ความแปลกแยกทางวัฒนธรรมและการต่อต้าน: แรงงานรับใช้ในบ้านสตรีชาวศรีลังกาในมัลดีฟส์

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CULTURAL ALIENATION AND RESISTANCE: SRILANKAN WOMEN

DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE MALDIVES

Mrs. Aishath Noora Mohamed

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Mater of Arts Program in International Development Studies
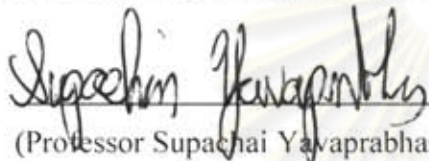Faculty of Political Science
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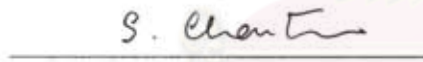
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วิทยานิพนธ์เล่มนี้เน้นการวิเคราะห์วิธีการที่แรงงานต่างชาติในประเทศมัลดีฟส์ต่อต้านความแปลกแยก
ทางวัฒนธรรมที่พวกเขาได้รับจากการทำงานและจากสังคมภายนอก แรงงานข้ามชาติจำนวนมากในมัลดีฟส์อาศัย
อยู่ในสภาพแวดล้อมที่จำกัดสิทธิต่างๆอย่างมาก เช่น การจำกัดสิทธิการเดินทาง และการเข้าถึงพื้นที่สาธารณะ
อีกทั้งยังรวมถึงความเป็นส่วนตัวด้วย จุดอ่อนของพวกเขาคือการที่ต้องพึ่งการปกป้องโดยกฎหมายที่มีอยู่อย่างจำกั
ด การสนับสนุนจากสถาบันต่างๆอย่างไม่เพียงพอ และยังมีข้อจำกัดของพวกเขาเองในการเข้าถึงสื่อ
แรงงานในประเทศที่ทำงานในครัวเรือนมักจะอยู่แยกกันและอยู่แบบหลบๆซ่อนๆ
ยังให้เกิดความเสี่ยงเกิดขึ้นภายในแรงงานข้ามชาติด้วยกันเอง อย่างไรก็ตาม
การศึกษาเกี่ยวกับแรงงานข้ามชาติจำนวนมากได้พยายามหาวิธีการในการต่อสู้และสนองตอบต่อข้อจำกัดทางสังค
ม วัฒนธรรมและการเมืองในสถานการณ์ต่างๆ จากการลงภาคสนามแบบมีส่วนร่วมกับแรงงานชาวสิงหล
การศึกษาพบว่าพวกเขาต่อต้านความแปลกแยกทางวัฒนธรรมโดยการกำหนดอัตลักษณ์ของตนเองขึ้นมาใหม่
และ โดย ผ่าน การ ใช้ เครื อ ข่ าย ทาง สังคม
และโดยการเจรจาต่อรองในเรื่องการเข้าถึงพื้นที่สาธารณะและการหลอมรวมในสังคม

การแสวงหาการสนับสนุนแรงงานต่างชาติในประเทศมัลดีฟส์ถูกกีดกันจากนโยบายและการปฏิบัติที่ป
ฏิ เส ธ การ ควบ คุม ส ภ า พ ก าร ทำ ง า น ข อ ง พ ว ก เ ข า
อีกทั้งนายจ้างและสังคมทั่วไปยังมีทัศนคติและการปฏิบัติที่แสดงถึงการแบ่งแยกและแบ่งชนชั้นต่อแรงงานรับใช้ใ
นบ้านชาวศรีลังกา   ผลการวิจัยพบว่าแรงงานต่างชาติได้แสดงการต่อต้านข้อจำกัดต่างๆ
รว ม ถึง สภ าวะ ค วาม เ ห ลื่ อ ม ล้ ำ ท า ง สัง ค ม ที่ ไ ด้ รับ ด้ วย วิธี ก าร ต่ า ง ๆ เ ช่ น
การสร้างเส้นแบ่งทางสังคมโดยถือสัญชาติตนเป็นเกณฑ์เพื่อสร้างความเป็นพวกเดียวกันของชาวศรีลังกา
การเจรจาต่อรองความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจภายในบ้านตนเองที่ทำงานโดยการใช้ทักษะความรู้
และการสร้างความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมและความผูกพันกับสมาชิกในบ้านผู้ว่าจ้าง
เครือข่ายทางสังคมของแรงงานข้ามชาติยังได้ให้ทางเลือกในกำหนดวิถีชีวิตของตนเองในมัลดีฟส์ด้วย การวิจัยยัง
มุ่งเน้นความหมายหลายของพื้นที่สาธารณะพื้นที่สำหรับคนงานชาวศรีลังกาและการใช้พื้นที่สาธารณะและพื้นที่ท
างสังคมอย่างไรจึงจะเป็นกลยุทธ์หลักในการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ทางเลือกและในการต่อต้านของแรงงานข้ามชาติ

สาขาวิชา การพัฒนาระหว่างประเทศ   ลายมือชื่อนิสิต ....
ปีการศึกษา 2553   ลายมือชื่ออ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก S. chemt
                        ลายมือชื่ออ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์ร่วม ....

AISHATH NOORA MOHAMED: CULTURAL ALIENATION AND
RESISTANCE: SRI LANKAN WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE
MALDIVES. THESIS ADVISOR: PROF. SUPANG CHANTAVANICH,
PH.D, THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR: MICHAEL HAYES, PH.D. 98 pp.

My study focuses on analyzing how the foreign domestic workers in the Maldives resist the cultural alienation that they experience within their workplace and the society at large. The relatively large migrant worker population in the Maldives lives in an environment with heavy restrictions on their rights, limited mobility and limited physical space and privacy. Their vulnerability is emphasized by the limited legal protection, inadequate institutional support and limited voice of migrant workers in the media. The domestic workers work in households, and are often isolated and hidden from the view, making the group potentially an even more vulnerable group within the migrant workers. However, several studies on migrant workers had described their agency in finding ways to resist and respond to socially, culturally and politically restrictive situations. Through participatory fieldwork with Sri Lankan Singhalese domestic workers, I explore how they resist their cultural alienation by redefining their identities and through the use of social networks and by negotiating place and space.

Findings support the foreign domestic workers in the Maldives are alienated through policies and practices that negates the control over their work situation. The community and household practices and views differentiate and subordinate the Sri Lankan domestic workers in relation to the Maldivians. The research shows the foreign domestic workers resist and contest the dominant views of their limited and subordinate social space through different means, such as placing social boundaries that excludes other nationalities to create a sense of community for Sri Lankans, negotiating power within the household by acquiring and employing skills and knowledge and building social and emotional ties with members of the household. The social network within migrant workers also provides alternative means of gaining control of their lives in the Maldives. The research also highlights the multiple meanings of space for the Sri Lankan domestic worker, and how the utilization of public spaces and places becomes a key strategy for building alternative identities and resistance for migrant workers.

Field of study: International
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ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

South Asia is a region well-known for exporting large numbers of low-skilled labor. The Maldives is, however, predominantly a receiving country of foreign migrant workers, with over 80,000 registered foreign workers (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives [HRCM], 2009), and an unknown number of undocumented workers, that could well exceed 20,000 (US Department of State, 2009). This is an alarmingly high number for a small population of less than 400,000. The number of migrant workers exceeds over one third of the Maldivian workforce by conservative estimates. Some even claim that the migrant worker population may be equal to, or even exceed the number of Maldivians employed in the workforce (HRCM, 2009). In addition, the Maldives has an extremely high unemployment rate of over 14% (CIA, 2010).

The female migrant workers are a small proportion of the migrant community, with 6252 registered workers (HRCM, 2009). Out of this, only 1342 are registered as domestic workers (Ministry of Human Resources and Sports [MHRS], personal communication, September 5, 2010). However, the quota for domestic workers is extremely large and flexible, with one domestic worker being allowed for each household (if extended families live together, they can claim to be multiple households as well) (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009, Annex 2 (16)). In addition, one attendant per person with long-term illness and one domestic driver per privately owned vehicle are also included in the household quota (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009, Annex 2 (16)). Hence, there is potential for the number of domestic workers to expand in the future.

The migrant domestic workers in the Maldives consist largely of members of neighboring countries, mainly Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. The largest numbers of women domestic workers are from India, with 643 registered workers, followed by Sri Lanka, with 425 workers (MHRS, personal communication, September

5, 2010). The domestic workers are in almost all cases, live-in workers, and hence, has little distinction made between work and leisure hours. In the Maldives, it had become an accepted norm that the maids (as they are currently referred to) would be given only a 3 hour break on Friday evenings to leave their workplaces, from 4:00 to 7:00 pm. Hence, apart from three hours a week they live mostly in social isolation.

The legal framework for protecting migrant workers is very limited in the Maldives. The Expatriate Employment Regulation which came into effect in 2009 is procedural, and does not define rights and responsibilities. The Employment Act of the Maldives, which came into effect in May 2008, defines rights of employees. It should, in theory, protect all employees, including the migrant workers, but the Act had not become a de facto standard in the private industries. The weak law enforcement agencies had been unable to address the issue (HRCM, 2009). In addition, there is currently no formal institution that looks into complaints from migrant workers (HRCM, 2009). The migrant workers are made even more vulnerable by the fact that the Maldives had not signed the Convention for Migrant Workers (HRCM, 2009). Furthermore, the countries where the domestic migrant workers come from, excluding Sri Lanka, have not signed the convention. Lastly, there are currently no national or international NGOs that work on migrant worker issues in the country.

The Human Rights Watch (2005), in their report on female domestic workers in Singapore, described the role of the live-in domestic workers (or maids) as performing child-care, domestic work and elder care, to enable the Singaporeans to work full-time. Hune (1991) cited Brettell and Simon (1986), that compared to men, migrant women, as „foreigners, workers and females in the intersection of nationality/race/ethnicity, class and gender" are subjected to „triple oppression" (807).

The role of the domestic worker in the Maldives was highlighted in the rapid assessment of the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (2009). The report by HRCM described the domestic workers as an indispensable part of the Maldivian household (HRCM, 2009: 39). With almost non-existent child-care facilities for working

parents, the domestic workers become the „child care system" for the working parents (HRCM, 2009: 39).

The media had recently started to focus on migrant workers as a vulnerable group in need of public attention. The media opinion of today contrasts with that of three years back, when migrant workers were portrayed as perpetrators of abuse and violence (Hameed, 2007). A recent article in the most widely circulated newspaper, Haveeru Daily News, described real incidents where migrant workers were victimized by Maldivians (Saeed, 2010). Other recent news articles, focusing on the vulnerability of the migrant workers also discussed the exploitation of workers, as well as the lack of rights given to them by the Maldivian law (Waheed, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Mohamed, 2010).

Despite their significant role in the Maldivian society, the foreign domestic workers are seldom mentioned in the Maldivian media and reports. Even the HRCM report on employment situation (2009) discussed the unique circumstances of the domestic workers in just one paragraph in the report. Hence, the domestic workers" existence remains relatively hidden from the public view.

The lack of protection provided by the law, the limited voice of migrant workers in the media and the inadequate institutional support for migrant workers make them an extremely vulnerable group in the Maldives. The severe limitations placed on their rights and the discriminatory attitudes of the Maldivian community could lead them to "feel like an outsider, serving the society yet not truly belonging to it" (Lindio-McGovern, 2004: 229). The relative isolation of the foreign domestic workers could make them an even more vulnerable group within the migrant workers. However, several studies on migrant workers (Lindio-McGovern, 2004; Williams, 2008; Carling, 2005) had described their agency in finding ways to resist and respond to socially, culturally and politically restrictive situations. These studies made me think critically about the migrant workers in the Maldives and look beyond the dominant discourse that portrays them as vulnerable. My study focuses on analyzing the existing strategies within the foreign domestic worker communities to resist their cultural alienation that they experience within their workplace

and the society at large. Specifically, I will be looking at how the strategies used for forming alternative identities, creating social networks and negotiating physical space are linked to the domestic workers" resistance to cultural alienation.

1.1 Research Questions

The study analyzes the strategies used by migrant domestic workers to resist cultural alienation in the Maldives.

The following questions are considered.

1. What are the factors that lead migrant domestic workers to be culturally alienated in the Maldives?
2. What are the ways in which migrant domestic workers use identity formation, social networking and negotiating space as strategies to resist their alienation?

1.2 Research Objectives

- To examine the ways in which migrant domestic workers experience cultural alienation in the Maldives.
- To analyze the ways in which migrant domestic workers use identity formation, social networking and negotiating space as strategies to resist their alienation.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

In this research I look into how domestic workers in the Maldives resist cultural alienation in their work and social lives. My analysis of resistance is strongly guided by contemporary studies that deal with the relationship between resistance and power, such as Mahmood (2005), Scott (1990) and Abu-Lughod (1990). Scott defined resistance as „any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended to either mitigate or deny claims…made on that class by superordinate classes… or to advance its own claims… *vis-a-vis* those superordinate classes" (1985:290). While recognizing the everyday forms of resistance that can be displayed through stories, rumors gossip, and

even through flight (Scott, 1990), I do not make the inference that these acts of resistance necessarily results in, or are intended to result in the total failure of the structures of their oppression (Scott, 1985; Scott, 1990; Abu-Lughod, 1990). Instead, I look into these forms of resistance to understand the complex ways power is transformed within these acts of resistance that undermines the conventional understandings of dominance, power and resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Although I recognize everyday resistance of domestic workers to their experiences of being dominated, I analyze further to understand the ways in which the domestic workers exhibit their agency by „inhabiting norms" (Mahmood, 2005: 15), or in other words, how the domestic workers work within the existing structures of dominance to gain more control over their lives. I maintain that these actions do not have to be seen as forms of resistance to domination. However, by these acts of agency, the domestic workers display their resistance to their relative lack of control and invisibility that is constructed through the dominant discourse.

My study takes the position that the dominant culture within which migrant domestic workers are living in becomes a constraining structure that alienates them in multiple ways. In this research I look into how the domestic workers resist the forms of alienation by forming alternative identities, by building and using social networks and by negotiating space and place.

1.3 Research Methodology

The research is based primarily on a small group of six domestic workers of Sri Lankan Singhalese origin, and their interactions with eight more of their friends, working in Male", the capital of Maldives. I undertook participatory fieldwork by taking part in their social activities and interactions used grounded theory to gain an understanding of their sources of cultural alienation and their response. Because I was viewed as an outsider due to my different nationality, culture and language, this becomes an ethnographic study of the group.

I used participant observation and semi-structured interviews as the main tools for collecting information from foreign domestic workers. For data analysis I used grounded theory, by focusing on the domestic workers" discourses and actions as a means of understanding their strategies of resistance.

I initially began my research by interviewing domestic workers at their employers" homes. Three interviews were conducted using this method (Viji, Ruvi and Asha). However, this method of collecting information proved to be difficult as few employers were comfortable with the idea of private interviews with domestic workers. The domestic workers, too, were not fully comfortable to talk in their work spaces. Furthermore, I was unable to select participants using the snowballing technique, because when I tried to approach the domestic workers directly, it was met with reluctance to participate. Instead, to continue with this approach, I had to get permission from specific employers to allow me to interview their employees. This method had the risk of forming a biased view, by limiting my participants to those employed by a similar social group, or allowing me access to participants with relatively low conflict with their employers. I abandoned this method after the three interviews, and changed my primary method to accompanying the domestic workers on their Friday afternoons as a participant-observer. Despite these limitations, I was still able gain valuable information from the home interviews, by observing the different types and dimensions of relationships that exist between the domestic workers and the other members within the households.

My knowledge of the activities of the domestic workers during their off hours was informed through my observation of a specific group of women, and hence, cannot be generalized to the whole migrant community. The women I interviewed were furthermore of Sri Lankan Singhalese origin, and particularly related to the social life of my initial contact (Asha), except for two other interviewees (Ruvi and Viji). Their ages ranged from the early twenties to mid-forties. All, except two, had primarily been employed as domestic workers. One had experience in a garment factory, and another had worked in a fish processing factory in the Maldives. At least two had previously worked as domestic

workers in other countries (Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait), before coming to the Maldives. The domestic workers came from different parts of Sri Lanka, but there were at least three from the same area (Kurunaigala). Furthermore, most of them were employed by relatively well to do Maldivians, at senior levels in the civil service and political posts.

My Friday afternoon activities consisted of visits to the three public spaces where most migrant workers spend their off-time, namely at the Republican Square (*Jumhooree Maidhaan*), Sultan Park and the Artificial Beach, on two separate occasions and a visit to the home of six part-time workers. The outings usually started at 2:30 pm, and ended at 6:30 pm. This was made possible because some domestic workers were given half-day off by their employers. However, they explained that their longer off-times was a rare case, and that most domestic workers got their free time from 4:00pm to 7:00pm, while some were not given any. My own observations of the public spaces frequented by migrant workers showed that the spaces were relatively empty when we arrived at 2:30, but was filled up by 5:00pm. The activities during their social hours were led by the domestic workers themselves.

The visits to the public spaces gave me opportunities to have in-depth interviews with individual domestic workers about their specific experiences, as well as small group interviews on broader topics. I had one-on-one interviews with Asha (three interviews), Kajol (one interview), Visaka (one interview) and Nipuni (one interview). However, these interviews were treated as informal conversations that explored their past employment experiences, their views of the Maldives and their feelings toward their current employers. Some of the topics that I brought up, but failed to talk further were their experiences (or knowledge of) different forms of exploitation in the Maldives and religion (explained in the next subsection). I spent the majority of my time with a small group of six women (Asha, Kajol, Nipuni, Laxmi and two more whose names are not mentioned specifically in this paper). However, there were some shifting of people in and out of the groups, and I was able to interact briefly with about eight more individuals (including Suree and Visaka). I gained information in these interactions by taking part

and listening to their conversations, occasionally asking for translations and participating in their activities.

I did a policy and legal analysis to understand the presences and absences of the law and regulations relating to migrant workers that could have an impact on their social and work lives. Questions regarding the conflicts in the law and actual practices were further clarified by meeting with a staff member of the Sri Lankan High Commission and emailing senior and middle-management officials of the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, the MHRS and the Department of Immigration. My analysis is partially based on the information I received from the Sri Lankan High Commission, the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives and the Department of Immigration. Statistics of the exact numbers of domestic workers by nationality and gender were emailed by the Ministry of Human Resources and Sports.

I also analyzed news articles that dealt with issues relating to migrant workers, to gain insight to the discourses promoted through the media on domestic workers. The chapter that explores the cultural alienation of migrant workers includes many of the views expressed in the Maldivian media.

Finally, my social life in Male" during the research period also exposed me to different views and observations of Maldivians, which I incorporated to the thesis with their permission. All of the views attributed to employers had been taken from such interactions. The perspectives of three women employers of domestic workers are quoted in this paper. All three of them are mothers of young children. A woman whose married children employ multiple domestic workers is also quoted in the thesis. However, these interactions provided a more accurate picture of the employer-employee relationship than more formal interview methods.

Limitations of Research Methodology

The method of becoming a participant-observer in the domestic workers‟ free time would have the risk of forming some biased views. The interview subjects are a limited sample of only six people; hence, the findings of this research do not represent the larger community of migrant domestic workers in the Maldives. Instead, the research outlines the ways the particular group that I interviewed show resistance to their cultural alienation in the Maldives, which also indicates the probability of similar strategies being used by other migrant domestic workers.

Being a Maldivian, it took me time to build rapport with the migrant worker group. In fact, it was on the final day that the group felt comfortable enough to share certain information. My nationality and the lack of time to build trust could have resulted in them censoring any negative opinions and feelings toward Maldivians. However, there were a few moments when the guard was let down to share some of their negative experiences of Maldivians. „There are good people and bad people in all countries. Even in Lanka there are bad people‟. This sentiment was voiced every time the domestic workers shared a story of being mistreated by Maldivians.

My identity also made the women reluctant to talk about certain subjects, such as religion. In the Maldives, religion is a sensitive issue. The Maldivian Constitution limits Maldivian citizenship to only Muslims, denies the rights of publicly practicing any other religious beliefs, and the construction of places of worship for other religions. Foreigners preaching other religions to Maldivians can lead to their deportation, sometimes without the right to a trial (Jory, 2005: 41; Larsen, 2009; Robinson, 2009). Hence, I was able to gain very little knowledge with regards to the role of religion in the formation of identity in the Maldives. However, my identity as a woman of a similar age made it easier for me to build a rapport with the domestic workers. During the discussions we came to discover our shared experiences, such as motherhood and living away from home that enabled me to develop closer bonds with the group.

While everyone in the group except one was fluent in my language, I did not understand theirs". Hence, many of the conversations happening around me were lost. When possible, I asked them to translate for me. However, it is likely that some information could have been lost or deliberately changed during translation.

Despite the above limitations, I was able to draw some parallels between the research findings and the findings of past researches in other geographical areas dealing with similar themes, showing some links between the experiences of migrant workers in the Maldives and other areas of the world.

1.4 Ethical Considerations

I conducted the research in Male" (the capital of the Maldives) where I was born and raised. Due to its relatively small community, there were times when I was interviewing employees of relatives, and well-known public figures. This created an ethical dilemma for me at two levels. First, the interviews provided knowledge that can be misused by me, for purposes other than the research. Second, the information I include in my analysis may give away the true identity of the employers that may create a negative public view of the person.

I tried to mitigate the potential overlap of my conflicting roles and interests by refraining from sharing any information except for a general overview of my research with my family members and friends during my time in the Maldives. Furthermore, I made a point of not mentioning details of the employer that might give away their identity even in the field notes. In my analysis I tried my best to exclude information that could lead to speculations about the employers" identity.

Similar to my concern for the identities of the employers, I was concerned about concealing the identities of the domestic workers. To prevent the problem, I used code names for the migrant workers I interviewed in my analysis. To further mitigate the potential implications, I refrained from mentioning any names when relating some of the information in my analysis.

The collected data was kept secure and confidential at all times, and was be handled only by me.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The primary research participants are a small group of Singhalese domestic workers linked by a strong social network. While other means of gaining a broader understanding of the potential sources of alienation were employed, the strategies of the domestic workers to resist these forces are primarily built on the information gained through my social interactions with my primary participants.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The research will contribute toward the existing academic knowledge on how migrant domestic workers adapt and respond to difficult and oppressive work conditions. Since my research will be conducted in a country where formal bodies such as NGOs that focus on migrant worker issues and religious organizations are virtually non-existent, and the limited time provided for migrant domestic workers for leaving the workplace is the unwritten rule, the study could provide understanding of the agency of migrant workers in an environment with limited support mechanisms.

The research could also be used by NGOs planning to work with migrant workers in the future, to gain an understanding of the existing informal and formal structures within migrant workers. The knowledge from the research can be used to formulate future projects for further empowering migrant workers. NGOs can use the findings of the research to understand how migrant workers can be organized to call for developing policies that provide rights entitled for the group.

The study findings can be of immense value to the Maldivian community to alter their views of the foreign domestic workers being in a permanent state of victimhood. In contrast, the study findings show the women are seeking ways to improve their work and social lives even within their restrictive structures.

Finally, the research could create awareness among policy makers on the issues faced by migrant domestic workers, and emphasize the need for creating supportive structures and policies.

1.7 Organization of Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter II I present a literature review that gives an overview of the history of migration in the Maldives and Sri Lankan, followed by definitions and past research findings on cultural alienation, agency, power and resistance. In Chapter III I look into the sources of alienation for the migrant domestic workers in the Maldives. In Chapters IV, V and VI I look into the ways in which alternative identities, social networks and negotiating spaces become means of resisting, contesting and negotiating power in their work and social spaces. In the final chapter of the thesis I discuss the research findings and outline some of the limitations brought about by the scope of this research. I end by proposing future researches that can be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the issues identified in this research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Migration to the Maldives

Migration and foreign labor has a long history in the Maldives. Accounts of the voyages of Ibn Battuta in the 14th century indicates that the Maldives royalty had in the past employed foreign scholars, including himself in areas where local expertise lacked such as the judiciary (Husain, 1976). Foreign female servants were also employed by the Maldivian elite at the time (Husain, 1976). Furthermore, a type of temporary marriage between visiting foreign sailors to Maldivian women was common in the Maldivian history (Husain, 1976). Hence migrants and migrant workers had made many different contributions to the Maldives.

The growth of the tourism and construction industries in the 1980s lead to the rapid economic development of the country (Niyaz, 1998). The growth of the industries required large numbers of unskilled labor that was not available in the country at that time. Hence, migrant labor from the nearby countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh had to be brought in (HRCM, 2009). This coincided with a time when the Maldivian identity was significantly based on creating an identity through religion (Islam) and language that brought the country culturally closer to the Arab countries (Jory, 2005:44), and set the country apart from the rest of the South Asian countries.

Development leads to better infrastructure and services and higher purchasing power, which could lead to higher ambitions and standards (Bartram, 2005). Fewer citizens become willing to take jobs that they perceive as low-paid and demeaning, leading to the import of cheap foreign labor (Bartram, 2005). The increased education services in the Maldives created similar ambitions in the Maldivian workforce, which lead to a mismatch of skills between the local workforce and the job industry (HRCM, 2009). The Maldivian school leavers were not adequately trained for high-level posts in the tourism industry, and unwilling to participate in the lower-level posts in the tourism

and construction industry (HRCM, 2009). Further interests of the industries, such as cutting costs through low salaries, and preventing employee turn-over made the cheaper foreign workers, with less likelihood of running away a more attractive option. The statistics issued by the Human Resources Department for November 2009 show that nearly 30,000 foreign workers are employed in the construction industry, and over 10,000 in the tourism industry (Human Resources Department, 2009).

Foreign domestic workers

A change in gender perspectives is a contributor to the popularity of employing foreign domestic workers. While women has become increasingly represented in the public sector (ADB & IOM, 2009), there is little observable change in transforming their roles at the private sector, creating double burdens on the woman. Furthermore, there was little development in alternate childcare systems; an issue that remains static until today (HRCM, 2009). The foreign domestic workers employed at a cheap rate to perform the multiple domestic roles of nanny, cook, and housekeeper, became increasingly popular.

The increase in the promotion and awareness of child rights, and better services at the rural islands could also have indirectly contributed to the increase in foreign domestic workers. For decades, school-aged boys and girls from the islands were temporarily kept with distant relatives or friends who owned homes in Male" by their parents, in the context of providing them better education (US Department of State, 2009). In exchange for their room and board, and education expenses, the children could be expected to cook, clean and mind younger children, or buy groceries from the market. In many cases the children were expected to work for long hours, and in severe cases suffered multiple forms of abuse (US Department of State, 2009). The signing of the CRC, resulting in a stronger focus on child rights and increased education standards in the islands could have contributed to the decrease of the practice of sending children to families in Male" (US Department of State, 2009). The resulting limitations for the Maldivian working parents could have lead to the increase in the employment of the foreign domestic workers.

Another contributor to the increased foreign domestic workers could be the change of the Maldivian family structure. More and more families are choosing to live as nuclear families rather than extended families (HRCM, 2009). Domestic workers could be considered as an alternative to the child care traditionally provided by the mothers and aunts.

Other views on the increase of in-migration

It is widely accepted that labor migration flows from the less developed countries to the more developed countries (Bartram, 2005). The Maldives is believed to be more developed compared to the rest of the countries in South Asia (ADB & IOM, 2009). However, statistics does not completely support this view.

A comparison of the Maldives with the countries of origin of migrant workers in terms of GDP per capita and the Human Development Index would show that the Maldives (HDI rank- 95, GDP rank- 104) is ahead of Sri Lanka (HDI rank- 102, GDP rank-116), the Philippines (HDI rank- 105, GDP rank- 124), India (HDI rank- 134, GDP rank- 128), Nepal (HDI rank- 144, GDP rank- 165) and Bangladesh (HDI rank- 146, GDP rank- 155) (UNDP, 2009). However, the ranking show that there are very little difference between the HDI and GDP values of the Maldives, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, but a larger gap exist between the other countries. From a global perspective, the Maldives is still under the least developed countries along with Bangladesh and Nepal (UNDP, 2009). Hence, the large inflow of labor migration cannot be completely attributed to the relative wealth of the country compared to the migrant sending countries. Conversely, the large migrant population gives an illusion of relative wealth to the Maldivians as well as the migrant sending countries (HRCM, 2009). Other factors, such as the limited employment opportunities, socio-economic inequality, government policies and conflict in the country of origins could be significant contributors to the decision to migrate to the Maldives.

Maldives Human Development Report of 2001 attributed the high dependency on migrant workers to the limited professional and skilled workers (UNDP, 2001). The large figures of unskilled labor (over 49% of the migrant worker population; Human Resources Department, 2009), compared to the relatively low numbers of skilled and semi-skilled workers (13%; Human Resources Department, 2009) indicates that this view does not adequately represent the situation. While it is indeed true that the hospitals, schools and companies would not be able to function without the large numbers of foreign labor, the statistics clearly show that the country is even more dependent on the low-paid, un-skilled labor.

Government Policies

A labor law was introduced to the Maldives for the first time in 2008. Before the law, the minimum standards for employment were set by two regulations that were in place since 1994, one for the government employees and another for those employed by the private sector (HRCM, 2009).

The Employment Act (2008) was a product of consultations with the relevant government offices, and to some extent, with the ILO (HRCM, 2009). The level of involvement of the private sector is unknown. The law is applicable today to all the employees, national and foreigners alike. The law sets standards to many issues, such as the maximum work hours, leave days and staff contracts (Employment Act, 2008). However, the law, until today, is poorly enforced, especially for the low-skilled and low pay jobs (HRCM, 2009). The HRCM"s rapid assessment on employment issues (2009) reported that they were highly doubtful of the implementation of the Employment Act (2008) of the Maldives. Its strongest criticism was due to the absence of mechanisms by which implementation of the Act can proceed (HRCM, 2009). For example, although the Act had given the role of establishing minimum wage to the government, it had not been done for any work up until today (HRCM, 2009). Furthermore, the mechanisms for ensuring wages are paid to the workers in the private sector regularly is extremely weak (HRCM, 2009).

The Employment Act (2008) has dedicated a chapter on foreign employment (Chapter 5) that covers only two points. Firstly, it says that the relevant ministry must publish regulations on the employment of foreigners within six months of the passing of the law (Employment Act, 2008.). Secondly, it states that the foreign workers are allowed to file complaints at the tribunal (Employment Act, 2008). The Act leaves the specific issues relating to the rights and entitlements for the migrant workers up to the relevant ministries. Furthermore, while the foreign workers are entitled to file complaints to the tribunal, the Act itself does not give any indication of how the mechanism should support the filing of complaints, such as reducing the language barrier, or making such services more accessible to those employed in remote islands. Hence, the relevance of the Employment Act (2008) for the low-skilled migrant workers is questionable. The Act was followed by the Expatriate Employment Regulation (2009).

The Expatriate Employment Regulation that came into force in 2009 gives detailed instructions on the various procedures that the employer has to follow when employing foreign workers. However, there is very little detail given for issues relating to the rights or entitlements of the foreign worker. For example, while it says that quotas will be approved after the potential employer can prove that the work conditions, the contract and the living conditions of the employee have been arranged, there is no minimum standard explained for these areas, and no details of how the conditions would be verified by the concerned authorities (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009: Article 2 (e)).

The regulation states under Article 8 that the procedures for the application for the work permit should be undertaken by an employment agency (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009). In Article 11, it further states that the foreign worker should be received at the airport by an official from the employment agency (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009).

The Expatriate Employment Regulation (2009) specifies that each foreign employee should be bonded to an employer. The regulation outlines the procedure that

should be followed by the employer in the cases of fleeing of employees (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009, Article 17). It further states that in the cases where the foreign worker is found, the financial responsibility for deporting him/her should be borne by the employers who hired the person illegally (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009). The employer is not criminalized for hiring the „illegal" worker (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009). However, the worker would be dealt by the police as an offender (Expatriate Employment Regulation, 2009).

The Maldives had recently been identified as a second tier watch-list destination country for human trafficking (US Department of State, 2009). This also brought to the international attention the fact that the country has limited policies in place to address the issue (ADB & IOM, 2009). Human trafficking of women and children are covered to some extent by the penal code (HRCM, 2009). Furthermore, the Maldives is also party to the SAARC convention that covers the sex trafficking of women and children (ADB & IOM, 2009). However, less had been written on labor trafficking in the Maldives, although it had been identified as a potential issue in the country (ADB & IOM, 2009; HRCM, 2009).

Forced labor is prohibited under the Employment Act 2008 (Article 3 (a)). However, there is no punishment in the Maldivian law for forced labor (HRCM, 2009). Hence, in such cases, the most that can be done is to file a complaint in the tribunal, which will then be settled through measures like compensation (HRCM, 2009), leaving the door open for such violations to continue. Furthermore, the proceedings of the employment tribunal are in the local language, and translators are often not provided (HRCM, 2009), making the foreign employee even more vulnerable in the proceedings (Robinson, 2010).

The Maldives is not party to the UN convention on migrant workers. The Maldives joined the ILO in 2009, but is yet to ratify any of its conventions (US Department of State, 2009).

A review of the policies related to migrant workers showed that they offer limited protection for migrant workers. There is little, if any laws in place *for* migrant workers. Rather, the few policies that are in place are intended to regulate the process of employing migrant workers, and hence, applicable largely to the employers, employment agencies and other parties involved in the employment of migrant workers. The limited recognition of migrant workers in policies has a strong relation to the current issues identified through the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives and the media.

Current issues

The current issues raised with regards to migrant workers in the Maldives are concerning the social and economic effects of uncontrolled migration, and the issues pertaining to the rights of the migrant workers (HRCM, 2009).

Today, the migrant worker population had been speculated to be as high as 110,000 (US Department of State, 2009) in the less than 400,000 population. Official figures show that there are over 80,000 documented migrant workers in the Maldives. An additional 30,000 undocumented migrant workers are estimated to be within the country as well.

Issues relating to the migrant worker rights had also been raised recently (HRCM, 2009). The fact that the Maldives had not signed the convention on migrant workers, despite their large number was raised, along with the poor living and working conditions they are subjected to (HRCM, 2009). This had been followed by articles in the newspaper that dealt with the vulnerability of the migrant workers in the Maldives (Waheed, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Mohamed, 2010).

Domestic workers are rarely discussed in the media and reports. For example, only a few paragraphs on the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives" report on employment (2009) focused on the unique issues relating to domestic workers. Hence, the lives of the foreign domestic workers remain relatively hidden from the view.

Domestic workers are a small group within the larger migrant worker population, with 5533 workers being registered as of August 2010 (MHRS, personal communication, September 5, 2010). Out of this, 4191 are men and 1342 are women (MHRS, personal communication, September 5, 2010). However, this amount may be misleading as the practice of bringing in foreign workers as domestic workers for commercial practices is very common, due to the larger quota available for this category (one domestic servant, one driver and one attendant per household) (MHRS, personal communication, September 5, 2010). Statistics indicate that only 35% of the domestic workers are registered in Male", while the rest resided in the Atolls (MHRS, personal communication, September 5, 2010). It is believed that those working in the Atolls may be engaged in commercial activities such as agriculture (MHRS, personal communication, September 5, 2010). Out of the women domestic workers, 83% live in Male".

Despite the small proportion, it is essential to pay special focus to the group, as past research show that being employed in a home results in a conflict between the public and the private and compels them to face unique challenges within their work environment (e.g. Gamburd, 2000; Anderson, 2000; Moukarbel, 2009, etc.). Furthermore, women migrant workers are faced with triple oppression, of being a woman, a foreigner and a worker (Hune, 1991). These issues are worsened by the fact that domestic work does not have a clear meaning, leading to workers in this category to be allocated a variety of household tasks (Galloti, 2009).

Defining Domestic work

Domestic work as a profession does not have a universal definition in place (Galloti, 2009). The ILO"s International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) of 1988 (currently undergoing revisions) contain a diverse set of tasks a domestic worker could do, varying from household work, child and elderly care, gardening, and security (Galloti, 2009). The only general feature that exists in the definition of domestic work across the globe is limited to „the private character of the workplace" (Galloti, 2009: 1),

where the normal public nature of employment is contradicted by the private nature of the household environment (Galloti, 2009).

Ramirez-Machado (2003) defined domestic work through a list of common accepted features attributed to domestic work. They include that „their workplace is a private home‟, that they work „in response to the needs of the employer‟s household‟, and is „carried on behalf of the direct employer‟, that the employer should not make economic or livelihood gain through the domestic worker‟s activities, the work is done for remuneration and the work itself is „generic and heterogeneous‟, with an extensive list of occupations included within (Ramirez-Machado, 2003:10-12).

In the Expatriate Employment Regulation (2009) of the Maldives, domestic work is defined as work done by a foreigner that does not contribute to the household income (Article 33), allowing great flexibility for employers to determine the scope and nature of the tasks for the domestic workers, as long as they do not consist of income generating activities. In the quota request form of the domestic workers, three types of workers are specified. They are domestic servants, domestic drivers and attendants (MHRS, n.d.). While drivers and attendants are not defined, the requirements that needs to be fulfilled for employing them gives them a broad idea of their tasks. In the Expatriate Employment Regulation (2009), the quota for an attendant is given if there is a sick (disabled, elderly, etc.) person in the house (40). The quota for drivers is one per private car, jeep or van (40). The lack of clarity of the duties of the domestic servant could have many implications that will be discussed later.

For the purpose of this thesis I limit my definition of domestic work to the category termed as „domestic servant‟. A domestic servant‟s tasks may include (but is not limited to) cooking, cleaning and looking after young children.

2.2 Migration and Sri Lanka

As one of the largest exporting countries of women migrant labor Sri Lanka is the second largest group of women migrant workers in the Maldives, with 425 registered women being recorded as of August 2010 (MHRS, personal communication, September 5, 2010). The country has been a prominent country of origin of women domestic workers since the 1970s (Sriskandarajah, 2002). Women migrant workers‟ remittances contribute significantly to Sri Lanka‟s economy (Lasagabaster, Maimbo & Hulugalle, 2005). Today the income by remittance had overtaken FDI inflows and foreign assistance (Lasagabaster, et al.; Ratha & Mohapatra, 2007).

History of Migration

Within the past 20 years or so, Sri Lanka had become well-known for its large number of out-migrant population. The first rapid outflow of labor migration in Sri Lanka was observed in 1977 (Sriskandarajah, 2002). The domestic condition (high unemployment rate and bad economy) was a direct contrast to the rapid infrastructure development happening in the Middle East at the time (Sriskandarajah, 2002). By encouraging Sri Lankans to migrate to the Gulf by reducing the travel and foreign exchange regulations, the government was able to solve the unemployment issue while benefiting from the foreign currency (extremely valuable due to the devaluation of the Rupee) into the country (Sriskandarajah, 2002).

In 1983, a second boom in out-migration was observed (Sriskandarajah, 2002). Sriskandarajah (2002) gave the two reasons for the increased and sustained labor migration as „the macro-economic benefits for the workers and the macro-economic objectives for the state‟ (p. 290). The consistently high unemployment at home and the attractive possibility of earning eight times the income from the host countries (mostly Middle Eastern) made it the rational choice for the unskilled Sri Lankan (Sriskandarajah, 2002). At the same time, the policy outlook of the government in the mid-1980s was to concentrate on building „highly industrial‟ human capital (Sriskandarajah, 2002, 291).

The labor migration supported this initiative by simultaneously decreasing the unemployment rate and increasing the national income through remittances and foreign exchange (Sriskandarajah, 2002). The mid-80s initiative had been ongoing today.

Current Situation

A profiling of the migrant workers from Sri Lanka would show that they are largely female (over 70%), with about 49% of them migrating to work as live-in domestic workers (Lasagabaster, Maimbo & Hulugalle, 2005). Most of the migrants come from families beyond the poverty line (Sriskandarajah, 2002). A little over one percent of the migrants are skilled workers (Lasagabaster, Maimbo & Hulugalle, 2005). A large majority of economic migrants are of Singhalese origin (Sriskandarajah, 2002). Furthermore, most of the migrant workers are temporary, contractual workers (Sriskandarajah, 2002).

The Sri Lankan government had placed various programs to encourage and facilitate work opportunities in foreign countries (Lasagabaster, Maimbo & Hulugalle, 2005). These include training programs, assistance in job seeking and loan schemes (Lasagabaster, Maimbo & Hulugalle, 2005).

Sri Lanka is also one of the few countries that had ratified the Convention on Migrant Workers. The Sri Lankan government has significantly improved their protective mechanisms in the receiving countries of migrant workers through their respective Embassies/ Consulates in those countries (CMW, 2009). The consulates employ a labor attaché to look into the labor and employment issues the Sri Lankan workers face in their host countries.

A significant change that has been brought to the employment process in the Maldives by the Sri Lankan High Commission is the mandatory registration of all employers (including households) in the High Commission (Sri Lankan High Commission, personal communication, July 19, 2010). The High Commission then ensures the parties sign a contract agreement that fit certain minimal requirements. The

model contract for domestic workers (drivers, house maids and house boys) has some points that are worth highlighting due to the contradictions, or additions to the Expatriate Employment Regulation (2009) in the Maldives.

Clause two of the contract explains the duties of the employees to be serving the employer „diligently" and „faithfully" (Contract Agreement of Employment, n.d.). They should „respect the customs (and) traditions" of the household and country (Contract Agreement of Employment, n.d.). Furthermore, the contract specifically states that the „employee shall reside in the residence of the employer", while not detailing any specific duties, states that they „shall be required to perform the normal duties assigned" (Contract Agreement of Employment, n.d.). The employer"s duties in Clause four also state that the employee should be „treated as a member of the household". All these details are additional to the national regulation. However, they do not contradict with it in any way.

Other clauses contradict with the regulation. For example, the employment regulation clearly states that in case of death the employer is not required to repatriate the remains to the employee"s country of origin. However, this responsibility is given to the employer in clause nine. Furthermore, the agreement gives some room for the employee to voluntarily terminate the contract on specific circumstances (clause eight), which was a right not given in the national regulation. Hence the agreement could potentially enhance some protection for the migrant workers.

Despite the agreement"s attempts to ascertain more rights for the migrant domestic workers, the implications of some clauses on their cultural and social lives are questionable. Some of the research findings indicate the practice of treating domestic workers as family, and the gendered expectations of their obedient personalities, for example, leads to structural issues at the institutional, community and household level that essentially brings about sources of domination for the employers and the dominant society resulting in the alienation of the domestic workers.

The next section reviews some of the past researches that look into cultural alienation, and the factors that could lead to the alienation of minority groups such as migrant workers. The two sections that follow explore past researches that look into the ways in which the minority groups respond and react to the alienation, through agency and resistance.

2.3 Cultural Alienation

Earlier definitions of the term see alienation as an active, conscious rejection or detachment from dominant norms and values (Keniston, 1965, as cited by Bernard, Gebauer and Maio, 2006). Morris (2002) saw cultural alienation as a result of a gap between the cultural norms and the individual"s life. This view maintains that the construction of culture is a collective process by which individuals in a community dealienates to form cultural norms, identities and institutions (Morris, 2002). Cultural alienation occurs when the culture becomes contradictory to the values of the self (Morris, 2002). Perceived discrepancies between personal and societal values had been seen to significantly contribute to cultural alienation (Barnard et al., 2006).

Cultural alienation had also been described as an individual"s internalized response to the dominant group"s rejection of ethnic groups and their cultures (Hernandez, 1994). It could lead temporary migrant workers to "feel like an outsider, serving the society yet not truly belonging to it" (Lindio-McGovern, 2004: 229). Practices such as ethnic and racial segregation, negative imagery of the ethnic group, coercion, and imposing dominant values and cultural norms could be ways by which minority groups are alienated by dominant groups (Hernandez, 1994). Hence, cultural alienation cannot be limited to the conscious rejection of the dominant culture (Miller, et al., 2008). It can additionally be attributed to the feeling of disconnection with the dominant culture due to the individual"s limited resources (Miller, et al., 2008), and the dominant group"s contempt for the individual"s culture and practices (Hernandez, 1994).

Studies show that immigrants who live with no contact with social networks that fulfill their cultural needs are more likely to feel isolated and stressed (Litwin, 1997 as cited by Miller et al., 2008). Hence, ethnic enclaves could fulfill this need by creating opportunities to experience their culture through food, language and other shared cultural experiences (Miller et al, 2008). In this regard, ethnic social networks provide essential emotional and social support to combat loneliness and isolation. However, other studies show living in highly segregated conditions with low or limited exposure to the dominant culture could lead to alienation from the dominant culture (Miller et al, 2008). Cultural alienation in immigrants had been linked to self-harm (Bhugra, 2002) and a desire to physically remove themselves from the host country (Feng-Bing, 2009).

How ethnic groups play a role in an individual‟s cultural alienation has been supported by studies cited above. Depending on the migrants‟ status in the host country, they could become an „ethnic community‟ or „ethnic minorities‟ (Castles & Miller, 2009:33-34). „Ethnic communities‟ can be formed in situations where the host country is open to cultural diversity and the formation of a multicultural community (Castles and Miller, 2009:34). On the other hand, discouraging or denying cultural diversity, and negative attitudes toward immigrants could lead to the formation of „ethnic minorities‟ (Castles and Miller, 2009:34).

Ethnic minorities can be a social construction of the dominant group, based on physical or cultural features (Castles and Miller, 2009:34). They could be assigned subordinate roles in the society, and the dominant discourse may project them as being a „threat‟ to the values of the state (Castles and Miller, 2009:34). However, this group itself is likely to have some shared values, beliefs and experiences (Castles and Miller, 2009:34). Hence, ethnic minority is a result of the „other-definition‟ (assigning subordinate characters to the dominant group) as well as „self-definition‟ (belonging to a group of similar values and customs) (Castles and Miller, 2009:34). How the „self‟ and the „other‟ are defined can be explained by looking into the various theories that attempt

to explain the relationships of power and dominance between the dominant and subordinate groups.

2.4 Agency

The view of migrant workers taking actions to resist or respond to their environment had been described as agency by Carling (2005). Agency of an individual in social theory could be described as the „internal powers and capacities, which, through their exercise, make her an active entity constantly intervening in the course of events ongoing around her" (Barnes, 2000:25). The argument for the individual as an active agent contradicts with the argument that individual actions are limited by the social structures around him/her (Barnes, 2000). However, Giddens emphasized the duality of agency and structure in his „structuration theory" (Barnes, 2000). He took the stand that human agency „draws upon elements of social structure" and uses them, which in turn alters their social environment and structures (Barnes, 2000:26). Hence, Giddens saw agency as the power of individuals to resist and alter constraining structures through intervention, while structure also limits and transforms the level of agency of a person.

2.5 Power and Resistance

Past researches indicate the ways in which domestic workers face unique forms of domination and suppression (Anderson, 2001; Brochmann, 1993; Moukarbel, 2009, etc.). State regulations that bond migrant domestic workers to their employers, the resulting informal and arbitrary work conditions, racism and the patriarchal views of the subordinate role of domestic work could contribute toward a more pronounced power relationship between the domestic and the employer (Moukarbel, 2009; Anderson, 2001, etc.).

Analyses of the exploitation of the maids and its effects reflect the broader theories of domination and resistance, and the relationship between resistance and power. Researches from the 1960s and beyond saw studies of peasant revolutions that brought about new dimensions to the term resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Earlier theories that explained the subordinate group's acceptance of their status through „false consciousness"

was rejected as illogical, as it did not explain sufficiently why the subordinate groups were willing to accept their positions (Scott, 1990:71-80). Instead, there was an interest in finding resistance even where explicit forms cannot be found, by reanalyzing the subordinate discourse to seek subtle challenges to domination (Mahmood, 2005). One such example Scott‟s alternative explanation for hegemony and false consciousness by looking into the disguised „hidden transcripts‟ folk tales, art and other means, that could eventually lead to public acts of resistance, such as revolt (Scott, 1990:80).

Abu-Lughod (1990) took a step away from what she described as a „romanticising of resistance‟ because of its theoretical limitations of understanding the functioning of power (42). Interestingly, the same term „romanticising‟ resistance was used by Constable (1997) to caution about the practicality of acts of resistance by domestic workers as an effective strategy for the betterment of their conditions (as cited by Moukarbel, 2009). This caution is repeated in the various studies that give evidence to the agency of domestic workers to resist the power of the employer over her, through overt and covert means (e.g. Moukarbel, 2009).

Abu-Laghod (1990) proposed shifting of the view of resistance to be seen as a „diagnostic of power‟ (42). Following Foucault‟s famous stance „where there is power, there is resistance‟, she proposed that a more „sensible‟ approach would be that „where there is resistance there is power‟ (42). By this, she meant that the study of resistance should become a means of understanding power and power relations rather than human agency. However, the secondary position given to human agency in relation to power can be questioned further.

While Abu-Laghod (1990) was proposing a shift of perspective of resistance studies, Mahmood (2005) questioned the fixation of the studies on resistance itself. She suggested that there were dangers of taking a stance that reads resistance in every action that could not be attributed to resistance (Mahmood, 2005:7-8). From a foucauldian angle, she argued that since power is dynamic between agents, and interacts with them to form the subjects, power itself is altered and negotiated in the process. Mahmood (2005), taking a stronger focus on agency and power rather than domination and resistance, not

only looked at agency from acts of resistance, but also from the different ways the individual „inhabits norms" (Mahmood, 2005:15). The choice of „inhabiting... norms" becomes agency in itself (Mahmood, 2005:21).

Several studies found mechanisms by which migrant domestic workers alter their situations that cannot be read as resistance to domination, but rather resistance to their state of victimhood. Brochmann (1993) found that the Sri Lankan domestic workers in the Gulf States used a number of „escape routes" to overcome difficulties (113), such as planning their work routines in a way that they encounter fellow domestic workers, saying they were Christian to be allowed off time on Sundays, and on extreme situations, lying about a relative being sick to go back home (Brochmann, 1993: 113). Gamburd (2000) observed that, in direct contrast to popular Sri Lankan media which show domestic workers as helpless victims, none of the domestic workers she interviewed presented themselves that way. Yeoh and Huang (1998) describes the dominant discourse on public spaces in Singapore excludes the migrant domestic workers as the other, but the domestic workers resist and contest these discourses to create „counter-spaces" (Yeoh & Huang, 1998: 595).

Carling (2005) sees the studies that focus on human agency as being an alternative discourse to the earlier victimhood approach that dominated the earlier studies done on migrant women. Carling (2005) argues that while the victimhood approach works well for stronger advocacy programs, the latter method is more respectful for the migrant workers" dignity. Furthermore, she suggests that this methodology can provide more room for deeper analysis of the different relationships and roles of the migrant workers, and how they work in an unequal power relationship (Carling, 2005). From this view, this approach becomes not only a means of portraying reality of the migrant workers, but also a way of transforming the dominant views toward them.

The next chapter explores the sources of alienation of migrant domestic workers in the Maldives. The factors are divided into three levels, namely, institutional, community and the household.

CHAPTER III

CULTURAL ALIENATION OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

The historical context of the increase in migrant workers in the Maldives highlights the contradictions that occurred between the formation of a cohesive identity of the Maldivians and the necessity of foreign migrants to accelerate the development initiatives of the country. The mismatch between the ideological view of the country and the reality could have contributed to the stronger emphasis on defining the boundaries between the Maldivian and the „other‟. The process of creating a social divide that defines and excludes foreigners from the Maldivians can be studied by looking at the structural and institutional level (policies and practices) the community level (public discourses), and the household level discourses and practices.

3.1 Alienation at the Institutional level

Policies relating to migrant workers are extremely lacking in the Maldives. The enforceability of Employment Act (2008), when it comes to low-skilled workers had been acknowledged to be weak (HRCM, 2009). The Foreign Employment Regulation (2009), while defining the procedure for employing foreign workers, does not address the rights and entitlements of the foreign worker. The regulation furthermore does not address the issue of mistreatment and exploitation by the employer from the worker‟s point of view. The sources of alienation for the migrant worker that arise from the Foreign Employment Regulation (2009) can be looked into from two angles- what is present in the regulation and what is absent from the regulation. The regulation has many features that limit the power of the foreign employee within the employment relationship.

The language of the regulation is one of the means of assuring the power of the employer over the foreign employee, by reducing the employee to a role of passive subject. The regulation is written in the Maldivian language readily available in the internet, but there is no online translation, limiting access to the document for the employee. The language and terminology used to refer to the foreign workers assume

them to be passive subjects. For example, the regulation repeatedly refers to foreign workers as *gengulhey bidheyseen,* which roughly translates to foreigners being kept or looked after by the employer. The term not only denotes the passivity of the employee, but also an assumed inferiority of the person in relation of the local employer. This is not a deficiency of the Maldivian language, as it allows other terminologies that assume the employee to be an active participant. For example, *vazeefaa gai ulhey bidheyseen* translates roughly to foreign employees. The wording implies the control of the employer over the foreign worker, and undermines the agency of the foreign worker.

The foreign worker is bonded to a specific employer in the process of acquiring quota, and later in getting the work permit. The name of the employer is specified on the work permit. The only means of changing the work place is by filling out a request form by the employer. This takes away the control of the migrant worker to change employers independently. Moukarbel found such practices of binding domestic workers to the employer to be „control mechanisms" for employer to have the power of the state (in relation to the domestic worker), and the power to represent the domestic worker (in relation to the state) (2009: 134). Since house-hold is a private entity and states do not interfere with the negotiations that happen within the boundary, this in itself provides the employer much flexibility and control to determine nearly all aspects relating to the employment relationship with the domestic worker (Moukarbel, 2009:134). Even in the few areas where entitlements for the employee were stated, the enforceability of these requirements was seen to be limited. For example, while providing adequate housing, food and shelter for the employee was mentioned in one article, the regulation did not specify how these standards would be measured, or the means to ensure them.

Apart from the bonding to the employer, the regulation also specifies the involvement of an employment agency (who is in many cases an individual, and a male), who becomes the main focal point between the employer and the migrant worker during the process of employment. Furthermore, the agent is responsible for collecting the migrant worker from the airport and bringing her to her place of employment. The agents

had been known to charge large fees for their services that could put migrant workers to a situation of debt bondage (HRCM, 2009). They could also use deception to charge for costs that are not borne by the agent. One of the domestic workers I interviewed said that she was told to pay for her return ticket, which is in reality bought by the employer. The employment agencies in the Maldives could furthermore rely on agents at the sending countries to recruit the workers for them. Apart from being indebted economically, workers could be coerced or encouraged to form new identities, by deceiving employers about their religion and culture. The pressure of conforming to the expectations of multiple parties to reach to her place of work could result in further limiting her control over the process.

The employer is required to process documents for quotas and work permit. However, in the case of employer negligence in fulfilling these responsibilities, the harshest penalty for the employer is that the foreign worker would be deported. This regulation fails to take into account how the employee could be affected due to the penalty, despite the lack of control she has over the situation. While keeping the foreign employee a passive subject, she is also subjected to the consequences of employer negligence by promptly deporting her.

The absences of the regulation could also create unintended, but significant issues for the migrant worker. The main absences in the regulation as well as other policy documents are the lack of rights and entitlements for the domestic worker, and the lack of protective mechanisms for the employee at policy and institutional level. For example, the absence of specific rights for the foreign employee had resulted in limited options being available for them to take legal action against their employers (HRCM, 2009). The employment tribunal, ministries and the courts are conducted in the local language, and the absence of translators had been noted as one of the barriers for the workers to raise their issues (HRCM, 2009).

The absence of any monitoring mechanisms also has far reaching conditions. As a Maldivian who has closely observed the recruitment process of domestic workers said,

„The maid does not even sign her own contract. And neither does the employer. But every maid who comes in legally actually has a contract. But it is signed by the agent for both of them" (July, 30, 2010). The maids come to the Maldives, unaware of their few rights, making them extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

The absences in policies could further impact the discourses and practices at the community and household level.

3.2 Alienation at the Community level

Migrants and immigrants can be portrayed as „a threat to economic well-being, public order and national identity" (Castles & Miller, 2009: 35). Until recently foreign Bangladeshi workers, who are the most represented in the mainstream news, had been identified almost entirely in negative imagery, in stories of child abuse, sexual harassment and fights with local workers (Hameed, 2007). The threat of the Bangladeshi worker on the community portrayed in the news was also confirmed by the actions of the Maldivians toward them (Hameed, 2007.). Maldivian views are suspicious of male migrant workers" intent toward local women and girls. The male migrant worker"s threat toward the young Maldivian girl had become a topic of speculation, when the Department of Immigration enforced a new regulation that requires foreigners getting married to Maldivians to place a deposit, and submit proof of a substantial income to get approval for visa (Shazra, 2010). Furthermore, a ministry official gave the reason for the regulation as, „Too many Maldivians are getting married to foreigners… (for) bad purposes" (Shazra, 2010). He also added that the regulation would protect Maldivian women as the „men get married here, and just take off without divorcing the woman, or paying her living expenses" (Shazra, 2010). While marriages between foreign women and Maldivian men also occur, the views expressed by the government official showed that these women were not seen in a similar light.

The woman domestic worker is mostly seen as a threat to the Maldivian identity. Women are often viewed as the upholder of culture and traditions, and the main actor in

passing of those values to the next generation (Birman & Tyler, 1994; Castles & Miller, 2009). Hence, the delegation of the mothering role to a foreign woman is raised as a concern when discussing issues relating to domestic workers. For example, a Maldivian individual I interviewed, who was empathetic toward domestic workers still questioned about the potential threat their employment brings to the cultural and religious values of the Maldivian children.

The employment of a large number of migrant workers had also been viewed as a threat to the Maldivian economy, by the loss of job opportunities for Maldivians and the draining of national income through salaries (Waheed, 2010).

The absence of structures through laws and regulations, along with a public discourse that view migrant workers as a threat can be a source of discriminatory practices that could lead to alienation. For example, incidences of assigning separate ferry queues for migrant workers and preventing Muslim migrant workers to pray in some island mosques had been documented (Larsen, 2009).

Labeling of social groups can be seen as a means of simplifying the complexity of the human nature. However, social labeling can become both a means to, and a result of stigmatization of social groups (Harter et.al, 2005). By assigning labels to social groups, a collective identity that differentiates the group from others is created. Hence, within the label lies a longer list of attributes, behaviors and values that a member of the group would possess. Constable (1997; as cited by Moukarbel, 2009) observed the Filipina nationality being generalized to the profession of being a maid. Similar observations were done by Jarallah (2009) for the Sri Lankan maid in the Gulf. The term *Sri Lanky* was used interchangeably with maid. In the Maldives, all migrant workers are labeled as „bangaalhis", which originates from „bengali" used for people of Bangladeshi origin. The word is now attributed to being foreign, yet of South Asian origin (where most low-skilled labor comes from), with negative connotations of poor personal hygiene and less knowledge about civilized existence attached to it.

The labeling is an active process, involving the agency of dominant groups. However, the resulting stigmatization of groups forms a structure that could affect individual agency in various ways. It can create an enabling structure for the dominant group by which they can reaffirm their power and dominance over other groups by being the „better" (more hygienic, more civilized, etc.) individuals. However, the resulting structure becomes a constraining factor for other groups by being generalized with a sub-group viewed inferior to the dominant group. The limited power and agency over their own social labeling could be contradictory to their own perceptions of themselves.

More recent news portrayed migrant workers in imageries of victimhood, who are made to migrate because of their poverty and lack of opportunity in their country of origin, to be subjected to ill treatment by their Maldivian employers. However, this portrayal still confirms some of the social labeling given to them („It is of no surprise that such tough men, who work like donkeys without any breaks to refresh themselves, will of course smell like goats," said the author in an article that described the lives of foreign workers in Maldivian coffee shops (Mohamed, 2010)), and justifies the poor social status given to them by the society („I think there is no reason to blame the Maldives and the people for not treating Bangladeshi"s „nicely". The Bangladeshi community in Maldives is taking much advantage and living a good life. Nothing worse than what they have in their own country," was a reader comment in an article about exploitation of foreign workers (Robinson, 2010)).

The labeling could suppress many of the experiences of the migrant workers that are contradictory to the dominant discourse. The experiences of migrant workers are given visibility through the dominant discourse, and those that contradict with it may be rejected or ignored. A surprising fact that an official from the Sri Lankan High Commission as well as domestic workers made was the shock brought about by the limited knowledge of the physical and cultural environment of the Maldives, to the incoming worker. „When I first came to Male" I was shocked. The house was so simple. And in my room there were rats," a domestic worker explained. „In Dubai (where she

worked before) the houses are beautiful. And when we reach the gates we smell perfume," she described further. Other migrant workers also compared the small houses of Male" with their own spacious homes. This view contradicts with the dominant view of the migrant worker living in Male" in comparative luxury, even within her cramped room. I was unable to explore whether the migrant workers keep these experiences secret, or they are suppressed by the dominant group.

The strong relationship between language and power had been highlighted in past researches (e.g. Lan, 2003). Language and communication had been identified as a symbolic means of gaining dominance between the employer and the domestic worker (Lan, 2003). Domestic workers have few linguistic resources when they come to Male". New arrivals often do not understand the Maldivian language or English. Not understanding the language not only hinders her work, but is also seen as a lack in intelligence by the employers. In contrast to the employer"s expectation for the maid to learn the language quickly, the way it is taught to the maid also differs from the proper use of the language. The language that is used with the migrant workers is grammatically incorrect, with additional peculiar terminologies added, that denotes a difference between the „true" language and the migrant language. For example, to say there is no sugar (*hakureh nei*), a migrant will be told *hakuru nethee thibey* (*thibey* being an additional, meaningless word within the sentence). The maid (as well as other migrant workers) is expected to be distinct from the Maldivian in the way they speak in the Maldivian language. At the same time, the language of migrant workers is constructed as an object of disdain, as popularized by TV comedic characters such as Pindey.

Pindey[1] is a popular comedy character constructed by a Maldivian actor that had been featured in a number of dramas in the national TV. The character is based on a male domestic worker of South Asian origin. The most distinct features of the character are his language and his attire (sarong and sleeveless shirt, with a towel around his neck).

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[1] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9ruUPfSpT0 for You Tube video clip of the TV character.

Pindey‟s personality is shown as naïve but well-meaning, which got him into comedic situations. His sense of style, even when he tries to dress modern, is shown as deficient, with his trouser too high, or his shirt too loud. Although Pindey is mostly shown as a good person, the main fears of the local population are brought out in his dramas. For example, in one drama he gets married to the woman of the house, and throws out the husband. Pindey‟s characteristics outline the mainstream views of the migrant worker, as an easily differentiated „other‟, with non-threatening characteristics such as child-like innocence and loyalty to the employers.

While the migrant worker is defined as a single group through labeling, they are also subjected to „racist hierarchy‟ (Anderson, 2000:154) based on nationalities. This hierarchy is predominantly based on the Maldivian discourse of the certain characteristics of people of different nationalities. My findings also support that of many researches that support that domestic worker wages are often based on arbitrary preferences based on perceptions and opinions of the dominant group (e.g. Moukarbel, 2009; Anderson, 2000; Jarallah, 2009, etc.). Nepalis were seen to be better, cleaner, more compliant, and as noted by the Sri Lankan maids, much prettier than women of the rest of the nationalities (echoing Anderson‟s (2000) findings of the whiter the skin, the better the wages). Sri Lankans were seen as quick learners and more adaptable, but more likely to have friends in the Maldives. Indians and Bangladeshi were seen as slow learners and less intelligent, but preferred by some employers because many of them were Muslim. Salaries were also differentiated according to the perceived superiority of nationalities, with Nepalis earning the most, followed by the Sri Lankans and the least earned by Bangladeshi and Indian workers.

A reader‟s comment to an article relating to Bangladeshi workers in a coffee shop got the following response, „These Bangladeshis unlike most Sri Lankan and Indian workers are more ignorant and more stupid and in fact they know nothing other than the cane/laatee. If one has to extract work out of them, a stern foreman with perhaps a cane in his hand, can work wonders with these people‟ (Mohamed, 2010).

I found that the Sri Lankan domestic workers‟ views also reflected this socially constructed hierarchy based on the dominant discourse, denoting a level of acceptance with it. For example, I was told that Bangladeshis are not clean, and that the men would behave inappropriately on the streets, such as deliberately brushing past women, or making comments. I was also told that Bangladeshi (and Indian, on another occasion) maids were slower learners. When I asked about why Nepali women get paid more, I was told that they were very clean and neat. Comments about the Nepali being fairer and „different‟ were also made. Sri Lankan maids may go along with these generalizations because it helps them carve an identity for themselves as Sri Lankans, from the larger „bangalhi‟ migrant population. However, this hierarchy ultimately works toward subordinating all migrant workers in relation to the Maldivian community.

3.3 Alienation at the Household level

House maids are often subjected to triple oppression, as a foreigner, worker and woman (Brettell & Simon, 1986 as cited by Hune, 1991). Apart from her alienation due to the above mentioned differences, she is also seen as a subordinate due to her position as a woman domestic. Domestic work had not been considered paid work in the Maldives, and is seen more as a social responsibility of women. When women started to work in the public sphere, domestic duties were fulfilled by non-working relatives, distant relatives seeking shelter, or young girls from the islands seeking education in the capital. In all these cases, domestic work was not seen as a paid work, but duties of a woman toward the home she was living in. Hence, the employment relationship between the maid and the employer remains informal. The maid‟s position within the household is further made ambivalent because her work place is also her temporary home (Yeoh and Huang, 1998), and her employers are also her guardians, bound by law, in the foreign country (Moukarbel, 2009).

The absence of laws and regulations for work hours and minimum wages had given the power to the employer, which can lead to arbitrary practices. Time away from work was seen as a privilege rather than an entitlement. While Friday afternoons was the

time majority of the workers were allowed to go out, there were inconsistencies in their free times. On Friday afternoons Laxmi‟s break started at 2:30pm, while Viji‟s started at 4:00pm. Nipuni‟s break ended at 5:00pm while most others‟ ended at 7:00pm. The free time of the domestic workers also revolved around the lives of their employers. For example, Nipuni has to go home early to feed the children.

In the absence of laws, the free time was viewed as a practice of benevolence by employer. The migrant workers that I met said that most Sri Lankan maids were not allowed to go out by their employers. Furthermore, the employers also saw the free time as a gift that should be given in moderation. One employer explained that it was important to maintain a consistent time for allowing migrant workers to go out, between the employers themselves. Social pressure seems to exist between employers to restrict the physical mobility of domestic workers, to ensure similar standards between them. Furthermore, the control of physical mobility is viewed as something positive for the maid, as a means of protecting her for her own good (as also observed by Yeoh & Huang, 1998). As one of the employers said, „the maids we bring are not educated. They are not used to places like Male‟. They do not know how dangerous it is to go out here‟ (Interview on July 30, 2010). Similar to Foucault‟s account of the disciplinary institution, the employer „normalizes‟ her disciplinary power through comparison and „differentiation‟ of the maid in relation to the employer, and by „hierarchizing‟ the „nature‟ of the maid in comparison to the average Maldivian (Foucault, 1984: 196).

The limited boundary between work and private life also creates more likelihood for breaking prior agreements. My final outing with the group of domestic workers was planned to be a visit to the annual night bazaar in Male‟ on a Saturday night. As I was supposed to pick up one of the domestic workers from her employer‟s home, I started calling her about fifteen minutes before the agreed time. After three attempts, I stopped calling when she did not pick up. Moments later she called back, and very shortly told me she was unable to make it, as she was busy. Overhearing the conversation, my aunt told me, „Of course, she should know she can‟t leave at night. She has to put the (employer‟s)

child to bed". The incident made me realize how little control the domestic workers had over their free time.

The perception of the domestic worker as a vulnerable woman under the protection of the employer had been maintained from the time the domestic worker used to be a young school-aged girl without parental supervision. Even the name- *gengulhey kujja* (the girl I keep or look after) has remained intact. The term itself denotes the employer's role to maintain surveillance of the domestic worker's actions, as if she was a child. In one of my interviews, I observed the employer speculating with her mother about whether their maid was talking to her friends on the streets, when she went away to make a phone call in private. Restrictions on the specific places the maid can visit are outlined by the employer, based on her values about safety and appropriateness. The protective employer may not be using overt mean of dominance, such as scolding. Despite this, Rollins (1985), cited by Anderson (2001) termed this as a strategy of maintaining control over the maid through „maternalism" (30). The mothering role implies the differential power relations that exist between the maid and the madam (Anderson, 2001: 30). The strategy of mothering the domestic worker puts her in a passive child-like position, while more power can be exercised by the employer.

In contrast to the maid's perceived innocence and naivety as well as the relative insignificance within the household, the maid as a woman is considered a threat to the woman employer (Brochmann, 1993). One advice I was given on employing a maid was to ensure she was not good looking or young. Brochmann (1993) further found that the maid being sexually abused by the male employer put the maid into a conflicting situation with the woman employer. Apart from the shame and humiliation it could bring about, such abuses could end in her being repatriated prematurely (Brochmann, 1993).

Romero (1992) as cited by Moukarbel (2009) found that the relationship that exists between the maid and the woman employer was strained because of the employer's feelings toward domestic work as demeaning work. She attributed the conflict between the employer and the domestic to the power struggle between the housewife and the

husband to legitimize domestic work to be real work (Moukarbel, 2009). The woman employer‟s own feelings toward domestic work created feelings of contempt from the employer‟s side toward the maid, which can consequently lead to different means of asserting power (Moukarbel, 2009). However, my observations of the Maldivian households told me a different story. Historically, the Maldivian community has seen the performing of the role of the wife and mother as essential feminine traits for a married woman (Husain, 1976). By employing a live-in maid the employer is delegating some of her roles to the worker, which removes a part of her identity as wife and mother. Hence, the woman employer lives in a battle of balancing between delegating and controlling tasks.

One mother explained the distinct role between the maid and her as follows, „My maid is pretty good…(but) I don‟t let the maid feed or bath (the baby), either my sister in law or I do the important stuff‟ (Interview on August 26, 2010). Another woman shared her feelings about having a cook, „My (adult) children don‟t want me to go in the kitchen (to cook). But it is difficult to stay away. Even the other day I could not help going in the kitchen (to cook). I know I will be the bad person (i.e. in the eyes of her children)‟ (Interview on July 30, 2010). The overlapping roles could affect the relationship between the maid and the madam, as the maid will often have to deal with the conflicting emotions of the madam, brought about by her own internal battle over the gender roles.

To conclude, the presences and absences of the Employment Act (2008) and the Foreign Employment Regulation (2009) contribute to the increased agency of the employer and the decreased role of the foreign employee to a state of passivity. The Foreign Employment Regulation can be seen to be a means of controlling the foreign „others‟ in the Maldives, by reducing their power and agency in the employment relationship. From the process of the quota request to the termination, the employer, the agent and the ministries were the active agents mentioned in the regulation. The employee is shifted from one location to another by these different parties. The restrictions placed by the law and the regulation itself can be seen as a manifestation of

the structural constraints placed upon the foreign worker. The resulting social relations within the community and households further portray the alienation of the foreign worker brought about by the absence of enabling structures in the Maldivian culture.

The perception of the foreign worker as a threat to the Maldivian identity, security and economy resulting in the labeling and stigmatization of the foreign worker is also a primary reason for her alienation. By assigning a collective label for foreign workers, distinction between the self and the „other" is achieved. The labeling leads to the stigmatizing of foreign workers through the implication of certain physical and social traits attached the label. The current discourse of victimhood of the foreign worker could lead to justify the stigma, rather than to rectify the misconceptions. Within the collective label, hierarchy based on workers" nationalities was seen to be present. The hierarchy further stigmatized persons according to their nationalities, taking away the control of individual workers over their identities. The hierarchy, being based on Maldivian values, attitudes and perceptions, further confirms the power of the Maldivian over the foreign worker. The labeling and classifying of foreign workers can be also seen as the visible product of the constraining structures to the foreign worker within the Maldivian community.

Much of the rules made within the household assume the role of the passive subject from the maid. The employer decides the level of free time, the role of the maid within the household, and the degree of closeness between them. Hence, the environment within the household becomes a representation of the structure or culture within the household. Because of the limited agency of the maid in affecting the structure, she could become alienated from the household environment.

As Morris stated, structures that „fail to fulfill needs, desires, limits rationality and freedom…" will become rejected by the self (2002: 195). Morris further stated that the cultural alienation of the self would eventually give way to the disintegration, and then, remaking of the culture based on the emerging values and norms (2002: 195). Hence, alienation from the Maldivian culture could result in strategies of resistance from the

domestic workers. But how does this work in this case where the migrant worker community is a minority, both in size and power? The next two chapters would look into how the foreign domestic workers resist the forms of cultural alienation that they experience in their daily lives, through the building of identities, social networking and use of space.

CHAPTER IV

BUILDING AN ALTERNATIVE SRI LANKAN IDENTITY

The previous chapter discussed how the dominant group dictates the identity of the migrant worker within the structure of the society and the household, and its consequences of alienating the migrant worker. The first section of this chapter will look into how domestic workers resist the discourses of the dominant group with regards to their identity. How the Sri Lankan domestic workers resist their homogenized identity within the larger migrant worker community through their distinct attire will be discussed. This is followed by an exploration of how they contest their differentiated position by using language capital. The section will end with an exploration of how the domestic workers contest and inhabit their racial hierarchy created through dominant views.

The next section will look into the effects of the complex power relations between the domestic worker and the woman employer due to their overlapping of roles and social space. The section will further discuss how the domestic worker builds an alternative identity in relation to her woman employer to contest the discourses of dominance of the employer. How the woman employer‟s own identity is influenced by the domestic worker‟s presence will also be discussed.

4.1 Recreating identity by contesting dominant views

Contesting homogenization through attire

Before I met Ruvi, she was described to me by a distant relative who knew her. „She is beautiful. Looking at her you would not say she is 40. But she still wears that t-shirt and skirt‟, she told me. She was referring to the attire that most Sri Lankan migrant workers wore (although some of the younger workers wear jeans, they are observed to be a minority). She implied that Ruvi‟s dress sense was a factor that made her unappealing, despite her physical beauty. Most Maldivian women are dressed in jeans, a modified

version of the *shalwar kameez* (A knee length blouse over matching colored pants), or traditional Maldivian dress (a tight, full length dress, with or without the head scarf). I was aware that Maldivians often regarded physical presentation such as attire and hair styles as the main difference between Maldivians and other nationalities in South Asia (as portrayed by characters like Pindey, described in the previous chapter). However, I did not attribute any significance of the attire for the Sri Lankan women until I asked one of the Sri Lankan domestic workers how she managed to recognize Sri Lankans, when their physical features are similar to Maldivians. She replied that she would not know the difference, if it was not for the difference in what they wear. While being aware of their attire being considered unfashionable, the domestic workers took pride in wearing them, especially on their day offs. Furthermore, I observed distinctions between other nationalities as well. Indians wore the *sari*, Bangladeshis wore the *shalwar kameez*, and Nepalis wore jeans and t-shirts.

I saw this act of differentiating themselves by their attire a means of carving distinct identities for themselves. In the Maldivian environment where migrant workers are often considered a homogenous group, labeled simply as „*bangaalhis*" or in the case of women as „*gengulhey kudhin*" (the children we look after/ keep), the dress becomes a way of making a distinction between the different nationalities.

The dress can also become an important marker for inclusion and exclusion. I had in the past been often mistaken for a Sri Lankan both by Maldivians and Sri Lankans. When I went to meet the domestic workers, I wondered if they would be able to see a difference between me and them. After my first Friday outing, I asked Asha if the group initially recognized me as a Maldivian, and was told that they did. How they recognized me was mainly by the way I dressed. The dress becomes a means of creating a first impression of social and cultural identity.

Contesting differentiation through language

Language is a tool for negotiating class and identities between the employer and the domestic worker (Lan, 2003). As highlighted in the earlier chapter, language is one of the ways by which Maldivians exert their power over workers of other nationalities. However, I also experienced two domestic workers who did not talk or understand the Maldivian language, and instead, talked to their employers as well as non-Sri Lankans in English. How English is used by Filipina domestic workers to elevate their social class in relation to their Taiwanese employers had been shown by Lan (2003). Speaking good English was seen as an advantage by certain employers, because this would enable them to teach their children proper English through the domestic workers (Lan, 2003: 142). The English language can also be a means of getting better employment opportunities in the Maldives. I learned, for example that one of the two domestic workers was employed by a high profile politician, and had been with the family for several years.

Speaking good English could also elevate her social class, and place her above non-English speaking Maldivians. Domestic workers mainly come from rural areas and generally are not able to speak English. However, the British colonial past of Sri Lanka had made Sri Lankan English teachers very popular in the Maldivian schools. Maldivians experience two distinct Sri Lankan characters in their lives- the teacher and the domestic worker, the major differences between the two being their ability to speak English. A domestic worker who insists on speaking English can be seen as breaking this clear distinction between the skilled and the unskilled Sri Lankan migrant worker.

Despite English being valuable for employment and social status, not understanding the Maldivian language could place barriers in building wider social networks. The domestic worker can be at a disadvantage when making contact with other Maldivians as well as other nationalities apart from her own. The Maldivian language is used to communicate not only with other Maldivians, but also with people of other nationalities. Therefore, language limitations could place considerable restrictions to her social circle.

I also encountered the opposite case, where the domestic worker had not only learned to speak Maldivian fluently, but had also learned to read and write the language. „I listen and watch the tuition classes of the kids. And I just learned by myself. Nobody taught me," she said (July 30, 2010). Maldivians have a tendency to speak to migrant workers using an extra expression *'thibey'* that sets these conversations apart from those with the locals. Her fluency of the Maldivian language contrasted with how they are usually spoken to by Maldivians. Her fluency in the language contests the Maldivian belief of a difference between the foreign worker and the Maldivian. Indeed, every domestic worker I talked to, except one, spoke and understood the Maldivian language well enough converse with me with only minor difficulties. Hence, the fluency of the Maldivian language itself can be seen as a strategy of contesting the dominant group's assumption of a difference in speech between the Maldivian and migrant communities.

Contesting dominant constructions of hierarchy

How Maldivians view migrant workers had been seen to be simultaneously homogenizing and differentiated through their nationalities. On the one hand, all unskilled migrant workers fit into the generalized term „bangaalhi". On the other, discriminatory actions such as different pay structures, and attributing generalized traits and behaviors to nationalities are practiced to form a „racist hierarcy" (Anderson, 2000:154). Furthermore, the domestic workers I interviewed also reflected the views when explaining the differences between the nationalities. When Sri Lankan domestic workers explain why they are preferred over Indian and Bangladeshi workers, we can attempt to explain their compliance to the dominant views by arguing that they are able to elevate their status by comparison. It becomes less clear why Sri Lankan domestic workers seemed to accept explanations for their lower pay compared to Nepali workers, for example. My research findings were not extensive enough to establish whether the Sri Lankans internally accept their status through „false consciousness" or whether this remains the public transcript of their false compliance to the social norm; hence this area needs to be further explored. However, as Scott (1990) stated, compliance with the

hierarchy does not necessarily mean acceptance. There could be other ways of defying the hierarchy through their discourses. I observed slight hints of resistance to the dominant construction of hierarchy in the conversations of the Sri Lankan domestic workers. For example, one domestic worker remarked that it was not only Bangladeshi workers, but even Nepali workers were not as clean as Sri Lankans (the exact opposite of the reason they gave for the higher pay of Nepali workers) (July 23, 2010). In another instance, a domestic worker joked that the only difference between a Bangladeshi woman and a Nepali woman is the shape of the eyes (July 30, 2010). The comparison of the Nepali to a Bangladeshi worker intentionally downplays the physical distinction made by Maldivians between Nepali domestic workers and those of other nationalities.

Apart from creating difference among domestic workers, the value of certain traits and characteristics are essentially determined by the Maldivians, and hence, the hierarchy also leads to the creation of a power relationship between the domestic workers and the Maldivians. I found that the sense of superiority of the Maldivian over the Sri Lankan domestic worker, however, is not uncontested.

In the previous chapter I described how the dominant view of the migrant workers as inferiors is maintained through the media and the opinions of Maldivians. Relating stories where Sri Lankan women deal better in certain aspects in life compared to the Maldivian women becomes a way of contesting this view, by showing how Sri Lankan women are better than Maldivians in certain aspects of their lives. One such example was how Nipuni explained the main difference between Maldivians and Sri Lankans as the low level of discipline of the Maldivian child compared to the Sri Lankan child. In her view, Sri Lankan parents clearly communicated right and wrong, while Maldivian parents simply resorted to distract the child from the unwanted behavior. She said this prevented the Maldivian parents from disciplining the child. „In Lanka, children will obey their parents," she said (Interview on 23 July, 2010).

A domestic worker further compared the Maldivian households to her own childhood home. She grew up in a large household with a working mother, „She did not

have anyone to help her. She gave us tasks to do around the house, both boys and girls. We helped her, and we learned how to do the household chores. In this country the children are not taught anything. I don‟t know how they are going to survive when they get married.‟‟ (Interview on 30 July, 2010).

The fact that the Sri Lankan domestic workers I interviewed used parenting and motherhood to create a clear distinction between the Sri Lankan and the Maldivian women becomes an interesting choice, as the role of the care taker is often taken by the domestic workers in their work lives. Therefore the depiction becomes more than a way for the domestic workers to make a division between them and the Maldivians and ensuring they are shown in the positive light. Alternatively, they could also be making statements that show the weaknesses of the Maldivian women employers in relation to themselves, as an alternative discourse to their own subordination within the household.

4.2 The Madam and the Maid

The relationship between the foreign domestic worker and her employers emphasizes the patriarchal nature of the Maldivian household and the class boundaries between the Maldivian and foreign domestic, and how these two factors could lead to a shift in perspective to the assumption of the power dynamics between the woman employer and the domestic worker.

More often than not, the domestic worker becomes a necessary part of the Maldivian household when the want or the need for the woman to seek employment arises. With few options of child-care available for working mothers, the domestic worker becomes the „child care system‟ for the working parents (HRCM, 2009: 39). The daily household tasks and looking after the children, which are assumed to be the woman‟s responsibility, are delegated to the foreign domestic worker. Hence, the domestic worker is seen as a means of easing the woman‟s responsibility of maintaining the household, but not completely removing the responsibility from her.

The domestic workers‟ accounts of the interactions with their employers are almost always to do with the woman of the house (or „Madam‟, as they are referred to). The „Boss‟ is rarely mentioned. The domestic workers‟ accounts shared with me in my research indicate the close relationship that exists between the madam and the domestic worker. The prominence of the „madam‟ in the domestic workers‟ stories show that, despite the households comprising both genders, the domain in which the domestic workers work in the households are strongly gendered. They furthermore outline the struggle of both the domestic worker and the woman employer to reconcile their positions in the household within the patriarchal power structure. The construction of the self and the „other‟ between the domestic worker and the woman necessitates negotiation of their spaces within the household (Yeoh & Huang, 1999: 274).

The temperament, behavior and attitude of the „madam‟ are central to the domestic worker‟s survival in the workplace. Nearly every domestic worker I met described their relationship with their madams to be pleasant and amicable. However, they were well aware of the difficulties they would face if they did not get along with their employers. Viji described her first day of work being full of anxiety about her madam. „I was told by (the foreign cook and maid employed by other members of the household) that she is very bad tempered, and she would scold a lot. So I was very scared,‟ she explained. However, her fears subsided after some time when such incidents failed to occur. „She has never scolded me so far. She always tells me, Viji, do this way, not that way,‟ she said (Interview on July 18, 2010).

Despite Viji‟s general satisfaction of her employer, the strong power relationship that exists between her and her employer is evident. However, the agency of domestic workers to resist the dominant power relations was also seen by their accounts of their experiences with their madams.

Fight and Flight

Unlike Viji, Kajol experienced a madam who was more unpredictable, or in her own words, „very good when she was good, but very bad when she was bad". After being allocated work that she viewed as out of the realm of domestic work, such as cleaning the employer's disabled son's soiled diaper, Kajol started having disagreements with her madam.

How Kajol justified her stand was through the knowledge she had of the different types of domestic workers in the Maldives. She explained that her employer used to employ an attendant as well, but she left after a disagreement with the employer. Also, as explained in Chapter II, while there is no clear definition of the role of a domestic worker, the Expatriate Employment Regulation (2009) divides domestic work into three categories, namely domestic servants, drivers and attendants. Because a specific quota is given for attendants to look after the elderly and disabled (40), Kajol used this knowledge to insist that the task of taking care of the disabled boy was not a part of her duties as a domestic servant. Her refusal to comply on these grounds, however, was not accepted by the employer. According to Kajol her madam scolded her in front of others in the household.

„Later madam came and said sorry. But I can't stay then, right (*dho*)? She said many bad things, so it doesn't change when she says sorry. I told her I was sick and need to go back for a while. I didn't tell her I was leaving," she explained. „When they were still good I once went back to Lanka and came back. I told them truthfully. But when they treat me badly, I cannot come back, right (*dho*)?" she explained (Interview on July 23, 2010).

In a situation where Kajol had less power compared to her employer, she decided to flee. The Maldivian policies do not specify the rights of the migrant worker in a situation where she takes the initiative to resign. Hence, Kajol, as well as others I spoke to used the excuse of being sick or a relative being sick to get out of negative

employment situations (as also observed by Brochmann, 1993 for Sri Lankans in the Gulf States). Scott (1985) described flight as an alternative of the more overt expressions of resistance, which nevertheless should be considered as a form of resistance that uses „exit" instead of „voice" as a means of protesting against the „petty leaders" (245).

Kajol justified her deception in the context of her employer"s unfair use of power over Kajol. According to Kajol, at least two other domestic workers left the household in a similar manner because they could not deal with the madam. When the action is repeated by the domestic workers, the subtle form of resistance through flight becomes a stronger message for employers who treat domestic workers poorly or unfairly, simply through the inconvenience of repeated hiring of domestic workers. It creates a fear in the employers themselves to treat the domestic workers well in order to keep them. However, flight could also work against domestic workers by the employer becoming stricter with the incoming domestic worker.

Kajol acted out her resistance to her employer"s dominance over her. However, I mainly observed more symbolic signs of resistance. I follow Mahmood"s (2005) caution of refraining from seeking resistance where none might be found. Why I argue that these acts could indicate resistance is because the domestic workers"stories indicate „symbolic inversion" of roles that put them above the madam (Scott, 1990: 166). These subtle hints of resistance show that „norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted…, but performed (and) inhabited…" (Mahmood, 2005: 15). In other words, I observed that in order to challenge certain norms, the maids gave emphasis to others.

Challenging and inhabiting norms

Many of the stories told to me by the domestic workers were about their daily activities. Their stories showed their busy schedules, different roles, from cook to cleaner and nanny, and their significance to the household they live in.

Asha explained the different roles she played within the household, from cooking and cleaning to putting the youngest son to bed. In Asha"s account of how she spends the

day, I found that she had very little time to rest. However, the fact that she has multiple tasks to fulfill was not related as a complaint, or a burden, but rather with pride. Asha was proud of her energy and skills that enables her to perform her domestic role. Nipuni, too, describes her role as the main caregiver of the two boys she plays the role of a nanny. She repeatedly expressed how she took care of them since they were nine months until today. Both Asha and Nipuni emphasized on their competence of their roles as domestic workers. However, they also used their competence to compare the lack of the same skills in the Maldivian women employers.

Asha shared her opinion of the Maldivian women by saying, „I am surprised by the Maldivian mothers. They don‟t have time to do anything. I don‟t know how they would survive if it wasn‟t for us. We do everything for them. I don‟t know what will happen when I leave…‟‟ (Interview on July 30, 2010).

Because both the madam and Asha were women, Asha compared her skills with what the madam lacked. Even within the household, there were remnants of the theme. When I observed that the Friday lunch in Asha‟s place ended with the same desert as the previous Friday, her madam replied that the young boy in the household prefers it. „Yes, he told me yesterday to make it‟‟, Asha quickly replied. Asha did not appear to be unhappy with her employers. However, it was seen that she demanded recognition of her role within the household.

Asha‟s accounts of her significant role in the household challenges and contests the space that is traditionally inhabited by the woman employer. This influence of the overlapping of the gender roles not only shapes the identity of the domestic worker, but also the woman employer. „One…concern I have is, will [my daughter] continue to love me? I mean right now she is very attached to me and won‟t even go to anyone else if I‟m around. I‟m concerned one fine day when I come from work, she won‟t come to me and prefer to be with the maid or someone else…‟‟ shared a new mother, about to start work (Interview on August 26, 2010).

The working women could experience conflicting feelings toward their domestic workers, who are enabling them to explore the public sphere with minimal worries of maintaining the household, but who, at the same time, are taking away a part of their role of wife and mother. The domestic worker"s efficiency in the role could possibly be recognized by the woman employer with respect and appreciation. Alternatively, the woman worker may end up resenting the domestic worker"s invasion of her space. In either case, the dominant view of the domestic worker as naïve and child-like is challenged. Instead, the woman employer is forced to recognize the domestic worker"s worth, which further challenge her own perceptions of herself within the locally constructed gender norms.

The woman employer could also make assumptions of an inherent „nurturing" role in the woman domestic worker, based on gender roles. Suree was given the task of looking after her employer"s nine month daughter for extremely long periods. However, she was not comfortable with looking after a child, and was willing to change her workplace and tasks for a much smaller salary.

An employer also shared her expectations of her domestic worker, who, like the employer had children of her own. „The one I have now apparently has three kids but doesn't even know how to handle a baby, nor does she like holding them or playing with them. She just lacks that natural tendency to be playful with babies that a mother has...", she said (Interview on July 25, 2010).

It is seen that both the domestic worker and the woman employer struggle to come to terms with their selves and the other, by comparing each other"s actions and views through their gendered lens. In the process of shaping their identities, both the madam and the domestic worker further reinforce the gender roles and the patriarchal systems they live in.

Countering 'maternalism'

Moukarbel (2009) described the power relations between the domestic worker and the woman employer to be built according to the preconceived gender roles (123). She cited Rollins‟ (1985) term „maternalism‟ to describe the domination of the domestic worker by the woman employer through gender-appropriate characteristics such as nurturing and protecting (Moukarbel, 2009: 129). This becomes a unique strategy of dominance used by woman employers to control their domestic workers through increased surveillance in the name of being protective of the domestic worker (Rollins (1985) as cited by Anderson (2001)). Maternalism plays the same role as paternalism by putting the domestic worker to a helpless „child-like position‟ (Moukarbel, 2009: 129).

„Maternalism‟ is a strategy of dominance that is built within the accepted norms and behavior of a woman as mother and a nurturer (Moukarbel, 2009), and hence the role can be reversed by the domestic worker as another woman, by acting maternal toward the employer. Stories teaching their employers the right way to do certain tasks were related by the domestic workers, which symbolizes the reversal of the roles by asserting their control in situations.

Asha explained how she worried about her employer‟s daughters not learning any household skills, and advised her previous employer to teach her daughters how to cook, to get them ready for adulthood. „The madam agreed. So everyday one of her girls will come to the kitchen, and make *roshi* with me (traditional flat bread)‟ (Interview on July 30, 2010). Her story reversed her role as the wise advice giver, while the madam was described as the person taking the advice.

In another instance, a domestic worker told the story of how the madam of „that house‟ (a relative of her employer) did not know how to react to the issue when her domestic worker told her that her money was stolen.

„She called the police right away. She didn‟t know she should not do that. If the money is there she would be so embarrassed, *dho*? So I told her she shouldn‟t do

that. She should try searching the house first. Otherwise it would be so embarrassing. She listened to me, and we searched together. And the money was there. She (the domestic worker) just forgot where she put it" (Interview on July 30, 2010).

Within the story, the domestic workers expressed her concern for the madams, who they felt was naïve and less informed than them. It is most likely that the domestic workers wanted to help the madams to resolve the issues. However, by relating the story to me, they also could have wanted to share how they „looked after" a madam in a crisis situation, by being the more knowledgeable person among them.

The above stories also contest the employer-employee power relationship through the reversal of roles of the domestic worker and the madam. These stories symbolize the domestic worker in the dominant role, either telling or advising the madam of the right way to do something. Similar to the role of „world upside down" paintings and prints of the European tradition (Scott, 1990:166-72), these stories provide a means of resisting the power and knowledge attributed to the madam in the dominant discourse.

While countering maternalism through role reversals could reverse power relationships temporarily, they may bring about slow change. Others such as Constable (1997) as cited by Moukarbel (2005) and Anderson (2001) argue that the subtle signs of resistance and agency bring no real change to the conditions of the domestic worker. However, I also observed a stronger attempt of negotiating power by choosing to live out as part-time workers, rather than the full-time live in agreements.

Part-timing

The part-timers I met had formed agreements with their employers (who are their legal employer, but play the role of sponsors) that are mutually beneficial. The „employer" fulfills the formalities required by the Maldivian government, and pays the fees and deposits required (which are, in some cases, later paid back by the domestic worker). In return, the domestic worker provides weekly (usually on weekend) cleaning

or cooking services to the „employer". The arrangement allows a more formal and structured relationship between the employer and the domestic worker. Specific tasks, such as sweeping the floor, cooking lunch or ironing shirts are assigned to the domestic worker to be completed within a specified number of hours (usually within two hours). The amount of work and the length of time are negotiated according to the pay. By choosing to work part-time, the domestic worker could resist the notion of dependency on the employer, and gain control over the employment process.

The male employer

While the female employer came across in many discussions, the male employer did not receive the same prominence. The most I was told was that „Maldivian men are not bad people". The absence of the man in the domestic workers" accounts show the patriarchal nature of the Maldivian household, where the male is absent from the private sphere of the household. It is likely that the domestic workers did not have to deal with the men directly, except when they get their monthly pay. This could have reduced the expectations of the domestic workers of the male boss. Furthermore, two domestic workers that I interviewed had experienced sexual harassment by their male employers in Gulf States, and hence, judged the Maldivian men they met through their specific experiences. Hence, for them, the absence of physical or sexual threat makes the male employer satisfactory.

To summarize, the woman domestic worker"s resistance to cultural alienation in the Maldives involves re-building a specific cultural identity through practices such as her attire. She could further form a unique identity of her own by emphasizing on certain skills and attributes, such as the ability to speak English that could elevate her social class, and economic opportunities. It is seen that the domestic workers resist the inferiority attributed to them by the dominant group by emphasizing on how they deal better than the Maldivians on certain aspects in their lives. The Sri Lankan domestic worker is seen to be actively involved in the process of creating her identity. During the

process, she also recreates the „others‟‟‟ that is, the Maldivians and other nationalities, in relation to themselves.

Within the household, the domestic worker‟s identity is linked to the identity of the woman employer, as their shared gender makes them responsible for the fulfillment of the household duties. Hence, the process of forming one‟s own identity affects the other‟s identity as well. Both the madam and the domestic worker produce gendered identities for the self and the other, based on their roles within the household. The strategies of dominance and resistance are in altering the identities by gaining control by covert means, such as „maternalism‟. The reversal of roles could result in the domestic worker gaining temporary control in certain situations. However, the strategies ultimately become a means of reproducing and normalizing the gendered identities the women live in.

CHAPTER V

BUILDING SOCIAL NETWORKS

In the previous chapter I discussed how the domestic workers contest the dominant views that homogenize, differentiate and subordinate domestic workers by adopting a unique dress, using language capital to elevate their social class and voicing opinions that emphasize their better skills in relation to Maldivians. I also explored how the domestic worker and the madam are linked through shared gender roles and social spaces, and how they struggle to recreate their identities in relation to each other. The chapter highlighted negative relations between the madam and the domestic worker due to their overlapping roles. In contrast, this chapter explores how the social network between the domestic worker and the employer plays a positive role, such as enabling them both to gain some amount of control over the employment situation. The chapter looks into different types of relationships developed by the domestic workers, and how these relationships are used by them to resist and negotiate power in their work and social lives. The first section looks into the domestic workers" view of „friendship", and the implied inclusion and exclusion through the term. The next section deals with the relationship between the domestic worker and the employer. Third, I will also look at how relationship between her and other members of the household becomes a valuable means of negotiating power. Then, I explore how the domestic workers" social group fulfills the support services lacking in the Maldives. Finally, I briefly outline how the domestic workers" families play an essential role in regulating their actions in the Maldives.

The social networks of the domestic worker become an essential source of social capital. She could use the social networks to gain opportunities for migration, to negotiate better working conditions, and to gain emotional support. Networks also becomes a source for building social capital through learning skills that have value such as the

Maldivian language and acquiring the best recipes for cooking Maldivian dishes, which could ultimately lead to an increased status in the employment relationship.

5.1 A friend can only be a Sri Lankan: The politics of forming friendships

Ruvi had been working in the Maldives for a long time, in three different homes. Some of her previous employers are influential political figures in the Maldives. She acknowledged the close relationship she has with her ex-employers. She still visits her first employer‟s home regularly, and they had helped her find other employers when they were no longer able to employ her. She also described her past employers‟ relationship with her as extremely respectful and courteous. Despite her close relationship with them she strongly rejected the idea of them being considered friends. „Friends (*rattehin*) can only be Sri Lankans,‟ she said firmly. Ruvi said she knows and has frequent contact with people of other nationalities. They even communicate by phone. However, she rejected all nationalities, apart from her own when describing her friends (Interview on July 16, 2010).

Ruvi further described the process of meeting other Sri Lankans on the street. She described such people as „passport friends‟. „I have lots of passport friends. We would always stop by and talk, and ask if they were Sri Lankan,‟ she explained. I inquired more about the meaning of the term „passport friends‟, and learnt that the term is used for the Sri Lankans they meet after they come to the Maldives (Interview on July 16, 2010). Asha further explained that „passport friends‟ are those they do not regularly meet during their stay, but are still considered as friends because they hold the Sri Lankan passport (Interview on July 23, 2010).

The feelings expressed by Ruvi were confirmed by the rest of domestic workers I met. I repeatedly asked why they did not consider people of other nationalities as friends. The main reason that was given was the difficulty in communication due to the language barrier. „How can we communicate well? They don‟t know our language and we don‟t know theirs,‟ explained Viji (Interview on July 18, 2010). This reason was later given by

Kajol as well. However, this reason did not explain the reluctance for Sri Lankans with good command of the Maldivian language, and regular contact with Maldivians did not form friendships. Furthermore, during our Friday afternoons, Asha would once in a while point out women from the crowd of Bangladeshis and Nepalis, and would refer to them as her friends (*ahanna rattehi vane*).

There are two ways of understanding the contradictory information. First, it is important to recognize that in the common use of the Maldivian language, the same words are used to refer to a friend (*rattehseh/rattehin*) and an acquaintance that had not become close enough to be called a friend. Hence, the reference to certain people as friends, and giving them the title of a friend becomes two different acts. Second, limiting the label of friendship to only Sri Lankans becomes a means for building a stronger sense of community within the Sri Lankans. By Ruvi"s statement of friends being only Sri Lankan, she is simultaneously excluding other nationalities from her social group, while creating a sense of larger community of Sri Lankans, that is not limited to the people she is in touch with.

My understanding of why Maldivians were not considered as friends also became clearer as the domestic workers shared some of their views of the Maldivians. While they did not share any specific experience of being mistreated, there was a sense of them being viewed as subordinate to the Maldivians (as explained in the examples below). Scott (1985: 41) explained how symbolic acts, such as abandoning certain forms of address becomes a means of rejecting certain elite values and orders. From this view, it can be proposed that the refusal to consider Maldivians as friends become a symbolic means of placing a barrier to their social space. It can furthermore be seen as a contestation to the dominant power of inclusion and exclusion.

I asked Asha about why her particular group of friends preferred to stay in the Republican Square, as opposed to the Artificial Beach, where the majority of the Sri Lankans socialized. After several diversions, she finally told me that the Sri Lankans

were sometimes harassed by groups of young Maldivian teenage boys that also frequented the area. „Once we were hit with some urine bags,‟ she explained. „After that we did not go there,‟ she said (Interview on July 30, 2010).

A more direct opinion of the Maldivians was shared by one of the younger, and newly arrived domestic workers on my final day of research. I had just shared the fact that I would be leaving the country soon, and that I enjoyed my time with them, and learned a lot through the meetings with the group of domestic workers that I spent the most amount of time with. The domestic worker replied that she was happy I spent my time with them. „You are not like other Maldivian girls. They are arrogant (*foni*). They keep us below them (*dhashukollaafa*, i.e., subordinate),‟ she replied (July 30, 2010). Other domestic workers around me also nodded in affirmation. This made me understand that the group was aware of the feeling of superiority of the Maldivians toward the foreign domestic workers.

Despite the generalized picture given above, I observed different levels and types of relationships that existed between the domestic worker and the people within her household of employment. Similarly, friendships were formed with great care even within the enclave of Sri Lankan domestic workers, and these were influenced by a sense of tradition and culture. The relationships with different members of the household and the Sri Lankan social group are described in detail below.

5.2 Social bonding with the Madam

While the previous chapter highlighted some of the conflicting situations that occurred between the domestic workers and their employers, I observed the building of closer bonds between them, and the formation of mutual respect for each other and their cultures as well. Viji described how her madam requests her to cook kiribath (milk rice, a traditional meal in Sri Lanka) everyday, and introduced the meal to her daughter. Visaka described how her ex-employers traveled all the way to her home town to ask her to come

back. „it is very far, but they still came and asked me to come to Male" with them," she said (July 30, 2010).

The relationship with past and current employers could provide a sense of belonging to and security to the domestic workers. It can also become a means of acquiring new skills and resources that can ultimately increase her value in the eyes of her future employers.

When I asked Asha whether she had any favorites among her past employers, she replied that it was the second home she was employed at. Asha explained that the reason was because she learned how to cook Maldivian food and delicacies through her second employer. „They have parties all the time. So I learned how to cook many things. I wrote them (the recipes) down on a book," she explained. She also said that in the process, she learned many Maldivian words, improving her spoken language (Interview on July 21, 2010).

The culinary skills Asha learned from that household became a valuable asset to her subsequent employers. „I like to cook on my own. I am very fast, and madam always says Asha likes to cook alone (i.e., never needs help)", she said smiling (Interview on July 21, 2010). The skills she gained from her previous employer had resulted in her being of greater value in her current place of employment. This can in turn give her more power to negotiate her position within the household.

The relationships with employers can also help her to find future jobs and other opportunities. At least three women I interviewed were introduced to their current employers by their past employers. In other instances, domestic workers may build relationships with their prospective employers prior to their employment. Friends making social visits to the employers home, relatives of the employers, or neighbors observing and sympathizing with the plight of an exploited domestic worker could form social relationships with the domestic worker, which could result in a future employment relationship. A domestic worker described how a neighbor of her previous employer,

whom she really liked, asked her to become their domestic worker. After completing her contract, she decided to be employed by them.

Although the above scenario paints a picture of total control of the domestic worker to choose her employer, in reality it is not as easy, as the domestic worker legally has no control over changing employers. In the more amicable situations, the domestic worker can discuss her issues with the employers and come to an agreement to change homes. In other situations, the employee may have to use deception (e.g. pretending to be sick, or making up a story of a family member"s death) to convince her employer to send her back to her country. She could then make new contracts with a new employer to return to Male". Of course, this could involve certain risks and complications, such as the employer refusing to cancel her earlier work permit, and reporting her as a runaway to the authorities.

The means of bypassing the normal route of employment can be seen as a strategy of resistance employed by the woman employer and the domestic worker, to regain their power over the employment situation. The lack of control over the employment process was mutual feeling between the woman employer and the domestic worker. Much of the employment process could involve men, from the husband who fills the forms, pays the feels, and ultimately becomes the legal employer of the domestic worker, to the agents, who could be overwhelmingly represented by men, making both the woman employer and the domestic worker blind during the employment process. As seen in the stories of Kajol and Suree, this results in the expectations of both the domestic worker and the madam not being met every time. As one of the woman employers put it, „luck plays a major part in finding the right one" (Interview on July 26, 2010).

The social relationships that are formed between the domestic worker and the employer are skewed by the unequal power, as highlighted in the previous chapters. However, this does not prevent them from forming empathetic, mutually beneficial relationships with each other. The business relationships formed between the domestic

worker and the employer can be alternatively seen as a means of resistance against the limited choice and control given to them (culturally and institutionally) in the employment process of the domestic worker.

5.3 Balancing power: Children and 'dhaththa'

While the employer-employee relationship could be seen as uneven in terms of power, the domestic workers often develop relationships with members of the employers" household that do not have direct power over the domestic worker. These relationships could contribute toward the domestic worker"s social capital, which she can then use for negotiating a better social position within the household.

The foreign workers I met described a unique bond that existed between them and the children of the household. When asked whether Viji will miss the household when she leaves to Sri Lanka, she replied that she will miss D (the four year old girl she looks after). "I will miss her, and she will miss me too. One day D asked me "Viji, please stay with me until I grow up," she said (Interview on July 18, 2010). The feeling was expressed in similar ways by other domestic workers who work as nannies.

"My daughter complains that I talk about the boys (in her employer"s home) all the time during my holidays. But it happens, doesn"t it (*dho*)? I have been looking after the boys since they were nine months. I will love them like my own kids, won"t I?" she explained (Interview on July 23, 2010).

In contrast to the employers, the children were described as more willing to learn the Singhalese language, and experience Sri Lankan food. "D always asks me, "Viji, how do you say this in Singhala?" And then she will keep saying that," Viji said with a smile (Interview on July 18, 2010).

The domestic workers could also view their role of the caregiver as a reason for better treatment, or at the least, more respect from the parents. Kajol explained her

important role in her ex-employer‟s household by saying, „she wanted me to care for her boy. If she want me to be good to her child, she should be good to me. Otherwise how can she know I will be good to him? But I loved him, so I was good to him‟ (Interview on July 23, 2010).

A Maldivian mother who employs a domestic worker also gave high value of a domestic worker who loves children. „The maid I had earlier was really good with my kids. I guess you can tell the quality of the maid by how much your kid likes or loves them‟, she said (Interview on August 25, 2010).

With children, the domestic workers get to experience relationships that do not fall into the power dynamics present in their employer relationships. Their stories show that children are more willing to learn the Sri Lankan language and culture, thus recognizing the cultural capital of the domestic worker that is lost to the Maldivian employers. Furthermore, their relationships with the children, and the emotional ties developed through the relationships can also be seen as a means of building social capital, since the relationships could lead to them being re-employed after the contract. The domestic worker‟s relationship with the children can be a valuable means of contesting and negotiating power within the household.

Apart from the children, domestic workers could also develop relationships with other members of the household that are less defined by power. The relationship with the mothers, mother-in-laws and other, usually older female, relatives could consist of less direct power and dominance compared to their relationships with the employers. Often these figures are referred to as „dhaththa‟ (sister), denoting a more familial relationship with them. For example, when I asked Asha whether she kept her own passport, I was told that it was with dhaththa (the employer‟s mother) for safekeeping. On one occasion, when I arrived at Asha‟s place a bit earlier than planned, I noticed that the employer‟s mother refused to eat lunch with her and her husband. A while later, I saw her having lunch with Asha. This observation made a great impact on how the relationships within

the household could create a complex web of power relations. Because of the seniority of dhaththa (being the mother or an older relative of the employer), she could have a certain degree of authority over the employers. On the other hand, if the employers work out of home, the dhaththa and domestic worker could become linked through their shared roles of looking after the children and household tasks. Not being directly linked to the employment relationship could also mean that dhaththa can become a relatively neutral third party in situations of conflict between the employer and the employee.

One of the stories that lead to my interest in my research topic is also worth noting here. The story, related by one of my family members, was about a domestic worker who had to look after a toddler from early morning until midnight. Apart from the working couple, her employer's mother also lived in the house. The domestic worker shared her difficult work hours with the employer's mother (whom she referred to as dhaththa). At first the mother tried to have a discussion with her son and daughter-in-law about limiting the domestic worker's work hours. However, when her children failed to resolve the issue, she finally helped the domestic worker to look for another home to employ her.

The role of the dhaththa, and other members of the household becomes a valuable source of power for the domestic worker, as they can give voice to her grievances. These members are often removed from the employment process. Hence, with the limited direct power over the domestic worker, building relationships with these individuals can become easier for the domestic worker. However, dhaththa could have a higher status in the household in relation to the employers. This complex power structure could be used by the domestic worker to gain indirect power from her relationship with dhaththa. Finally, the dhaththa and the children can offer a familial environment for the domestic worker, who had left their family members in their country.

5.4 The 'Adoption' of Sisters: Building friendships with other domestic workers

In the absence of formal support systems for domestic workers the longer employed domestic workers play the role of the extremely crucial support system for the new arrivals. They help the new arrivals in learning the language, the skills and etiquette required by the employers. In this regard, the long term employees assist new employees to form a level of conformity among the domestic workers.

Asha has over fourteen years of experience of being a domestic worker in the Maldives, and a year or more of experience in the Gulf. During the years in the Maldives she had formed many social networks with Maldivians and Sri Lankans alike, and now acts as an informal „agent" to her Maldivian acquaintances.

My first meeting with Asha on a Wednesday afternoon was interrupted by a series of phone calls. Asha explained that she was helping a Maldivian family to find a domestic worker. Asha was playing the role of the liaison between the Maldivian family and their soon-to-be domestic worker. She explained that the potential domestic worker had traveled to the airport, to be told that the employers would have to fill out a form in the Sri Lankan consulate in the Maldives, to be allowed to travel. She said the Maldivian family had completed this form now, and everything was set for the domestic worker to travel. During our interview she got a final call from the potential domestic worker, to whom she reassured that everything will be arranged for her to catch the flight the following day.

A few days later I finally met the new girl, Laxmi, on her first Friday afternoon. „She called me to ask how to make roshi ", Asha said. „I explained to her, but it takes time to learn," she explained. After that, Asha started talking to a confused looking Laxmi about the Maldivian language. I did not understand Singhalese, but I understood that she was translating common words in Maldivian and Singhalese language. She explained, for example, that lonu (salt) was also lonu in Maldivian. This appeared to be done to give

some reassurance to Laxmi. Laxmi stopped Asha to ask for translations of other words, to which she complied (July 23, 2010).

By bringing Laxmi to Male‟, Asha had taken the role of a big sister to her. She has a sense of responsibility toward Laxmi. At the same time, she has a sense of responsibility toward the Maldivian family to ensure Laxmi fit to their requirements. Throughout my interactions with them, I noticed a continuous dialogue between Asha and Laxmi, where Asha explained and instructed Laxmi on Maldivian language and food. I would hear Laxmi sharing other information about the household and what different members were doing. The role of the protective big sister was also evident by her relationship to Kajol, another domestic worker she found for a Maldivian family.

Asha‟s network of friends seemed to consist of the big sister „protectors‟ and the more vulnerable protected. Asha played the role of a big sister to Laxmi and Kajol.

„I helped the Madam in that house (gesturing to another part of the house, where relatives of her employer lived) to find a domestic worker. But the house has a sick (mentally impaired) boy. It was hard work and she (the domestic worker) was not happy there. So when I was asked by a nice family for a domestic worker I helped her transfer to their place.‟ (Interview on July 21, 2010). However, I learned later that the „transfer‟ of Kajol did not happen in the amicable fashion described by Asha, but involved some level of deception in the process.

Asha‟s account of how she helped Kajol find alternative employers and Kajol‟s own explanations of the story (related in the previous chapter) gave me insight to the significant role played by the social groups to escape from exploitative or even seek better alternatives. It was interesting how Asha helped Kajol to leave the employers with whom she had a close enough social connection to find a domestic worker. As highlighted in the previous chapter, although the domestic workers were legally offered very little options for resigning from their employment, the option to flee is taken as a way of protesting against poor working conditions.

In extremely exploitative situations, the domestic worker‟s adopted family could even provide financial assistance. Ruvi explained how she bought a domestic worker her flight ticket to return to Sri Lanka, when she was unable to tolerate the long hours her employers required her to work (Interview on July 16, 2010).

The ‚passport friends‟ that they meet in their daily lives could also become a source of seeking better employment opportunities. Suree came to the Maldives to work in a household that had a small 9 month baby. She was not told that her job would be to take care of the baby. Nipuni, a live-in nanny met Suree in the lift of the building where both their employers lived on rented apartments. When she heard Suree‟s despair over her sleepless nights, sometimes going well beyond three am at night, she told her own employer about it. Her employer offered Suree the job of a cook, for a lesser salary. Suree did not mind the less pay, and accepted the job.

The role of long-term domestic workers to ensure better living standards for the incoming domestic workers was also evident. The longer serving domestic workers become the incoming domestic workers‟ means of assessing their employers before making the move to work in the Maldives.

I met Visaka on my last Friday with the group. She was a part-time domestic worker, who worked in a total of four households. She told me she just went to a household that wanted to employ a domestic worker. She went to inspect the room the domestic worker will be staying in, and found it extremely small and inadequate. ‚You can barely keep a bed in it. She won‟t be able to stand up properly. I told them no, I can‟t bring a maid to live like that,‟ she told me and the rest of the group (July 30, 2010).

Within their social groups, I observed the domestic workers filling out the gaps resulting from the lack of support services in the Maldives. Asha and the other senior domestic workers ensured the incoming domestic workers fit in and are accepted by the employers by becoming their guides for learning the language and culture of the Maldives. They also support the domestic workers to escape poor and exploitative work

conditions, and seek alternative employers. Finally, the long term domestic workers could take the initiative to ensure good working conditions before employees arrive in the country.

5.5 Maintaining relationships from afar

Although the relationships built in the Maldives fulfill many practical and emotional needs, most of the domestic workers I interviewed had strong ties with their families, and actively sought ways to maintain their connections to Sri Lanka. Mobile phones were the means used to maintain their connection.

The phone calls are not only used to keep up to date with their loved ones, or get emotional support, but also to seek guidance on becoming good daughters, mothers and sisters. I met a domestic worker who had stopped her Friday outings, despite her employer‟s consent for her to do so. When I asked her why she chose to stay at home on her Friday afternoons, she replied that her brother told her that her friends (with whom she used to go out with) were not really good people, and instructed her not to go out. Despite her brother being too far away to know what she did on Friday afternoons, she abided by her brother‟s advice, which confirms, to her, that she is a good sister.

In Sri Lanka, motherhood is the most valued role of a woman (Brochmann, 1993). This put mothers who make the difficult choice of migrating in a contradictory position. Nipuni decided to work abroad when her husband passed away. Her job as a nanny provided funds for her daughter‟s studies. She explained how her good behavior in the Maldives became a part of being a good mother to her daughter.

„In Sri Lanka a girl‟s marriage is very difficult. They will look at everything about the girl, and even her mother. The boy‟s family will somehow find out how I lived in Male‟. So I have to behave well if my daughter is to get married to a good person,‟ she said. „But through my friend I met Asha. They invited me to go out one Friday, and I

have continued to do so with Asha. She is a good person," she explained (Interview on July 30, 2010).

The domestic workers" stories show that their behaviors and decisions were not only linked to their current lives in the Maldives, but also to their lives in Sri Lanka. Though physically removed from their families, they were dreaming of the day when they could come home.

In conclusion, social networks can be a means of inclusion and exclusion on a representational level, for instance using „friends" for only Sri Lankans. Furthermore, relationships with different members of the household where she is employed can be a means of gaining resources to resist the dominance of the employer. Alternately, the domestic worker could also develop mutually benefiting relationships with her employers to ensure better control of both parties in the employment process. The domestic workers" social networks become an informal, alternative support system that provides social, emotional and even economic support to them. Finally, the domestic workers attribute a strong link between the consequences of her actions in the Maldives to her family in Sri Lanka. Thus the links with their families back home plays a significant role regulating their actions and behaviors in their employment.

In the next chapter I look at how the domestic workers use and negotiate physical and social space in Male". In the chapter I explore how these negotiations become a means of resisting dominance and dominant discourses, as well as a resource for gaining security by building collective identities.

CHAPTER VI

NEGOTIATING SPACE

As the second most congested city in the region (ADB & IOM, 2009), physical space is a scarce commodity in Male‟, the capital of the Maldives. With the average house hold accommodating three or more people in a room (HRCM, 2008), claiming of space is a political issue in the Maldives. Hence, it did not surprise me that the domestic workers also brought up the issue of limited physical space whenever I asked them what they disliked about the country. Comparison of the size and open spaces in the Maldives and Sri Lanka was one of the first topics of discussion whenever I met a domestic worker.

The discussions revolving around the lack of space in the Maldives ironically happened in the few remaining open public spaces in Male‟. I sat with Asha and her friends in the large, open area named *Jumhooree Maidhaan* (Republican Square), arguably one of the most beautiful and spacious areas in the crowded city. At three in the afternoon, the space was slowly being occupied by foreign men and women. About thirty minutes later, the space was not even half full. „Just wait and see. At five o‟clock, the place will be full,‟ observed Asha. Indeed, by late afternoon, the large space was packed with a mix of foreign laborers, domestic workers and low-level staff working in private companies (July 30, 2010). Observation and explanations offered by the domestic workers also gave me insight to the carefully followed rules within the public spaces that contributed to the formation of identities based on nationalities, while also providing a protective façade of collective identity of the social class imposed on them by the dominant group.

This chapter will look into the meaning of space to the Sri Lankan domestic worker, an alternative view to the migrant workers‟ agency in occupying public spaces, and the roles of the embassy and the physical construction of their homes in Sri Lanka as representations of the protection, comfort and pride.

6.1 The meanings of space- 'I've travelled all the way to Jaffna[2]'

When I asked Kajol about her impressions of the Maldives she replied, „Male" is very small, *dho*. But I still like it," (Interview on July 23, 2010). Nipuni also brought up the lack of space in our conversation, emphasizing on the limited space to explore. „In Lanka I travel all the time. I"ve travelled all the way to Jaffna," she said (July 23, 2010). She waited for a while, as if expecting a reaction to this piece of information. As I learned more from my interactions, I came to realize that space had multiple meanings for the Sri Lankan domestic worker.

Space as a statement of freedom and liberation

Restriction of physical and social movement is one of the significant cultural limitations of the Sri Lankan woman (Brochmann, 1993:88). The restriction of physical movement, in particular, had traditionally limited women from participating in a number of production activities (Brochmann, 1993:89). Furthermore, the non-working woman confined to only household duties had become the culturally approved role and a status symbol for the affluent (Brochmann, 1993:91). Despite this ideal picture, economic needs had placed demands on non-affluent women to labor in the fields along with the men (Brochmann, 1993:90). Furthermore, women had participated in the informal (urban mills, domestic work, etc.) and formal workforce since British colonialism, although they were situated mainly at the lower level of the pyramid (Brochmann, 1993:92). Yet, the bottom line remained that the ideal place for the woman was home.

Because of the social restrictions placed upon the women"s physical mobility, the decision to travel abroad for work can be an act of liberation and empowerment. Nipuni"s statement about her travels, for example, was a statement of breaking away from the traditional confines of her culture. For others, the decision to work abroad can be a way of taking control of their lives. For example, one of the domestic workers decided to

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[2] Jaffna was a part of Sri Lanka that was difficult to access due to war for many years. However, Nipuni's journey took place after the war, when people were allowed to travel there.

work abroad when her husband became addicted to drugs and stopped contributing toward their household income. Another woman said that she chose to migrate to provide better education opportunities for her daughter when her husband passed away.

The breaking away from the cultural restrictions, in a way, is contradicted by the conditions of the live-in domestic worker in the host country. The live-in domestic worker lives in a paradoxical situation where her temporary „home‟ is also her place of work (Yeoh & Huang, 1998: 585). As in any work situation, she undergoes supervision, which could potentially provide very little room for privacy within the household (Yeoh & Huang, 1998: 585). Her awareness of being scrutinized could lead her to alter her behavior to show only what is deemed appropriate within the household. Hence, public spaces that the domestic workers occupy on their Friday afternoons can become the spaces where their true identities are revealed. In other words, the public spaces give them the opportunity to be free.

Claiming of public spaces by domestic workers had been shown in other studies, to be a means of contesting dominant discourse and practices (e.g. Yeoh & Huang, 1998). Domestic workers in the Maldives choose to spend the short, three to five hour break on Fridays to meet their friends in mainly three public spaces, namely, the Republican Square, the Sultan Park and the Artificial Beach.

During my research I came to realize that the spaces to socialize were carefully chosen, and were largely based on nationality. „This park (Republican Square) is Nepal and Bangladesh. Lanka people stay in Artificial Beach. Indian people go to Sultan Park,‟ Asha explained (July 23, 2010). The sense of identity related to their nationalities was so significant that the physical spaces for each nationality within the Republican Square were also divided, as if by an invisible line. The spaces for each nationality was furthermore divided into smaller groups of five to 10, sitting on the grass, the benches and the low wall surrounding the park in small circles. The Sultan Park, too, was filled by Indian workers, sitting within their individual groups. The act of sitting with their fellow nationals became a means of reaffirming their identities, and their sense of solidarity.

Despite being Sri Lankan, Asha‟s group preferred the Republican Square to the Artificial Beach, because they encountered a bad experience in the latter area (as mentioned in Chapter V), when some Maldivian youth threw bags filled with urine at the Sri Lankan workers. When Asha took me to meet her friends who socialized at the Artificial Beach, I observed that there were only about 25 to 30 Sri Lankans in the large area. Maldivian youth swam in the sea, and Maldivian parents sat or stood watching their toddlers run around the paved „beach‟. Sri Lankans sat in a row, on a long low wall near the sea. There were a scattering of other Sri Lankans on circular benches on the beach, with their backs to each other. Unlike the Republican Square and the Sultan Park, where the space was dominated by the foreign workers, in the Artificial Beach, the foreigners were still a minority. In the Artificial Beach, they still stood out from the crowd. Hence, I came to understand that while the separation of nationalities was an essential part of reaffirming their identity, Asha and her friends also gained a sense of security by blending into the larger, dominant population of foreigners in the Republican Square. While maintaining the social and physical spaces bound by the unspoken rule of national segregation, the smaller nationalities gained their protection and security from the larger groups by posing as a single social group of migrant workers.

Figure 6.1 Representations of nationalities in Republican Square on a Friday afternoon.
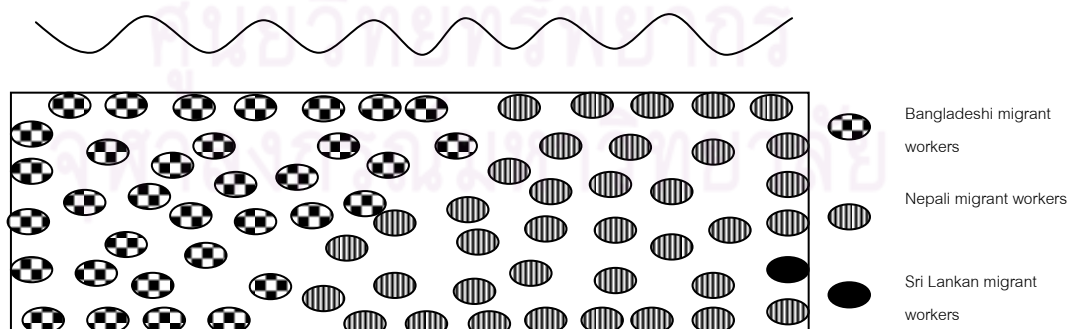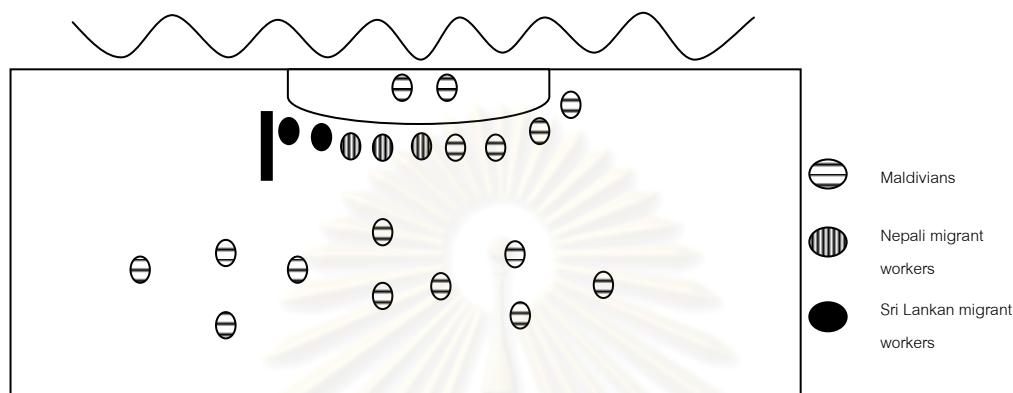
Figure 6.2 Representations of nationalities in the Artificial Beach on a Friday afternoon

Choosing the life of a live-out domestic worker can be another way of liberating oneself away from the confines of the private household. When I questioned Visaka why she chose to work part-time, she replied that it was easier. „It‟s easier, isn‟t it? (*faseyha ennu?*). Work is over at six. You can do anything you want after that. Living in, we finish work at 10 or 11,‟ she said. She furthermore added that, when living in, they had to be on call anytime, and had to take many different roles. The part-time work allowed them to separate work hours from their private lives, and to choose the types of domestic duties they perform (Interview on July 30, 2010).

It is also important to recognize the existing restraints in part-time work. For example, while the domestic workers can have more control over their employers, they are still bonded to their legal employers who have the power to cancel their work permits and deport them (the Expatriate Employment Regulation (2009) specifies that the foreign workers can take extra work only with the permission of their employers). Hence, the comparative freedom of part-time work is gained through sensitive negotiations of mutual benefits. A part-time worker explained the convenience for her employers by simply saying, „they did not have a room for me. So it is easy for them too‟ (July 23, 2010). Because the arrangement is negotiated, there is no consistency in the employer/

part-time worker relationship. For example, one worker said that her accommodation was paid by her primary employer on top of the wages for her work, another was provided a room for her services (no wages were given), and a third paid all her expenses herself, while contributing some work on Fridays as a token of appreciation.

Public space as a test of personal restraint

The liberation of reclaiming public space can also be seen in the alternative light of going against culture and tradition. In one of her conversations, Asha mentioned that she would never work as a part-time worker. When I asked her why, she said that it is not good for a woman to walk alone on the road (Interview on July 21, 2010). By not being good, she meant that it was not socially or culturally acceptable in her home country. Hence, while acknowledging that part-time work had many benefits, she restrained herself from making that choice, in order to follow cultural and social norms.

Nipuni explained the importance of maintaining her reputation in the Maldives to ensure her daughter‟s future marriage to a good family. She emphasized that venturing out into the public could have social consequences that goes beyond their lives in the Maldives (July 23, 2010).

The domestic workers are essentially becoming physically and socially removed from their cultural norms and practices. They struggle to draw clear boundaries to comprehend the cultural appropriateness of certain behaviors and practices. Away from their supportive (or restrictive) networks, the domestic workers take a more active, and individualistic role in the decision making, and the resulting behavior may not be seen as uniform across the social groups. For example, Nipuni refrained from going out during her free time, until she met Asha, whom she believed to be a good, reputable person. Asha, who can be described as an active and resourceful person with a large social network stops short of working part time, as this would necessitate walking alone in the road frequently.

The agency shown by the domestic workers in their decision of the culturally appropriate behaviors could also be linked to their need to hold on to their own cultural values while in the Maldives. The act of preserving their internal values could in turn provide them a deeper sense of identity that could be used to guide their behavior in the Maldives.

Space as a means of resistance

The taking over of public spaces becomes an extremely meaningful political message in the over-crowded city of Male". The occupancy of the public spaces by large numbers of migrant workers can create „counter-spaces" that contest the dominant group"s perceptions of public spaces (Yeoh & Huang, 1998:595). For example, the view of a large number of carefree women spending hours in a public space could contest the idealistic notion of women being hidden from the public view. Even more so, the occupancy of the public spaces could contest the dominant group"s perception of migrant workers themselves.

The large crowd of migrant workers filling out the largest free spaces of the country can challenge the Maldivians" view of the migrant population being a minority. The sight compels the Maldivians to acknowledge the large community, and the possible threat of dissent. As long as the division between the migrant workers is not realized by the Maldivians, the group can appear an imposing vision. An opinion piece by a Maldivian in an online newspaper echoed this fear.

> „…and when it all just gets to be too much, we escape to where we can. The Artificial Beach, *Jumhooree Maidhan* (italics added), anywhere to get some space. Yet as I walk along stone pavement to those few clearings we have, I turn my head and look around and I do not see my countrymen. I do not see my people taking respite. As many pigeons as I see in my Republican Square, can I see foreigners crowding my spaces as well. In every direction that I turn, I am alienated in a space that is mine" (Waheed, 2010).

The occupancy of public spaces is one of the few situations where migrant workers regularly display their agency to the public. This take-over can be seen as a means of peaceful protest, in the culturally and politically restricted environment they live in.

Another way space is utilized for resistance is by shifting to part-time work. Working as a part-time domestic worker, despite the stigma attached to venturing into the public sphere can be seen as a strategy of resistance, and a means to reclaiming of social and physical space lacking in their experiences of full-time domestic workers. When Asha expressed her negative feelings toward part-time work, I asked her why many Sri Lankan domestic workers chose to work that way. She replied that it is more comfortable (*araamu*, or luxurious) (Interview on July 23, 2010). My visit to a room rented by the part-time workers was, to my eyes, anything but luxurious. The small room had a double-decker double bed sized iron structure. I was told that three women slept on each bed. On one end of the room, a plywood partition separated a small kitchen with a stove and kitchen items. The remaining space had about five plastic chairs. I was also surprised to learn that the room costs about $500 a month, not including water and electricity (July 23, 2010).

Earning more money can be possible by working part-time, but the chance of losing money is also present. As far as economic benefits are concerned, part-time work can be a risk. As Visaka explained, „I work in three houses and my employer"s on Fridays. So I earn $300. I share a two person room for 2000 (approx. $180, i.e. $90 each). We pay water and electricity. I pay for my visa too" (Interview on July 30, 2010). While live-in workers" basic needs, from emergency and medical costs to her toiletries and even her phone cards, are provided by the employers, live out workers often are left to fend for themselves for all these needs.

What Asha meant by luxurious (*araamu*) was the knowledge and satisfaction of the space being owned (temporarily) by them. The domestic workers can be themselves in their homes. They choose the people they let into their space, and they can make their

own set of rules to govern their lives within it. In other words, the room becomes a place they can control, as opposed to their working lives, where they obey the rules of their employers.

Having their own space also diminished the domestic workers" need for socializing in public spaces. Part-time workers expressed that they would much rather rest in their rooms than go out on Friday afternoons. Social visits by other domestic workers to their homes also could be a reason for their lessened interest for their Friday outings.

6.2 Pushed to the periphery? An alternative view

When I was walking around Male" with the domestic workers, I began to notice that the roads that were chosen by them were nearly empty, despite the time being the afternoon of the Maldivian public holiday. The roads that we walked bordered the city, and were mainly occupied by offices, schools, shops and other buildings with public access. Scatterings of homes were also around us, but the areas can be argued to be the more non-residential areas in the small two-square kilometer city. That was when I realized that even the areas occupied by the migrant workers were at the periphery of the city, fairly removed from the activities of the residential life.

Figure 6.3 Public spaces occupied by migrant workers, and routes taken on my field visit by domestic workers on Friday afternoons.
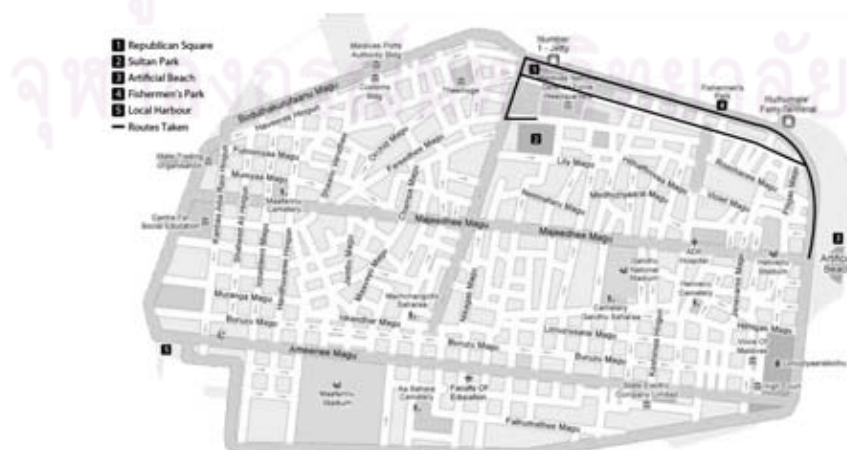
The areas where migrant workers chose to stay in made an even clearer divide of the „us and the „other", where one is allowed in or expected to remain out (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). The division was a convenient strategy for Maldivians to allow migrant workers to socialize during their free time, while not transgressing their own spaces. This could result in the Maldivians being more „benevolent" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998) of their own loss of space for the short span of time on Fridays.

The „power of benevolence" (Yoeh and Huang, 1998:94), however, allows the power holder to remove the privilege any time they wish. The Sri Lankan domestic workers explained how they used to socialize in the Republican Square, until the Maldivians started to stage some protests in the area. „The police told us it was not allowed to sit here. So we started to go to the Artificial Beach", she explained (Interview on July 30, 2010). Hence, even though the migrant workers can use the spaces strategically to create their identity and to show resistance, they remain in these public spaces with a degree of consent of the dominant group. The privilege of occupying these spaces can be removed by the dominant group. Furthermore, while the sense of identity and solidarity has their advantages, the spaces confirm the divide between „us" and the „other". The delegation of the migrant workers physically to the city periphery becomes a symbol of their marginalization.

6.3 The Embassy- A source of symbolic capital

All the migrant workers I interacted with knew the existence of the Sri Lankan High Commission. Some reported that they visited the embassy (as the High Commission is referred to) on special religious and cultural occasions, such as the Vesak Day. One woman said that she went there monthly for a special religious event held every Poya Day (every full moon, which is a public holiday in Sri Lanka). Some, like Asha said that they had never been to the embassy because they „never had any problem" (Interview on July 21, 2010).

Ruvi, who had attempted to seek help from the High Commission when her friends faced issues with the employers, said that the High Commission was able to assist on the rare cases of severe abuse and exploitation. On the more regular occurrences of being subject to work overtime, the embassy was helpless (Interview on July 16, 2010).

Despite this, the embassy is used as symbolic capital to contest power by domestic workers.

One of the domestic workers shared how she got back her passport from her employers. „I told madam to give my passport. She said she will not give it. I told her she can't keep my passport, it is mine. So I told her I will report her to the embassy. Then she gave me my passport." I asked her whether she called the embassy. She replied that she did not have to, because they gave back her passport (Interview on July 23, 2010).

The knowledge of the existence of the embassy and its role was used to gain control in situations where the domestic workers could potentially be exploited.

6.4 Constructing homes- 'My house was built because of Male''

The domestic workers" perception and reality of „home" and „privacy" being a contradiction during their work in the Maldives, their actual physical home in their country becomes extremely important. For many domestic workers, the construction of their home is the greatest achievement they gained during their work in the Maldives. Returning to a beautiful home was a vision that was expressed during the interviews. Furthermore, they expressed their belief that the Maldives contributed to the achievement of building their homes. „My house was built because of Male"" was a sentiment expressed by two domestic workers on two separate occasions. Another expressed her desire to go back to Sri Lanka to start building her home. „I want to be there when it is built," she said.

The sense of achievement they experience by constructing their homes is evident in their descriptions. There were other variances. One was saving money for her marriage. Another was investing for her daughter's education, and announced her

daughter‟s good grades in the recent exams. It was seen that their visual imageries of what they built out of their earnings gave them strength to move forward.

To summarize, the migrant workers‟ occupancy of the few available public spaces on their free time every Friday fulfilled their need for building solidarity and resistance. The act of mixed nationalities occupying large spaces, while dividing the spaces according to nationalities plays the dual role of building a sense of identity and belongingness, while getting a sense of protection from the larger group. The occupation of the spaces could also be seen as a sign of resistance to the dominant belief of them being a minority, by the strength in their numbers. The occupation can be viewed as a means of silent protest to their insignificance in the daily lives of the Maldivians. However, the spaces they occupy can also be seen as the periphery of the city, away from the lives of the Maldivian community. The spaces the migrant workers occupy can be seen as a means of forming a greater divide between the dominant and the „other‟.

The recent trend of working as live-out part time workers can also be a means of liberating themselves of the restrictions they face within the employers‟ home environments. The freedom to choose the times, types of work, and even the employers to work for is viewed to be worth the financial risk and deviations from the culture. The choice of living out provides them a sense of control over the employment situation that was lacking in the live-in arrangement.

The knowledge of the embassy alone gives the domestic workers power to resist domination. Furthermore, the imagery of their achievements helps them to keep moving forward. These spaces, while not being a part of their everyday lives, give them strength through the knowledge of their existence.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The foreign domestic workers in the Maldives face multiple challenges in their work and social lives in the Maldives. These challenges are manifested through government policies, stigmatization by the community and arbitrary rules and surveillance within the household. These factors can lead to the domestic worker to be alienated from the Maldivian household as well as the larger community. However, the research findings indicate that different strategies are used to resist their alienation in the society and the household through building alternative discourses on their identities, forming social networks within their social groups and temporary households, and contesting dominant discourses of physical space.

7.1 Discussion

Those who argue against the constructivist approach claim that despite the current trend toward the constructivist approach to culture and ethnicity, group members often experience or believe their ethnicities to be primordial (Horowitz, 2004). Furthermore, they argue that the construction and reconstruction of ethnic identities could be a slow process that happens over a long period of time (Horowitz, 2004). However, my research findings show that the constructions of ethnic „others‟ do happen in the Maldives, through the dominant discourse. The „bangaalhi‟ is a constructed ethnic identity that simultaneously homogenizes the migrant workers and excludes them from the dominant society. Similarly, the dominant group constructs the identities of the different nationalities within the identity, by defining the „nature‟ of the nationalities through their own discourse. However, the feelings of the migrant workers toward their own ethnic groups tended to reflect a more primordial view, as each nationality had their own social groups that were relatively closed to other nationalities. Furthermore, my observations of Sri Lankan Singhalese women showed that the groups were further divided by ethnicity and language, with those with similar ethnic and linguistic origin forming separate

niches. However, how the process of forming ethnic niches occurs in other national groups needs to be studied in detail before a conclusion is drawn.

Labeling for „differentiation" and „exclusion" is also a means of exerting disciplinary control of a minority group, by selecting the attributes that define boundaries between normal and abnormal (Foucault, 1984:195). Hence, the process of labeling becomes a means of creating a homogenous structure that defines physical and social characteristics, and classifies them to their position in the social hierarchy. The domestic workers" actions such as fluency in the language, advising and instructing their madams on childrearing and selecting employers through social networking challenges the dominant views of the migrant worker being different from the Maldivian community, being less knowledgeable than their employers and being helpless over their situation in the country. The domestic worker furthermore resists dominant discourses of being excluded by being active agents of deliberate exclusions, by forming friendships with only Sri Lankans, constructing identities by physical appearance and complete occupation of certain public spaces.

Gamburd (2000), in her study of Sri Lankan domestic workers travelling to the Gulf States was surprised to learn that, unlike the media"s presentation of the workers as being in a state of victimhood, the workers themselves presented themselves as active, conscious agents in control of their lives. The accounts of the participants I interviewed supported this view. Their stories were related in a way that they were the main protagonists in the stories. For example, one of the domestic workers started her story this way, „(my friend"s) bag was snatched one day. But she got it back" (Interview on July 30, 2010). When I asked her how, she replied that the woman ran after the Maldivian teenage boy, and alerted everyone on the streets by shouting. Finally, other people on the streets were able to stop the boy, and returned back the bag. „Then she told the boy, „next time just ask me for money and I will give you"," she told me, and laughed.

I found the story represented the image the Sri Lankan domestic workers wanted to portray to the Maldivian community, that they were not the helpless victims they are

portrayed to be. Victimhood itself labels a person as being inferior and unable to control her destiny. Hence, the label could itself be a hindrance to her personal and social development. Hence, the desire to break away from the label could lead her to emphasize events where she was in control.

Scott (1985) defined resistance as „any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended to either mitigate or deny claims…made on that class by superordinate classes… or to advance its own claims… *vis-a-vis* those superordinate classes" (1985:290). The strategies employed by Sri Lankan domestic workers I interviewed indicate their resistance to the dominant views and practices. Dominant views that differentiate and subordinate the Sri Lankan domestic workers are contested through their presence (such as their distinct dress and their physical occupation of the public spaces), their skills (such as acquiring language and household skills) and through their alternative viewpoints that emphasizes their strengths in relation to the Maldivian women. Resistance to dominance was also seen, through their specific methods of creating stronger networks within their own social circles as well as within the household and opting to flee from negative employment situations. However, these forms of resistances also require the domestic workers to „inhabit norms" (Mahmood, 2005: 15). I identified the distinct way the domestic workers employed their specific gender roles to justify and elevate their position in the households. These contestations not only recreate their own identities, but also those of the women employers.

In the absence of laws and regulations that protect their rights, domestic workers seek alternative means of protection, through their social networks. To avoid being exploited through multiple agents, domestic workers in the Maldives are used as „agents" when seeking employment in the Maldives. To ensure good living conditions, the same social networks are used to inspect the homes before making the journey to the country. Networking with the locals and Sri Lankans also become a source of finding better employers, or more suitable jobs in situations of exploitation or mismatch.

Domestic workers also try to gain better control of their work and social lives through negotiations with their employers, such as working for multiple employers on a part-time basis. In the process they are challenging their own cultural restrictions of physical mobility. Domestic workers who choose this method of employment report having more control of their work hours and tasks. While some report this method generating more income, others said that due to the additional living expenses, part-timing is not particularly advantageous financially. Hence, it was more of a way of gaining control of their employment situation and personal space.

The research outlines some of the ways the Sri Lankan domestic workers resist their social and physical constraints in the Maldives. However it is essential to refrain from „romanticizing" the role of resistance by assuming that they have the power to transform the constraints faced by domestic workers. Instead, these actions could be used to analyze the ways structures of dominance and absence of structures that enables affect domestic workers in different ways.

7.2 Future Research

My research focused on a small group of migrant domestic workers belonging to a specific ethnic and national group. Hence, the research findings cannot be generalized to the larger migrant domestic worker community. This research can be expanded to compare and draw parallels between different nationalities and ethnic groups to gain a deeper understanding of the different ways migrant workers are alienated from the Maldivian culture, and their responses. Detailed research on the effects of space and time on migrant worker's behaviors and strategies was not covered in this research, and could be useful for understanding the ways structures of dominance influence the agency of migrant workers.

In my research I did not observe any social interactions happening between the domestic workers and Sri Lankans belonging to other skills levels, despite the Maldives employing many Sri Lankan teachers, accountants and other professionals. Even the men

I met through the domestic workers were domestic drivers, cooks and office assistants (the lowest paid staff) in private offices. Hence, to further explore if the ethnic niches are further divided by class boundaries need to be explored.

The current lack of quantitative and qualitative data available on the migrant workers makes objective analysis of any issue relating to the group and its impact on the Maldives extremely difficult and impractical, if not impossible. This has lead to broad assumptions being made by focusing on subjective means such as specific events and situations that are made visible through the media and institutions. Hence, at this point, any study that explains the many facets of the migrant workers" lives, or its influences would be valuable for the country. However, my analysis identified the current public discourses on migrant workers that portray them either as a threat or a vulnerable group, through homogenizing and stigmatizing, as a primary factor that inhibits them to live their lives as dignified adults able in control of their destinies. Hence, research that objectively questions these assumptions, such as the social and economic impact of the migrant workers, and gives a stronger understanding of the process of migration (e.g. how decisions to migrate are made, how the money is spent, etc.) could counter some of these assumptions to create a more holistic understanding of the migrant workers as thinking individuals and conscious decision makers.

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BIOGRAPHY

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