The Kitchen Spoon's Handle

Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids

Michele Ruth Gamburd

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS
ITHACA AND LONDON

5 Control of Remittances: Prosperity and the Extended Family

When Domestic Workers Leave the Domestic Economy

In the 1960s cinnamon production and the coconut fiber industry employed most of the Naeaegama villagers, but since the early 1980s dramatic shifts in the local economy have occurred. Jobs in the armed forces, tourist industry, and local garment factories now employ significant numbers of local men and women, yet the migration to the Middle East overshadows all other forms of work. This change in economic orientation foreshadows transformations in village and national gender hierarchies, with a large range of local tensions and conflicts arising as women step into the role of wage earner. In this chapter I first examine the concept of "prosperity," the goal for many female migrants. Through case studies of married and unmarried migrants, I then explore how different families negotiate the control of remittances, and how these decisions create and reflect patterns of power and authority in the family.

In the early 1980s Sri Lankan social scientists speculated that salaried employment would bring women control over the money they earned, which would, at least in theory, heighten their standing in the family and community. R. B. M. Korale noted that the migration of labor provided women with a mobility "unimaginable a few years ago":

> The economic necessities which fuel these migration flows will alter the social relationships within family units and in society as a whole. It is also expected that the desire for greater independence and participation in the social and economic process by women will be enhanced. The wealth acquired by females and the dependence of other household members on this income, will further buttress their social transformation resulting in greater social and economic rights being granted to females. (1983, 23)

Ten to fifteen years after this optimistic prophecy, new economic opportunities for women have transformed their social roles. This chapter examines both the ways in which women have gained authority and independence and the forces that have worked against dramatic upheavals in village gender hierarchies.

Bringing domestic work into the global economy has changed how women think of their work. Interviewed village women explicitly equated the job they did abroad "for the market" with their everyday activities in the home in Sri Lanka, recognizing the market value of their labor. At the same time, however, they recognized that work abroad gave them no other skills they could sell to enhance their earnings upon their return. Nor did domestic service challenge the gendered division of labor. Poorly paid and not well respected, jobs as domestic servants in Sri Lanka attracted only the most desperate returned migrants. In their study of Sri Lankan female migrants to Singapore and Hong Kong, Dias and Weerakoon-Gunawardene (1991) suggest that returnees stepped relatively easily back into their household roles of wives and mothers. During their work abroad, they do not adopt foreign customs or assume a different ethnic identity. Although they gained self-assurance, women did not go far in rejecting accepted customs, starting their own businesses, or taking on roles of community leadership. Dias and Weerakoon-Gunawardene claim that women take a passive approach to their return, fitting back into their households smoothly.

While Korale's optimistically predicted gender revolution has not yet come to full blossom, Dias's and Weerakoon-Gunawardene's pessimistic portrayal of passive women also oversimplifies changes in practices and ideologies in the village. Taking domestic work out of the domestic economy has sent a series of shock waves through village social hierarchies, giving migrant women leverage to bring about transformations in gender relations. This leverage stems not so much from changes in what work women *do* as from changes in what that work *means*, which is associated with shifts in women's employers, workplaces, and earnings. Despite the lack of major changes in their home environments, migrants

have acquired a certain self-worth and dignity through their jobs which lend them assurance in their struggle for power. Through migration opportunities many poor women have ready access to gainful employment, while poor men have none. This situation threatens earlier patterns of male dominance in the village. Changes in women's social positioning have taken place not on a *tabula rasa* but in the context of preexisting gender hierarchies and cultural ideologies that devalue women's work to begin with. Women's new control over financial resources has not led directly to an increase in their authority and decision-making power. Instead, change has come about through slow and painful struggle.

The following sections focus on the contestation and renegotiation of gendered power structures. I examine three cases in which husband and wife struggled over the control of remittances and two cases in which unmarried migrants sent money to their parents. In these, like many, instances, the person who spent the money acquired as much or more power and authority than the person who earned it. Paradoxically, the "greater independence and participation in the social and economic process" that Korale predicted as a byproduct of migration appears as much or more in the individuals handling remittances as in the migrants themselves. The incrementally shifting habits and attitudes of ordinary people in their everyday world reveals the rupture and reinforcement of older village practices in flux.

"Prospering"

By the most frequently voiced village standards, the goal of migration is *diyunu vennạ* meaning to prosper, improve, or develop.[1] A num-

[1] A person, village, or country can *diyunu vennạ*, or acquire more wealth, knowledge, or assets. Saying "*minissu vaeDi diyunu venạvaa*" means that people have become rich and prosperous, or *diyunu veccạ minissu. diyunu raTạval* are developed countries. A rich or improved literature would be *diyunu sahitvạyạk*. One can improve in knowledge (*daeniima. vidyaavạ diyunu karạnạvaa / venạvaa*) and learning (*igaenniimạ diyunu karạnạvaa / venạvaa*). *karạnạvaa* [to do or make] is the active verb here, while *venạvaa* [to happen or become] takes the passive role. Thus *diyunu karạnạvaa* implies an active agent while *diyunu venạvaa* merely denotes that development has taken place. Denoting mental and meditative cultivation in religious writings, *diyunu* also refers to the development of institutions and communities. Although one can improve lands and gardens (*iDam, vatu diyunu karạnạvaa*), *diyunu* does not refer to development in the physical or biological sense—for instance, children reaching puberty, or trees and vegetation growing in a field. My thanks to Kusuma Karunaratne, W. S. Karunatillake, and Anne Blackburn for their private communications on the concept of *diyunu*. Any misinterpretations are strictly my own.

Fig. 3. A successful businesswoman, Polwatta. This entrepreneurial merchant spent a number of years in the Middle East. With the help of her family, she set up a shop in Polwatta upon her return. (Courtesy of the author.)

ber of situations qualify as prosperity, but housing provides the most visible index of family accomplishment. Almost unanimously, women and men say that migrants go abroad because they want to buy land and build a house; acquiring such property counts as "prospering."

Over the thirty years between 1968 and 1997, the correlation between social status and housing quality in Naeaegama underwent a shift. In 1968 only the wealthier (often high-caste) families in the village lived in cement or brick houses with tile roofs, whereas the poorer families lived in clay houses with tin sheets, tar sheets, or coconut-frond mats as roofing. House size and quality reflected social status and wealth. After 1968, population pressure reduced the size of individual home gardens, though the wealthiest Halaagama villagers still retained the largest land shares. Whereas a cement house once unequivocally indicated a wealthy Halaagama residence, in 1994 people of all castes owned cement houses (often only half-finished) on relatively small plots of land. In 1968 the gradual rise and fall of family fortunes roughly paralleled the grandeur of the house. In contrast, the

speed with which family affluence could change had greatly increased by 1994; some families went hungry in half-finished mansions while others stored color televisions under palm-frond roofs. Sporadic access to money through migration gave more people the means to improve their housing, thus making housing a less reliable marker of social status than it had been in the past.

Villagers often channeled remittances toward family consumption. While using "Middle East money" this way did not count as a waste in most villagers' opinions, neither did it count as prospering. Many families planned that after a woman went abroad, her parents or husband would continue to work, meeting most if not all of the immediate family needs. Unskilled men, however, found the jobs available for them in the village area labor intensive, unpleasant, poorly paid, and short-term. Under these conditions, many preferred not to seek out such opportunities actively, especially if their wives earned good salaries abroad. In cases where families depended on remittances for daily consumption, little or nothing remained of the migrant's wages but what she might have kept in a personal bank account or invested in jewelry.

The common trope (or figure of speech), "He sits idly, drinks, and wastes,"[2] expressed many women's frustration with idle husbands. Although they held repaying loans and sustaining a family without further debt as laudable objectives, working women often resented their spouses' indolence. Local, national, and international observers shared a critical attitude toward instances of voluntary male under- or unemployment, especially when the family "failed to prosper." (I explore men's perspectives on this issue further in chapter 7.)

Control of Remittances: Married Migrants

This section presents three case studies where married migrants remitted money to their spouses, and explores the power dynamics involved in decisions about who should use the money and how. While some of the events discussed are more dramatic than a random sampling of cases would provide, many of the issues over which these couples struggled also appeared in decisions faced by other village

[2] *"nikam innavaa, bonavaa, naasti karangvaa."*

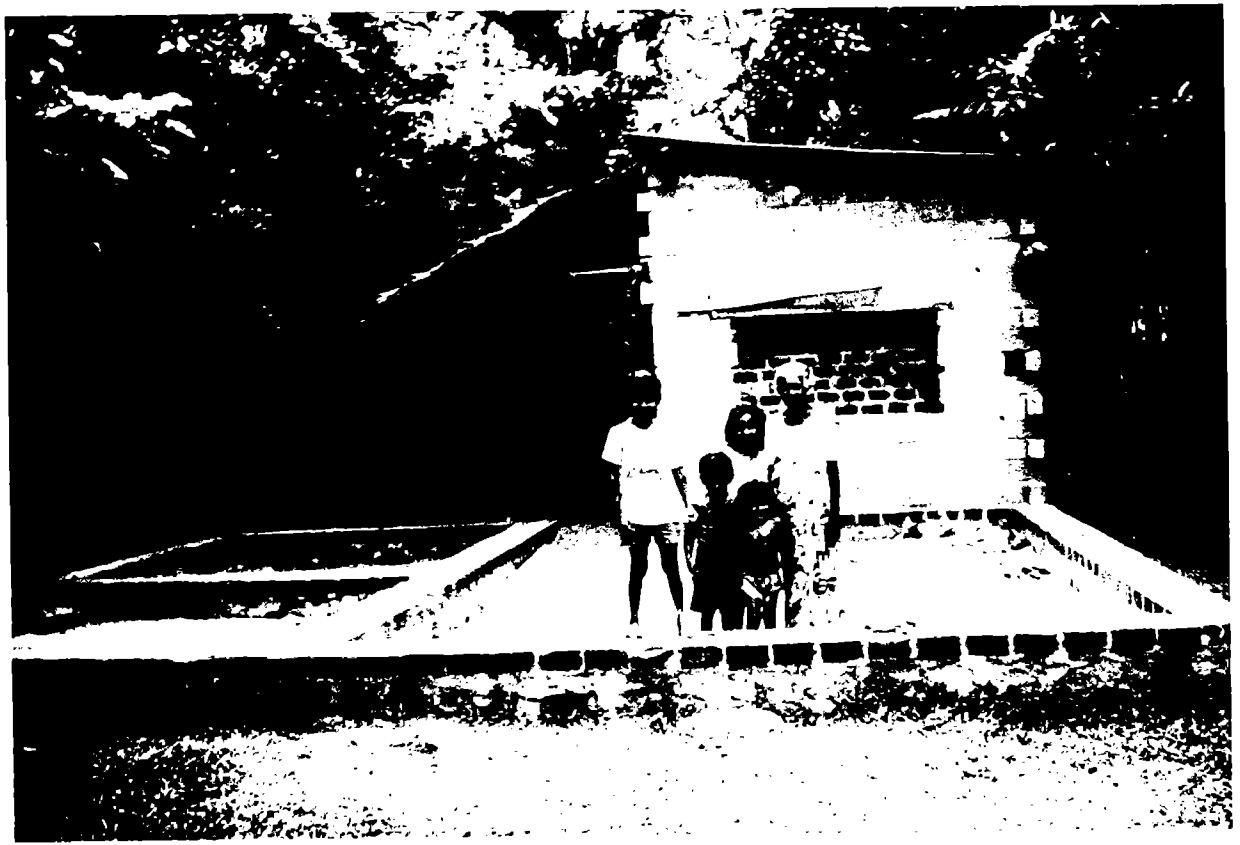

Fig. 4. A woman and her grandchildren, Polwatta. The woman on the right looks after her four grandchildren while their mother works abroad. With the money from her second trip to the Middle East, the mother started construction on the house in the background. (Courtesy of the author.)

families, and Naeaegama residents frequently referred to these cases as examples and illustrations when they spoke of migration.

Ranjani's House

A tall, thin woman with worry lines beyond her years, Ranjani lived with her grown son and daughter on the marshy back portion of her sister's small land plot. After eight years of work abroad, Ranjani lived in a house she described as "like a kennel where bitches have puppies,"[3] a tiny two-room clay hut with coconut-frond roofing. She said that some women would have drunk poison if what had happened to her had happened to them.

Receiving a piece of land in a government land distribution in 1980 (described in chap. 6), Ranjani and her husband Sarath started building a large house in 1986 with the money she sent home from working for two years in Saudi Arabia. Construction continued, funded by Ranjani's next job in Jordan. Tensions between the couple grew, however, over Sarath's alleged infidelity with a neighborhood woman and over how to spend Ranjani's remittances. Although Sarath asked that Ranjani not give any money to her parents, she sent them some secretly. Furious when he discovered her deception, Sarath fought with Ranjani's parents; her elderly father's leg broke in the brawl. In 1988, while Ranjani was still in Jordan, her husband sold their house and land for much less than its worth and bought a second house further from her parents' land. Upon her return from Jordan, Ranjani said her husband beat her to keep her from being too close to her family, but when he hit her, she ran to her parents. Sarath burnt Ranjani's identity card and her clothing, sold the second house at a loss, took the money, and left the village to live with his lover. Having allowed both the bank account and the land to be written in her husband's name, Ranjani and her family had no leverage to prevent the sales.[4]

After her husband sold their house and left, Ranjani returned to the Middle East. Working two years in Kuwait, she sent her money to her

[3] *"balu paeTav danna kuuDuvak vagee."*

[4] In 1988 Sarath sold the first house, land, and Rs. 30,000/ worth of unused building materials (worth Rs. 61,500/ in 1994 rupees) for a mere Rs. 70,000/ (Rs. 143,500/ in 1994 rupees). He bought the new house for Rs. 47,000/ (Rs. 96,350/ in 1994 rupees). Sarath sold the second house for Rs. 30,000/ (Rs. 61,500/ in 1994 rupees) to a woman who had been working in the Middle East. Please see note 5 and appendix B for more information on monetary values and inflation.

mother, who paid off loans and took care of household expenses. When Ranjani returned to Sri Lanka in 1991, only a minimal sum of Rs. 6,000 / (Rs. 8,100/ in 1994 rupees) remained in the bank.[5] Ranjani worked another two years in Abu Dhabi, UAE, with a similar lack of lasting material benefit. In 1994 Ranjani got a job in Jordan, from which she vowed she would not return until she had saved enough money to buy some land and build a good house. In 1997 her brother-in-law reported that she had worked for three years abroad, bought a small plot of land in a village ten miles distant, and started to put up a house with the help of her grown son. She had remitted a total of Rs. 190,000/ (Rs. 137,500/ in 1994 rupees, or U.S.$2,750) with which her brother-in-law had paid the moneylenders and negotiated the land purchase.

After their separation, Ranjani met her husband once at a fair; she told me with pride that she hit him in the face with her umbrella. Denigrating Sarath with a common trope villagers use to define a wasteful husband, Ranjani said, "He just sat at home eating what I sent." This implication of idle consumption seems to misrepresent Sarath's actions. Ranjani's natal family, not her husband, were the ones who spent her earnings for daily consumption. Jealously defending his wife's remittances from other family members, Sarath successfully invested her money in a large cement house. Once their marriage fell apart, however, he sold the house and appropriated the profits of Ranjani's migration for himself. Despite urging from her family and friends, perhaps fearing that she did not have enough funds to win a legal case, Ranjani refused to go to the courts to claim her half of the money her husband made from selling their house and land.

A group of Kurundugoda women that gathered during one of my several interviews with Ranjani discussed strategies for retaining access to and control over money earned abroad. Many women said that they insisted on opening bank accounts and buying land in their own names, despite inconveniences to people at home. All said that they counseled future migrants to keep their money with them, only sending home occasional gifts for holidays. They recognized that remitted

[5] In this chapter monetary values are not uniformly standardized; instead, both nominal values (rupee values informants report paying) and real values (equivalents in 1994 rupees, adjusted for inflation) are given. This shows how dramatically inflation has affected the value of the rupee over the years. In 1994 Rs. 50/ = U.S.$1. To avoid encumbering the text, only U.S. dollar equivalents for particularly salient figures are noted. For more information on inflation, exchange rates, and consumer prices, see appendix B.

money often vanished before the migrant returned home. The group's agreement on ways to manage financial responsibilities indicated a growing awareness of power issues central to the control of remittances. Even these knowledgeable women, however, did not always follow their own advice and remitted money to family members. Thus, whether women prospered from their work abroad depended more on the people handling their remittances than on their own hard labor.

Success and Suicide: Kamala

Five years after Ranjani's dramatic domestic tragedy, a young village migrant named Kamala quarreled with her husband, Pradeep, over control of three-and-one-half years' worth of remittances. Infidelity, ties with the extended family, a house, and land figured in this case, as well.

When I first spoke with Kamala's mother, Caroline, in May 1993, Kamala had been in the UAE for nearly three years. Caroline, a plump and cheerful mother of ten grown children, looked after her daughter Kamala's two sons during the day, and their father Pradeep took them in the evenings. Kamala usually sent all of her money to her husband. Caroline and Pradeep had quarreled fiercely when Kamala sent some money directly to her mother. Resenting both his stinginess and his control over her daughter, Caroline said that although she looked after and fed his children, Pradeep only occasionally gave her money or food items. In January 1994, my research associate Sita and I talked with Caroline again; when we mentioned the Middle East, Caroline started to cry, saying that Kamala, who had returned from Dubai the previous October, had been very rude and unappreciative lately. Although Caroline had looked after her daughter's children for three years, Kamala had given her no money and no thanks. Even when Caroline was in the hospital, Kamala had not come to visit. Crying harder, Caroline pointed toward her daughter's house and said that mothers love daughters more than sons; the sons wander away, but the daughters should stay loving. Kamala's behavior hurt her badly. Several days after Sita and I talked with Caroline, Kamala attempted suicide by drinking a poisonous weed killer. Deep matters clearly distressed both mother and daughter.

Sita and I talked with Kamala about a month after her suicide attempt. In her narrative about life in UAE, Kamala painted herself as practical, self-reliant, thrifty, and strong. She looked after nine chil-

dren, cleaned, cooked, fed the livestock, and did the laundry. Kamala related how she handled several crises arising during her stay in the Middle East, portraying herself as decisive and assertive. Stressing the importance of self-confidence, Kamala claimed that each time that she stood up for her rights abroad, her situation improved. In contrast, Kamala's life in Sri Lanka seemed beyond her own control. Saying that she went abroad "to improve the family," she mentioned a desire to buy the house her family had rented for six years or to buy land and build another. When Kamala returned to Naeaegama, her husband had not only failed to buy land, but he also denied her access to the money she had earned. He specifically forbade her to give money or presents to her natal kin, a slight they took very personally. Rumor suggested that Pradeep had lent much of Kamala's money to a Berava caste neighbor woman, and some villagers hinted at Pradeep's sexual liaisons with this and another woman. When Kamala suggested that she should return to the Middle East, Pradeep refused. Eyes downcast, Kamala said, "He won't let me go anywhere." Pradeep not only controlled Kamala's past wages, damaged her relationship with her parents, and cheated on her, but he also forbade her to return to her job abroad.

In Sri Lanka, threats of suicide are common and attempts frequent; globally, Sri Lanka ranks second only to Hungary for suicides per unit of population (Marecek 1998), with both men and women attempting and committing suicide in roughly equal numbers. Writing of suicide as an aggressive act aimed at expressing frustration and at causing mental pain, Jonathan Spencer notes its prevalence in relationships where "the overt expression of anger is quite simply unthinkable" (1990, 186). In Sri Lanka, wives and children cannot freely express anger or frustration against husbands and parents. Seen in relation to her self-portrayal as decisive, independent, and courageous abroad, Kamala's suicide attempt represents not only the psychological despair of alienated labor but also the forceful expression of extreme dissatisfaction. Bringing her grievances dramatically into the public eye, Kamala's action seriously challenged Pradeep's authority over her money, social relations, and travel plans. The extreme nature of her protest suggested the ineffectiveness of less drastic measures in her struggle for a modicum of independence. Gender relations entrenched in the household still remained extremely powerful; despite Kamala's self-destructive initiative, she never obtained clear control of her money during my stay in the village.

Piecing together information collected in 1994, I began to understand what Pradeep had done with Kamala's money. Although local

gossip implied that he had wasted much of what she remitted, a closer look revealed considerable thrift and business acumen. Caroline and Kamala independently confirmed that one year of Kamala's salary went to pay back the loan taken to finance her job. Caroline noted that Pradeep had purchased a small cinnamon garden for about Rs. 25,000/ (Rs. 30,300/ in 1994 rupees). With two months' salary Kamala purchased a sophisticated cassette player which she sent to Pradeep in Sri Lanka. Perhaps the greatest source of tension was Pradeep's loan: Pradeep (Halaagama) had lent Rs. 65,000/ (Rs. 78,650/ in 1994 rupees) to a neighbor woman of the Berava caste, who promised to pay it back but in early 1994 showed no signs of doing so. While indiscriminate gifts of money hardly counted as a wise investment, lending money for interest or acquiring property in lieu of unpaid loans could benefit the family in the long run. In 1994, village opinions about whether Kamala's and Pradeep's family had improved through migration varied, though many people felt that it had not.

When I returned to Naeaegama in 1997, Kamala again held a job abroad. My research associates Siri and Sita and I spent a long morning speaking with Pradeep. In the three years since 1994, the family's financial situation had greatly improved. Pradeep told us his version of his Berava neighbor's debt. In 1992, with his sister's approval, he lent his neighbor Rs. 25,000/ (Rs. 30,300/ in 1994 rupees), less than half the amount I was told in 1994, taking a copy of her father's land deed as collateral. She promised to pay back double the principal within two years. Unbeknownst to him, she had pawned the original deed to another person; feeling neighborly, Pradeep had not paid close attention to legalities. When Kamala returned to the village in 1994, she challenged Pradeep to show her what he had done with her money. Pradeep asked their neighbor repeatedly to give him the Rs. 50,000/ (U.S.$1,000) she owed. The neighbor said, "Tomorrow, tomorrow," until Pradeep knew that he "had to do something strict." After a heated conversation, the neighbor asked Pradeep to give her another year on the loan, and she would pay him Rs. 100,000/. He asked the neighbor to come to the house of a lawyer at the junction, and they would write an official contract including a lien on the property. The lawyer refused to draw up the document without the original deed. Pradeep threatened his neighbor with a knife, and she went home in tears. Her elderly and well-respected father then came to Pradeep's house. He said that the whole transaction had taken place without his knowledge, but he promised to take care of the problem. The family took a

loan to pay their other creditor and then made a contract to pay Pradeep Rs. 75,000/ (U.S.$1,500) within two years, or Pradeep would own the property. Several days before the end of their grace period in 1996, they borrowed Rs. 100,000/ (Rs. 80,100/ in 1994 rupees) from a village moneylender (probably promising to repay twice that sum) and paid Pradeep Rs. 75,000/ (Rs. 60,000/ in 1994 rupees). If Pradeep's statement about the initial value of the loan was correct, then his investment had roughly doubled.

Pradeep said that he had used the money retrieved from the neighbor, and money from Kamala's salary, to buy the house and land that they had rented for the previous nine years. He spent Rs. 125,000/ (Rs. 91,250/ in 1994 rupees). Now he said that he felt happy and freed from worry. He was thinking about building a better house, worth Rs. 400,000/ (Rs. 292,000/ in 1994 rupees) on the property. If his wife worked abroad for four or five more years, they could do it. He also hoped to open a fish shop in the front of the house so the family would have a business that Kamala could run when she returned. His detailed discussion of bureaucratic licensing paperwork convinced Siri, Sita, and me of his seriousness. With land, a house, and a business, Pradeep's family would certainly count as prosperous.

Sita, Siri, and I asked Pradeep about his fight with his in-laws. Pradeep felt that his wife's family, by asking money from him and his wife, kept trying to "pull him down" when he was trying "to raise his head." He claimed that during Kamala's first stint abroad, her family took things from his house in his absence, including a gold necklace. When his mother-in-law took care of the children, she kept asking for Rs. 300/ and Rs. 500/ for this and that. He felt that he had already provided adequately for the children's care and found the requests exorbitant. (His description of the sorts and amounts of goods he gave his mother-in-law varied substantially from her account.) Unbeknownst to him, his mother-in-law asked for Rs. 7,000/ from Kamala, which Kamala sent. When he found out, Pradeep quarreled with his mother-in-law, telling her that since he and Kamala had registered their marriage before two witnesses, he had the *ayitaya* [ownership] of Kamala, and they had no business asking money from her in secret. (During our post-interview discussion, Siri and Sita, sensing my outrage, assured me that "ownership" went both ways, and that the wife also "owned" the husband.) Pradeep felt that both his wife and his in-laws should have asked him openly. In a letter to his wife, he criticized her for sending money to her mother. Sita and Siri later said they had the impres-

sion Pradeep felt his mother-in-law was asking for something extra, some payment in exchange for looking after her grandchildren, which he felt violated proper parental etiquette.[6]

Not only had his in-laws asked for too much money, Pradeep also said that they sent letters to his wife, telling her false stories about his behavior in her absence, and asking her to divorce him and go live with them. Replying to her questions by letter, he wrote that if she wanted to divorce him, she should feel free, but if she did, he would commit suicide and kill their two children as well. He related with drama her return to the village in 1993 after "three years, three months, and two days" abroad, saying that he demanded—before she brought her baggage into the house—that she choose either her parents or himself. He portrayed Kamala as saying that her parents were "wrong," that she had been wrong to send them money, and that she had never doubted him. She came into the house to live with him.

Pradeep said that Kamala stayed in the village for three years, and everything was fine. "Oh, well, not quite," he qualified; after six months at home, Kamala drank poison. Pradeep then told his version of his wife's suicide attempt. He claimed that contrary to village rumor, Kamala had not drunk poison because of a love affair he had had with another woman. His in-laws had helped spread the false rumor that nearly killed his wife. Instead, she had drunk poison because of a fight he had had with his father-in-law about an old bicycle frame. (Siri and Sita later found this a very weak point in Pradeep's account. "Why would a grown woman commit suicide over a bicycle?" Sita asked. "Maybe a man might," Siri thought, but never a woman.) At Kamala's bedside in the hospital, Pradeep asked her why she had drunk the poison. She said it was "the anger of the moment." Pradeep told her that if she wanted to commit suicide, he would bring her a good poison, and she could "finish the job." Then he would go "see to her father and brothers" [hurt or kill them]. Pradeep reported that Kamala said, "I was foolish and I am sorry." After Kamala's suicide attempt, he found it difficult to live in the village because everyone believed the story about the love affair, and everyone stopped him in the street to ask about it.

During Kamala's three years at home, they had another son. Two weeks before she delivered, Kamala fought with her parents. Pradeep portrayed Kamala as accusing her parents of "eating" Pradeep (taking all his surplus, and more) while she was out of the country and con-

[6] For Caroline's side of this story, see chapter 8.

tinuing to try to do so at that time as well; he depicted her as siding with him against her natal family. Since that time, Pradeep said that he had had no contact with his in-laws and had forbidden his children from visiting their maternal grandparents. Kamala and Pradeep worked closely with Pradeep's parents instead.

Pradeep said that he had originally forbidden Kamala to go abroad again because she had broken their first agreement (that she would work abroad for five years straight) when she came home because of her parents' letters. Financial pressures forced him to reconsider, and since Kamala got a job in the same house where Pradeep's younger sister worked, he had no objections to her going abroad. At the time of our interview she had been abroad for nine months and five days; Pradeep kept count. He sent letters weekly, including notes from the children and his own advice to her on how to conduct herself in her job. He assured us that although Kamala had studied for more years than he had, he surpassed her in writing and math. In control of his wife's remittances, rid of her clinging relatives, and convinced (at least in his narrative) of his intellectual and moral superiority, Pradeep said that he had exclusive control of his family; life was "90 percent okay" and he was happy.

Using purely material criteria, Pradeep's successful venture in moneylending and his purchase of land and a house qualified his family as one that improved through migration. Pradeep continued to work in the village while his wife worked abroad. He seldom turned to drink, and his demeanor in no way suggested that his masculinity suffered from his wife's migration. Instead, Pradeep's control over Kamala's remittances bolstered his social standing in the village. Kamala's estrangement from her natal family and her suicide attempt, however, revealed tensions over the use and distribution of the money Kamala remitted. Although their nuclear family ranked as prosperous and stood to improve further in the future, the internal struggle for control over Kamala's money nearly tore her body and her family apart.

Kamala's situation echoed that of Ranjani, the woman in this chapter's first case study. Both women's husbands saved their salaries carefully and invested in property. Both sought to limit contact between their wives and their natal families, feeling that too much money seeped away in the interactions. Both women resisted their husbands' restrictions vigorously. Both husbands engaged in alleged extramarital affairs in their wives' absence. Separated from her husband, Ranjani returned to her natal family; separated from *her* natal family, Kamala associated exclusively with her husband's relatives. In her

separation, Ranjani lost heavily; by remaining with her husband, Kamala maintained her access to the land and property her earnings had purchased, but at a steep price. Well-educated, young, independent, and spirited, Kamala still faced nearly insurmountable resistance to her efforts to control her own money. Kamala's suicide attempt, though very effective in making public her displeasure with Pradeep, did not seem to change the situation she had found intolerable. Indeed, Pradeep's narrative showed his controlling and domineering nature clearly. Perhaps the rising expectations of young village women led them to chafe more at the gendered restrictions imposed by their families. Kamala's case, in particular, gives one pause to consider whether the changes in the village have necessarily benefited the women.

Accountability in the Other Direction: Simon and Chandrika

Having presented two cases in which female migrants struggled with their spouses over control of the money they remitted, I now turn to a case in which a male migrant sent his earnings home to his wife. During her husband Simon's absence, Chandrika controlled both her own salary and the money he sent her every month. Upon his return, Simon held Chandrika accountable for her use of his money in a way that neither Ranjani nor Kamala could hold their husbands.

One of only six village men to work in the Middle East, Simon spent eight years as an exterminator in Saudi Arabia. Simon remitted much of his considerable salary of Rs. 11,000/ a month to his wife Chandrika. Among the best educated in the village, Simon had completed his A-levels (the Sri Lankan equivalent of high school) while his wife Chandrika held a bachelor's degree from a private university in Colombo. Leaving their young son with Simon's sister during the weekdays, Chandrika commuted to work at an import-export firm in Colombo, supervising the construction of their new house in her free time.

With Simon living abroad, Chandrika held considerable power and authority in the village. Able to trace her line of descent back to the Halaagama woman who had founded Naeaegama nine generations earlier, Chandrika inherited land in the oldest and wealthiest village neighborhood, near the temple. Simon's family, also Halaagama, held land in the area as well.[7] Chandrika gave generously and often to reli-

[7] The land holdings of Simon's father, Podi Appuhami, are discussed at length in chapter 6.

gious and secular festivals. Upon his return from Saudi Arabia, Simon stepped into a leadership role befitting one of his caste and wealth; until then, Chandrika, acting as his proxy, not only headed her own household but also influenced village decisions in his stead. Chandrika lost much of her authority when her husband returned.

Sita and I spent a leisurely afternoon in April 1993 talking with Chandrika as she supervised bricklaying at her new house.[8] Started in 1991, the large structure occupied land given to Chandrika by her mother. Various items of furniture and household appliances such as a refrigerator, a television set, and a pump for filling an overhead tank to supply running water were stored with Simon's family. Chandrika thought that when fully constructed, her house would be worth about Rs. 300,000/ (U.S.$6,000), not including furniture.

Ebullient over plans to purchase a bus with his savings, Simon returned from Saudi Arabia in July 1993. Disappointed with the slow progress on the house, he began to question his wife concerning her use of the money he had remitted. Things came to a head between Simon and Chandrika in October 1993, with a loud and violent fight. Sita, who lived across the road and heard the argument, told me some of the details. Saying that he had remitted Rs. 250,000/ (U.S.$5,000) to Sri Lanka since he started working in the Middle East, Simon demanded to know what Chandrika had done with the money, and why she had failed to finish their house. He also wanted to know what had become of three gold chains and a pair of gold ear studs, altogether worth another Rs. 50,000/. Chandrika's response, that Simon should not ask about "past things," prompted his reply, "Without asking about past things, I have nothing to say in the present. Now, what have you done with the money and the jewelry?" Simon showed his sister his accounts, lamenting that he could find no trace of the money he had sent home and that his wife not only refused to talk about the money but also refused to cook his meals. Sita said Simon then "got damned wild with Chandrika," and hit her. Crying and screaming, Chandrika shouted that she did not want him as a husband anymore and threatened to jump into the well. Simon's sister restrained her from this suicide attempt.

Drawn by the noise, several neighbors gathered in the road. Approaching the arguing couple, Sita told Simon and Chandrika that it

[8] In Sri Lanka, custom dictates that a family member must supervise all hired workers to ensure diligence and prevent theft.

was not educated to shout at each other in public. Chandrika said Simon had struck her. Sita replied that all husbands were like that and recommended that Chandrika tell Simon what she had done with the money. Chandrika again attempted to run away, saying that she would kill herself. Stopped by her sister-in-law, she amended her statement, saying she would first kill Simon and then kill herself. Sita stooped to comfort Chandrika's wailing six-year-old son.

Later I asked Sita what she thought had become of the money. Chandrika, who continued with her own job when Simon went abroad, had told Sita that she saved all the money Simon remitted in a bank account, using her own salary to maintain her family. In retrospect, Sita suspected that Chandrika had been lying. Chandrika had lent a great deal of money to various people, many of whom had not paid her back. In particular, Sita thought Chandrika had covered a debt of about Rs. 50,000/ for a sister, lending even more to a jobless brother.

Chandrika's decision to give her brother some of her husband's money reflected deeply held patterns of family and caste association. In a close-knit kin community, relatives claimed mutual access to assets, and family obligations operated to level out differences in material and economic well-being. Those who accumulated significant assets without redistributing their wealth to poorer relatives made choices about which of their kin ties to sustain on their way up the ladder and which to abandon. Sustaining and severing kin ties had a direct impact on caste and sub-caste relations. The highest grade in the Halaagama caste retained only those who maintained social standing and wealth; poorer relatives and families who lost respectability through "incorrect" marriages dropped to a lower grade or out of the caste altogether. All villagers strove to maintain "far" kin links with rich and respectable relatives while distancing themselves from associations with poorer but "closer" relations. Chandrika's brother amassed considerable debts to a Para caste moneylender. The moneylender offered to forgive the debts if Chandrika's brother married the moneylender's sister. Despite Chandrika's gifts of money, her brother accepted the arranged marriage, thus threatening his own caste status, tainting his family's, and irrevocably demoting his children's. Chandrika's devotion to family and caste accounted for at least some of her husband's missing money.[9]

[9] For more on the topic of caste grades, see G. Gamburd (1972, 308ff.). Also see chapter 6 for a more extensive discussion of kinship and caste relations in the Naeaegama area.

In Sita's opinion, Chandrika stood answerable for her use of Simon's money. Although just, such accountability has rarely been applied equally to men and women; in the numerous case studies with which I am familiar, I never found an instance of a husband beaten by his returnee wife when she found that he had wasted her money. By contrast, Sita (and many other village women) found Simon's violent assault well within the range of acceptable masculine behavior; local gender roles legitimated his physical aggression. As Chandrika's and Kamala's stories illustrate, both the accused and the accusing women threatened or attempted suicide to express their emotional displeasure and distress. Kamala swallowed poison in her frustration and rage; panicked and guilty, Chandrika threatened to jump in the well. In both cases, village cultural habits channeled women's violent emotions inward against their own bodies, instead of outward against their husbands (see Waters 1999).

In a society dependent on the extended kinship system, numerous people have claims on the money that migrants earn. Although many couples have allocated the fruits of labor abroad without dramatic, public disputes, the issues over which Ranjani, Kamala, and Chandrika fought with their husbands have prevailed in many households. In their cases, the men sought to consolidate remittances by investing in a house. The violence Sarath and Pradeep deployed to try to separate their wives from their families, and Simon's rage over Chandrika's gifts to her siblings, could be read in two ways: first, as characteristic of abusive and controlling husbands, and second, as a result of wariness of becoming too firmly enmeshed in a large and impoverished extended family, on either the wife's or the husband's side. In all three cases tensions between nuclear family and extended family ran high, precisely because people valued remittances so greatly.

Control of Remittances: Unmarried Migrants

"Not even five cents' worth": Premasiri's Daughters

Similar tensions over accountability, cooperation, and access to money have affected the families of unmarried migrants. Claiming that parents often wasted less money than husbands, Byron, the local subagent introduced in chapter 2, thought that unmarried women often fared better than married ones when they migrated. Considered by many villagers as a family much improved through migration to the

Middle East, three of Premasiri's five daughters had worked abroad, with two leaving before they married and all three remitting their money to their parents.

Siri and I found Premasiri sitting in the dappled morning shade on the cement border that surrounded his spacious five-room tile-roofed house in Gurupitiya, peeling cinnamon for a local landholder. He and his eighteen-year-old youngest son, who scraped the hard green outer layer off the sticks before his father stripped them of their rich, red, inner bark, welcomed our interview wholeheartedly as a chance to chat while working. A tall, lean, graying man in his fifties, Premasiri said that he took good care of the money his daughters sent from the Middle East, declaring, "I didn't waste even five cents' worth."[10]

Premasiri's family (Halaagama) bought their land from a Berava family in the early 1960s. Until 1988 they lived in a small house, which they later enlarged and improved. In 1988 they paid to bring an electricity line down the road to their house, a luxury few except the wealthiest in Naeaegama could afford. In 1992 they added several rooms and replaced the roof, and in 1993 they constructed a carpentry workshop at the back of the property for their son-in-law.

One of the first in the village to go to the Middle East, Lalita, Premasiri's third child, spent nearly six years abroad. Paying an agency only Rs. 675 / (Rs. 4,500 / in 1994 rupees) in 1978 for a job in the UAE, she earned Rs. 3,200 / (Rs. 21,500 / in 1994 rupees [U.S.$430]) a month for the three and a half years she worked abroad. In 1981 she went abroad again and spent two years in Jordan, receiving a free ticket from a sister also working abroad. There she made Rs. 3,000 / (Rs. 12,000 / in 1994 rupees [U.S.$245]) per month. Altogether she earned about U.S.$24,000. With the money Lalita remitted to a bank account in her mother's name, her family bought two acres of cinnamon land. Well tended, the land lucratively supported a family. By peeling their own cinnamon, Premasiri and his son earned even more per acre than other landed proprietors, who had to share their profits with their peelers. Premasiri's cinnamon estate adjoined and rivaled those of several wealthy Halaagama landlords.

Anticipating Lalita's return, Premasiri and his wife arranged a marriage for her. They chose a hardworking young man who had done some carpentry for the family. The boy's mother was from the Para caste, his father Halaagama. The Para shadow on his social standing

[10] *"sata pahakvat naesti kalee naeae."*

matched the loss of respectability associated with Lalita's long absence from parental supervision. At the same time, his industry and work ethic recommended him, just as the dowry Lalita's parents offered recommended her. Despite their daughter's wealth, Premasiri and his wife chose a hardworking son-in-law of mixed caste, rather than making a higher-status match. Their choice indicated that they valued employment and future financial security over caste status.

For her wedding in 1983, Lalita received Rs. 40,000/ (Rs. 130,000 in 1994 rupees) in cash and Rs. 20,000/ (Rs. 65,000/ in 1994 rupees) worth of jewelry and furniture as a dowry from her parents. Premasiri reminisced about the wedding ceremony, which went on for five days and cost nearly Rs. 75,000/ (Rs. 241,500/ in 1994 rupees). Both the size of the dowry and the magnificence of the ceremony and following celebrations enhanced the status of the new couple and their families. I did not ask about ownership of the two acres of cinnamon bought with Lalita's wages from her first job abroad, but I assume that Premasiri held it in his name. Whatever the arrangement, it seemed to please all parties, judging from the high degree of cooperation in the family. Money and goods seemed to flow in abundance among family members, without an exact tally of worth and debt. Premasiri kept close tabs on his daughters' money, however. When another of Premasiri's sons-in-law (also from an arranged marriage) took to wasting money and selling liquor while his wife was abroad, Premasiri said that he and his sons "chased off that useless dog," supporting and protecting the divorcée in a village that stigmatized such women. Premasiri's investments ensured enough wealth for all those in his extended circle, also making him a patron to some of his poorer relatives.

Mahinda's Elopement

Whereas women with good relationships with their families have often profited by allowing their parents to arrange a marriage for them, women who chafed against their parents' authority have found freedom through choosing their own mates. Unmarried migrants at odds with their parents or not receptive to arranged marriages have either eloped with men of their own choice or renounced matrimony entirely. Their financial independence has given them more authority in making such decisions.

In mid-January 1993 Mahinda, the eldest son of a poor Halaagama family in Naeaegama, sneaked off in secret with a neighbor's niece.

Her father (hoping for a better match for his daughter, who had just returned from the Middle East) chased the couple, trying to catch them before they had "lived as husband and wife" and to separate them by force. Having hoped to arrange a marriage for Mahinda, his family also disapproved of the love match.

Several days after the elopement, Siri met Mahinda at the junction. Offering him a cigarette and calling him a bridegroom, Siri asked what business brought Mahinda to the market street that evening. Sitting on his bicycle and checking frequently over his shoulder, Mahinda replied that he had sent a message to his mother and feared that his father might intercept it and come in her stead. Legally married, the new husband and wife had accepted an invitation to dinner at Mahinda's father-in-law's house. To keep their self-respect, they felt they needed to arrive at the house by car, but after a small wedding party and registration fees, they had exhausted all of their money. To hire a car, Mahinda had asked his mother for money in secret. Later that evening Siri saw mother and son talking, and money changed hands. Siri noted that Mahinda had no steady job and that neither bride nor groom owned property. Observing the couple's youth, Siri predicted a dearth of long-term planning and asked, "What do they know about the world?"

When I interviewed Mahinda a month later, his wife had found another job abroad. Borrowing Rs. 13,000/ to pay the job agent, she left to work for two years as a housemaid in Kuwait. Mahinda claimed that his wife's parents had used all of the money she earned abroad, wasting much of it. "She had nothing left when I got her," he said, except for Rs. 3,000/ that they spent on the wedding. Before they married, she had told Mahinda she planned to go back to the Middle East. Mahinda's bride found herself in the unenviable position of starting afresh, taking loans to finance her third job abroad rather than using savings to pay the agency.

During the year following her departure, Mahinda lived with his parents. He held no steady job but spent his time with another young migrant's husband, telling jokes and smoking cigarettes at the junction. Neither man's wife sent money during that time, though both husbands accrued considerable debts that they promised their wives would repay. Mahinda's wife escaped what she must have seen as the trap of her parents' control by marrying, thus ensuring that she could manage her own finances. At the same time, future relations with her husband, especially those pertaining to administering her money, remained open to negotiation.

While Mahinda's wife chafed at parental control, Premasiri's daughters did very well by letting their father control their remittances. Mahinda's wife married a penniless, jobless young man without her parents' permission, with only Rs. 3,000/ in hand. In contrast, Premasiri and his wife arranged good marriages and hefty dowries for their daughters, trying to ensure that their husbands had good jobs and stable characters. While Mahinda's wife had no assets to her name when she went abroad for her third job, Premasiri's daughters had all acquired houses and land. In the case of one of Premasiri's daughters, where an arranged marriage failed, her father continued to look after his daughter's finances, children, and house. By marrying for love, Mahinda's wife renounced her claims to all such help from both her parents and his; parents felt less responsibility toward couples who eloped than toward those whose marriages they arranged. In these cases as in others, prosperity depended not only on the industry of the migrant but also on the wise investments of the people at home receiving and managing the migrant's remittances. Whereas a family working in harmony could perform miracles with the incoming money, migrants from families at odds with each other found it difficult to control their money and improve.

Other Motives and Meanings for Migration

Although most Naeaegama women said that financial necessity impelled their migration, other more troubling and less socially acceptable motivations often emerged under the surface. Speaking of Filipina migrants who worked as domestic servants in Hong Kong, Nicole Constable (1999) argues that economic explanations of migration sometimes supersede other motivations (such as wishing to escape bad marriages, or enjoying life abroad) in women's stories. Naeaegana women often said that they went abroad because they wanted to help their families, but sometimes they also went abroad to get *away* from their families, particularly in the case of physical abuse or unfaithful husbands. Constable notes that if migrant women admitted that they enjoyed their work abroad, then their "exile" would lose its selflessness, and their loyalty to home would come into question. Sometimes women enjoyed their time in Hong Kong, especially the independence and the new sense of self they gained. After spending long periods of time abroad, some no longer felt entirely at home in the Philippines.

Similarly, although many Naeaegama migrants worked abroad purely for the money, others left the village because of the "push" of their social situations at home or the "pull" of new destinations. The following two cases demonstrate alternative motivations for migration above and beyond the wish to improve.

Dreaming of Travel: Shriyani

Of all the village women with whom I spoke, Shriyani was the only one to say that she had gone abroad primarily in order to see new places, meet new people, and learn new languages. Ever since she was fifteen, it had been her dream to travel. An unmarried middle daughter in a family of seven children, Shriyani worked as a housemaid in Pakistan for four years. She then went to Jordan, where she worked for a year and a half. In February 1993 she left Jordan to go to Vienna, Austria, to work first as a housemaid and later as an assistant in a nursing home. I met her in April 1994 when she visited Gurupitiya for the Sinhala New Year holiday. In 1996 she married a man from Austria, and in 1997 she brought her husband and their new baby to see her family in Sri Lanka.

Shriyani came the closest of any village woman with whom I talked to voicing what might be called explicitly feminist ideas. During our midmorning interview at her parents' house, Shriyani dressed in white cotton pajamas and a bathrobe and spoke in German-accented English. Describing herself as "a lot like a man," Shriyani said that she did the adventurous, away-from-home things that men often did, that she cut her hair short, and that she preferred to wear trousers. Because people in Sri Lanka "had different ideas," she tried to tell them what life in Austria was like. For instance, her mother often told Shriyani not to walk alone in the village. Shriyani said that even before she went abroad she thought such rules were "nonsense," and she often fought with her parents about them. Elaborating on her "masculine" skills, Shriyani mentioned that in high school she captained the debate team and that as a child, she used to ride a bicycle (an activity reserved largely for men). I asked if she could swim, and she replied, "Yeah, sure." Most village women (and even some men) could not. "That's why people hate me," she said. In Austria, despite hard work and racism, she found a freedom and acceptance unattainable in the village.

Before her marriage, Shriyani remitted most of her surplus salary to her parents in the village, who had clearly prospered through her work

abroad. She portrayed herself as a loving and selfless daughter. Nevertheless, she had no intention of returning permanently to the village. Looking over her shoulder and remarking that it was good her parents spoke no English, Shriyani told us that she had overheard her parents planning to arrange a marriage for her. They were anxious because she was nearly twenty-eight years old. Shriyani felt that she could not consider marrying a Sri Lankan man. Her experiences in Vienna made her sure that she would prefer to live there than in the land of her birth. Despite her love for her family, the values of female independence that attracted Shriyani to Europe in the first place left her few viable options in the village.

Burnt and Beaten: Winitha's Escape

Hunger, grinding poverty, and domestic violence have motivated a number of village women to seek employment in the Middle East. In some cases where unions disintegrated, migrant women have found the end of their marriages a relief, not a tragedy. Despite the difficulties of living alone, they have preferred their new independence. Official pronouncements and national news items that lament the adverse effect of migration on matrimony rarely take into account the premigration quality of many of the failed relationships in question.

One day in late December 1992, when Siri, his wife Telsie, and I were walking along a back road near Siri's cinnamon garden, a woman with a small child in her arms approached us tentatively and asked Siri if he would read and translate the English on a postcard she had just received from a Colombo job agency. The card informed Winitha that she had been selected as a housemaid and that she should come to the agency immediately. Winitha had four children, the youngest just over a year old. She had been in Kuwait when the Gulf War broke out, and although she had managed to pay off her loan, she returned with absolutely nothing else, "not even a dress or a biscuit for my children." As she told us this story, she started to cry.

On our walk home, Siri told me that Winitha's husband, Sunil, could peel cinnamon very efficiently but instead worked with the local illicit liquor producer and spent a great deal on alcohol while his children went hungry.[11] Siri and Telsie speculated on two motivations for Winitha's migration: to alleviate the family's poverty, and to escape a

[11] For more on alcohol production and masculinity, see chapter 7.

husband who drank and beat her. Telsie, who taught Winitha's eldest daughter at the local school, claimed to have seen burn marks on Winitha's arms where her husband had hit her with the firewood from the cooking hearth. Siri said that some nights the children stayed at the house next door for fear of their father, and Winitha stayed with her sister in a nearby village. With no money for herself, no food for her children, and problems from her husband, migration to the Middle East represented Winitha's best option.

Several days after meeting her on the road, Siri and I went to Winitha's house to interview her about her upcoming job as a housemaid in UAE. One of the numerous little girls in the area ran to tell her that we were there, and she came quickly from bathing, wearing a wet sarong. Siri and I took shelter from a light rain under the narrow porch of the house next door. After changing, Winitha joined us there, wearing a dress with a large rip in the shoulder. Several times during the interview she made some polite but urgent gestures for us to please speak softly or change the subject; she worried that Sunil, drunk on the bed in the front room of their hut, could overhear our conversation.

Winitha planned to stay abroad for three or four years, hoping to pay back her loan and then earn enough money to build a new house. She said that the packed-earth floor of her damp clay house got muddy when the land flooded during the monsoon season. Keeping most of her wages in the bank, Winitha expected to send some money to her husband's mother, who would look after her four children while Winitha worked abroad. Asked what her husband Sunil thought of her new job, Winitha replied quietly that, although he anticipated money with pleasure, two days earlier he had gotten very drunk and broken all the clay cooking pots in the house.

Women migrated to the Middle East with a variety of different motivations. In Winitha's case, the need to leave merged with the goal of earning money for land and a house. In the Middle East, women were sometimes confronted with grueling labor, beatings, burns, even rape. But many found work abroad safer than life in the village, where they might face similar or worse treatment. Paradoxically, the Middle East provided them a refuge from the home. Although some felt Winitha had abandoned her children to a fearful and hungry existence, she had succeeded in saving herself temporarily from the same. In 1997 Winitha's family lived in one tiny room of a partially completed cement house, while she again worked abroad. Regardless of whether the

money she remitted eventually completed the house as she hoped, Winitha had successfully accomplished several of her main objectives merely by leaving the country. Unable to reform her husband, she nevertheless curtailed his power over her by leaving, and by sending back money that she hoped would, at least in part, benefit her children.

Remittances and Social Change

R. B. M. Korale and Malsiri Dias, two Sri Lankan social scientists whose views are summarized at the beginning of the chapter, suggested respectively that wage-earning from migration would revolutionize women's social standing, on the one hand, and that returned migrants passively reassumed their roles as housewives on the other. Gender roles that emerged from the flux of individual lives in Naeaegama revealed a reality somewhere between these two extremes. Women constantly negotiated their relationships with their parents, their husbands, and their extended families, with no guarantees that change would be for the better. Sri Lanka's "army of housemaids" abroad and the reserve troops back at home fought innumerable individual battles within the enmeshing power structures of their own families.

Few would dispute that images of women have changed, literally and figuratively, through labor migration. In the middle of our interview, Premasiri sent his son to fetch a large, framed picture of one of his daughters, taken in a Jordanian studio, posed against a backdrop of Grecian columns. Before the burgeoning of migration of labor to the Middle East, nearly all of the large studio photographs found in village houses depicted couples on their wedding day, with smaller snapshots capturing the wedding ceremony and celebrations. In 1994 most migrants' houses contained photo albums filled with scenes from abroad: housemaids in veils and long dresses, smiling Arabic children, foreign houses, and exotic landscapes. Sent from abroad to make the strange familiar, these pictures occupied the same physical space as marriage photos in village houses. The photographs from the Middle East, however, emphasized a woman's work instead of her marriage, picturing her as an individual in service, not as half of a couple.

Questions of women's empowerment did not rest with the individual woman alone. Just as a photographic portrait always hung in the context of the living room it graced, so migrant women always

functioned in the context of their families. Rarely did women explicitly voice expectations of increased individual power and authority as motivations for their migration. Benefits of migration for a woman depended more on the budgeting and planning of the person controlling her remittances than on the skills of the particular migrant. Migrants and the other individual members of their families often held different priorities, and various parties exerted different forces to further their own goals and objectives. In relating case studies of struggle between parents and children, husbands and wives, spouses and in-laws, I by no means wish to suggest that family tensions arose exclusively due to the migration of labor to the Middle East. Such disputes occurred regularly in the village, even in families with no one overseas. In the face of limited resources, decisions over the allocation of money inevitably aroused tension and dissent. Remitted money merely raised the stakes and clarified the contestants.

These five case studies of married and unmarried migrants illustrate the obstacles women and men have encountered in their efforts to retain control of money they sent back to Sri Lanka. Ranjani, whose husband sold their house and land, felt powerless to seek redress for the theft; her family also seemed unable to reclaim the loss. Kamala's dramatic suicide attempt drew widespread village scrutiny of her husband's extramarital affair, but it did not shake his control over her finances. In 1997 it remained unclear whether she found Pradeep's acquisition of a house and land adequate compensation for her alienation from her natal family. Simon, in his public verbal and physical assault on his wife Chandrika, held her accountable for having distributed his money to her family members instead of using it to build a house. While Mahinda's wife chafed against the tyranny of her parents and sought independence through her elopement, Premasiri's thrift, forethought, and business acumen allowed him to give lavishly to poor relatives and arrange desirable marriages for his daughters. Struggles over control of remittances often revealed tensions between the desire to redistribute wealth earned abroad along the network of extended family and the equally strong desire to accumulate wealth in the form of real estate and housing. How much of the extended family unit shared in a migrant's prosperity depended on the political maneuvering, economic savvy, and luck of the people handling remittances.

Holding a series of priorities in mind, female migrants have set forth not only to improve by earning money for a house and land but also

to feed their families, earn dowries, see the world, and sometimes to escape abusive husbands and dominating parents. A lack of visible material affluence does not always count as failure to prosper. While a family might not immediately buy land or construct a house, migration has enabled people to pay back old debts and live more comfortably. Social scientists analyzing the success and failure of migrants' endeavors need to consider both the goals with which people went abroad and the initial conditions under which they labored. I found that many individuals and families whom villagers had counted as "not improving" in 1994 had "improved" markedly by 1997; for example, a number of houses only half-constructed in 1994 had roofs, doors, and furniture in 1997. Large, poor families burdened with debt required a number of years with a steady salary before showing signs of material prosperity such as buying land, building a house, and starting a business. Similarly, women laboring under older gender hierarchies might need years of economic independence before they can overthrow cultural prejudices and sexist restrictions.

Villagers negotiate not only their standing in a prestige system but also which system of prestige to join among the many operating simultaneously in the village. Individuals and families have positioned themselves with respect to multiple intersecting identities and forms of oppression, searching to find and to legitimate the system offering them the most upward (or the least downward) mobility. Favoring an individualistic, capitalistic direction, Premasiri married his daughter Lalita to a mixed-caste man of industrious character; by spending lavishly on her arranged marriage, he increased the family status with a traditional ceremony. Despite their family disputes and seeming lack of money, Chandrika and Simon retained considerable authority in the village, a residue of former wealth and continuing prestige. One could read Chandrika's attempt to use Simon's money to prevent her brother's mixed-caste marriage as an effort to preserve her family's high-caste position. Using multiple hierarchies and multiple methods to evaluate standing, villagers joust for status in many different arenas simultaneously. Women's struggles for gender equity are enmeshed in equally compelling social contests within systems of kinship, caste, and class.