as a form of terrorism that instills fear through psychological coercive control (Pain 2014a&b) was demonstrated in Vasukhi's story. She described his transformation from an abject man who begged for Vasukhi's affection to a monster who violently beat her regularly 'until [she] blacked out'. Vasukhi told us that her husband 'removed his mask soon after marriage'. Vasukhi called him 'a psycho' because she could never anticipate his attacks. Her narrative epitomized the corporeal nature of DV. 'He used to kick me for small things [...] Even my daughters witnessed how he used to beat me when I was pregnant with my son'. The terror he created in the house had once provoked Vasukhi's son to 'bite the father because he was hitting me so much'. Vasukhi's mother – who was present during the interview – told us that she would intervene. 'I used to try to restrain him [...] the children would be howling, [Vasukhi] would be bleeding. We loved her and took good care of her as a child, so how can a mother watch?'

Vasukhi, with her mother's support, had complained to the police many times. They would warn the husband, but ask her 'to be patient' indicating the contradictory outcomes of the PVDA: public condemnation of DV that allowed Vasukhi to seek help coupled with the expectation of tolerance. Vasukhi's mother told us that a trip to the police would result in a brief respite, 'but every day, every year it was the same [...] sometimes he would stop, but he would start again. He was always suspicious of her'. At the end of the interview Vasukhi told us 'I suffer a lot, but I always put on a happy face' referring to how she managed her feelings of shame for being in an abusive marriage.

### *Motherhood: enduring violence*

For Heshani, like Vasukhi, marriage punctuated her life with violence. She too did not mention her husband during our initial interviews. Heshani was an assertive and articulate woman who liaised with the Local Government Authorities on behalf of her community. She was 49-years-old and worked six days a week as a domestic worker to educate her three sons aged 17, 15, and 13. During our life-history interview, we were taken aback when she burst into tears at the start of the interview. Like for Vasukhi, her childhood home had transformed into a dwelling-place of violence after marriage. Heshani recounted her childhood as being 'very happy [...] my father loved me very much. He was my best friend [...] He brought me up like a flower [...] He died when I was 25. It was the end of my happiness'.

Soon after Heshani had migrated to the Middle-East as a domestic worker. She sent money to her mother to renovate their house, but refused to return



home even for a holiday because she had found a 'good home' and a boss who 'cared for her like a child'. When she turned 30, Heshani's mother had, after 'tricking' her into returning to Sri Lanka by saying she was critically ill, 'married [her] off without doing any background checks'. Her mother's actions demonstrate how violence is moored in the social institution of family (Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021). Towards the end of the interview, I asked her why her mother – who was benefitting from Heshani working overseas – pressured her to get married. Heshani explained that to have a 30-year-old unmarried daughter was 'shameful'. Marriage in Sri Lanka is a cultural imperative whereby women and their families achieve status and respectability (Abeyasekera 2021). Many women, like Heshani, accept marriage as inevitable and remain in violent marriages because of the stigma of singleness and divorce.

On her wedding night Heshani found out her husband was already married, and a compulsive gambler. 'From the beginning it was very difficult [...] he drank, he gambled, he owed money to people, and he hit me all the time'. Later, I asked Heshani why she had not left, especially since the marriage was technically null in the eyes of the law, and also because she jointly owned her home (with her brother), and had considerable savings from working overseas. Her response illuminates why gendered norm of shame is often the reason for not seeking help. 'I was so ashamed that people will tell stories [...] I was brought up like that. I didn't tell my family; I was just crying'. Later she told us that he had abandoned her after the birth of their third son, leaving her 'desperate [for money]'. She mentioned how ashamed she felt when she had to 'beg him' for money. As a gambler, he was often hiding from debtors and would ask Heshani to meet him at night. She described how this exacerbated her feelings of shame and isolated her further from her community. 'My father always accompanied me even as a young woman [...] I was so ashamed [...] I couldn't look at my neighbours' faces'. Remembering her father's care was a way of communicating the brutal denial of care Heshani had to endure in her marriage. Women like Heshani endure DV in silence while sustaining home because they fear being ostracised from their communities if they share their suffering with others (Udalagama 2018). This is because women are socialized into the moral economy of care that holds them responsible for making a success of marriage. Silence borne out of shame is nevertheless isolating as Heshani's story reveals.

As mentioned, the life-history interviews were not intended to probe domestic violence. Violence punctuated women's life-stories; it was remembered viscerally, but recounted as an everyday experience (Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021). For example, while relating an argument with her husband's sister, Heshani told us, 'My husband hit me till I was unconscious [...] The neighbours called the police and he was remanded'. She gave us no background to the incident and continued to talk about her animosity towards



her sister-in-law who she blamed for hiding the truth about the brother's vices when she had proposed him to Heshani's family. By recalling the incident not as a spectacular event, but as an example of everyday violence, Heshani's narrative mirrors how DV is regarded as mundane and apolitical, but is akin to a form of terrorism that causes serious harm (Pain 2014a). Later Heshani talked about enrolling her oldest son in an ICT course. 'He beat me up thoroughly when he found out how much fees I had paid'.

With schools closed during the pandemic, expenses were high. Heshani had to invest in multiple phones and data connections for online school, and also buy more groceries as the children were home the whole day and could not access school meals sponsored by the Government's School Nutrition Programme. By talking about how her husband's gambling was curtailed because his income from pavement hawking was interrupted by multiple lockdowns, Heshani gave us a glimpse of her explanatory framework for his violence that was predictable – 'he hits me every day' – but also produced and intensified by poverty and changing material circumstances (Pain 2014a). For Heshani, motherhood meant enduring violence while working hard to secure 'a good future' for her sons. 'I used to come home from work and give tuition classes at night to the neighbourhood children to earn something extra. I still do [...] he is always at home sleeping. I cook, clean the house, go to work'. Heshani's homemaking is not limited to unpaid care-work; it is also about her *paid* labour. Like Vasuki, Heshani's wages sustains the household. Linking domestic violence to the political-economy of women's labour is critical because it reveals the depth of women's 'double-burden' and the conditions under which they must bear it. Working-class women like Heshani and Vasuki bear the burden of household survival and shoulder the responsibility of social reproduction under conditions of DV.

Fulu (2013) challenges the modernist logic that women's vulnerability to violence decreases with financial autonomy. She observes that in South Asia, women become more vulnerable because of the shift in the balance of power within the household. The shame Heshani initially felt was later replaced with anger, and a sense of agency to resist in the ways she can. 'Now I don't keep quiet. I go to the police. I talk back [...] My sons tell me not to provoke him. Why should I be quiet? I pay all the bills!' Heshani's changed behaviour, as Pain (2014a) explains, is a form of securitization that everyday terrorism produces, but is not successful in challenging DV.

Heshani told us that her eldest son asks her, 'Why am I keeping him here? Why don't I divorce?' When I gently repeated her son's question, she told me, 'The children are all alone in the house when I am working. When he's there, it is something'. That 'children needed their father' was a logic that I heard from other women who tolerated DV and demonstrates how 'the motive force of patriarchy lies in the social power of [...] men [...] to command the labour power of subordinate women [...] by control[ling] the ideological and

materials means of reproduction’ (Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021, 549). Even as Heshani recognised her role as the breadwinner and resisted DV, the affective logic of care prevailed through the norm of the long-suffering mother. ‘I often think of suicide, but I have to live for my sons’.

### *Fear and shame: domestic violence as terrorism*

The desire to die and the will to live for children was a common theme in the narratives of victim-survivors of DV. It was used to convey the desperation women felt for having no escape from violence other than through suicide. Maternal duty, however, held them back, compelling them to dwell with DV. Saumya had poured kerosene oil on herself while pregnant because her husband ‘was a wicked man [...] I didn’t want to have any more children with him’. Saumya was 39-years-old with three children – daughters aged 20 and 14, and a ten-year-old son. Saumya intimated that she was subject to marital rape. ‘I didn’t want to have any more children with him after my daughter, but he was harassing me saying his mother thinks he is infertile if we don’t have more than one child [...] then after two children he said “no point having daughters, I must have a son”’. Fear and shame forced her to continue to live with him. It was for the sake of the children, Saumya said, that she hid her suffering. ‘I didn’t want to embarrass my children [...] I couldn’t talk my friends. They thought I was happy’.

Saumya was seventeen when her grandmother had arranged her marriage. When Saumya’s father died soon after she was born, Saumya’s paternal grandmother had adopted her. Later, she had bequeathed all her property to Saumya to ensure she had security. The early marriage, Saumya told us, was because her grandmother wanted to see her ‘settled’ before she died. Like Heshani and Vasukhi, Saumya’s financial autonomy did not make her less vulnerable to DV (Fulu 2013). Saumya’s material circumstances - property ownership and poverty - contributed to her experience of violence (Pain 2014a)

Saumya’s exterior presentation of cheerful equanimity was remarkable, especially after we heard her life-story. When we first met her in January 2021, she was running a successful wholesale egg-business from home. Saumya was an enthusiastic participant in our study; she would text us regularly during lockdowns and welcomed us warmly to her home when we visited. Hence, we were worried when she was unreachable for several months following her husband’s sudden return from the Middle-East due to the pandemic. When she finally called, she had moved out on rent. When we met with her in November 2021, Saumya made it seem that her marital issues had started recently after discovering he was having an extramarital affair. He wanted a divorce, but was refusing to leave until she paid him. ‘He’s made accounts of all the money he sent me [from overseas] including the children’s expenses’. He was demanding that she settle the loan she had

taken to buy a three-wheeler and write it in his name; he had even coerced her into handing over her egg business to him. 'He keeps saying, "I married you because your grandmother promised me a house".'

The husband's use of terror tactics to gain control of Saumya's assets was achieved through instilling fear and causing shame. Saumya told us he knew she was 'shy and easily embarrassed [...] he would follow me around [the neighbourhood] shouting and asking me for money [...] He would lock me inside the house, then he would stay outside so that I can't even leave from the back door'. She had left to a relative's house with her children for a brief respite. When she returned the abuse continued. 'When I came back, he assaulted me. I was in the kitchen scrubbing the floor when he came and said, "why did you come back?" and he kicked me in the chest. I just collapsed and woke up in the hospital'. When the doctor suspected DV, Saumya was too ashamed to speak up. 'I didn't tell them I was assaulted. I didn't want to embarrass my kids. I wanted to somehow settle the issues. I never even went to the police'. Even after she moved out, he was continuing to terrorise her by publicly humiliating her. Saumya showed us a CCTV recording of her husband standing outside the gate with a plastic tube threatening to assault her if she stepped outside without his money.

At this juncture, we stopped the interview outraged that Saumya was writing the three-wheeler in his name, borrowing to pay part of the money he was demanding, and was also planning to hand over the house to him. We explained her rights, asked whether she was willing to seek legal assistance, reassuring her that we would support her through the process. It was when we returned to the life-history interview that Saumya talked about the violence she had endured from the early years of marriage. 'I was so scared of him. I was so young. I was like a small child being controlled by a cane [...] He would call me *kālakaṇṇī*. The epithet has its roots in Buddhism and means 'wretched unfortunate person'. When used to insult a woman, it characterises her as being contaminated by the bad *karma* of her previous lives, and as contagious because a woman's karma determines the success or failure of home and family. Here, the husband was attributing Saumya's father's early death to her bad fate. To be called *kālakaṇṇī* was deeply hurtful – Saumya whispered it – because it assaults one's self-worth making women believe they deserve the suffering life meted out. That her husband experienced no shame in publicly demanding she pays back monies he spent on their children underscores the gendered effects of norms.

### 'Quiet politics': poverty and labour migration

Pain (2014b, 128) characterises women's activism against DV as 'quiet politics [...] a slow, difficult struggle against hegemony that is messy and rarely complete'. She highlights 'multiple leavings' as one of its key features. In this

section I discuss temporary separations to highlight labour migration as a form of 'quiet politics' that is entangled with globalisation and international division of gendered labour. I explain why gender norms, gender relations, the structural constraints of poverty, and COVID-19 rendered separations an ongoing yet incomplete struggle against DV. I also illustrate how poor women's means of escape from DV entangles them in global processes of gendered violence.

Vasukhi and Heshani sought temporary legal redress by complaining to the police. Vasukhi used it as a temporary respite from violence – 'he would be quiet for a while', while Heshani used it to humiliate her husband who would 'disappear' for a few days. Saumya left the home she owned for her safety and peace-of-mind. For all three women, labour migration offered a longer respite from DV. While the material conditions of women's migration are documented for Sri Lanka (Kottegoda 2006), the link to DV remains under-theorised. Labour migration as a form of escape reveals the multi-scalar structures of violence aimed at women's labouring bodies (Wright 2013). It offers a reprieve from the unbearable violence of the everyday, only to embroil women in the globalised exploitation of women's labour. For my interlocutors escaping DV was to endure the pain of leaving children behind. That these women provide the means for middle-class women to escape the drudgeries of housework illuminates the violence of capitalist relations (Federici 2020). The connection between women's labour and DV also highlights the hidden costs of labour productivity. Together they underscore why we must pay more attention to the political-economy of women's labour, especially how social reproduction and global production is enacted through multi-scalar violence.

Vasukhi migrated to the Middle-East as a nursing assistant leaving her two-years-old twins with her parents. Forced to give up work after marriage, Vasukhi found herself unable to provide for her daughters as her husband was also unemployed. Later, as a way of saving money so she could return home sooner, Vasukhi found her husband a job in the same city. She told us that he was permitted to visit her once a month, and during this time she became pregnant and had to return home after only working for two years. Her husband also returned, and the violence continued during and after her pregnancy. In October 2019, when Vasukhi's parents had asked him to leave, he had moved to the Eastern Coast of Sri Lanka leaving her to manage the children's expenses. When Vasukhi's husband lost his job during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, he asked to return, but was unable to on account of the inter-provincial travel bans. In July 2021 Vasukhi told us, 'He's back. I am ignoring him. I am busy at work'. After a brief pause, she said, 'What to do, he loves his children. At this time (referring to the pandemic) I can't chase him out'. When we spoke to her in December 2021, she was looking to migrate again, but was worried that her elderly mother would be burdened with childcare. Vasukhi's

mother was hoping that he would migrate leaving them in peace as the house was tense after his return.

Heshani too had migrated for work when her husband returned after abandoning her. It was around the same time that a dispute over the ownership of Heshani's home had started with her mother and brother. 'They were all harassing me for money [...] so I asked a friend in Qatar to find me a job'. Heshani did not complete her two-year contract because she 'desperately missed' her children. 'There was a children's park where I worked. When I hear the sound of children, I used to go to the window [...] I could not bear to be away from them'. As mentioned earlier, Heshani did not want to divorce because she needed him at home. When I asked why her sons could not manage on their own – they were 17, 15, and 13 – she told me that on-line schooling had complicated her life. Although Heshani cooked lunch before she left for work, she believed an adult's supervisory presence was needed because they were home the whole day. Although the PVDA provides legal means with which to protect women from future violence, these structural constraints make it hard for women to either expel their violent husbands or leave home themselves.

Saumya funded her husband's labour migration. It gave her the peace-of-mind she needed to start her own business and take care of her children. When her husband was stranded in the Middle-East during the pandemic, she had sent him money for the ticket and the prohibitive quarantine costs the Government of Sri Lanka imposed on migrant returnees. It was when he returned that the violence had escalated to a point that she had to leave the home she owned to a remote suburb about a two-hour bus ride from the centrally located neighbourhood of our study. Her 22-year-old-daughter's job as a junior insurance agent paid the rent. Her younger daughter's school was still online, hence the distance did not matter. However, Saumya was compelled to keep in touch with her husband because her ten-year-old son's school had reopened, and he was too young to travel on his own. After our interview, Saumya consulted a feminist lawyer to file a case against the extortion and violence. The legal process had to be halted when she had a heart attack in December. When she recovered, she made the decision to migrate because she believed it the only solution to regaining her home. Although she took the lawyer's advice and followed through with filing a case, her energy was spent sitting the exams she needed to migrate to Singapore as a domestic worker convinced that if she can pay her husband, he would finally leave her in peace.

## Conclusion

The paper foregrounds the enmeshment of violence, care, and the political-economy of women's labour. The case-studies of working-class

women illuminate how homemaking extracts women's reproductive *and* productive labour. They illustrate how poverty, global capitalism, and patriarchal gender-relations underpinned by gender norms and religious values entrap women within multiple structures of power and engenders violence in the home. During COVID-19 even separations as temporary and incomplete forms of resistance became impossible when home and family were legislated as a place of safety and protection.

At the outset, I pointed to the ideological construction of the home as a haven: how it conceals domestic violence, and obscures how 'the peaceful home is often produced under the threat of violence' (Price 2002, 40). I described violence as a condition of possibility in the production of home. The literature on DV highlight women's silence as stoic endurance. It does not underscore enough how women absorb violence as part of their everyday. My interlocutors' narratives illustrate how women come to *expect* and *accept* DV as ordinary events by folding violence into their everyday experiences of home. Women absorb violence because of gender norms and religious values that produce the triumvirate of woman-home-suffering, which normalizes domestic violence by venerating gendered suffering. The mother is the Buddha of the home, I argued, because she endures violence on account of home and family by embodying the feminine virtues of patience, forbearance, and long-suffering.

In their reflections about the ordinary, Das (2020) and Mattingly (2014) write how women's everyday is characterized by a dual character: deep disappointment that is also inflected with longing in the way women continue to invest in the everyday. For women in Sri Lanka, home is embedded in a complex geography of belonging. Their homemaking underscores not only exceptional resilience, but a moral commitment to home and family. It is through women's everyday acts of care and repair that our fundamental human needs for nurture and belonging are realized. This paper illuminates how women come to embody the duality between hope and despair, longing and disappointment in producing home amidst brutal violence. Women's moral imperative to care for others while enduring violence and the denial of care demonstrates how the moral economy of homemaking sustains a gendered regime of value (Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021).

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