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Intimate Evictability: Urban Displacement, Familial Violence and Women's Claim to Home in Urban Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

'Evictability' describes the role urban displacements play in the governance of 'unwanted' citizens in Europe where eviction is imminent yet uncertain. This paper proposes 'intimate evictability'. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the paper illuminates how the governance of the working-class poor via eviction and relocation interfaces with the intimate sphere to produce hostilities between kin. The life-stories of four women illustrate how state policies that discard the poor by denying their right to a home percolate to the home in the form of inheritance disputes and domestic violence. The dual effects of urban displacement and familial violence, the paper argues, is a gendered form of 'slow violence' occurring on multiple scales. This paper makes a case for why bureaucratic processes that 'other' the poor must be read as existing on the same continuum as acrimonious kinship relations that are about discarding unwanted women from home and family.

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Introduction

This paper situates critical experiences of intimate, gendered and everyday forms of 'evictability' encountered during recent fieldwork in a working-class community in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Huub Van Baar (2017) proposed 'evictability' to describe the role urban displacements play in the governance of 'unwanted' citizens in Europe. Defined as 'the *possibility* of being removed from a sheltering place', 'evictability' is a conceptual tool with which to understand 'newly developed mechanisms, discourses, and technologies of bordering' such as gentrification, evicting the poor and public

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health order (Van Baar 2017: 213–214, *my emphasis*). While *eviction* means the organised removal of people through forfeiture, confiscation, or destruction of property, ‘evictability’ calls attention to constantly being threatened by such practices. This paper draws attention to ‘intimate evictability’. It illuminates how evictability practiced at the level of the state interfaces with the domestic sphere to produce intimate forms of evictability in the home. The paper explains how hostile state-citizen relations – in this case arising from the Sri Lankan state’s governance of Colombo’s working-class poor as unwanted and expendable – percolate to the domestic sphere to produce gendered forms of familial violence. The primary focus of the paper is on the *mechanisms* of evictability, namely the ‘attritional warfare’ (Brickell 2020) that characterises familial violence over inheritance rights. In doing so this paper makes a case for why state policies and bureaucratic processes that ‘other’ the poor must be read as existing on the same continuum as acrimonious kinship relations that are about discarding unwanted women from home and family.

The context of this paper is the Sri Lankan state’s Urban Regeneration Programme (URP). Launched soon after the end of the civil war, its objective was transforming Colombo into a ‘World-Class City’ (CPA 2014). From 2010 the URP began forcibly evicting working-class communities in Central Colombo and relocating them to state-built high-rise buildings in the outer-periphery of the city (Abeyasekera *et al.* 2019). In doing so, the URP laid siege to the ways of living the working-class poor had creatively eked out for generations. First, the URP deliberately disregarded the history of these communities. Most families are not recent migrants and can trace their residence in Colombo’s working-class neighbourhoods back several generations. What’s more, previous state policies had recognised their right to the city by providing services and by issuing residence permits (Abeyasekera & Gunasekara 2022). Families proved legal residence for school enrolment and voter registration by showing utility bills and annual rates paid to the Colombo Municipal Council. The URP’s relocation policy of verifying ‘ownership’ single-handedly reversed pro-poor housing policies introduced by various governments since the 1970s. Second, by compensating ‘a house for a house’ rather than a house for each household, the URP turned a blind eye to how families had divided up their original home into several households to accommodate each generation. To ignore the difference between kin, family and household was not mere indifference, but a form of bureaucratic violence unleashed on the working-class poor.

Joint-family households is not a customary practice across Sri Lanka’s ethno-religious groups (Goonsekere 1990; McGilvray 2014). My fieldwork revealed that prohibitive rents and land prices in the city barred the working-class poor from buying a home. The situation had compelled families to incrementally and creatively expand their existing houses vertically to accommodate new family units with each generation. Most of these multi-story houses functioned as separate households. Others, after negotiating with kin on inheritance claims, had moved out to rental properties within the community or to other working-class neighbourhoods. The URP policy refused to acknowledge that a single compound housed multiple households. By allocating ‘a house for a house’ when allocating flats in the state-built high-risers, the URP

threw into disarray the carefully managed spatial dynamics and kinship relations of families living in one house. Previous research had shown the impossibility of fitting multiple families into a 400-square-foot flat (Abeyasekera *et al.* 2019). By decreeing that families living in rental homes as ineligible for a new flat, and by stipulating that only those who could prove ownership of the ‘original’ house from 30+ years ago were eligible for compensation, the URP reignited conflicts over inheritance rights.

Empirically, this article explores the everyday effects of this policy regime. It narrates the life-stories of four women living in a working-class community marked for eviction and involuntary relocation in the foreseeable future. Conceptually, the paper illuminates how the insecurity and uncertainty of living with the possibility of being evicted by the state, i.e. evictability, percolates to the domestic sphere to produce ‘intimate evictability’. Living with evictability, this paper demonstrates, have exacerbated hostilities among kin over inheritance rights and intensified violence against women.

Across South Asia, urban development has resulted in forced evictions and displacement of the working-class poor (cf. Bhan 2009; Feldman & Geisler 2012; Maqsood & Sajjad 2021). In her work on intimate geographies of violence, Katherine Brickell (2020) combines the study of domestic violence with forced eviction to describe its dual effects as a gendered form of ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2011) occurring on multiple scales – between state and citizens, husbands and wives – and experienced intimately by women. Brickell compares its *modus operandi* to ‘attrition warfare’: a military strategy that refers to the gradual wearing down of the enemy through sustained and unrelenting offensive. The dual study of forced eviction and domestic violence, Brickell argues, ‘reveals a similar tactic in civilian life and has depletive effects’ (67): they are dispersed across space and time; is insidious – it operates out of sight and is invisible; and pernicious – it erodes women’s homes and bodies. Drawing on Brickell’s critical scholarship I propose ‘intimate evictability’ as a form of slow violence that is enacted through the tactics of ‘attrition warfare’ against women’s homes and bodies. My aim is to describe how ‘intimate evictability’ percolates from the global to the local and from the state to the domestic sphere to reveal the multiple geographies of gendered violence. Intimate evictability locates familial violence and inheritance disputes as originating *within* the state’s governance strategy of imminent eviction, and reveals how urban displacement produces toxic relationalities.

The representation of slow violence is elusive: ‘how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects?’ (Nixon 2011: 3). This paper illuminates how life-stories are powerful representations of the temporal dispersion of slow violence. The narratives I present illustrate the ways in which women must bear the brunt of hostility, sabotage and emotional wearing-down even as they undertake the care-work necessary for survival and nurturance of family and home. This paper details the tactics kin use against their female relatives to evict them from home, and the strategies women deploy in withstanding incremental acts of violence against them in their claiming of home. In doing so, I aim to identify the effects and the affective atmosphere of habitual hostility in the home. By revealing the material causes of intimate evictability, its relational dynamics

and its emotional consequences, this paper answers the call by feminist critical geographers to move away from global spectacles of crisis and focus on the everyday and intimate effects of global capitalism and neo-liberal economic policies (Brickell 2012).

This paper contributes to feminist scholarship on urban displacement, home and violence against women in the following ways. First, it foregrounds familial violence as a mechanism through which unwanted women are evicted from home and documents strategies women deploy to counter eviction. Second, it proposes ‘intimate evictability’ as a conceptual tool with which to analyse how state policies that discard unwanted citizens percolate to the intimate sphere. Intimate evictability, I show, encapsulates how the multiple geographies of violence and displacement are imbricated in women’s narratives about home and belonging. I begin with a discussion on why ‘wars of attrition’ and ‘slow violence’ are critical concepts through which to theorise ‘intimate evictability’. Next, I discuss the limited attention the scholarship on DV in South Asia has paid to the effects of familial violence on women’s experiences of spatial precarity. The history of urban poor settlements in Sri Lanka I construct next is intended to recover the history of Colombo’s working-class settlements that was deliberately misrepresented by the post-war state. After describing my fieldwork, I discuss inheritance norms that are essential for understanding the kinship disputes I present through the life-stories of four women.

Slow Violence, Attrition Warfare and Intimate Evictability

Brickell’s scholarship on forced eviction and domestic violence illuminates how they are not two discrete forms of violence, but are intimately connected in the way their ‘intimate injustices and precarious journeys’ are simultaneously experienced by women (2012: 5). Domestic violence, Brickell argues, is one of the most overlooked forms of displacement in the way it forces women to either leave home or stay within a violent environment. Forced eviction, Brickell shows, places a disproportionate burden on women who must ‘absorb the consequences of eviction – destruction of family home, splintering of family and community ties, loss of livelihood, and access to services and facilities’ (12) – and continue with the ‘survival work’ required to make a new home. By studying them together, Brickell reveals how the domestic sphere and intimate life are shaped by and influence, wider historical and political processes, and why domestic violence and forced eviction are both forms of gender-based violence.

To study the politics of home is to reveal the tensions between symbolic power and lived realities. Grounded in nostalgia and yearning for the future, home is regarded as a place of safety, security and belonging – a haven for our existential vulnerabilities and a space that inspires hope (Bachelard 1994/1969; Allison 2013). Home also exemplifies the unequal gendered power relations of patriarchy where violence and control contend with care and resistance (Mies 2014; Ramamurthy & Gidwani 2021). More recently, ‘precarity’ has been proposed as an alternative approach to ‘placemaking’ in analysing people’s capacity for homemaking amidst ‘un-homely’ conditions (Hinkson 2017; Bonfanti *et al.* 2022). Regarded as a basic human right and

fundamental to being human, studying how people make home amidst intimate *and* structural constraints and violence is vital because it deepens our ‘understanding [of] the micro-geographies of social and spatial uncertainty’ (Brickell 2012: 227) while revealing the economic and political systems that underpin them. By studying discriminatory housing policies and practices we can uncover the ‘histories of vulnerability [that are] inscribed in people’s homes’ that put them at risk of exclusion and segregation (Bonfanti *et al.* 2022: 5).

Taking inspiration from Brickell’s work, this paper’s dual focus on familial violence and involuntary relocation uncovers the ‘mundane operation of the world’s political economy’ (Porteous & Smith 2001, 641), and underscores the importance of studying crises, not as spectacular events but as every day processes whose consequences are dispersed as they are devastating to ordinary life. Nixon (2011) defines these ‘slow-moving’ and ‘anonymous’ disasters as ‘slow violence’:

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space [...] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales (2).

Brickell (2020) weaves the spatial onto Nixon’s temporal to illustrate how women’s experiences of displacement from home occur simultaneously on multiple scales, and whose effects are borne by women’s bodies over their lifetimes. She describes how women in urban Cambodia rely on altruism and placating behaviours as ways of halting forced eviction and coping with domestic violence (69). These efforts have depletive effects because neither domestic violence nor forced eviction are one-off events, but repetitive tactics that drive women to despair on a daily basis in their efforts to build life and home. It is this tactic of dispersed violence across multiple scales and temporalities that Brickell describes as ‘wars of attrition’ because of the way it wears down women. As I will demonstrate, familial violence can also be compared to attritional warfare because kinship disputes stemming from competing claims over the natal home are on-going, and are never fully resolved because of the condition of evictability the disputing parties live within. Berlant (2007: 757) describes this form of living as ‘slow death’ – ‘a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life’.

The focus on the intimate reveals how urban displacement occurring at the level of the everyday produces multiple vulnerabilities that are marked by gender and class (Sassen 2000; Brickell *et al.* 2017). Hinkson (2017) in her review of anthropological concepts of place and placemaking explains the critical difference between human precariousness – the condition of being dependent on others – and precarity – a shorthand for describing the dispossession that characterises our present ‘nightmarish’ age. Gardner (2022: 1) draws on two examples of ‘unexceptional’ forms of urban displacement in Dhaka – abandoned girls and wives of missing husbands – to illustrate how ‘gender, space, and emplacement work together to produce particular vulnerabilities via [...] “spatial precarity”’. She defines ‘spatial precarity’ ‘as a vulnerability that arises from the entanglement of risky geographies, tenuous emplacement, and relative

navigational skills' (4). For Gardner's interlocutors, vulnerability is a function of their inability to circumnavigate the bewildering cityscape of Dhaka and the relational dynamics of marriage and family; its consequences: being untethered from home and dislodged from family. These women's lives exemplify how our human condition of being vulnerable is intensified by the historical condition of precarity.

For my interlocutors, intimate evictability arises from navigating the risky geography of home where violence is imminent. Women's tenuous emplacement is a function of the state's denial of land rights and the competing inheritance claims of family. Women's survival depends on the strategy of 'standing one's ground' both literally – by staying put in the home despite unrelenting efforts to evict them – and metaphorically – in their determination to endure violence for the sake of home and children. Intimate evictability is experienced in and through the body. Women deflect familial violence via the strategy of repeated migration. In leaving home to work overseas and by sending money to support kin, women gain some room for manoeuvre in claiming home. Yet, as I will show, this is only a temporary reprieve from the spatial precarity that women experience in the form of intimate evictability.

Familial Violence and Spatial Precarity: Women's Everyday Experiences of Kinship and Home

Feminist geographers have emphasised how domestic violence not only causes temporal instability but produces spatial precarity (Warrington 2001; Pain 2014; Brickell 2020). Public health scholarship has tended to collapse DV with IPV (cf., Garcia-Moreno *et al.* 2006; Abramsky *et al.* 2011), obfuscating how women *simultaneously* endure IPV and familial violence (WHO 2005: 44). The older anthropological scholarship on joint-families in Northern India highlighted the role mothers-in-law played in subordinating and isolating daughters-in-law (cf., Vera-Sanso 1999; Parry 2013/1979/2013/1979), but did not emphasise the 'slow violence' accompanying these experiences, namely the coercive relational dynamics and incremental acts of violence that family members in collusion with husbands perpetrate against women. Contemporary scholarship pays attention to the socio-cultural and political economy of dowry violence in patrilocal households (cf., White 2017; Young & Hassan 2018). Feminist scholars have attended to violence perpetrated by mothers-in-law (cf., Fernandez 1997; Oldenburg 2002/2010; Gangoli & Rew 2011), emphasising how patriarchal household structures perpetuate everyday practices of power and control and familial violence that critically shape women's vulnerability in the home (cf. Pinto 2011; Rew *et al.* 2013; Kowlaski 2016). Pinto's (2011: 381) ethnography of women's mental health vividly describes North-Indian marriage – characterised by 'natural antagonism between natal and affinal families', and households structured by the dual hierarchies of gender and age – as dangerous to young married women's coherence in whose bodies 'the vulnerability of relations accumulate'. The violent effects of kinship on women's sense of safety, security and belonging are exemplified in the narratives of women who are institutionalised for paranoia and other psychiatric illnesses. The critical connection between violence against women and spatial precarity is highlighted in the emerging

literature on transnational abandonment of wives, where women are economically exploited by husbands and their families with a promise of a visa to the Global North and subsequently discarded (cf., Anitha *et al.* 2018).

In Sri Lanka, familial violence is both ordinary and pervasive. Spencer's (1990) counter commentary on violence and aggression in everyday life amongst the Sinhalese lays bare why the spectacular violence against Tamil minorities during the 1983 pogrom should not be naively read as 'uncharacteristic' of an ethno-religious community defined by the Buddhist values of non-violence and equanimity. Kinship disputes, Spencer notes, reveal impulsive acts of anger and aggression in the everyday lives of the Sinhalese: first in the form of homicides – a significant proportion of which take place among male kin; second in public displays of suicide or suicide-like acts following intense familial strife. The phenomenon of women and men performing 'suicide-like acts' to instill moral pain on family members to shame them (Spencer 1990: 612–613) is analysed in depth in subsequent scholarship as 'protest suicides' whose communicative function is particularly effective when performed in the context of close relationships, especially kinship (Widger 2015: 507–508).¹ Widger describes how the police and hospitals record suicide and suicide-like acts as resulting from inter-personal strife, specifically in the realm of kinship and intimate relations. The explanatory narratives of young women's motivations to engage in suicide-like acts also point to inter-personal conflicts resulting in familial violence involving verbal abuse – accusations, reprimands, shaming – followed by physical assault by parents and older male siblings (Marecek & Senadheera 2012; Abeyasekera & Marecek 2019). Although the literature does not explicitly analyse the correlations between familial violence and spatial precarity, it is clear that inter-personal strife in the domestic sphere undermines people's sense of security at home and often leads to forced departures.

'Underserved Settlements': Politics of (mis)Representation and Dispossession

In this section, I recover the history of policy interventions designed for Colombo's working-class settlements to illuminate how the relocation of working-class communities to state-built high-rise buildings in the outer peripheries of Colombo from 2010 onwards was justified through carefully crafted (mis)representations. I describe the four main elements of this politics of (mis)representation that drew on sociopolitical and cultural imaginaries about the urban poor in defending the state's (re)possession of working-class neighbourhoods without fair compensation. I argue that the post-war state's Urban Regeneration Policy (URP), in disregarding the histories and living-arrangements of the urban poor, is the principal cause for re-igniting kinship tensions over inheritance and for exacerbating domestic gendered forms of familial violence in the intimate sphere.

Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital city and home to approximately 800,000 residents, has been characterised by persistent inequality.² In 1974 a Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) survey found that 50% of the city's residents lived in tenements, slums and

shanty housing (Collyer *et al.* 2017). This figure, according to a survey by the Urban Development Authority (UDA) conducted in 2011, had barely changed in forty years. The survey recorded 53% of Colombo's population as living in 'underserved' settlements (Collyer *et al.* 2017) – a term strategically deployed to deliberately misrepresent low-income neighbourhoods as 'off-grid' with the aim of earmarking them for eviction under the UDA's Urban Regeneration Programme (URP). Under the post-war regime, the UDA's administration was directly brought under the Ministry of Defense and evictions commenced in 2010 with military support (Perera *et al.* 2017). The evictions of 'underserved' communities were justified in the name of post-war development and the beautification of Colombo: 'underutilised land' and 'economic corridors' of the city had to be released for the regeneration of the economy.

The first element is the politics of (mis)classification. 'Underserved' is a broad-based idiosyncratic housing typology that is not commonly used outside the Sri Lankan context. It refers to two categories of housing with inadequate services: (a) 'slums' – planned residential units, often co-owned by multiple parties, that have fallen into a state of disrepair with minimal common water supply and sanitation; and (b) 'shanties' – unplanned and/or self-built housing with inadequate communal services (Redwood & Wakely 2012; UN Habitat Sri Lanka 2018). This typology superseded the housing classification of the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) whose Population and Housing Survey (2012) classified only 6.4% of Colombo's housing stock as 'semi-permanent and temporary housing'.

This (mis)classification also disregarded the history of the Sri Lankan state's commitment from 1970 onwards to pro-poor programmes with an emphasis on increasing welfare housing (Samaratunga & O'Hare 2013). From 1972–1976, the then government acquired a majority of private lands occupied by tenement communities in order to end the exploitative relationship between rich landlords and the poor (UN Habitat Sri Lanka 2018). The Million Houses Programme (MHP) – which won the World Habitat Award (1988) and influenced the Global Shelter Strategy (2000) – had a significant impact on tenure security and citizenship of the poor in the 1980s (Joshi & Khan 2010; Abeyasekera & Gunasekera 2022). Through its 'aided self-help' approach, the MHP transformed informal low-income settlements in Colombo into legitimate neighbourhoods by: building infrastructure such as roads, wells and community centres; providing services such as water and electricity, schools and a local government representative; and by issuing residence permits with a legitimate postal address that demarcated parcels of land to each family (Abeyasekera & Gunasekera 2022). This is not to deny that from 1994 onwards low-income neighbourhoods in Colombo had fallen into disrepair, owing to the state deprioritising the welfare of working-class communities (Abeyasekera *et al.* 2019). However, the enduring legacy of previous governments' commitment to housing for the poor was revealed in a survey conducted in 2012 by Colombo Municipal Council. The survey found that over eighty percent of households in low-income neighbourhoods have legal access to water and electricity, pay rates to the municipality for environmental services, and almost all children attend state schools (GOSL 2017).

A second element of the misrepresentation was that of scale. The CMC Survey of 2012 using the UDA's definition, recorded 1735 'underserved' settlements in the city (UN Habitat 2018). However, what was not highlighted is that these settlements occupy a mere 900 acres, which is only 10% of the Colombo's landmass (Perera *et al.* 2017). Sri Lanka building laws prohibit the construction of houses on land less than seven perches (50m² or 544f²). However, in 1977, the Urban Development Authority's (UDA) Slums and Shanty Improvement Programme introduced a 'special projects' provision that allowed low-income households to construct houses on land as little as 37.5 square metres 'in-situ' without allocating more land (Joshi & Khan 2010). Unlike in popular representations of sprawling slums of South Asia, a unique characteristic of Colombo's low-income communities is that they constitute small pockets spread across the city. In fact, 74% of them have less than 50 housing units, while the larger settlements with more than 500 units accounts for only 0.7% of the urban poor settlements in Colombo (Sevanatha 2002).

The third element of (mis)representation was the politics of (il)legitimacy and (il)legality. Under the MHP the commitment to provide a *home* – not a shelter or even a house – was solidified through tenure security (Abeyasekera & Gunasekara 2022). This was exemplified in the speeches of Prime Minister Premadasa – the architect of the MHP – who urged people 'to dream about owning a home'. Under the MHP, the provision of residence permits, legal postal addresses, voter registration and provision of environmental and public services explicitly recognised the working poor as citizens with rights to the city. This legacy is reflected in the CMC Survey (2012) that recorded 682 of the 1735 'underserved' settlements as fully upgraded with secure tenure, services and reasonably good quality of housing (GOSL 2017). Of the balance 1,053, around seventy-eight percent have some form of tenure security with only 22.6 percent having no security. In fact, the National Housing Policy of 2017 – drafted after the Rajapaksa regime was defeated in 2015 – explicitly recognises that 'underserved' is a misrepresentation of a population that has historically been socially and legally recognised as belonging to the city (GOSL 2017).

The culmination of this politics of (mis)representation was dispossession. Under the Hundred-Thousand Houses Programme (1977–1982) – a precursor to the Million Houses Programme – the state had adopted a provider-based model in building houses for the poor. By the end of 1982 the state found the costs untenable (Abeyasekera & Gunasekara 2022).³ In response, the MHP adopted an aided-self-model that provided start-up loans and planning expertise, and formalised community-level organisation to encourage the working-classes to design and build their communities and homes. When the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) calculated the 'real cost' of the houses built, they found that most households had spent 3–4 times more than the loan when constructing houses in terms of labour and materials.⁴ When evictions commenced in 2010, a majority of houses in low-income neighbourhoods had incrementally expanded their houses vertically to accommodate their growing families who could not afford to move out due to Colombo's prohibitive rents (Abeyasekera *et al.* 2019). The Rajapaksa-led government obliterated this history when they relocated low-income communities to state-built tower blocks and, instead of

regarding the new flats as compensation, forced the poor to sign a twenty-five-year loan for LKR 1,000,000 and demanded a down-payment of LKR 50,000–100,000 for keys. The state even disregarded free-hold deeds (Redwood & Wakely 2012), and, in most cases, turned a blind-eye to the multiple households that lived in a single premise, and ‘compensated’ a house-for-a-house, rather than a house for every household (Abeyasekera *et al.* 2019). This policy, I argue, is the root cause for re-igniting simmering kinship tensions over inheritance rights. From 2010 onwards, Colombo was transformed from a city that recognised its working-class poor to a city that dislocated them to the margins of polity. As Perera (2020: 52–53) aptly notes, state policy was ‘beautification’ – a slum-free Colombo, not a poverty-free Colombo.

Fieldwork

The life-stories in this paper are drawn from an ethnographic study of women’s homemaking and access to services in a low-income neighbourhood in Colombo. From November 2020, my research assistant and I followed the lives of twelve women living in a tenement community in Colombo’s historical neighbourhood of Slave Island. Using a connection my activist assistant had with an office-bearer of the women’s committee (*Kantha Samithiya*), we asked that she introduce us to women who represented the ethno-religious demographic of the community. Our interlocutors included three Malay-Muslims, three Moor-Muslims, three Tamils (Hindu and Christian) and three Sinhala-Buddhists. The youngest was 32-year-old while the oldest women were in their 60s. All of them were employed, married and had children. The ethnography investigated women’s homemaking as emotional labour and activism in contending with eviction and precarity in the wake of the state’s aspirations to make Colombo a ‘world-class city’. With COVID-19 the study also investigated the pandemic’s devastating consequences on urban livelihoods, schooling and health. Relationships were formed when lockdowns were lifted by visiting women in their homes, and continued during lockdowns through WhatsApp chats, phone interviews and check-ins and photo diaries. The life-history interviews used in this paper were conducted between October and December 2021 when we spent approximately 2–4 h in each woman’s home talking about their life-journeys aided by a life-journey map in which women marked the significant events of their lives. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh.

Kinship, Inheritance and Migration

Sinhalese inheritance norms are characterised by equal distribution of property amongst sons and daughters (Goonesekere 1990). While the ancestral home is usually inherited by the youngest son, endogamous marriage to kin in the same village meant that it was not uncommon for daughters to inherit land in the family compound where she may build a house (Gunasinghe 1996; Leach 1961). Neolocal residence is the norm amongst urban middle-class Sinhalese; in practice, however,

couples usually live near either natal family (Abeyasekera 2021). I learned that amongst the urban-poor, parents believed daughters needed protection and childcare assistance after marriage and in later years relied on daughters for eldercare. Therefore, if the natal home was too small for sub-division, daughters usually inherited, but with the understanding that sisters will financially assist brothers, which was accomplished through migration.

The life-stories of my Muslim interlocutors indicate that both Moors and Malays follow matrilineal norms of inheritance and matrilocal residence patterns of Muslim communities in Eastern Sri Lanka and across the Indian Ocean littoral (Kooria 2021; McGilvray 2014).⁵ Daughters inherit the natal home, while sons join the natal households of their wives. Although brothers must contribute substantially to the building of dowry houses for sisters (McGilvray 2014), I found that amongst the urban poor, Muslim women migrated overseas to provide for their natal and later marital families.

From the 1970s onwards the demand for domestic workers in the Middle East resulted in women accounting for more than fifty percent of low-skilled labour migration from Sri Lanka (Weeraratne 2021). My interlocutors' life-stories illustrate the intimate connection between poverty, migration and familial violence. Women from all ethno-religious groups had migrated to the Middle East multiple times before and after marriage to meet kinship obligations and ensure household survival; many were also escaping familial violence. My fieldwork elucidates how matrilineal norms of inheritance and matrilocal household structures are attenuated by the material deprivations of urban poverty – i.e. cramped homes, soaring property prices and rents, precarious employment – precipitating toxic inheritance disputes between brothers and sisters not recorded elsewhere in South Asia. The literature on South Asia, as discussed earlier, foregrounds IPV and dowry disputes between natal and affinal families with little attention to familial violence between siblings. As I will show, inheritance is bitterly contested with familial violence a mechanism for discarding unwanted women from home. Women migrate with the hope that by meeting financial obligations to kin and gaining relative financial independence, they can improve their status and bargaining power.

Wars of Attrition: Battling for Home

Maleeka – a Moor-Muslim – lives in constant fear of her brothers' violence. Maleeka has five brothers and a younger sister. It was understood that the natal home in which their maternal grandmother lived would be inherited by the two grand-daughters, while the grand-sons would move to their wives' homes after marriage. Because her sister married before Maleeka, she claimed the house and for many years refused to partition it. Eventually Maleeka claimed approximately one perch of land (25.29m² OR 272.25f²). The bigger section is occupied by her sister whose hostility is an everyday experience for Maleeka. 'Whenever she sees me, she either actively ignores me, glares at me, or abuses me in filth. I try to keep out of her way, but how can I – she lives next door!' While her brothers have no legal claim to the house, what is clear is that Maleeka

is unwanted, and their intention is to wear down Maleeka's resolve to stay put by periodically assaulting her and vandalising her home. This attrition warfare placed Maleeka in a state of intimate evictability – she lived in constant fear of losing her home.

From childhood, Maleeka has experienced home as a place of brutal violence. When she was eight-years-old her mother migrated overseas for work. Her oldest brother was sixteen, her youngest eight-months. Their father did not live with them as his business was in a different Province. As the oldest girl, Maleeka was expected to manage the household. Her mother's family, who lived in the neighbourhood, was supportive, but her mother's sister's daughter, who had been asked to help Maleeka, ganged up with Maleeka's oldest brother. '[They] didn't want me going to school. [My cousin] burnt my books saying I should stay at home'. Maleeka's father had intervened, but her brother's will prevailed.

My father bought new books [...] a school bag and I went to school after about a month's break. My brother fought with my father, he even hit my father because I was going to school. After that I didn't go. I liked going to school, but I had to stop. I was good at my schoolwork; I still have my report cards.

Maleeka wept, recounting how she was made to work 'like a servant'. Maleeka was thirteen when she dropped out of school permanently to run the household including washing her brothers' clothes and cooking. When her mother returned after eight years of being away, she too tried to intervene. 'My brother said, "why don't *you* stay back and send her to school?"' Maleeka's brothers felt that in the mother's absence, it was Maleeka's responsibility to manage the household. Maleeka's mother had to keep working overseas to provide for the large family. When her mother returned for good, Maleeka migrated. She spent ten years – from the age of 23–33 – working as a domestic worker in the Middle East to support her siblings.

When Maleeka's mother passed away, the disputes over the house began. As Maleeka was unmarried at the time, her sister – who was married with two children – felt she had a right to the house. She did not want Maleeka living with them because 'she was worried that I will take her husband'. While four of her brothers had moved to their wives' natal homes, one of them had no house and conspired with the others to evict Maleeka. Maleeka fought back. 'How can they throw me out? How many times I went to the police! I told them I was a *lamissi*. Where was I supposed to go?' *Lamissi*' means 'maiden' and is used to describe a young unmarried virgin. Maleeka used her source of shame – that she was unmarried at 30 – to her advantage by referring to herself as a young hapless woman who needed the security of her natal home. The police took her side, but the violence continued. 'I had to fight against all [my brothers]. Once, my brother hit me till he broke two of my teeth'. Maleeka stopped and showed us the gap in her upper-palette. We could not hold back our tears and cried with her. 'I did so much for them, and they did this to me. Because of that I curse them!'

Maleeka had married a South-Indian Muslim while overseas. When she returned with her husband in 2007, she had to visit the police several times before Middle

East her sister agreed to partition the house with clapboard. Her sister, however, refused to share the water and electricity connection, and did not give Maleeka the paperwork she needed to register the house as a separate entity and apply for services. For several years Maleeka survived with a single fan and light tapped illegally from the mains. It was only in 2011, when Maleeka adopted her daughter following several miscarriages, that Maleeka's husband had persuaded her sister to take pity on the baby and share the paperwork. Maleeka worries that since her daughter is adopted her sister will claim the house for her children when Maleeka is no more. Maleeka's siblings continue to challenge her right to the home by using violence to intimidate her and by demanding money. Maleeka believes her siblings are 'jealous' because her mother's family 'loves me more [...] they support me when I'm in need [...] I helped them a lot I was overseas'.

Maleeka – 51-year-old at the time we spoke to her – blames her ill-health for the harassment she has endured for nearly thirty years.

This house is a problem-house. I am sick, I have diabetes, and I can't be a patient anymore. My sister and brothers harass me. One of them is connected to the underworld. He fights with and has even broken our [electricity and water] meter boxes [...] I want to at least rent this house [but] I worry that [my brothers] will make the tenants' lives miserable.

Maleeka is desperate to rent her place, move out, and live in peace, but she knows her brothers will evict her tenants. She is also worried about the lack of clear legal documents that will make it difficult to reclaim ownership if she leaves. The only way Maleeka can claim her right to a home is by staying put. Attrition warfare has been going on for decades, but Maleeka still endures.

Heshani, like Maleeka, is regularly assaulted by her brother. A Sinhala Buddhist, Heshani's father had made it clear that she would inherit the natal home while her brother would move out after marriage. Heshani explained that unlike her – she was a domestic worker – he had a steady job at a newspaper publication house. He had also married into a relatively better-off family who owned property; hence, Heshani was confident that he would not claim the house. For several years the siblings' relationship had been amicable. About ten years ago, however, he had started threatening eviction if she did not pay him LKR one million as compensation. Heshani believes he needs the extra money for his mistress. The timing of the dispute, however, aligns with the launching of Colombo's beautification project. Heshani's neighbourhood is on prime land in the heart of the city and has been earmarked for demolition. While nobody wants to move out, the community is aware that if they have some proof of residence, i.e. if not a state permit, at least utility bills in their name, they will be compensated with a new flat. Therefore, it is no small coincidence that Heshani's brother started demanding money around the same time.

Heshani's brother would frequently waylay her when she was returning from work and assault her. 'He has hit me several times [...] I have even gone to the police'. Heshani had migrated overseas soon after her father's death at the age of 25 and only returned five years later when her mother insisted she get married. Heshani

had been close to her father, but her mother favoured her brother and supported his claim to the house. Heshani sold the gold jewelry she had bought from working overseas to pay him LKR 835,000. Eventually, Heshani had paid him another 65,000, but had no receipt for the transaction. The brother continues to demand the balance 165,000 plus an additional 100,000 for their mother's eventual funeral expenses – a sum that Heshani cannot pay. Heshani lives in a state of intimate evictability; she fears her brother's, connections with the police, local authorities and lawyers, because it gives him the upper-hand when threatening eviction. But Heshani believes she has a right to the house and stays put.

Originally constructed with clapboard, Heshani had remitted money while working in the Middle East to rebuild it with brick and mortar. A foundation was laid, and a second floor added. Heshani told us that her mother's brother's daughter had kept accounts of Heshani's remittances, but, when she handed Heshani the records, Heshani had dismissed them saying, 'everyone knows I built the house'. Heshani is worried because she has no documentation to prove ownership. Houses in her community do not have title deeds; some have Government issued residence permits. These were sometimes sold to others; while the name on the residence card could not be changed, the local government official's attestation legitimises these unofficial transactions. Heshani's father did not have a residence permit; neither had he changed the utility bills to his name – the only other way to 'officially' prove ownership. Everyone in the community, however, acknowledged the house was his. When Heshani inherited, she avoided the tedious bureaucratic process of transferring utility bills in her name because her mother – who had moved back to her natal home in the same neighbourhood after Heshani married – did not support her claim to the house. Without her mother's signature, the local authorities would not issue documents stating Heshani was the primary occupant.

Heshani's house was the smallest of the homes we visited. Its breadth was only a little more than the length of our legs when we sat on the floor. The downstairs comprised a narrow hallway and an alcove for a kitchen; the upstairs – one long room. Heshani, her husband and three sons – aged 13, 15 and 17 – shared the space. Heshani's husband was an alcoholic gambler who abused her regularly. Heshani worked as a domestic worker during the day and conducted tuition classes in the evening to ensure a good education for her sons. Against one wall of the hallway were narrow tables piled high with schoolbooks and uniforms; a shelf held photos of prize-givings and trophies from sports-meets. The pandemic situation had exacerbated Heshani's economic issues. Her husband – a pavement hawker – no longer contributed as his business had shut down. Heshani had to buy mobile phones for her three sons for their online classes. Food bills had gone up on account of their staying home throughout the day. It was literally impossible for Heshani to pay the balance money her brother was demanding.

Heshani keeps mostly to herself because of the shame she feels for being a victim of domestic violence. As a domestic worker she feels she has little power to fight for her rights although in reality she has managed to stay put. She repeatedly told us how exhausted she felt on a daily basis for living in this state of intimate evictability.

Heshani is 50-year-old and has lived with IPV and familial violence for over thirty years. ‘Practically every day I go to my [maternal] uncle’s trying to come up with a solution. [...] I am exhausted with worry’.

Staying Put

Tasneem – a 56-year-old widow – is regarded as a squatter in the home she has lived in since she was sixteen. Tasneem was barely 16-year-old when she was coerced into marriage by her husband. ‘I could not refuse him because he was a thug [he] threatened me’. Tasneem is Malay; when she married a Moor, her mother asked her to leave her natal home. Tasneem moved in with her husband’s parents, his three sisters and three brothers. Although at first they had ‘loved her [...] I was very beautiful’, the material realities of poverty coupled with her husband’s flouting his duties as the eldest son and disregarding Muslim inheritance laws resulted in her mother-in-law ill-treating Tasneem. Tasneem’s husband – ‘a drunk [who] barely showed up for his job at the Municipality’ – rarely contributed to the household budget.

They would feed us only if we gave them money. There were days when I was starving. My husband was a thug and would steal food, but I didn’t want to eat stolen food [...] Even when I was pregnant, they didn’t feed me. I feel like crying when I remember.

Tensions about residence rights have been on-going for years. Tasneem described the original house as ‘a temporary shack with a very low roof [...] just one room with a kitchen in the corner’. They used the public toilets nearby. The house stands on two-perches of land in the heart of the city, and belonged to Tasneem’s mother-in-law; after her death, it passed on to her oldest daughter. All the others had moved out after marriage. All three sisters-in-law had, however, converted the shack to a three-story house over time to claim ownership rights. Tasneem took us on a tour. The ground floor was the oldest sister-in-law’s domain and was divided into a living room, kitchenette and shower room. Tasneem’s daughter occupied a room on the first floor. There were two rooms on the third floor: the first was built by the second sister-in-law who had given it to one of her daughters to live in; the second – which was kept locked – was built by the third sister-in-law who visited on weekends.

When Tasneem’s husband died, Tasneem was asked to leave, but she continues to live in the hostile environment because she insists her daughter has a claim on her father’s house. Tasneem’s son moved out after marriage, but her daughter lives in the same house with her husband and three children. Neither Tasneem nor her daughter can afford their own place and must stay put despite the daily hostilities.

Tasneem does not have her own room and sleeps in an open hallway on the first-floor with her two grand-daughters and her sister-in-law. She owns a small cupboard in which she keeps all her belongings: clothes and groceries. She is not allowed to use the kitchen by her sister-in-law. On the day we visited, the padlock on Tasneem’s cupboard had been broken and part of her wages had been stolen. Tasneem eats breakfast from the corner shop. On most days she visits her sister after work and returns home only to sleep. Every morning, she washes her grandchildren’s clothes at the public tap

and puts them out to dry before going to work; she irons them at night. Tasneem adores her grandchildren and doing their laundry is one way she is allowed to contribute to the household.

Tasneem works as a cleaner for a corporate office. During the multiple lockdowns, she was not paid. We asked her how she managed with regards to food, but also time and space. She told us that would make herself a cup of tea before the others woke up, and ate instant noodles purchased from the vouchers the research project provided. She could not watch TV in the living-room because of the hostilities. To avoid daily arguments, Tasneem had stopped talking to the adults in the household and kept to herself. She would sit out on the tiny balcony, listen to the radio and play with her grandchildren during the day.

Tasneem has lived with intimate evictability her entire adult life. It was because she felt unwelcome that Tasneem had migrated to the Middle East as a domestic worker for twenty years. She hoped that by supporting her in-laws financially, they would be grateful to her.

I didn't save anything because I sent all the money back to my in-laws as they were looking after my two children [...] I was a fool. They all had a good time when I had money. I provided for [my sisters-in-law's] six children too.

Tasneem calls herself 'a fool' because she believes that instead of funding the extended family's material needs – clothes, electronics etc. – she should have used the money to expand the house. It was the only way she could have had a stronger claim to the house and avoided the pain of being called 'a squatter' by her in-laws. Tasneem feels even more alienated at home because her daughter is estranged from her. 'She calls my sister-in-law "Amma" (mother), not me. They turned her against me'.

Staying put is Tasneem's only choice; but it is also a strategic decision. Although Tasneem's daughter is tolerated by her paternal aunt, her paternal cousins have asked her to leave as she has no inheritance rights. 'Now they want her out of the house too, but I won't budge for her sake. She has a right to live here'. Tasneem's home was a cupboard, a mat and a strip of balcony chockfull of laundry. Whenever we met Tasneem, however, she was cheerful and lively. She had made a life by knitting together a tapestry of kinship relations by being a loving grandmother, a helpful mother, a reliable aunt and a companion sister.

Repeated Migration and Multiple Displacement

Surekha's life-story exemplifies how the 'structural forces of unhomeliness, alienation, and homelessness' (Brickell 2012: 227) play out in the intimate sphere to produce spatial precarity. Surekha lived in her natal home with two never-married maternal aunts. When I asked her if she had any fond memories of her childhood home, she said, 'no [...] my grandmother loved me a lot, but my mother did not. I have suffered a lot'. Surekha's narrative evoked a strong sense of displacement – a feeling of being out of place (Allison 2013). As a child, she remembers feeling uncared for; she was compelled to take on adult responsibilities at thirteen owing to what

Surekha felt was her mother's irresponsible behaviour. Surekha was embarrassed by her mother. Surekha's family was Malay-Muslim – an ethno-religious group known to be more liberal-minded than Moor-Muslims on account of their being more educated as well as more 'modern' in their dress and habits. Hence, Surekha could not understand why her mother had six children when it was clear that the family could not afford to feed them. She did not blame her father. She only told us he was a 'heart patient'. When her mother went into hospital for her last two deliveries, she had asked Surekha to pretend they were sisters because '[my mother] was embarrassed to admit she had a daughter who was fifteen'. Surekha had dropped out of school in Grade 5. She first said it was because she was ill, but later she told us she had to work to support the family. Her mother eventually migrated overseas, 'but she never sent me any money. I can say I never ate off her. It was I who earned and provided for my siblings'.

Surekha married at eighteen, but left her husband soon after her second son was born because he assaulted her regularly. During the four years she was married, Surekha moved 4–5 times. She needed to escape her natal home, but never felt welcome in her married one either. Her mother-in-law had ill-treated her. Surekha wept as she recalled how hungry she felt while pregnant, and how humiliated she felt when she was sent to the public tap to wash the family's clothes and bathe. Soon after her first son was born, she migrated overseas for work leaving the baby with her aunts. When she returned after a year, she got pregnant again. Just before giving birth, she had moved out because of her mother-in-law's ill-treatment and her husband's violence. 'I just got into a three-wheeler and went around until I found a place to live [...] I found a small hut and thought this is better than living with [my husband's family]'. Surekha migrated for the second time leaving both her children with her aunts. When she returned, she found a job in a Garment Factory. She hinted that her third son was the manager's – 'he didn't leave me alone'. Surekha then moved back to her natal home and lived with her aunts, before migrating again. From the age of nineteen Surekha has worked in the Middle East for almost twenty-five years to provide for her sons. She said her only happiness in life was that they were educated – they had studied up to Grade 10 – and she had funded their weddings.

Surekha lived in her natal home with her aunts. She told us that the house belongs to them, but she is entitled to live there and, if sold, she could claim a share. The house – fairly spacious when compared with the others we had visited – was divided into four sections. The first two sections were the main house with a porch, hallway, two rooms, kitchen and bathroom which her aunts occupied. The third section was at the back comprising a series of small rooms with a bathroom, which her aunts rented out to boarders. There were two small rooms upstairs. Surekha's brother lived in one, she lived in the other. Surekha did not quite explain to us why or when her aunts banned her from the main house. She intimated it happened during COVID-19 when Surekha lost her jobs as a hospital attendant and could not pay her share of the utility bills. 'They asked me to stop using the kitchen saying gas was expensive'. Surekha was allowed to use the bathroom once-a-day. She had to fill a bucket with

the water she needed for the day. ‘I fill the bucket and slowly draw it through the window with a rope. It is too heavy to carry up the staircase’. Surekha cooked herself a one-pot rice meal on the small hot-plate she kept in her room. She ate only once-a-day. Most days, she bought a *roti* from the corner shop and drank coffee when she was hungry. She refused to stay overnight with her sons saying they needed their privacy and had their own families to support. She seemed adamant not to burden them.

Surekha’s narrative of suffering was at variance with her outward demeanor and comportment. At 61, she was the oldest participant in the study, but she was always impeccably groomed even when we dropped in on her. She was the only woman who wore make-up and jewelry and styled her hair. At the end of the interview when we laughingly complimented her looks, she told us, ‘I am very careful with my body. I don’t have a single blemish. I only use natural products to wash my hair and moisturize my skin’. On reflecting on her story and her outward appearance, I wondered whether her comportment – that of a well-mannered lady – and her care for her body was a response to her sense of feeling out of place in the world.

Conclusion

This paper proposes the term ‘intimate evictability’ to describe how the construction of unwanted citizens by the Sri Lankan state produces toxic relationalities and gendered forms of familial violence in the domestic sphere. The bureaucratic violence of forced relocations aimed at discarding citizens into the peripheries of its polity, this paper showed, seeps into the family to ignite violent contestations over inheritance rights and the discarding of unwanted women from home. The principal aim of this paper was to illuminate how the dual effects of urban displacement and familial violence accumulate in women’s bodies, its ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2011) exemplifying women’s vulnerabilities to and producing ‘spatial precarity’ (Gardner 2022).

I began this paper with Van Baar’s (2017) notion of ‘evictability’ that radically denationalises the study of mobilities and border-control in Europe by reflecting on the ways in which governance of unwanted citizens is enacted through intra-national enforcements of evictions and surveillance of neighbourhoods. My paper illuminates that intra-state border-control through the illegalising of unwanted citizens is occurring beyond Europe via urban regeneration and ‘world-class city’ building in the global south. In earmarking working-class neighbourhoods for more profitable ventures than homes for the poor, the processes of gentrification in Sri Lanka are justifying the segregation of undesirable citizens in the name of economic development. By denying residential histories and invalidating the legacy of previous state policies that recognised their right to the city, evictability by the state is enacted through the withdrawal of citizenship rights of the working-class poor. Thus, new borders are being drawn between desirable citizens who can be visible in the ‘world-class city’ and unsanitary citizens who are being relocated to the margins of the polity.

Through the life-stories of four women living in a working-class neighbourhood in Sri Lanka’s capital city, this paper emphasised the importance of analysing the

consequences of urban generation beyond the generalisable; by illustrating how urban regeneration's violent effects are shaped by culture-specific kinship norms, specifically matrilineal inheritance and matrilocal residence patterns of Moor and Malay Muslims and the Sinhalese. The Sri Lankan's state's explicit decision to compensate 'a house for a house' rather than a house for each household strategically ignored the difference between family, kin and household. In so doing the state unravelled the delicate negotiations over inheritance that siblings were managing through the duty of care and reciprocity. By allocating a single flat for a family that had formed multiple households within the same house, and by refusing to allocate a flat to those who had moved out into rental properties, the URP reignited sibling disputes over inheritance rights. The structural constraints of an unaffordable housing market and the technologies of evictability, this paper shows, are leaching into the home producing protracted wars of attrition between family members and gendered forms of 'slow violence'.

Overall, this paper draws attention to how urban regeneration places women at the confluence of violence and vulnerability – a place where women must contend with intimate evictability even as they must nurture and create home. The life-stories also illuminate women's resilience and agency. Maleeka, Tasneem, Surekha and Heshani used multiple migrations as a dual strategy: to escape violence and to gain bargaining power. Upon their return, the women stayed put by asserting their right to a home. These women appear indefatigable in their daily struggle with intimate evictability, but their life-stories illustrate that the struggle for home – a place of belonging, rest, and renewal – is an existential crisis that has depleted their lives in immeasurable ways.

Notes

1. 'Suicide-like acts' is the term used to emphasise that these acts are seldom motivated by a wish to die and, therefore, not failed suicide attempts. Rather, in publicly performing them, people seek to shame others for causing them suffering.
2. Colombo's population suggests low-levels of urbanisation in Sri Lanka. In fact, these official figures obscure one of the highest rates of urbanisation in the world. Expansion of the city, which has taken place beyond Colombo's municipal boundaries, accounts for a little over 6 million, or a little less than one-third of Sri Lanka's population (UN Habitat Sri Lanka 2018 as summarised in Perera & Spencer 2023).
3. In addition to the high costs, Sri Lanka was facing a liquidity crisis, neoliberal reforms that imposed budget cuts on social welfare services, and a civil-war that demanded an increased defence budget (Abeyasekera & Gunasekara 2022).
4. In fact, a substantial percentage of houses built during the MHP exceeded what the state had spent per house during the HTHP, which was LKR 30,000.
5. Of the 9.3% of Moor-Muslims in Sri Lanka, the district of Colombo is home to 13.2% of them. Malay-Muslims are only 0.2% of Sri Lanka's population with 32.7% of the community living in Colombo.

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