

**Cultural Construction of the 'Sinhala Woman'  
and Women's Lives  
in Post-Independence Sri Lanka**

Janaki Jayawardena

Ph.D.  
University Of York  
Centre for Women's Studies  
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You are doing this (research) because there is a reason for it. Otherwise you could have stayed at home surrounded by your family. But you left them and are doing this work because it will do good to someone. I hope I may have a chance to read the book (thesis) you write.

Podi (Age 54, Badulla)

## Abstract

This thesis examines the lives of Sinhala women in postcolonial Sri Lanka, particularly the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' as an aspect of the 'invented tradition' during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to historicise gender and culture I examine the pre-colonial and colonial period and also focus my attention on a set of informal restrictions working to constrain women's equal participation in economic, social and political activities, which the Sinhala community identifies as a part and parcel of the 'culture and tradition'. This thesis uses life histories of sixty-four women and life cycle and life course approaches to analyse the data. The first chapter sets the context of the study. The second chapter discusses childhood in order to examine how girls come to understand that they are different from boys. The third chapter discusses an important milestone in Sinhala women's lives, attaining puberty, where the 'traditions' they learn become meaningful and reinforce gender differences. The fourth chapter discusses how and why the 'tradition' was invented. The fifth chapter explores the impact of the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' has on adult women's education, paid work, political participation and family. The sixth chapter focus attention on ageing women, a subject that has previously received little attention. My study concludes that 'culture and tradition' transcend social, economic and urban/rural boundaries and impede Sinhala women's progress, constrain them by maintaining and reinforcing existing gender differences and prevent them enjoying equal rights and equal respect. However, the life histories also show that women's experiences of subjugation differ from each other according to social, economic and geographical differences. Therefore, the interplay between the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' and the socio economic material conditions which has a profound impact upon women's lives.

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## Chapter One

### The context of the study

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produce this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (de Beauvoir, 1988:295).

I have selected this quotation from a white middle class French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir to start my thesis on Sinhala women because, as my study will demonstrate, what she has said more than half a century ago is still relevant and applicable to the Sri Lankan society in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following her argument in *The Second Sex*, the aim of this thesis is to examine and explore the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' and how its persistence permeates the social discrimination against and subjugation of Sinhala women in the post independence period in Sri Lanka.

As in most developing countries, in Sri Lanka there is an increasing interest in improving women's status and eradicating gender inequalities to achieve an equal and just society. According to Article 12 (2) of the 1978 constitution of Sri Lanka, 'no citizen shall be discriminated against on the ground only of ... sex' (Coomaraswamy, 1990:123). However, despite many social, economic, legal and political changes, women in Sri Lanka are deprived of equal participation in political, economic and social activities. The principles, ideas, rules, norms and decision-making procedures governed by males, have been used to regulate the

position of women in Sri Lanka despite the changes which have occurred in the wider society. Women have been given a fixed identity through this regulation as a species biologically weaker than the male, sexually vulnerable, born to produce children and to take care of domestic affairs and, therefore, in need of the protection and guidance of men.

The apparatuses that work to maintain the identity of Sinhala women are described within the Sinhala community as cultural traditions. It is generally accepted that these traditions were permanent features of oriental cultures and preserve women's honour and respectability and were infused into society from the beginning of the history of Sinhalese people. Recently, a male writer of an article in the newspaper *the Island* criticising the 'cultural invasion' of television says 'apart from being foolishly sentimental, they (drama on television) have infringed upon the barriers of culture and decency as to be an insult to the purity and chastity of womanhood and motherhood, particularly, raised with sanctity in the traditions and customs of the oriental way of life' (Lalprema, 2002). A common argument in the media is that the traditions assigned to Sinhala women provide a 'correct place' in the community and if women behave according to their 'correct place' they are honoured and respected and, therefore, there is no need for them to have equal status with men.

However, my personal experience as a woman of the same ethnic group and my lifelong observation of the community have enabled me to realise that the core of these 'traditions' is maintaining a set of informal constraints that reinforce and

strengthen gender differences within the Sinhala community, generating unequal power relations and subjugating women. When I was a small girl, I was reprimanded for sitting with my legs upon the chair, for climbing trees and whistling. My elders always told me this is not how girls do things or this is not how girls walk, laugh or sit. Once when I protested about my father opening my personal letters he said 'whether right or wrong you have to obey and accept my decisions and actions as the head of the family and if you don't agree, the door is open and you can leave this house.' Both he and I knew that I couldn't make such a decision because of my sexual vulnerability. When I informed my friends, relatives and colleagues that I was going to the United Kingdom to study for a postgraduate degree and decided to go alone, the first thing many of them said was 'Oh what will happen to the children then'. If a woman resists the cultural expectations of female behaviour by expressing her personal desires, then she is regarded as not a 'proper woman'. One of my colleagues once informed me my behaviour was more mannish than a male's behaviour. The answer to the question what does a woman achieve by behaving according to her 'correct place' is a 'good name' (*honda nama*) or good reputation in society. For this a woman has to restrain her personal ambitions and desires and submerge her individuality in the name of family and the community. Thus, it is clear that the Sinhala woman's 'correct place' constrains what she can do, where and on what grounds.

The personal stories of women interviewed for this study strongly indicate that I am not unique. Women talked about their desire to progress and expressed their

happiness about the 'progress' women have made so far. However, their stories show how they are constrained in their aspirations by having had to behave as 'proper Sinhala women'. Hence in my view, today equality for Sri Lankan women is a fundamental need. By saying equality for Sri Lankan women I do not mean only having equal opportunities with men in spheres other than home and sharing household work and responsibilities equally. In Sri Lanka, women respect men but they do not receive the same respect from men. Therefore, in my view, equality for Sri Lankan women means equal opportunities as well as equal respect in every aspect as a fellow human being.

All the same, this study is limited to the women of the major ethnic group, the Sinhalese, because being a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, the three main communities, namely, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, have maintained cultures that are distinct from each other. Therefore, it is difficult to do a study on Sri Lankan women in general because even though they are in a similar situation, their experience may vary from each other under different religious, cultural conditions.

Since the late 1970s, women's issues in Sri Lanka have been subjected to intense research at both academic and non-academic levels. Substantial data has been gathered on the economic, political and social issues that women in Sri Lanka face, and these studies point out that women have an unequal secondary place due to gender discrimination. However, apart from a few studies centring on the colonial era (Risseeuw, 1991; de Alwis, 1999) there have been no in-

depth studies done on how gender is constructed and why gender differences prevail in contemporary Sri Lanka. In my view, it is important to identify the roots of the problem before addressing the consequences because, as feminists have successfully argued, it is not biological sex differences but the social construction of gender that deters women from enjoying equal political, economic and social rights.

This chapter deals with five key issues. The first section will provide an understanding of the conceptual concepts and issues that are surrounding the study of gender and history and why they are important to this study. The second section will give a brief account of historical background and the situation of today. The third section is about existing research on Sri Lankan women and will examine the gaps in that research in order to contextualise my study. The fourth section on methodology will justify life history interviews to collect data and using life cycle and life course approaches to my analysis. I also discuss the research process, including selecting areas for interviews, interviewing, transcribing and translating data and problems of using statistical data. Finally, I will briefly outline the content of subsequent chapters.

### **Gender History and Tradition**

Among the reasons for gender discrimination in Sri Lanka, many women cite traditional, patriarchal and cultural constraints. Nevertheless, the majority of these studies do not examine what these constraints are to the same depth as they examine class, caste, colonialism or religion. Hence this study will attempt

to fill that gap by examining the nature and extent of the nexus between culture and gender in contemporary Sri Lanka and it will demonstrate how 'traditional cultural' patriarchal constraints limit and determine women's status. While gender is the central concept in this study, it will also explore the idea of the invention of tradition introduced in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

Here I will argue the idea that what the Sinhala community believe to be 'ancient Sinhala Buddhist traditions' are in reality inventions of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, which emerged in the context of nationalist movement against British imperial rule. During the protest over imperial rule, the idea of the Sinhalese as a distinct 'nation' different from the other 'nations' in the island – Tamils and Muslims – emerged. The Sinhala nationalist leaders imagined the identity of the postcolonial state as a 'Sinhala Buddhist State' but also as scientifically and economically developed country. As this thesis points out, in the post colonial state, roles and places for men and women were clearly demarcated according to gender. Partha Chatterjee (1989) says that in India, 'the nationalist resolution against the dominance of colonialism was built around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres—the material and spiritual.' The material domain, which was reserved for maintenance of superior western techniques in governance and policymaking, was assigned to males. The home was considered as spiritual domain where the distinction between 'East' and the 'West' was marked to construct the self-identity of national culture. According to Chatterjee, nationalists used a variety of sources to draw a specific solution and reconstructing a 'classical tradition' was one of them. This he named as a new

patriarchy, which worked to confine women to the domestic sphere. He argues that:

The home was the principal site for expressing the quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essential spiritual [that is feminine] virtues; they must not, in other words, become *essentially* westernized (Chatterjee, 1989:627. Original emphasis.).

Elsewhere Chatterjee argues that within this context, the nationalists in India solved the women question by constructing a new identity for women, which was distinguished from both westernised and indigenous patriarchy. Though the 'tradition' is the symbol of the native cultural identity he says it was a 'deliberately "classicized" tradition- reformed, reconstructed' and works to determine Indian women's place today (Chatterjee, 1990,244).

From the middle of the nineteenth century to right up to the present day there have been many controversies about the precise application of the home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine dichotomies in various matters concerning the everyday life of the 'modern' woman-her dress, food manners, education, her role in organizing life at home, her role outside the home (Chatterjee, 1990:243-244)

The ideology of the Sri Lankan male nationalist leaders was very similar to Indian nationalists and as I argue in this thesis, as a consequence, a set of 'traditions' were stamped upon women in the name of culture, which became deeply rooted within the Sinhala community. In *Gender and Nation* Nira Yuval-Davis (1998) states that women reproduce nations, biologically, culturally and symbolically. I argue that this is the case for Sinhala women and this has led to a construction of



an imagined Sinhala woman, which marginalises women and restricts their access to spheres other than home.

One of the remarks the interviewees for this study constantly came up with was 'I do/follow this because it is our culture/tradition'. What women have internalised as 'culture and tradition' has a strong impact upon contemporary Sri Lankan women's individuality and deciding their place at home and outside the home. This study hypothesises that what the community believes to be an ahistorical 'Sinhala woman' of today is not a fixed product of an imagined two thousand five hundred years old pure Sinhala Buddhist culture, but rather a discursive production of the socio-cultural construction of gender as a consequence of structural and ideological changes Sri Lanka underwent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Geraldine Gamburd points out:

When we ask how women were portrayed in this civilization, which is over 2500 years old, there is of course some ambiguity. ... They have been both admired and spurned. I argue that this is the case, first of all because Sri Lanka's values and ideals, though they were viewed and labelled as Buddhism, have roots in both Hinduism and Buddhism (Gamburd, 1994: 37).

Though Chronicles and other historical sources such as ruins and stone inscriptions point about a 2,500 years old history of a civilisation, the culture of that civilisation was not permanent and static. Invasions at various periods, migrations and cultural exchanges with other countries have had a significant impact upon the culture of Sri Lanka. Hence I would like to argue that the ideas,

norms, beliefs, values, customs and habits of the Sinhalese community were changed and shaped by the influence of other civilisations.

This study aims to historicise 'gender' and 'culture' by examining the nexus between culture and history because my research indicates that the level of subjugation of women has shifted along with the historical changes. Thus it is clear that the relation between dominant men and the domesticated women and the power structures are fluid and not static, as the majority of the community believe today. Very often Sri Lankan feminists speak about the patriarchy as a reason for subjugation of women in Sri Lanka. Hence I was interested in finding out what forms and structures of patriarchy operate within the contemporary Sinhala community. It is clear from my research that the Sinhala community cannot be described as a 'classic patriarchy', which Deniz Kandiyoti (1991) identifies as operating within South Asia, North Africa, Muslim Middle East and East Asia. Evidence on pre-colonial period indicates that Sinhalese did not practice primogeniture. Women had access to property and had a claim on family patrimony. There is evidence that indicates that women participated in non-domestic work and were not totally secluded from public spheres. However, it also is clear that men were honoured and respected as leaders and had an authoritarian place in family. Kandiyoti states patriarchal relations are susceptible to historical change and as this study clearly shows, the patriarchal relations within the Sinhala community changed and modified and adjusted according to time space and structure. Nevertheless, loosely following Sylvia Walby's (1989) argument that patriarchy does not have a single basis, I will explore four spheres

of women's subordination, namely, familial production, education and paid work, patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal culture.

This study is dealing with three different historical eras, namely, the pre-colonial period, the colonial period and the post independence period in order to support the central arguments of the thesis. There is not much recorded evidence on ordinary people in pre-colonial times because the main sources of pre-colonial history, chronicles and rock inscriptions, mainly deal with political history and rulers. However, this study reconstructs the status of women in the pre-colonial period by using scattered information in those historical sources and by using the records of Europeans from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, which provides useful insights into ordinary people's lives. It is important to note here that I am selective in quoting Europeans. All the European writers I quote in this study were residents in Sri Lanka for a long period and not mere travellers who spent a few months in the country. Some of them were civil servants who were engaged in administrative work and mastered the Sinhala Language.

As this study will show, it is highly likely that the reason for women's secondary status in the pre-colonial period was the influence of Hinduism and Brahmin ideology. According to Hayley, a former civil servant, 'in a Buddhist community the necessity of obtaining a *putra* (a son) for the maintenance of prosperity in the future life did not exist' (Hayley, 1923: 167). Based on the principle of equality, Buddhism rejected rigid oppressive social practices, norms and structures prevalent in ancient India. Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka in the third

century BC and since then became the religion of the majority in Sri Lanka and rulers of the ancient period took a pledge and ruled according to the principles of Buddhism. However, the evidence shows that both state law and religion did not have a strong grip on deciding the civil affairs of ordinary Sinhalese. According to Hayley, three kinds of law, namely royal law, sacred law and traditional law prevailed in pre-colonial Sri Lanka and what influenced people's lives most was the law that is recognised as the traditional law (Hayley, 1923:154). Under this traditional law women enjoyed far more rights and freedom than today.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that they stood equal to men. The evidence shows that men were respected and had more privileges than women. Being close to India, inevitably Sri Lanka was influenced by Indian politics, and culture. This influence of Indian politics, culture and religions had an impact on deciding the Sinhalese women's place in Sri Lanka, but such influence took less rigid forms than in India, it seems, due to the influence of Buddhism.

The study will examine how the next phase of history, namely colonialism, had a profound impact on changing Sri Lankan women's lives. This thesis mainly deals with the British period because as will be explained below, it was the British who were able to capture the whole island and introduced many structural changes. As I will demonstrate, the introduction of Catholicism by the Portuguese, the introduction of Roman Dutch law by the Dutch rulers, and the more profound changes imposed by the British rulers on social, political and economic structures put constraints on women's spaces and reinforced their secondary place in society. At the same time, the emergence of nationalism in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century as a counter product to imperialism ensured the idea of women's secondary place and the nationalist ideology was in accord with colonial male ideologies. In inventing an imagined pre-colonial 'Sinhala Buddhist Society', the male nationalist leaders solidified the idea that women's place is at home, and they should free men to work to build up the postcolonial nation and country by taking the responsibilities of women's natural place, doing domestic tasks and being carers. Women were not looked upon as leaders or human beings that are on a par with men.

It is evident that what the nationalist leaders imagined as the place of 'Aryan Sinhala woman' in pre-colonial society was actually that of women in ancient India. However, as the thesis will demonstrate, the identity of the 'Sinhala woman' constructed by the nationalists was distinct from the pre-colonial 'Sinhala woman' and as Chatterjee argued this 'new identity' was based on selected 'ancient traditions' and also on ideas, values and norms of colonialists on women. Hence the ideas of nationalists were went hand in hand with colonialists and in turn created a mythical image of a 'Sinhala Woman' who was 'modern' and not yet modern and founded the notion of a woman's 'correct place'. This in turn created an ambiguous situation for the majority of women when they had access to the 'new spheres' in the postcolonial period. On the one hand, they found that they had access to modern education, paid work and access to spheres other than home, but the benefits women could gain through these were restricted due expectations that they play the role of the 'Aryan Sinhala Woman'.

The political, social and economic structures that were created during the colonial times began to change after independence was achieved in 1948. Successive governments adapted to various changes with an attempt to develop Sri Lanka as a 'modern nation'. The state paved the way for deprived lower class people to have access to modern developments by adopting welfare measures. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the overall economic framework was manipulated and controlled by the government and that era saw the nationalisation of Foreign owned plantations, industries and services in order to Sri Lankanise the economy. Several economic plans were introduced to achieve economic development and to steer towards socialism but the development plans did little to contribute to economic development. Sri Lanka changed its economic structure into a market and trade oriented approach and the economy was liberalised in 1977. Since then the private sector has been expanding slowly but steadily and more job opportunities were created than before 1977, especially in business, finance and information technology.

In spite of all these changes, culture and tradition are regarded as static and unchangeable, thus providing the basis for the notion that Sri Lankan women do not need an equal place because they have a 'correct' place, and women who behave according to this 'correct' place win the respect of the community. This prevents women from enjoying equal rights by constantly reminding them that they are secondary to men and their prime role is domestic work and caring. Though women are aware of their ambiguous situation, they are reluctant to break the barriers because of the '*lajja* and *baya*' (shame and fear) instilled in

them by the family and community and by their internalised ideas of being a woman within such a context. Therefore women are deprived of the full benefits of access to economic, political and social spheres.

In order to understand the situation of contemporary Sinhala women it is necessary to say a little about the general characteristics of Sri Lankan society before narrowing the discussion to specific areas. Hence the next part will give a brief account on colonial era and the emergence of modern Sri Lanka.

### **A general description of Sri Lanka**



Figure 1: Map of Sri Lanka

The first colonisers, arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 (then called by them Ceylon) had a stronghold in the coastal areas. The Portuguese ruled the coastal areas for only a short period of sixty-two years out of Sri Lanka's 450 years of colonial rule, during that time they ruthlessly destroyed the Buddhist temples in coastal areas to impose Catholicism. The Buddhist monks fled to the interior of Ceylon and Catholicism took strong hold in the coastal areas. The Dutch captured the areas controlled by the Portuguese by 1766, and ruled until ousted by the British in 1796. The major change brought about by the Dutch was the introduction of schools and implementation of Roman Dutch Law in the coastal areas. When the British captured the areas ruled by the Dutch in 1796 they placed these areas under the control of the British East India Company. In 1815 the British were able to do what the other two nations had failed to do: capture the last kingdom of Sri Lanka in the central area, helped by the local chiefs who were against the king. Sri Lanka remained as a British crown colony for 145 years, and thus British rule had a far greater impact on Sri Lanka than the Portuguese and Dutch rule. As a consequence of the British colonial regime the political, social and economic structures of Sri Lanka changed profoundly.

Sri Lanka gained its independence in February 4<sup>th</sup> 1948 and became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in 1972. Since independence, Sri Lanka has been grappling with the consequences of colonial domination. It has also been ravaged by protracted civil war for more than three decades originating from the tensions between the two major ethnic groups and two unsuccessful insurrections staged by a Marxist oriented political party. The major structural



transformation since independence has been change from a state controlled, planned economic system to a free market economy. Sri Lanka has two systems of law today. The 'Common Law', which developed from Roman Dutch and English law, is applied to all people in Sri Lanka in general. The other legal system, which is known as the "Personal Law" is the customary law and has three flavours – the Kandyan Law which applies to the Sinhalese in central Sri Lanka (Kandy and surrounding areas), Thesawalamai<sup>1</sup> of the Tamils and the Muslim law (Sharia Muslim Law) but these are applied only to limited areas such as property and marriage.

Since independence, Sri Lanka has been defined within the category of 'Developing Nations' by the United Nations and similar organisations. Despite the low economic growth, (real GDP growth rate 5.5% from 1991-95 and dropped to 3.7% in the last quarter of 2001) some areas such as education and health reached higher levels of development due to welfare measures. For example, the literacy rate is over 90% of the population, and 93% of the population have access to basic health care. Since independence, Sri Lanka's human development has been remarkably successful, but according the *World Fact Book*, in 1997 it was estimated that 22% of the population would be below the poverty line (Central Intelligence Agency, 2002). The major obstacle to economic growth is the ongoing war. Defence expenditure averages 50 billion rupees (\$ 725 million/ £ 4,736,304) a year and puts severe constraints on economic development (CSIS, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Thesawalamai is a system of law, applicable to 'Malabar inhabitants of the Province of the Jaffna' and was codified by the Dutch in 1707 (Vakilno1.com, 2002).

According to the 2001 census, the total population of Sri Lanka is estimated to be 18.73 million. The majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese, make up about 75% of the population and Tamils and Sri Lanka Muslims are the next two ethnic groups which comprise about 12% and 6% of the population respectively. The rest of the population is composed largely of Burghers (descendants from mixed marriages of locals with the Portuguese and the Dutch) and other minorities. Buddhism is the major religion and as the religion of the majority of Sinhalese is given more prominence by the state than other religions.

Even though the caste system is in practice in Sri Lanka, it was different from the caste system in India. As the fourth chapter will discuss, the caste system in Sri Lanka was changed significantly with the colonial influence. Moreover, the caste system of the Sinhalese was based on occupations and when the trades such as cinnamon gained importance new castes were created. The castes are divided mainly as upper castes and sub castes. Another caste division among Sinhalese is upcountry and low country. Some castes are found only in the low country area. However, the importance of caste has decreased over time and only has an impact on marriage in some instances. Richard et al. (1971) mentions a list of castes among Sinhalese and according to them, Goyigama, Radala (holders of royal appointments), Mudali (popular leaders), Patti (cow herds to the king) are the high castes. There are sub castes only found in Kandy (upcountry) such as Katupulle (royal clerks) Nilamakkara (temple servants) and Hevapanne (soldiers). Karāwa (fishermen) and Durawa (toddy tapers) and Salagama (cinnamon

peelers) are found only in low country area. Apart from that there are various other low castes such as Navandanna (craftsmen and smiths), Hunu (lime burners), Hena (washers), Berava (drummers), Vahumpura (jaggery makers) rodiyas (untouchables) etc.

The interviews for the study show that class has a significant impact on women's lives. However, the class system in Sri Lanka is flexible and also underwent significant changes overtime. Roughly in Sri Lanka classes are divided upper middle class, lower middle class and working class. However, since 1977, the emergence of a new category, identified as the 'new rich' has further blurred the class division.

### **Contemporary literature on women**

While life stories I collected are central to my analysis of Sinhala women's lives of today, I also draw on existing research in order to historicise gender and culture. Research done by both native and foreign women on women in Sri Lanka, and other publications, have illuminated the colonial and pre-colonial part and also delineate the gender disparities that prevail in contemporary Sri Lanka. However, in this section I will examine the gaps in existing research and show how the research for this study differs from the existing literature particularly in relation to culture and tradition.

There is a growing body of literature on women published since the late seventies that has contributed to raising the awareness of the situation of women

in Sri Lanka. However, the majority of this research is quantitative and is based on statistical data and structured interviews which, though they provide information on the gender discrimination and disparities in various areas, are limited in understanding individual women's lives. Since the focal point of this study is to examine women's lives in the post independence period, I have concentrated on literature dealing with the three main areas of women's lives which feature in my study, namely education, paid work, and family/sexuality.

### Education

All the research on education shows that, even though women have an equal access to education, gender disparity still prevails at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Abewickrama (1991) concludes that girls are not discriminated against in primary and secondary education and have equal access to education at all levels, but that gender difference is visible in higher education, which is important for future career opportunities. Abhayadeva (1991) states that women's education up to any level appears to be an investment for their future while the findings of Jayaweera (1991, 1995, a, 1995b), Jayaweera and Ismail (1992), state that girls do not face gender discrimination in education. However, there are gender differences in career guidance, curriculum, and vocational training for girls. Hence girls' education does not provide many employment opportunities. All these studies identify that there are various factors that produce gender disparities in education, most importantly, that poverty, class differences and rural/urban differences are the main factors that generate gender disparities

in education. Rupasinghe (1991) shows that the difference between the achievement of girls and boys in secondary education is very insignificant when compared to the difference within each sex across the different types of schools in Sri Lanka and points that socio economic factors such as poverty and class differences affect achievement in education. According to Jayaweera gender role stereotypes and cultural conditions also influence gender but there are no in-depth explanations on how and why these factors constrain girls' education.

Indraratne (1994) suggests that there is a gender gap in university education despite equal access for girls and boys in primary and secondary education.

Liyanage, in her research based on a case study of the University of Peradeniya (1996) further states that there is a difference between male and female participation and achievements in academic as well as in non-academic activities.

She points out that among other factors, the freedom of the female students is limited by the restrictions imposed by the family and boyfriends and also by the 'educated' community (she does not explain who they are) and rules and regulations in the residential halls (e.g. night curfew).

Liyanage indicates that there is a lack of opportunity for men and women to develop open and flexible relationships due to cultural barriers and gender role assumptions that promote sexism.

Some other studies have attempted to analyse the nexus between

socialisation and education (de Mel, 1994, 1996; Jayasena, 1996,1998).

These studies also show that educational policy, curriculum and textbooks and the role of teachers in education are affected by the prevailing ideologies of gender in Sri

Lankan society which reinforce such ideologies.

Madiwaka et al. (1990) investigated the problems women in Sri Lanka face in pursuing higher education. This study shows that the financial status of women plays a major role in determining participation in higher education. Married women are in a more disadvantaged position because it is a problem for them to spend a part of their income on education instead of on the family. The other major problems women face are having an insufficient knowledge of English and poor library facilities. Though this study found that domestic work is an impediment for some married women, it also shows that husbands encourage their wives' participation in higher education and the majority of men are willing to give support in domestic work.

It is important to note here that one of the major limitations of these studies is that they investigate education only as a qualification for employment opportunities and do not highlight women's aspirations in education other than as a route to a career. The issues that emerged from my study confirm many of the findings of previous studies. Nevertheless as demonstrated in the fourth chapter, I take a different stance on some of the constraints on women's education and in particular I explore how education is valued by women other than as a qualification for paid work.

## Paid work

Almost all the studies on women and paid work show that there is unequal participation in paid work despite the fact that women constitute over 50% of the population and have equal access to education. However, research on paid work is mainly centred on a few areas, namely, the plantation sector<sup>2</sup>, Free Trade Zone<sup>3</sup> house maids in West Asia<sup>4</sup>, and credit, rural economy and self-employment<sup>5</sup>. The reason is that these are the main sources of foreign income for Sri Lanka and the sectors where women's participation is more prominent.

There have also been a few studies on women and technology (Amarasooriya 1992; 1993; 1995, Andersson Claes-Axell 1991; Ariyabandu, 1994; Dhanapala, 1994). Three studies concentrated on factors impeding women's careers (Iddamalgoda 1990; Jayaweera S. & Sanmugam Thana 1992; Amarasooriya, 1993). However, these studies are limited to high profile careers. Both Iddamalgoda and Jayaweera carried out their studies respectively on women in higher management positions and on female engineers, while Amarasooriya concentrated on science and technology professions only. Amarasooriya indicates that although discrimination between men and women in terms of pay and conditions of work is non-existent in science and technology professions, cultural and socio-economic factors limit women's equal participation. According

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<sup>2</sup> See: Jayaweera. 1991; Pinnawela 1991; Kuhatasan & Baddewela 1991; Kanapathipillai, 1992; Wickramasinghe, 1992; Uyangoda. 1995; Atkin, 1995; Gunasekara, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> See: Abeywardena et al. 1999, Rosa, 1994, Dep Weerasinghe 1992, Jayasena, 1991; Hettiarachchi, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> See: Dias, 1987, 1992, 1996; Gunatilaka 1991; Hettige 1992; Dissanayake 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See: Jayaweera 1991; Reid. 1991; Dayaratne 1992; Ebert, 1994; Ekanayake & Srisena, 1994; Amarasinghe, 1992; Eshani, 1995; Gunasekara and Leitan, 1996

to her, traditional cultural values and child bearing and nurturing responsibilities lead many qualified women science graduates to seek teaching or desk bound jobs rather than go into the field. Iddamalgoda also argues that in paid work, business or self-employment, women need to be freed from the burden of domestic work. Jayaweera and Thana's study concluded that women engineers are constrained by societal expectations of gender appropriate careers.

However, in addition to the particular problems women face in paid work due to gender differences, these researchers give prominence to issues such as lack of state welfare support and law, low income, working conditions and adjustment problems. Other explanations for gender discrimination in paid work are 'feminine curricula' for girls' in education and vocational training, occupation crowding in service sectors and under representation of women at a decision making level. The patriarchal nature of the society and traditional cultural norms and customs are also mentioned, as are attitudes of parents, husband and males at the workplace. However, there is no in-depth explanation of what, how and why traditional cultural norms and customs constrain women in paid work.

My research indicates that some of the above explanations are less evident today in creating gender disparities in paid employment. As the fifth chapter will demonstrate, the girls' choices in curriculum and attitudes of the family and men are changing. Chanuri Jayasena (1996) shows that the male attitude is less influential in creating gender disparity in high level employment and that women's internalisation of familial and maternal ideals are more influential. Among the



research on women and employment, Carla Risseeuw (1991) provides a particularly valuable insight as to how subjugation to colonial rule, especially the British colonial domination, changed and strengthened the gender differences in pre independence Sri Lankan society and how that changed the situation for women of today. Following the argument of Risseeuw, in this thesis, I argue that women's own internalisation and the community's internalisation of the idea of 'male work' and 'female work', led to an inadequate interpretation of the concept of the 'female worker'. In the same manner the idea of the male breadwinner, which was constructed during British colonial rule has been internalised by the community. It is my contention that these factors are still very powerful in creating gender disparities despite structural changes.

### Family/sexuality

Compared to studies on education or women's paid work, little research has been conducted on family and gender relations in Sri Lanka. Feminist interest, it seems, is more focused on economic aspects, health, and violence. Research into the family tends to focus on how the functions and patterns of family life have changed due to economic developments, the role of the mother in families, or on domestic violence (De Silva N., 1992; Kiribamune, 1994; Jayaweera. & Sanmugam Thana 1996). Jayaweera (1992) attempted to review changing gender roles and relations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries from a broad socio-historical perspective. She identifies the macro structures and processes that have contributed to positive and to negative changes. She argues that gender

inequalities are caused by unequal access to resources and reproduced by the gender division of labour within and outside the household. However, the limitation of this study is that there is no in-depth investigation of the structures and process she mentioned in creating gender inequality. Kottegoda (1994) shows that in the Sri Lankan context, the need to define more clearly what is meant by the term 'gender' arises from the uninvestigated relationship between characteristics associated with biological differences and those characteristics which are identified as socially constructed.

However, Sasanka Perera's (1997) study on the social and cultural construction of female sexuality and gender roles in Sinhala society attempts to understand how gender discrimination still prevails in Sri Lanka despite women having progressed in many areas. He points out several sexual scripts that formulate female sexuality and gender roles and concludes these are based on, justified and legitimised on the basis of perceived continuity in the form of traditions or conventions. He identifies the major reason for this as the problem of attitudes and lack of serious intervention to change these attitudes. Furthermore, he discusses the importance attached to women as primary socialisers and the 'cultural archives' of the society, and how women's relations within society are marked by a lack of power. However, as he himself points out, the study is brief and incomplete. His research is limited to examining a few publications and some unstructured and informal interviews, done on a random basis.

Even though many of these studies tend to cite patriarchy, culture and tradition as a factors in gender discrimination in Sri Lanka, it is remarkable that there has been no attempt to see how the cultural aspect affects the construction of gender, to identify the 'traditions' that reinforce gender differences today or to determine what forms and structures of patriarchy exist in Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, Malathi de Alwis (1994, 1999) fills this gap to some extent. She explores how the forces that emerged during the colonial period constructed the gendered identity of women and subverted them. She provides an important insight to the emergence of nationalism and the western ideas imposed on women in Sri Lanka by colonialism and how the impact of this has led to women policing themselves. However, her studies are based on historical data and do not represent the voices of women of today.

My study also examines and explores the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman'. However, my point of departure differs that from previous studies by investigating how the cultural construction influences the life of contemporary Sinhala women. I employ life history research method to bring Sinhala women's voices to the forefront.

## Methodology

An important aspect of this study is to use life histories as a primary methodological tool. The interviews done for this study are of a narrative type and they collected events and happenings of the lives of interviewees as primary data, which helped this study to explain how culture and tradition constrain women. This offers a way to integrate Sinhala women's lives into Sri Lankan history, which has hitherto been neglected by conventional methodology, which feminists identify as androcentric (Jackson, 1998:47). According to Sherna Gluck (1996), life histories reflect the values, attitudes and relationships of the interviewee: the patterns and rhythms of her life and times. Therefore, the aim of this study is to use life histories to put women's previously unheard voices at the centre and to bring the patterns and actions of their lives to the surface in order to examine the accounts of Sinhala women's experiences from their own perspectives. In other words, individual understanding of how women's life experiences, values and attitudes were shaped and how they have altered them. Following Jan Sangster (1998), by using oral history I do not attempt just to 'fill in the blanks in women's traditional history' or to provide 'better history' or 'more history'. My intention is to examine how dominant ideologies shape Sinhala women's world and how women understand, negotiate, resist or challenge these ideologies. In my view, though the quantitative research done by feminists in Sri Lanka provides knowledge of gender inequality in Sri Lanka, the picture is incomplete and does not tell us how women accept, react and respond to discrimination and oppression. Hence by using oral histories, exploring how

culture constructs gender, my study acknowledges women's cultural agency and allows their voices to be heard. Life histories of women also give an insight to the roots of this discrimination and how it operates to constrain women.

In life histories for this study women actually reconstitute their lives and therefore, they are not just primary texts, providing information. One may argue that people cannot remember everything about their past, or they may conceal things when talking about sensitive topics. However, it is important to note that during the interviews, the interviewees were actually engaged in constructing their memories and what they remembered is what they kept intact in their memories and what was therefore significant to them. Women may have been selective in what they said during the interviews but what they chose to tell me was what they wanted to express. In other words, what women presented to me as their accounts of their lives is what they wanted to be heard.

Chanfroult-Duchet says:

I shall define the 'life story' as the product of a ritualised speech act, which results from the conjunction, in the 1970s, of a genre, autobiography, with a new medium, the tape recorder, within the institutional framework of social sciences. Life story is thus at first a methodological tool used to collect information from social categories (among them women) which, although social actors, do not have access to the public stage. But considered as a genre, it can be viewed as an object created by the form and the contents, which produces meaning, just like a literary form (2000:61-62).

Using life stories as a primary source to analyse women's situation, in any society in the world, is crucial because as she points out, 'the orality of genre produces a system of formal and structural recurrences and the interactional system, as well

as the stress on the social self, produce reference to socio-symbolic discourse and the social imaginary through which a culture, by means of language, maps and deciphers the world, a dimension also present in autobiography, but heavily marked in the life-story'.(Ibid. 63)

I argue that what Chanfrault-Duchet says here is applicable to the stories of my interviewees, because as I have mentioned the stories are not just sources of information. Though my interviewees were at different ages, different locations and from different socio- economic backgrounds, their life stories enabled me to identify and extract the common themes that appear across them. Their stories clearly indicate how 'culture and tradition' operate within the Sinhala community and thus provide a conceptual understanding, since the narratives of women are based on the discourses available to them.

The life stories collected for this study reveal events in the life courses of these women from their birth to the present. My familiarity with people's way of speaking enabled me to see that the women did not hesitate to share their knowledge of their own experience. Nor did they find it difficult to relate that experience to me though I was a 'stranger'. Many said 'this is the first time I am telling about this to anyone'. Perhaps it was easier for them to reveal their private lives to someone from outside because of the knowledge that I am not a character that appears in their day-to-day lives. Most importantly, these life stories clearly show how Sinhalese women absorb and internalise the social norms, customs, and traits. Revealing the tension between this constructed

identity and their lived experience and also how women have construct their self identity according to these traits and the ambivalence this produced in them is an important aspect of these life history accounts.

Since this study uses stories of women's lives as the prime resource, it uses the life cycle and life course approaches, which has to my knowledge, not been used so far as an analytical framework in Sri Lankan gender studies. According to Giele and Elder 'The superiority of the life course idea is in its flexibility and capacity to encompass many different types of cultural, social, and individual variation' (Giele and Elder, 1998:22). They state that life course refers to a sequence of socially defined events and roles that an individual enacts over time and, also allows for the 'encoding of historical events and social interaction outside the person as well as the age-related biological and psychological states of the organism' (ibid.:22-23) According to Patricia Allatt and Teresa Keil, (1987), while life cycle emphasises 'ages and stages' in life, life course emphasises the individual's transition through those stages in changing historical conditions. As they point out, these approaches help to unshackle our conceptualisation of women's life experience from the family cycle. Both these approaches 'show how gendering the public/private spheres is neither random nor 'natural' but critically controlled and influenced by cultural dictates and structural constraints' (Allatt and Keil, 1987:2). Differences in life stages clearly indicate how individuals are subjected to social change and also gives an insight to how an individual adapts, resists or finds options and strategies to cope with social change. Therefore, these approaches allow the analysis of Sinhala women's life

experiences through the various important stages of their life in order to understand the social construction of gender within the community and how it has impacted on women. As a spectrum of diversity, this enables the researcher to understand the change and reflexivity of interviewees and also the link between historical changes and women as individuals.

Hence organising this study through life cycle and life course, approaches, I locate the life stories of the interviewees from childhood to later stage of the life of Sinhala women to examine the changes that happen in their lives. This in turn will support the main argument of this study, that the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' profoundly impacts women's lives today. As Stevi Jackson points out, those who research on their own memories or others memories 'do so from the assumption that our past has something to tell us about our present selves, about our individual subjectivities, about what made us what we are' (Jackson, 1998:51).

### **Research process**

Altogether a sample of sixty-six women were interviewed from the three areas selected for this study, Colombo, Badulla and Hambantota. I did not plan to select a specific number of women and my aim was to interview as many as possible. Therefore I stayed around a month in each in Badulla and Hambantota. My intention was to emphasis the diversity of the social world Sinhala women live and experience. Therefore, I did my best to include women from different socio-



economic backgrounds, to find out how the structures and the prevailing dominant ideologies impacted upon them.

A special consideration was given to age because, though this study is on the post independence period, it was essential to include memory and narratives of older women in order to reflect upon the changes that have taken place since independence. Ten out of these sixty-six interviewees are over fifty years old and nineteen interviewees are fifteen to twenty five years old while the rest of the interviewees are between twenty-five and fifty. The reason for interviewing a large number of women between ages of twenty five and fifty is the narratives of that age group includes memories of childhood as well as adult life. Hence in my view their stories provide a better understanding of the changes in the post independence period and how they affected women. Also in my view, the youngest interviewees and their stories of their lives and their views on paid work, family and marriage as well as interactions within spaces other than the family, enabled me to understand the solidity and centrality of the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman'. Because what they said reflects what they have already internalised of being a woman within the Sinhala community. Hence including life stories of women at different ages enable this study to examine Sinhala women's lives in the context of past, present and future.

## Interviews

### Selecting areas:

Conducting research in Northern, North central and Eastern provinces for the research was not possible because it was relatively unsafe to go to those areas due to civil war. Therefore, I decided to conduct my research in Western, Uva and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka. Three districts in each of these provinces, namely Colombo, Badulla and Hambantota, were selected for oral interviews. The main reason for selecting these districts was that the majority of the population consisted of the Sinhalese. I also took class difference, urban/rural differences and economic structures into consideration in deciding upon these districts. I would like to mention the fact that the names of the villages I am using in this thesis are pseudonyms.

Colombo, situated on the West Coast of Sri Lanka, is the commercial and administrative capital of the country and a highly urbanised and industrialised area. As the commercial capital, almost all the factories, private businesses and technology companies are located in and around Colombo. Being the centre of cultural influence, my observation was that Colombo is also subjected to contemporary external cultural influences and cultural changes more immediately than other areas in Sri Lanka. The social strata of Colombo are also different from the other two areas because a large number of professionals and industrial workers and business community reside in the metropolitan area. Many houses I

visited in Colombo were large, comfortable with nice gardens and modern facilities. This was a major contrast with the other two areas. The way of women's speaking and manners and dressing were more 'polite' and 'cultured' than in Badulla or Hambantota. Apart from girls who were in school, some university students and all the other women were paid workers. Most of the women interviewed in Colombo were more privileged than the women from the rural areas.

By contrast, Badulla district in Uva province, which is located in the east-central part of Sri Lanka, is relatively isolated. Even during colonial rule, English officers rarely visited the Uva Province due to the difficulty of the reaching the area without proper roads. Therefore, it has been almost excluded from exposure to cultural changes. Uva has always been, and remains, a rural farming community – mainly paddy and *chena* (slash and burn) cultivation. In Badulla, I interviewed women from three different areas in the Deniya Administrative Division of Badulla District, namely: Neluwa, Deniya and Pataha. Neluwa and Pataha are two villages of the Deniya division as it is divided into several Grama Niladari (Village Official) divisions for administrative purposes. There are about 1,500 to 2,000 families in the Neluwa village. The village belongs to the Komarikaveva Govi Janapada Vyaparaya (Komarikaveva Farmers Settlement Scheme), which was established in the 1950s as a result of the government decision to irrigate certain areas in order to promote agriculture and to settle farmers who did not own land. Yet the village does not receive water for irrigation because it is situated at a

higher altitude than the reservoir. As a result they have to depend on rainwater and they face difficulties due to droughts.

According to the stories told by my colleague's family and his friend, their ancestors left the plains and settled on hilltops during the 1818 and 1848 uprisings against the British to avoid the reprisals of the British colonial rulers. Their main occupations then were hunting and *chena* (slash and burn) cultivation. Gradually people began to come down from the hills, settled in flat lands and such settlers populated Neluwa village. It is a very fertile area. The villagers use wells as the source of water for drinking, washing and bathing and the area has not yet received pipe-borne water. Women draw water in pots. When the wells get dried up in the dry season, women have to walk for two to three miles to find water. The village received electricity at the end of the 1980s. However the main electrical household items are restricted to small television sets (mainly black and white), or cassette players. In a very few houses I saw modern goods such as gas cookers, water heaters and refrigerators. Most of the houses are small and partially built. In most of the houses, kitchens have clay floors plastered with cow dung. According to the women in the area, cement floors are not suitable for the kitchen because they do not absorb the water that always spills on the floor when pouring water out of the pots in which they store it. Firewood is the main energy source for cooking. They gather firewood from their gardens or bring large bundles of wood from the jungle or *chena* two to three miles away from homes. They told me that males cut the wood but it is they who carry the burden home. The place that has the lowest priority in their houses is the toilet. There is a nice

looking little stream flows near the boundary of my colleague's parental home and when I expressed my desire to wade through it I was informed that many people still use the stream for defecating.

Deniya is the most developed area compared to the two other villages. All the government offices are situated in Deniya and part of the village is populated by the people who have been settled there for generations. The others settled there under Badulu Oya Govi Janapada Vyaparaya (Badulu Oya Farmers Settlement Scheme). People in Deniya seem to be well off when compared to the people in the other two areas. According to one of my companions (people who helped me to find interviewees and who escorted me around the area), most of them are engaged in petty businesses such as small-scale retail traders and owners of rice mills. The owners of these businesses in all three areas I visited appeared to be wealthier than the rest of the villagers. They have better houses and some own private vehicles too. Some villagers spoke about a vicious circle of a business with these petty businessmen. During the harvest villagers earn more money than usual either by selling paddy or working in rice fields. With this money they buy luxury items, mainly televisions, cassette players, bicycles, wristwatches and jewellery. When the villagers have financial difficulties between harvests they pawn these items to businessmen to a small sum of money. Many of them are usually unable to reclaim the items as they cannot pay the high interest or the money and the traders sell them. According to the villagers this happens every year.

Pataha is a remotest area in the Deniya AGA Division. The village is situated on a foot of a hill. Main occupations in the village are paddy farming and *chena* cultivation. The village comprises mostly people who did not inherit land for housing and farming from their parents mainly due to being members of large families, and hence are forced to 'move up' to the hill seeking land for housing and farming as the population grows. There is a gravel road going through the village. The village received electricity in the year 2000. There are no 'big' shops<sup>6</sup> around and they have to come to Neluwa to buy provisions. Most of the houses are small and partially constructed. Only a few houses have televisions. The nearest school is about two to two and a half miles away.

Main occupations in all three areas are farming (rice and *chena* cultivation), brick making, casual labour, government service, and small business, selling firewood, working in armed forces and garment factories. Both men and women talked about not having opportunities to earn money in other ways. During the time between cultivating and harvesting some men went to Colombo to work as private security officers (because after preparing paddy fields men have no more work to do) but according to some, because of the cost of living in Colombo, they could not save money to send home with the little pay they received. At the time I visited several boys talked to me said they were looking to work as conductors on buses owned by individuals in Badulla or Colombo because it is better than being unemployed.

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<sup>6</sup> These shops are small and sell only a few essentials such as rice, powdered milk, soap, kerosene oil etc. People usually buy things from the weekend fair because

Hambantota, the southernmost coastal district of the country, was under successive colonial regimes. Hence I generally assumed that this district has experienced the changes that had been brought by the three colonial powers. The main occupations of people in Hambantota are fishing and farming. The major industry in that area is salt making. The salt plants in Hambantota have provided salt for the country since ancient times. Today the salt plants are operated under the authority of the Salt Co-operation (semi privatised state co-operation). Hambantota has a mixed population, mainly Sinhalese and Muslims. In Hambantota my interviewees were mainly located in two areas, that is, Seruwa and Badda. Seruwa is a settlement about a kilometre away from Hambantota town and considered as a village<sup>7</sup>. The first family arrived and settled in the village in 1947. The government in power at that time started a housing scheme for middle class people and land was given on 99-year leases. Later in 1986 ownership deeds were given to these settlers. There were families in Hambantota town who encroached on state land. These families were removed from there and given land in Seruwa village when plans were made to develop Hambantota town. At first, 18 families came to settle in Seruwa and then more people arrived. The village received electricity and tap water in the 1990s, and until then their only source of fresh water was from wells built on the seashore.

Most of the houses I saw are not completed as in the Badulla area, but it seemed that they are a little better off than the people in Neluwa. Badda, the other area

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things are cheaper.

<sup>7</sup> The towns in Sri Lanka are where the all shops, other business and usually the bus stand is located. Village is where the houses are located, usually with a small shop or two, and place to worship.

of Hambantota where I interviewed women, is an area about half a kilometre from Hambantota town. It is a densely populated area and has a more suburban environment than Seruwa.

Seruwa, the village I visited is mainly a Sinhala village but the two ethnic groups live side by side. Being situated in the south-eastern coastal plains, Hambantota belongs to the dry zone but rice and a few vegetables are cultivated in the area. At the time I visited, the area was in the midst of a drought with severe water shortage even for the most basic needs. The main occupation in the area is fishing. Most of the villagers in Seruwa are labourers. They work in rice fields, brick making or at the Salt Co-operation. Some work at the rows of shops situated along the road. Kataragama, a very famous shrine for the god Skandha, visited by many Sri Lankans to fulfil their vows or to worship is situated in Hambantota district and there is a thriving business for these shops. They sell some sweets, which this area is famous for, other types of food and drinks, handicrafts and herbs. Another thriving business is buying and packing salt. Therefore, unlike in Badulla, both men and women have more opportunities to earn an income however small it is. There are a few women working in the Government sector, many of them teachers. Many girls work in garment factories. According to the information I received, many women from the area have also gone to Middle Eastern countries as domestic helpers. A few women also work in Colombo in places other than garment factories.



### Setting up interviews and interviewing

As well as conducting oral interviews, I visited three schools, one in Colombo and two in Badulla. I also visited two police stations in Badulla and Hambantota. I had a lengthy conversation with a teacher involved in a counselling project in the area of Badulla. I was able to meet the gramaseva niladāri (village official) of Neluwa but unable to visit one in Hambantota or Colombo due to clashes of my schedule and theirs. The purpose of speaking to the officials, principals and teachers was twofold. Firstly, to make general observations in order to have a more clear vision about the areas. Secondly to find out about the number of incidents reported on domestic violence, rape etc. and the drop out rates of girls and boys in schools. However, pieces of conversations I gathered from them provided more information were very useful as additional data.

I engaged various methods in all three areas to set up interviews. Making contacts through relatives and friends was the primary way of meeting interviewees. When approaching interviewees having intermediates is important because it helps to build trust between the researcher and the interviewees and thus helped me to gain people's confidence. After having been interviewed, many women said they could talk to their friends or relatives and arrange an interview; hence I used 'snowballing' to enlarge the sample. My initial point of contact was Colombo where I reside. Before going back to Sri Lanka I spoke to my mother in law and asked her help to find interviewees in Colombo. She

contacted neighbours and some women she knew and the students in her tuition class. All the young girls I initially interviewed were educated in girls' schools and when I expressed my desire to interview young girls attending a mixed sex school, she contacted a friend of hers and arranged for me to go to a school to interview schoolgirls. The teachers selected some girls because they said those girls are 'forward and not shy'. I interviewed women from the neighbourhood of my home in Colombo, the market in the town I live, and in the University. I directly approached a colleague, my students and a friend.

A colleague in my department helped me to contact interviewees in Badulla District and I stayed with his parents. I was keen to go to his birthplace because of the stories he told us about his mother and about the conditions in that area. His mother, a friend of his and his friend's sister in law helped me to approach the interviewees.

I approached the interviewees in Hambantota through the support of one of my former teachers, who is also a friend at the University of Peradeniya. He introduced me to a top official of the Sarvodaya Organisation in Mātara who introduced me to the Hambantota branch of Sarvodaya. Sarvodaya is a non-governmental organisation that operates in most parts of Sri Lanka and aims to help deprived sections of the population to better their lives. A woman at the centre introduced me to another woman who is working in a development bank and she introduced me to interviewees in the village. While in Hambantota, I came to know about non-traditional vocational training given to women by World

University Service – Canada, another non-governmental organisation that operates in the area. I approached the organisation and they agreed to introduce me to the two institutions in the area that help them to carry out the training programs they funded. Hence I interviewed several young women from Hambantota who were being trained at Seruwa vocational training centre and Eraminiyāya National Youth Service centre.

Doing interviews in Colombo was not very difficult, as the women I contacted were either known to me or to my mother in law, therefore I was relaxed when I did the interviews. Most interviews were conducted at interviewee's homes. Two interviewees arranged to meet in my mother in law's house because they felt they couldn't talk freely at their own homes. Some interviews were done in my office at the University of Colombo. At the mixed sex school I had to do the interviews during the school hours because the principal expressed his concern about young women being 'alone' on the school premises after school hours. An agreement was reached and the girls were allowed to talk to me at free periods and a science laboratory was given to us. We had interruptions during the interviews because sometimes students or teachers entered the lab. Once we had to move into a small room inside the lab because a class was supposed to have an audio-visual lesson.

Before setting up interviews, I met the women and told them that my purpose is to gather life stories and asked them to think carefully whether they wanted to be interviewed or not. I also explained that I was not going to use real names if I

used their stories in my thesis. My explanation varied according to the level of the education of the interviewees. For women who could understand what a PhD and a thesis means I explained directly what my purpose was. To some I said I am writing a 'book' for an 'exam'. Some women asked me whether the purpose of my research was to write for a newspaper and I had to further explain the 'exam'.

I was little anxious when I visited the other two areas. I sensed the uneasiness in my family about going to another area to do interviews. One request of my husband was 'not to ask "provocative questions" and not to give advice if women talk about family problems because if husbands found out, that might create trouble'. I explained that I know what I should do and should not do.

People who helped me to get in touch with interviewees' in Badulla and Hambantota at first thought I wanted to interview women who have difficult lives. I explained that I wanted to interview any woman who would agree to do an interview. They also wanted to know what kind of information I was expecting from my interviewees because they wanted to explain to interviewees before taking me to meet them. I asked them to tell the interviewees I was interested in knowing their life story from childhood.

Another issue I had to confront was my dress code. In Colombo, when I visited the mixed school to get permission to do interviews, I was wearing trousers as I normally do and I sensed that there was an expectation I would dress in a sari

when doing the interviews. I inquired from a female teacher and she said it would be better to wear a sari. Her explanation was if I wore a sari it would be better because I am a lecturer. I realised that the teachers wanted to establish a power relation between the students and me as between them and the students. I said I thought wearing a sari was not necessary because I was just going to have a conversation with the students and finally they agreed with me.

When I went to my colleague's house in Badulla to live and conduct the interviews, my colleague strongly advised me not to wear trousers while I was there because women wearing trousers are looked down on by the villagers and it might hinder my research. Therefore I took some long skirts and rubber slippers to wear while going around the village. This helped me to look like I was one of them. When I met his family members for the first time, I felt a little tension because of my anxiety about the kind of reception I would get from them. It disappeared soon when I joined them in cooking lunch. Later they told me that they were worried that they may have to wait on and serve food and drink to this woman from Colombo who would do nothing but stand around with her hands crossed. It was not difficult for me to get incorporated into the village life in Badulla, as I grew up in a village in Walapane, near the Badulla District and close to Deniya.

I decided to wear trousers in Hambantota as I felt that I was an outsider there. I stayed at the regional centre of Sarvodaya and thought because of that I was not going to offend anyone in particular. I also assumed that the people in

Hambantota would not find wearing trousers offensive as this area was subjected to colonial influence and also frequently visited by both local and foreign tourists. However, every time I visited the village, a group of boys and some men whistled and shouted behind me and demanded my trousers. Gayan, a small boy I became friendly with asked me why I did not wear dresses like other women. I was taken back a bit, but decided to keep wearing trousers because I did not want to give in.

In Badulla I had to confront some other tensions too. During one interview in Neluwa, another woman came and sat with the interviewee and me. I explained that I do not want to do the interview in front of others and asked the interviewee to ask her to leave. Later I came to know that this woman has spread a story that I was there to stir trouble again as during the 1980s insurrection. However I had finished the interviews in Neluwa by that time and was about to go to Deniya. Fortunately, the story did not cause any trouble. My companion (who introduced me to interviewees) advised me not to carry a file or anything that looked as if it contained documents because people might think that I was a government agent collecting information on people's income and they might refuse to talk to me. At that time the government was reconsidering cutting the amount of money given to low income families under Samurdhi, a government aid-programme. Hence I had to be careful when I asked interviewees about sources of family income.

I was concerned about establishing my relationship with interviewees. With my experience I knew that in Colombo calling women by name or their title (Miss/Ms

or Mrs.) was easier than in the other areas. As is the common custom in many areas, I used kin titles to address interviewees in Badulla and Hambantota and sometimes in Colombo. I used the term *Amma* (mother) for older women and *akka/nangi* (elder sister/younger sister) and *duwa* (daughter) for the other interviewees. This helped to create trust and a friendly relation between interviewees and me.

Being accustomed to the customs, habits and traits of villagers in rural areas in Sri Lanka and to the urban life also was a plus point for me as a researcher. I was not a total stranger for the interviewees. Nevertheless, I sensed that my career as a lecturer and studying in United Kingdom made many women believe that I was different from them. In Badulla and Hambantota, women tried to be polite in front of me. They tried to be nice to their children when their children nagged them. They also tried to use formal Sinhala instead of the colloquial Sinhala they normally use in the area.

Some women were a bit tense about taping the interview. In Colombo only two women were concerned about interviews being taped and one woman out of these two did not agree to tape the interview even after my explanation. She was concerned that if I allowed my tapes to be used by others, someone might recognise her voice. However in Badulla when interviewees saw the micro cassette recorder I carried around they relaxed. Nevertheless, I had to convince some interviewees that a micro cassette could not be put into a standard cassette and listened to by others. One elderly woman refused to take part after

my explanation. She later told my colleague's mother that she almost fainted when thinking of talking of her impoverished life to a stranger. However, the other elderly women were enthusiastic of being interviewed. One woman asked me whether I could give a copy of the cassette to her.

I usually began the interviews by telling them 'let's talk about your life and to begin with tell me when and where you were born'. The educational level and exposure to outside areas other than home and birthplace of the interviewees had a significant impact upon the telling of their life stories. I observed that the higher the educational level, the easier it was to speak more coherently and to understand my indirect questions clearly. Many women asked me what is the value of knowing their life stories. Sometimes, after giving me a piece of information, some said 'I don't know whether this important' or 'am I talking rubbish?' I kept a mental note on what the interviewees talked about and if I felt I needed more information or they did not talk about the matters I was interested in, I asked indirect questions.

I also noted that women specially sacrificed their time and stayed at home to be interviewed. Many interviewees told me 'I had to go for weeding or put soil around chilli plants but I stayed today to talk with you' or either 'if I was not talking with you I would be doing this or that by this time'. It should be noted here that one man in Neluwa said that it is women who carry the burdens of families and do everything. Nevertheless, they agreed to sacrifice the time they could make earning a living or doing their daily domestic chores. This showed me that the



interviews were important for these women as well as they were for me perhaps because they realised it gave them a chance to have their voices heard.

One of the constraints I felt while doing the interviews was the need to do a lot of prompting at times. Women sometimes wanted to know what answer I expected from them. I had to explain that I am not looking for answers but information.

There were moments when I prompted some interviewees asked me what exactly I want to know. I explained what I want to know is not important and what is most important is what they want to say. Sometimes some women misunderstood my indirect questions. For example when I asked 'can you tell me how was your relationship with your father?' some responded 'oh it was like father and daughter' because the Sinhala word for relationship (*sambandhaya*) is also used to describe a love or sexual affair. More elaborate explanations were needed on the question in such instances.

Contrary to the women I met in Badulla, women I met in Hambantota and Colombo were sharp and not shy about being interviewed. I observed that women in Hambantota are familiar with being interviewed because of the development work carried out by several non-governmental organisations in that area. Some women said they were interviewed several times by some researchers. They were not shy about talking of their lives and some talked about their bad experiences as if they were routine and without showing many emotions whereas women in Badulla were often emotional.

Another fact that should be noted here is that I observed that interviewees from Colombo and Badulla were cautious when they talked about their hardships, bad experiences or bad familial relationships whereas women from Hambantota did not mind voicing what they felt. Though it is difficult to assess the reason for this, I believe that the main reason is women in Hambantota were not shy about talking such matters. It is also highly likely that women in Colombo and Badulla internalised the saying '*gei gindara pitata epa*' (do not discuss family problems with outsiders) more strongly.

Interviewees in Colombo did not ask any questions after my explanation of the purpose of research. Nevertheless, some women from Hambantota wanted know what benefits they would receive out of my interviews and many of them were very inquisitive about the nature of my research unlike the women from Badulla. The reason for this, I believe is that women in this area are used to being interviewed by developmental agencies in order to provide economic opportunities.

However, I strongly sensed that both in Badulla and Hambantota women expected that there would be some benefit for them out of these interviews. In a way I believe this was right because the interviews were emotional outlets for many women. Unlike in the other areas, during the interviews almost all the women Badulla were in tears at some points. Mentioning death of family members, hardships of life, or attempts to pretend the abuses they faced as simple moved them to tears. There were times I said to some interviewees that

we could stop the interview if they wished, but none of them said yes. They shared their sorrows, fears, anxieties and hopes with me. I was burdened with the ethical concerns that I was distressing the interviewees for my own purposes and therefore what I was doing was wrong. I was emotional at some points because some anecdotes bore similarities to my own life experience and I felt and touched by their pain if as it was my own. Nevertheless, it strengthened my purpose, seeking a better understanding of Sinhala women's lives.

### **Transcribing / translation**

According to Barbara Tuchman, the real difference in research in contemporary history and research in past history is in the stance and the intent of the historian.

She says:

Where does he stand in relation to the events? Is he writing from inside or out, as participant or as observer? Is the intent basically apologia, or an attempt to collect the whole story and stand back from it so that he can see it in the round? The answer determines the research, or rather what is done with it, for what finally counts is not the research *per se* but what you do with it after you got it (Tuchman, 1996:95).

The process of writing up based my research is influenced by being an insider.

In other words, I was able to integrate and understand the stories of the interviewees as a woman from the same community and, as a woman who shares the constructed meaning of the 'Sinhala Woman.' However, in my view, I am an observer and outsider too because of my privileged position of having the necessary theoretical understating to unravel the meanings of the constructed identity through the life stories presented to me by other women. Hence I stood back from the stories, looked at the various discourses tangled in those life

stories and hidden meanings of every pause, silence, tear and laughter of the interviewees.

Nevertheless, it was a difficult task. I completely transcribed and translated five interviews from the three areas. Having experienced how time consuming this was I decided to half transcribe the rest of the interviews. On the basis of translated interviews and by listening to all the tapes I designed a list of themes and divided them into sub topics. All the interviews were transcribed in point form under these themes and subtopics. Whenever I heard a piece of conversation, which I felt worth quoting, I transcribed the whole piece. Though I realised I have been selective, the strategy was to tease out the ideas and explain things where it was necessary.

However, the main limitation this study faced was translating the quotations of Sinhala publications and transcribed data from Sinhala to English. Three out of sixty six interviews were conducted in English. Two women were not fluent in Sinhala as their first language is English and the other suggested to talk in English because she said since my thesis will be written in English, talking in English would be more suitable and I respected her view.

Maria Birbilli, (2002) states that when collecting data in one language and presenting in another, the translator's linguistic competence and knowledge of the culture are among the facts that affect the quality of translation in social research. Phillips (1960 in Birbilli 2002) says this is 'in absolute terms an

unsolvable problem' which results from the fact that 'almost any utterance in any language carries with it a set of assumptions, feelings, and values that that the speaker may or may not be aware of but that the field worker, as an outsider usually is not.' However, in my case, it was not a difficulty being an insider. However, this does not mean that I have not encountered problems when translating.

According to Gerding-Salas (2000), the most frequent difficulties translators face are of a semantic and cultural nature and another problem is 'not found terms'. The writers cited in Maria Birbilli's (2002) article suggest that on occasions where two languages do not offer direct lexical equivalencies, researcher's efforts should be directed 'towards obtaining conceptual equivalence without concern for lexical comparability'. I have encountered both problems and tried to find the nearest common sense interpretation and provided more explanations in footnotes where I thought it was necessary.

Another problem I encountered was women's 'roundabout' way of talking about matters they thought they did not have to explain because I would understand perfectly or with a topic they found difficult to talk about openly. This frequently happened when menstruation, sex or sex related topics and their relationships with boy friends were discussed. For example if a woman said she thinks 'women are filthy' and when I asked her to explain why she thought so she would say '*eyi māse wenawane*' (a direct translation would mean – why! it happens monthly). I have had to encounter the same experience with the interviewees who spoke in English. For example a quotation I have cited in the third chapter

chapter says: 'That is telling the brothers you will have to look after your sisters. It is not just a meaningless thing. In a nice subtle way, told the brothers, your friends will come but they (brothers) must look af...[after](their sisters) you must look after the sister.' What she actually meant here is that ceremony of puberty signals to the brothers that they have to be cautious and keep their eyes open in order to prevent an intimate relation developing between his sisters and his male friends. She did not elaborate this because she knew I would grasp the meaning. However, at such instances I was able to pick up the full meaning and implications and used my knowledge of understanding to interpret what the interviewees actually said.

According to Honig (1997, in Birbilli 2002), a literal translation (translating word by word) could perhaps be seen as doing more justice to what participants said. However, as Birbilli says, at the same time it can reduce the readability and understanding of the text. A good example is lack of articles in the Sinhalla language. We use the word *eka* (one) as a prefix or suffix when talking about a single objects or subjects (A car – *car eka*, A fridge – *fridge eka*, a child – *eka lamayek*). If translated word by word it would mean car one, fridge one or one child. Hence there was a need to be careful when translating published articles and the transcribed speech of interviewees.

According to Kay Standings (1998) translating the transcribed interviews into a more suitable and acceptable form for an academic piece of writing is problematic. In her experience, by tidying up (editing) the transcripts of the

interviews conducted in English, Standings states she homogenised the women's voices by making them all sound (or read) the same way. She further states 'I took away their own (and my own) distinctive way of speaking, which reflects their background and culture, and made standard English the 'normal' means of communication'. My own experience of translating Sinhala to English was the same as Standing's experience. I felt not only the regional and class difference in Sri Lanka, but also the cultural difference in using the English language as a form of speaking in both Sri Lanka and Britain. Though the interviewees who spoke in English were fluent in the language, their English was Sri Lankanised and Sinhalafied.

Therefore, I decided not to look for more elegant words because I felt it would destroy the Sri Lankan essence that was presented in the quotations, but tried to translate my quotations into good everyday English as it is essential to present a meaningful piece of writing. I have paid attention to the intended function of the quotations (Rossman and Rallis: 1998 quoted in Birbilli, 2002) and worked to provide the best possible meaning and correct message of the quoted articles and interviews. Therefore, whenever I encountered difficulties I consulted a native English speaker to grasp the meanings of the words I was intending to use and assessed the possible meanings to find the nearest equivalent.

In addition to the interviews I have drawn statistical data to conceptualise my findings and using them has not always being easy.

## Using statistical data

A study done by Franzinetti (1991) shows that current definitions of European Community and the United Nations on work, employment, activity and inactivity are inaccurate in storing statistical data and therefore problematic for women as they do not represent the actual situation of women. Though quantitative data are valuable and important for research, I found using statistical data published by the Department of Statistics for this study was problematic. Even though the primary research method in this study was qualitative, presenting numbers and percentages were important where it was necessary. However, as the fourth chapter will show, using statistical data to conceptualise women's work was a problem until the 1970s (Risseeuw: 1991). As Risseeuw points out the data either did not represent or misrepresented the women's contribution to the Sri Lankan economy in colonial and postcolonial times. The validity of using statistical data in this instance diminishes, as it can be not said to reflect the actual situation.

Another problem I encountered when using statistical data was the universality of the statistical data. The statistical data includes every ethnic group and, except in a few situations, which have no importance to this study, there was no separate data on individual ethnic groups. The population surveys after 1970s were not extended to the Northern areas, which are under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and is largely comprised of the Tamil population. Nevertheless, it is generally assumed that the data adequately



represents the situation of the majority ethnic group as it comprises 75% of the population.

### **Chapter organisation**

This thesis is primarily based on data gathered through life histories and the chapters are organised according to the life cycle approach and will start from childhood and proceed into older age.

The second chapter is important in two ways: a) as the first stage of the life cycle, i.e. childhood and b) as a basis for grounding the themes that intertwined in this thesis. Therefore it discusses what are the decisive factors that make girls imagine that they are different from boys, focusing on family, school, social relations outside the family and the wider culture. Family as the primary space of people's lives plays a crucial role in generating power relations within the structures of a society. Therefore this chapter will discuss how the relationships between family members generate unequal power relationships and what girls internalise through their exposure to this process. School is a major space in many children's lives. They spend a significant part of their time in school and it has an important impact as a major institution of learning. Here, the chapter focuses attention on the taught curriculum and children's interactions in Sri Lankan schools. In my contention that, both impose social values and norms that prevail in society in general and strengthen unequal gender relations children experience at home. Experiences in interacting outside the family are very important, as this is where internalised behaviour will be tested and assessed.

This chapter will show how limited access to social life outside the family makes girls understand that they have a different place and role within the community. Culture is a key factor within all the parameters discussed above because of the role it plays on 'deciding' social habits, values and norms. Hence the chapter will give an insight to the culturally appropriate patterns of behaviour for Sinhala women, which will be intertwined in the following chapters.

The third chapter focuses attention on the attainment of puberty, which is a turning point in Sinhala women's life cycle as the junction that decides women's transition from childhood to adulthood. Various writers have attempted to analyse the ritual of puberty and its social meaning, nevertheless, I propose that they analysed the ceremony of puberty at a macro level and did not attempt to examine it in terms of gendered experience. Hence this chapter will critically analyse the research on the ceremony of puberty among Sinhalese using the reflections of women on the ceremony and what they have been told in order to examine how the ceremony reifies and reinforces gender difference. Connecting with the Foucauldian idea of self-surveillance this chapter will provide an understanding of the contemporary Sinhala girls' lives within the context of being a 'big girl'.

The fourth chapter questions the roots of 'tradition' which provide meaning to the place of Sinhala women as they enter puberty within the community to show how this imagined place is socially constructed. It will also discuss how women's access to the spheres other than home is determined by the two sets of

ideologies, namely, the colonial social, religious values and points of view of male colonial officers, and the ideologies, social values and norms of the 'imagined' pre-colonial Sinhala Buddhist culture and tradition, which surfaced with the growth of nationalism in the early twentieth century. Building on the analysis of 'invented tradition', I will argue that the colonial view and the nationalist view were in accord where women were concerned.

The fifth chapter will discuss how women's internalised ideas of being a female in Sinhala community in post independence period affect their adult life. In order to argue that the developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which is rooted deeply within the community, constructs the contemporary 'Sinhala woman' and constrains her, I will explore four main areas, namely, education, paid work, politics and the family/sexuality to analyse the situation of women in the post independence period. Within this discussion the thesis will examine the concept of modernisation and individualisation in relation to Sinhala women.

The sixth chapter discusses older women in Sri Lanka, a subject which has received very little attention in previous research. The chapter will discuss how not having access to resources in their earlier life has deprived them of making free choices and how, even though older women prefer living with the family of children as is the custom, it puts them in a dependent position and constrains them. The chapter will also examine the role of the state and the non-

governmental organisations in caring for older people as the primary organisations, which work to better older people's lives.

Finally the conclusion will sum up the key findings of previous chapters and evaluate the consequences of the gender construction of Sinhala women. It will also discuss the measures that have been taken to change the situation of women in Sri Lanka and the results of those measures.

## Chapter Two

### Boys are boys, girls are mothers and wives

Everybody knows that men and women are different but behind this knowledge lies a certain uneasiness: how different are they? What is the extent of the difference? What significance does it have for the way male and female behave and are treated in society? (Ann Oakley, 1972:9).

As Oakley points out, it is very important to understand what causes the difference between men and women in any society because it may have an influence on their rights as human beings. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to begin analysing the Sri Lankan scenario from the particular point of view of the interviewees and their reflections on pre-pubescence will set the background for succeeding chapters. Understanding childhood is crucial because this is where a child begins to realise his/her place in the society in which he/she lives. Social institutions such as family and school, and the interaction within and between these institutions and the customs, norms and traditions which govern that interaction, tell a child the place she/he has in the society she/he inhabits. Hence this chapter will discuss the narration of Sinhala girls' life experience within the family, outside the family and in school and identify the decisive factors that make girls understand themselves to be different from boys. It is important to note that the narratives of the lives of interviewees contain what they remember of their past and present. The continuity of those memories shows that they have a large impact on the shaping the lives of those women. The interviewees' memories of

childhood strongly indicate that far from being passive, the interviewees were active in observing and learning and interpreting the social world around them.

Bronwyn Davis (1989) suggests that positioning of children in society is facilitated by the interactions with others whom a child encounters and by the discursive practices they learn in which bipolar maleness or femaleness is embedded. It is evident that the interviewees were keen observers and active learners when they were children and from what they learned and observed, they made their own sense of culture and continued to remake it during the interview. The discussion in this chapter shows that in their childhood, girls realise and internalise that they are different from boys and men. When they reach one of the most important events in their life, puberty, girls have already registered in their minds that they have a distinctive place in the family and in society.

To investigate the ways in which the girls learn and realise these differences and the subsequent power relations between men and women I will look at three different spaces that are important in childhood: the home, school and interactions with the world outside home. It is also equally important to discover the factors dominant within the Sinhala community in creating and maintaining this difference. The life stories of the interviewees provide ample evidence to argue that 'culture and tradition' have a strong influence in creating gender differences irrespective of class, age or regional boundaries though the impact is varied. Hence this chapter will examine what influence 'culture and tradition' has on creating the identity of Sinhala Women.

## Understanding of the family

For many children, the very first place of experiencing social values is the family. The family cannot escape the social values and norms embedded in the society and the familial relations are woven according to them and therefore the home situation influences the way men and women behave. Within this parameter, in a typical Sinhala family, a child's relations with family members are important in creating her or his identity. From the accounts of interviewees on their life as a little girl, four themes have emerged. The different power relations between the sexes, different gender roles in the family, a different set of restrictions for girls and the heterosocial nature of the community were identified as the most powerful factors that girls internalise in their understanding that they are different from the other sex.

When comparing the accounts of interviewees on their mother and father it reveals how the girls understand and internalise the unequal power relations between the mother and father.

A: We were scared of father. If we had anything to tell him, we let him know that through our mother.

Q: Why?

A: I don't know, he never hit us but I don't know. [...] He scolded me but never hit. All of us were scared of him, but I don't know why (Seena, age 36, Colombo/translated.).

As is typical in many societies around the world, in Sri Lanka the father is considered as the chief figure of the house. The majority of the interviewees expressed the same feeling about their father. The children are expected to respect his authority and be obedient to him. Though this is expected from both

sexes girls undergo a different experience. Not only do they have to respect and be obedient to him but they also have to serve him.

Because he is the head of the family, we specially serve him food first and we treat him with lot of respect [...] We bring everything to him. Even the tea and the food. When he finishes eating we take the plates away and wash them. It (serving the father) comes from early times.[...] He is the head and we also have to treat both father and mother well. But we treat father better than mother. However, mother eats later and that is how the women are being shaped from the beginning (Ruwini, age 26, Hambantota/translated).

Here Ruwini justifies men's different status by saying that is how it has been 'from early times'. In other words many people believe that what is in practice today was in practice a thousand years ago and therefore it is the Sinhala tradition.

The girls see how their mothers and elder sisters serve the father and that makes them feel that father is a special person. The majority of the Sinhalese accept the Buddha's teaching to pay respect to parents and elders. However, as Ruwini observed what the girls see in practice is, their father being served before the mother and how their mother waits on to serve him. From this primary observation, many children infer two things: that their mother is less important than their father is and secondly that women are less important than men generally.

In addition, fathers have the authority to punish girls if they defy him. Most of the interviewees said their fathers were strict. According to Seela (age 41, Badulla) her father severely punished his children for the slightest misdeed, so they did not like him much. At the same time the children could not defy him if he said, 'don't go to school today.' Hansi (age 41, Hambantota) another interviewee said



that the girls used to retreat to the kitchen or bedrooms when father came home and never looked directly in his face.

Girls' experience in familial relationships also points out to them that women are the nurturers. Even though they said they were scared of the father on the one hand they remember their fathers as also being loving, caring and good because they are seen as the providers. Almost all the interviewees said they were either scared of or respected the father though he was not strict. The fear and respect stems from the idea that he is the protector of the family because he is the provider. Therefore he has the authority to be vigilant about their behaviour and punish them if necessary. In Deesha's (age 16, Colombo/translated) own words: '...and daddy thinks there is no one above him. He always says if go over him no one can stay in his house anymore. He feels so because he is the head of the home, and thinks everyone should listen to him. Especially our mother because mommy doesn't work, (paid work) he thinks mommy should be under him.'

Not only does he have an authoritarian place in the family, he is also free from the responsibility of day-to-day domestic drudgery. Apart from an interviewee from Badulla, all the others said the father or husband helped with domestic work but the data show that it is not an equal sharing. Deesha (age 16, Colombo) and Dilu (age 17, Colombo) both from upper middle class families in Colombo said their fathers would help the mother in the kitchen or with cleaning if there was no servant. This strengthens the little girl's idea of father being the provider and mother being the nurturer. They remember their mothers cooking, feeding and

taking care of them. The interviewees did not mention that their mothers provided economically for the family.

A: I think our father is very valuable. I consider father is nobler (*utum*) than my mother. We [...] mm [...] because he works hard to maintain us. When think, it is in only in our family [...] that there is more unity in our family. We do not have a close relation with other relatives, because of that [...] mm [...] We live under father's orders.

Q: Now, doesn't mother help with the work in chena (shifting field) and the rice field?

A:(She) does. Both of them go together [...] both of them [...]

Q: Does father help with the domestic work?

A: Yes he does too

Q: How?

A: mm [...] now if there is no work in the fields and only if the food is not prepared, when we (women) were not able to be at home to cook, he cooks (Rasi, age 15, Badulla/translated).

Rasi's (age 15, Badulla) mother works in the fields together with the father. Both of them go in the morning and come back late in the evening. However, her mother has no hand in taking the crops to be sold in the fair in Badulla town and so she does not see her mother as economically productive. What Rasi said about her parents' show that she has grasped the idea father is superior than mother and should be well respected.

Many interviewees used the term mother in plural form [Ammala (mothers)] when they were referring to parents or family in general. What the girl child experiences is her mother being pivotal to the family. Mothers spend most of their energy and time on the family therefore practically girls are closer to their mothers. Mothers also scold and beat girls but there is more physical and mental

contact between them and daughters and they are more available and approachable than fathers. Hence in a girl's mind, a mother is associated with the private sphere while a father is associated with the public sphere. In other words, though their mothers were farmers or paid workers and played roles other than being mothers, what the girls remember is how mothers took care of them and nurtured them, and how their fathers went to work everyday to earn money to maintain them. They do not remember fathers as people who did domestic work. Fathers were always linked to the world outside home.

However, the picture is somewhat complex and it seems that class, education and urban/rural differences have an impact on deciding the relations between the girls and their fathers. It seems that compared to the pre-pubescent years, girls' relationship with their fathers changed after they attain puberty. There was a physical closeness when some girls were small. Some girls even slept in the same bed with the father when they were small. However, that closeness gradually lessens when the girls grow up. Except one girl, the interviewees from Badulla or Hambantota did not remember their fathers as having been friendly whereas many interviewees from Colombo remembered their fathers as friendly. In middle class and educated families girls are friendlier with their fathers. Nevertheless, except a young interviewee, all the women said they did not tell everything to their fathers. What being friendly meant for them was not getting beaten or scolded by fathers. Most of the girls from Colombo said their fathers were not strict and they were not scared but they respected their fathers. However, a very few said that they could discuss their private feelings with their

fathers. Overall, it seems that the father has a distant place in girls' lives regardless of whether he is being strict or friendly and he is the most respected figure in the family.

The other area where the girls learn different power relations in the family is the relation between the male and female siblings. The narratives of interviewees report boys in families having authority over girls. The girls who have brothers also observed that there is covert favouritism and preference for the boys in the family and they did not have to do domestic work as the girls did.

The boys have fewer responsibilities at home and the girls have to help with cooking, washing, cleaning and sometimes taking care of younger siblings at home. The older interviewees said that they were kept from school to take care of siblings and the cooking in order to allow parents to do farming. Some said they wanted to go to school and felt sad about dropping out: they had no choice but to obey their parents. In rural areas, boys do also perform domestic tasks such as cooking, drawing water and bringing firewood. However, when the young girls are at an age of managing such tasks they have to do the bulk of the domestic work. The eldest girl has more responsibilities than the younger girls do in the family. According to Podi (age 54, Badulla) because she was the eldest, she had to work in the fields with her parents and when not doing so had to look after younger siblings and cook. In urban areas, it seems except in working class families, boys seldom help with domestic work. It is been customary in rural areas to keep children at home to help with cooking, to take food to workers, cleaning and taking care of younger siblings because the older people are busily

involved in farming activities such as ploughing, planting and reaping harvest. However, the young interviewees from rural areas said their parents do not try to keep them at home to do domestic work as in the past when planting or harvesting. In urban areas also the situation is different today and girls spend more time on studies than on domestic work. Due to the high competition in passing ordinary level and advanced level exams, they go to private tuition classes after school and at home spend more time on studying though they help with cleaning and tidying the home. It seems the situation has changed for the younger generations with parents' ambition to provide a good education for girls as it will be shown in the fifth chapter.

Apart from the difference of involvement in domestic tasks girls see that the boys have more power within the family than themselves, especially the elder brothers.

Even though (brothers) did not advise [...] really even if we have not been told [...] we knew [...] of brothers [...] in the family, I have three. Among them one brother works in Hambantota post office. He is a bit strict. Really, since from the days of schooling [...] now after we lost father, that brother is like a father to us. So even now, he doesn't tell us directly anything. Even he doesn't tell, most of the time we know how he wants us to behave... most of the time brother is very very strict. When I was living in parental home [...] I remember when I was small [...] because one of my sisters had cut my hair short, that brother tied my sister's hair to the key on the door. If something had happened he beat us, kicks, just like that he was very strict. So we knew that it is because girls need to be disciplined. [...] After father died that brother gave us protection. If we went out, mother or sisters can't follow us all the time, so it's the brothers kept an eye on us. [...] Most of the time we were under that brother. Even today, though married, we have something like a respect for him... I am telling you, still I am a bit scared of him. (Laughed) (Rani, age 34, Hambantota/translated)

It seems Rani's situation is most common to girls who have elder brothers. Next to the father brothers have most authority over girls. They keep watch on girls to

see whether they behave well. They can beat girls if they 'do not behave well'. One girl said she is not scared of her father but scared of her brothers because they are strict and if her brothers were not in the area their friends spy on her for them. When I was in Hambantota, I went with three teenage boys to see the windmills erected as a pilot project to generate electricity and to collect some wild berries growing abundantly around that area. While we walked we saw two girls around nine years of age walking together. One girl was very fair and was wearing a skirt slightly above her knees. It turned out that the other girl was one of the boy's sisters. The boys were in front of me and I heard the brother saying to the other boys 'Her (sister's friend's) character is not good and I have told her not to associate with her. Wait till I get home.' This incident and the other accounts of the interviewees' show how the brothers' keep control over girls' lives. They are also watchful about how girls fulfil their domestic tasks. Taru, (age 42, Badulla) recalled how her brothers used to check the bottom and inside of the pots in which they kept water. The girls in the family were asked to clean the pots and scrape the inside of the pots to keep them dirt free and if the pots were dirty brothers scolded and hit the girls.

Brothers can also impose restrictions on girls. According to Priya (age 25, Colombo), when they (she and the elder sister) wore a dress her mother used to ask them to show it to the cousin brother<sup>8</sup> (father's sister's son). He would say 'it

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<sup>8</sup> The kinship terminology of the Sinhalese is as following:  
 Seeya and Achchi (grand father, grandmother)  
 Amma and appachchi or tattha (mother, father)  
 Duwa and putha (daughter and son)  
 Leli and bana (daughter in law and son in law)  
 Akka and aiyya (elder sister and elder brother)  
 Nangi and malli (younger sister and younger brother)

doesn't matter if it is another girl but this dress is not suitable for a sister and good if it is a bit longer' at such times their mother asked them to wear trousers.

A very few interviewees said their brothers are like friends. Yet, brothers could decide what they wear, where they go or with whom they socialise. None of them said they could do the same to their brothers.

Although generally there are no overt signs of son preference and the Sinhala community accepts that boys do better than girls it also seems that boys attract more favourable attention in the family than girls.

Mother seems to favour my brother a lot. One thing is he is very bright. When she praises us in front of someone she praises him a lot. When she gives food he always gets the lion's share. Because there is a little comparison between me and my brother, from the beginning I was not close to my mother (Amali, age 25, Colombo/translated)

Her mother's attitude was that the brother studied well and went to the university but she assumed Amali's A' level results would be not good even though she had good results in her O' levels. She gleefully reported her results were better than her brother's was even though she did not study as hard as he did. According to Amali this special attention and the comparison had an impact on her and it led to her distancing herself from her mother. Priya's (age 25, Colombo) father died of

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Minipiri and munupura (granddaughter and grandson)

Loku appachchi/ loku tattha/mahappa (father's elder brother)

Bāppa (father's younger brother)

Māma (mother's brothers.[loku māma-elder brother/ podi māma-younger brother])

Nandā (father's sisters [loku nandā-elder sister, podi nandā-younger sister])

Loku amma (mother's elder sister)

Punchi amma (mother's younger sister)

Children of loku appachchi, bāppa, loku amma and punchi amma are blood (parallel) cousins and marriage between blood cousins is prohibited.

Children of nandā and mamā are called Nena [female] and Massina [male]. They are cross cousins and cross cousins are allowed to marry.

The common practice among Sinhalese is addressing the blood cousins and cross cousins by the same terms we use for sisters and brothers.

cancer when she was seven months old. The grandmother who came to look after them said they lost their father because they had sinned in a previous life. Therefore, the girls should serve their brother. So she washed his clothes. Whenever they had sweets they were given to the brother to share out. When relatives brought gifts, the brother could choose first. Her sister was unhappy and rebelled because she was older than the brother. Even the grandmother did not always ask the eldest sister to serve the brother, because she was the eldest and the brother too respected her as the eldest in the family. This is primarily due to the respect for age as this chapter discusses later. However, Priya has always been advised to serve the men in her family, with consequences, as can be seen in a later chapter, for her marriage. According to Neetha (age 57, Colombo) boys in her family were loved more than the girls. Special food was made for the boys. She explained it by saying that the elder brother was born after the two girls and the family was very happy to have a son. The girls did not dwell on the special treatment afforded their brother. However the fact that she still remembers it (she is 57 years old) suggests a lingering consciousness of the difference.

The research for this study shows that the role of the brother is also more or less the same as the father. Brothers also have been seen as protectors and providers. It is an accepted norm in Sri Lanka that older brothers should not marry until the girls in the family are given away in marriage. In the family, it is the brothers who keep surveillance on girls and they have an unquestioned authority to beat or scold girls. Hence the girls learn to be obedient to the male members in the family.



Gagnon and Simon (1974) state that females live in a homosocial world as do males but it is a homosocial world composed both of adult women and peers who primarily value the girl for her ultimate status as wife and mother. They further state: 'In this sense girl is prepared for heterosociality, if not for heterosexuality' (Gagnon and Simon, 1974:56). In my view what they said about adolescents in a western country in mid twentieth century is true of Sinhala society today. The interviewees are closer to their mothers, sisters or aunts or grandmothers in the family than to male members of the family. Hence I would like to argue the close relations with female members of the family prepare Sinhala girls for heterosociality later in their life and the advice they receive from adult females on behaviour is what those women internalised themselves.

Our mother is very good. My friends also say she is good. That means [...] that I can tell her any problem, but some things [...] I don't tell everything to mother [...] but I joke with mother and we are close like friends. (Upsara, age 18, Colombo/translated)

The majority of the interviewees stressed the closeness to their mothers. Only a few women reported they are not close to their mother because she was stricter than their father. The close relationship, it seems, stems from practicalities of childcare. The mother is the person who inquires about their needs. Hence the girls perceive that mother to be more attentive and approachable than the father. Furthermore, it seems that that this differential intimacy is extended to the mother's kin in preference for the father's. In other words, many interviewees said they are more close to their maternal relations than to paternal relations.

However, most of them admitted that they do not tell everything to their mothers. It seems that they are close to their mothers yet apart from them. The reason is that mothers are the main advisers to the girls. The mother tells girls how to behave inside and outside the home. Hence if the girls feel that what happens to them in day-to-day life or their feelings differ from the expected behaviour, they are reluctant to reveal their feelings and possibly face their mothers' disapproval.

Elder brother was not at home. Now, [...] next to mother and father, elder sister mostly acted as the head of the family. I think when small my other sister and me grew up without doing anything wrong because we were more scared of our sister than our mother or father. She acted like an elder.  
(Seena, age 36, Colombo/translated)

In a typical Sinhalese family, the eldest sister has a more influential place than younger sisters or brothers. The interviews show that if the eldest girl is educated or an employee, her opinion is also respected in decision making. The older interviewees who were the eldest in the family claimed they acted like surrogate mothers. They took care of the home and younger siblings in the absence of the mother. According to Kiran (age 22, Hambantota) their childhood was spent at paternal grandparent's house because her parents worked away from home. They suffered a lot because their aunts were cruel. Her elder sister had to do a lot of domestic work and the aunts frequently beat her. Nevertheless, she took care of the younger siblings to the best of her abilities. It seems that this responsible role allocated to the eldest girl in the family has decreased in recent years with increased emphasis on girls' education. However, many girls cannot escape from domestic work completely. They still have to be domestic helpers and more importantly they are also the prime advisors to younger girls in

the family, hence they have to be an example to the younger siblings. An elder sister is expected to conform. More often than not she follows the expected set of behaviour in the family. However, she may have an influence over younger brothers and earn their respect though she is not equal to her elder brothers. Like the rest of the siblings she has to respect and be obedient to the elder brothers.

My sister is quiet. She may be not as good as mother but she also is very good and I can tell anything to her. She advises me a lot. Even if a boy asks to have a love affair I tell my sister. Such things I don't tell my mother. My sister helps the family even though she is married and separated from us. Especially for my education (Disni, age 18, Colombo/translated).

While brothers provide protection, the elder sisters provide guidance and examples of appropriate behaviour. The elder sisters are authoritative but not authoritarian. They advise and take care of their sisters but the sisters have no control over the girls' lives as their brothers do. However, sisters in general provide more moral support than the other family members. Hence the girls are closer to sisters than the other family members and they can talk about their anxieties, hopes fears and day-to-day experiences with their sisters. It seems the bond with the sister closest in age is stronger than with the eldest sister. This is because as discussed the above, the elder sister also wins the respect of the family as an elder brother or parents.

The data suggests that as a general rule, little girls soon recognise the asymmetrical power relations in the family. The father is the head of the family and next to him the brother is the most powerful figure. Women provide service

to them. Men and boys have the power to police the behaviour of women in the family, though mothers and elder sisters advise them on how to behave. Girls' close influences in the family are their mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers.

It seems that the power relations in a Sinhala family are based on dynamics of both gender and age. Though the gender difference is most strong, and has a negative impact on women's place in the family, hierarchy of age, on the other hand seems to have a positive impact on women. The older women earn respect in the family and they have a considerable influence in family affairs.

### **Changes in the family and girls' situation**

In Sri Lanka, family formation has undergone several changes due to economic and social changes of the post independence period. As a result of the imposition of monogamous marriage as the only legal 'civilised' form of marriage polygamy has gradually disappeared and is socially not favoured anymore. Free education increased the number of qualified people and access to job market. Since the process of urbanisation is slow in Sri Lanka many kinds of job opportunities are available only in the few highly urbanised areas and therefore people have to migrate and settle in such areas. As a consequence the number of married children who live away from their parental home is increasing. Some married interviewees in Badulla and Hambantota said they first lived with the husband's parents when they had children and found it difficult to share what they earned with the rest of the family so they built their own home and left.

Some interviewees said though they lived under the same roof, they cooked separately. The households of interviewees in Colombo were mostly limited to parents and two or three children. Another reason for this is that many young people like to break away from parental ties and have their own life. However, it does not mean their relationship with parents is completely severed. Many young women go back to the family for the birth of their children and stay the first three months at the parental home, which is an established tradition. It is quite common for the mother of the wife to come and stay with the couple for a period of time to take care of the young mother and the newborn. Couples with young children very often get the help from mothers to take care of children while they work since finding servants for domestic help is difficult and unaffordable for some and also due to lack of childcare facilities.

The size of the family has also changed due to the implementation of successful planning and propaganda on family planning by the successive governments. Many families tend to have two or three children. Hence, the nuclear family is the most preferred family for many Sri Lankans (Abeykoon, 1995). The average age for marriage for females rose from 20.9 in 1950s to 23.5 in 1970s and steadily went up in subsequent decades (Dallas Fernando: 1975).

As Asoka Bandarage points out:

Higher education, wage employment, urbanisation among other factors have contributed to increasing the average age at marriage for women in Sri Lanka. In 1991, the average age at marriage for women was 24.4 and men 27.9. The late age at marriage in conjunction with wide spread acceptance of family planning have brought down fertility levels over the last few decades. At a total fertility rate 2.39 children per woman and a population growth rate of 1.2% per year, Sri Lanka is considered a demographic success story (Bandarage, 1998:8).

However, it seems this change in the family formation did not have a large influence on changing the role of girls in the family. In other words, the size of the family does not lessen the girl's participation in domestic work. Today parents do not ask young girls to drop out from school to be a substitute for the mother. Yet, they have to learn the same domestic tasks the older interviewees performed as little girls and the domestic tasks are still not evenly divided between girls and boys.

In my understanding from the interviews girls have no ambiguity about their role in the family in the future. They assume they are born to nurture families. It is clear that the majority of women give priority to family life and being a mother. Even the younger interviewees who aspire to higher education and a high profile career are aware of the role assigned to a mother. Dilu (age 17, Colombo) is such a girl who, when she talked about education, mentioned the fact that even women who are not looking for higher education or a job have to be educated. She said that as mothers such women should know how to take care of the health of the family and bring up children properly because, if the world is a cradle, the hand that rocks it is a woman.

Q: How do you find your life as a daughter?

A: Some times I am happy about being a daughter but sometimes I feel sad about it. If being a boy there are no problems to a great extent. It is not so if being a girl. There are problems and a girl is asked not to do this, not to do that, don't follow this [...] a boy is not get beaten at home. It is not so for a girl and they get scolded and beaten (Geetha, age 15, Hambantota/translated)

All the interviewees mentioned a set of restrictions, which will be discussed later in this chapter, to which they are expected to conform. However, it does not mean that boys have a free life either. The main restrictions on boys mentioned by the interviewees were not to associate with bad friends and not to go out after six o'clock in the evening. In contrast to that, there is a well-established set of restrictions for girls, which has a huge impact on deciding girls' place at home and making them obedient and docile. It is important to note here perhaps that this obedience is not voluntary. If the girls do not follow the restrictions the elders can punish them. Hence the threat of abuse is the underlying force that gains the girls' obedience. Girls are aware that they can be verbally/ physically abused if they disobey. No evidence could be found in the interviews about resistance to that authority when girls are small. The resistance emerges later in teenage years in different forms. However, I argue the major impact of these different restrictions that they inculcate in girls behaviour that is different from boys.

There is strong case to argue that when the girls start schooling at age five they already have established that there is a difference between them and boys through their relations in the family and already know they have to behave differently from boys. The interviewees' reminiscences of the time in school show that in all the schools across Sri Lanka, a set of rules to discipline children, attitudes of teachers and, the taught curriculum generate the idea that girls are different from boys not just biologically. Therefore they are treated and expected to behave differently from boys.

## **In school**

According to a study carried out by Swarna Jayaweera, dropout studies on Sri Lankan schools in general found that boys had a slightly higher rate of early leaving than girls. Statistics show that at secondary level, especially at senior secondary level, the participation rates of girls are higher than that of boys (Jayaweera, 1990:100). Needless to say as an institution of learning, school has an important impact upon children. Children learn social values and norms as well as formal subjects in school as an integral part of society. Hence this section will explore the areas already mentioned to examine how they reinforce the difference between Sinhala girls and boys.

Research on school and gender by western writers shows that the school environment reinforces gender differences (Steedman, 1982; Davis, 1989; Archer, 1992; Thorne, 1993). According to a study done by Signorella and Liben (1987) referred in Archer(1992), children are highly knowledgeable about activity stereotypes by kindergarten (age 5-6), and about trait stereotypes by seven to eight years of age and therefore there is little room left for variations in middle childhood. The interviews carried for this study also clearly show that when girls go to pre-school and to primary school they have already internalised stereotyped gender roles and traits through their experience in the family, which is reinforced at school.

Girls and boys don't sit together [...] it is that [...] I don't know why. We [...] but we don't sit together with boys [...] sometimes [...] maybe, otherwise



we are very embarrassed. If boys are sitting on one side the girls are sitting on the other side (Rasi, age 15, Badulla/translated)

In Sri Lanka, there are two systems of schools; single sex and mixed sex schools and girls and boys have to sit separately in mixed schools. Some interviewees said they sat together with boys up to year two (age six) and then they had separate rows for girls and boys. Hence the school promotes gender segregation and it reinforces the idea that girls should keep themselves away from the boys.

A: When I was very small [...] at the time I did not understand things I played with boys. But later when I started understanding things, kept the boys away, didn't like to get them near me even. Earlier there was a dancing [...]

When we were small a dance was taught to us at school. For that we had to hold hands with the boys, so we took a small stick with us. And never hold the hands of the boys and gave them the stick to hold if had to hold hands with them.

Q: Why didn't you let them to hold hands?

A: Don't know (laughs) maybe because embarrassed when I was small or otherwise because didn't like it. Any way at that time [...] boys are not [...] we were not in an age of understanding when we were at four, five, six, seven grades (Rosha, age 16, Badulla/translated).

The girls find it embarrassing to interact with boys at the grades mentioned by Rosha. Many interviewees said they played and talked with boys when they were very little and later they started to play and chat separately. In school, primary teachers seemed to be encouraging them not to mix. According to (Hansi, age 41, Hambantota) children were not allowed to do things together. Once they played with the boys and the principal had beaten them. Nimmi (age 20, Badulla) said the principal in her school sees interactions of boys and girls in a strange way. She does not like girls talking to boys.

Kiran (age 22, Hambantota) said they had separate classes for boys and girls until year nine. This was changed when a monk was appointed as the principal. His opinion was having separate classes for girls and boys were not good to develop friendly relations. As a result of having separate classes she said the girls did not speak to boys at all until they were in year eleven.

Many schools in highly urban areas are single sex schools and the interviewees from such schools said the schools very strongly opposed socialising with boys. There are very few male teachers in girls' schools and boys are not allowed to come into the school.

Yes, we were subjected to very [...] now if there was the prefect's day or something like that held, boys and girls are totally separated in the school [...] That is the nature of our school. That school treats boys as another species of animals (Priya, age 25, Colombo/translated).

Deesha (age 16, Colombo) another interviewee said once they had a fair at the school and a banner was put up declaring it was a girls-only fair. Fathers were allowed to come but brothers were not allowed. According to Dilu (age 17, Colombo), she studied in both mixed and single sexed schools and the advice on behaviour was extremely different in the two schools. In her own words, at the girl's school, speaking to a boy was considered as a great crime and was like a disaster. She was involved in a project on AIDS and she had difficulties in talking to boys to get information. Another friend of hers had problems because she was seen in a shop with her father and brother. Hence, in girls' schools interaction with boys in or outside the school is highly discouraged.

The majority of the primary school teachers are women and their attitude on behaviour has a big influence on children. Many interviewees said that teachers encouraged them not to talk with boys. Research done by Gaya de Mel (1994) points out that the responses of the teachers indicates that they promote gender differences in schools because they have been socialised the same way. Her findings are important because they show the ambivalence of women in a society where opportunities are available but at the same time constrained by the social values and norms. According to de Mel, the majority of the primary school teachers accept equality of sexes and reject sex stereotypes. However, they accept the superior status of males in the field of employment and on family relations they are less liberal in rejecting sex stereotypes<sup>9</sup>. A minority of teachers in her research sample did not reject sex stereotypes and did not accept the equality of sexes. Another study done by de Mel (1996) shows that the majority of the female teachers prefer boys as leaders. Hence it is clear that the attitudes of the teachers promotes and preserve the beliefs and values of the community at school.

The school curriculum also promotes and reinforces gender differences. Asoka Jayasena (1991) concludes that the examples presented in text books illustrate the process of cultural and social reproduction through text books and the portrayal of women in school textbooks continues to be depressing. She has examples to show that the textbooks give students a clear demarcation of the

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<sup>9</sup> This is an important phenomenon represented in the interviews done for my study too. Though women are in favour of having equal access to public spheres, many accept sex stereotypes. In the fourth chapter I argue that this was a result of the invention of tradition in the late nineteenth and twentieth century.

roles assigned to men and women. In both Sinhala and English text books there are lessons and illustrations indicating that girls and women perform household work while men go out to work. Also in lessons for various grades while occupations such as nurses, teachers, and weavers are assigned to girls, jobs such as planters, astronauts, postmen, and cricket players are assigned to boys. The text books also promote the ideas such as women are beautiful, feminine, deceitful and easily get frightened while men are masculine, bold and intelligent (Ibid.:5-17).

Thus the experience of the interviewees, and the research already done on schools suggests that the school in Sri Lanka promotes and reinforces gender differences in society. The little girl's experience of being different from boys, which begins at home, is confirmed in the next social institution they encounter, school. This has an impact on future life of the girls. Girls who studied in girls' schools said it was more difficult for them to interact with boys in the university than for the girls from mixed schools. They said it would have been better if they had chances to mix with the boys. The girls from mixed schools said they do not find interacting with men very strange because they were with the boys in school. The consequence of not mixing with boys is that young girls feel embarrassed when they have to play or work together with boys because they feel that boys are different species. This creates barriers and makes it difficult for women to interact freely later in life.

However, for many interviewees their happiest time in life was the time at school. According to them school was a happy joyful place. Though they were subjected to discipline, in school they could make friends of their own sex and interact freely with them. For many interviewees forming friendship with other girls was important because they could confide in their best friends. In that sense it seems it is correct to assume that school provides a sense of independence and freedom though there are restrictions.

It seems that the little girl's world has had only two major spaces. That is home and the school. The school is the major place they could meet and interact with people other than family members and relations. The girls from very rich families in Colombo talked about going to parties, swimming clubs, dances etc. However, that is not the case with the majority of Sinhala girls. As shown earlier, there are restrictions on girls' behaviour in schools too. One interviewee said their teachers told them boys are better than the girls because boys do not shout like girls. Whenever girls flouted rules they were reprimanded. Hence both worlds remind her constantly of her place in society in general.

### **The world outside the family**

I have to keep my problems inside me and have no one to talk to about the problems I have. My family doesn't like me mixing with friends. Not only friends can't mix with any one. And my family doesn't like even sending letters to my friends. Because of that I live like a prisoner (Ruwini, age 26, Hambantota/translated).

Ruwini said she was discouraged from making friends from her childhood. Her case may seem an extreme situation because the majority of the interviewees talked about their friends and some childhood friendships with other girls that continued into adult life. Nevertheless, according to all the interviewees, interactions outside the family (immediate family and the kin), especially with males, were highly discouraged. When they were little girls they were told to study instead of playing outside. Some were beaten for playing instead of studying. This does not mean that they did not play at all. Nevertheless, they were encouraged to play with their own siblings rather than with children from the neighbourhood. The interviewees said they were not barred from playing with boys, however, when asked who the boys were, many interviewees revealed that the boys they played with were either their cousins or children of other relatives. The reason for not playing with boys other than relatives is that they were advised by the elders not to talk with boys.

Children were very often advised not to associate with 'bad' children. When asked what the parents meant by 'bad children' it came up that children belonging to low castes or children not from their own social circle were regarded as bad. Therefore other than gender difference, interactions with children outside the family are controlled by the caste and class dimension too.

Going out is also not encouraged by the family. As one interviewee summed up, it is to school from home and then to home from school. Except in urban areas, there are no children's parks or play spaces to entertain children. According to

many interviewees they have been scolded or beaten for going to neighbouring houses to play. The girls who have brothers said the brothers had few restrictions on going out or playing outside. Brothers could play outside all day long and in villages they could roam around. The only restrictions they had, as mentioned before, was the night curfew and not associating with 'bad children'.

This suggests that a girl's experience in the family and interactions with outside of it is different from that of the boys. Hence in their growing up years girls learn that they have a different place in the family and society and they are expected to behave according to that place. This difference is clearly marked by the set of restrictions that are exclusive to girls within the Sinhala community and the interviewees identify them as '*sampradāya*' (tradition) and part of '*ape sanskrutiya*' (our culture). I argue that the foundation of these restrictions is the perceived sexual vulnerability of Sinhala women. These restrictions are the primary tools that police the behaviour of girls, the aim which is to turn girls into obedient, modest, chaste and virtuous women, control their sexuality and is therefore instrumental in constructing their gender identity. Hence the next section will examine what the restrictions are and how they influence girls.

## Culture

As a daughter? A daughter has more problems than a son. Influences [...] a daughter has to [...] more than a son [...] mm. [...] At home [...] now, a son can do anything. A daughter is not allowed to do everything like that (Kiran, age 22, Hambantota/translated)

This was Kiran's reply for my question 'how is your life as a daughter?' The interviewees talked about a considerable number of restrictions they have been asked to follow as girls. Among them the most prominent restriction is on talking or having love affairs with boys<sup>10</sup>. Girls have been told not to talk to boys more than necessary. They were told not to talk or laugh loud, to sit properly and adjust the dress before sitting down, and not to run. They were not allowed to go out late in the evening especially after six o'clock, go out alone or go out without the permission of an elder. Some said they were not allowed to drape a sarong when bathing<sup>11</sup>. They were encouraged to study rather than to play. They were not allowed to go out with their girl friends to see a film, a drama or on a trip. If girls want to go to see a film either they have to go with the family or with a brother. Most of their outings were either school trips, trips with parents and relatives or visiting relations. Very often, the girls were not encouraged to spend a night out of home, even with close relatives. Strict restrictions are placed on dressing or undressing in an open area. Girls cannot decide on the way they dress. They have to listen to parents, brothers and wear what is acceptable to society. In general, applying makeup, having long nails or short hair is not approved. The girls can wear anything when they are very small, up to age five, but they have to follow the restrictions as they grow up. The dress code becomes especially prominent after puberty.

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<sup>10</sup> The interviewees used the English word affair when talking about their past or present relationships with boyfriends. In Sri Lanka, having a love affair is somewhat different from the West. Most of the time people speculate that the affair would end up in marriage. An affair may be more intimate and sexual or it may be limited to holding hands kissing if the couple have a chance to meet freely or it may be limited to writing letters only. Having several love affairs is considered as bad and if a girl has had several love affairs before marriage, she is seen as having a bad character.

<sup>11</sup> The sarong is men's cloth. Some believe if a girl wore a sarong, she might conceive.



The restrictions are also connected with the *nambuwa* (honour) of parents and the family. According to Amila (age 28, Hambantota) her mother always told the girls they should behave like girls and save the respect of the parents. A girl who does not behave according to the restrictions is considered as a shameless girl and would bring social humiliation to the family. Gaya (age 73, Colombo) an elderly interviewee from a traditional aristocratic family said they used to run on the hills and play around when they went for holidays in their ancestral home, but said in an amusing tone, that her Grandmother always cautioned the girls 'Genu lamai wikunanna tiyena badu', girls are just goods that had to be sold, therefore must be flawless. In other words, telling the girls' that their character must be perfect. The underlying message is that girls have to be careful not to lose their virginity and femininity.

It seems the girls internalise the idea that unlike the boys, girls always tend to do wrong. Therefore they are given strict guidelines to follow in order to be socially accepted. It was clear that during the interviews, interviewees strongly feared that they might be seen as bad characters. When questioned whether they received any advice on how to behave as a girl or whether they had any restrictions, many of the interviewees said no and reported there was no need because their parents and teachers knew they were good and wouldn't do anything wrong. What the interviewees meant by 'good' was that they did not have intimate relationships with boys, and that they were obedient and listened to the parents and teachers. However, when asked about how they dressed or

whether they went out with friends they said they did not do this or that because the girls have been told not to or because they have sensed their family/father/brother would not like it. This shows that what interviewees believe about such restrictions is contradicted by their actual situation as it exists. My data suggests that while talking generalities women did/do not realise restrictions which they have internalised as part of the Sinhala 'tradition and culture.' However, when they constructed more specific memories restrictions had been mentioned.

Therefore, I would like to argue that the socialisation process for girls in and outside the family is different from that of the boys and therefore, as they mature girls already assume that they have been assigned a different role in society and the family.

Really [...] now, we are women no? When being girls [...] especially a girl should know everything about working in the kitchen (Sumi, age 41, Badulla/translated).

One of the most quoted proverbs in Sri Lanka is that a 'woman's luck is in a corner of the kitchen.' As is common in many societies, it is an accepted fact that women's primary role is managing domestic work. Hence little girls are not excluded from domestic tasks. They have to help with cleaning, drawing water, helping with cooking and sometimes taking care of younger siblings. However, if the parents do not earn enough money girls have to be economically productive too. Especially in rural areas many girls help with farming and if not they take care of domestic work and allow the mother to spend more time on farming. According to Saman (age 39, Colombo), she was born as the eldest to a family of

seven children. Her mother had to pluck tea on a nearby estate when the father alone couldn't maintain the family. She cried when she recalled the memory and said she felt very sad because her mother is fair, thin, and with long hair, a very beautiful small made woman. Her mother used to wear long gowns but she had to wear *redda* (a cloth women drape around hips) and *hatte* (blouse) to go to work. Along with studies she did domestic work, marketing and took care of siblings. During the weekends she visited her grandparents to gather *gotukola* leaves (a green leaf eaten as a salad). She tied them into small bundles and sold them to the women who trade in the nearby fair. She continued helping her family even after she got married and left parental house. It is believed that women have traditional duties to raise children and take care of domestic work as mothers and caring for the family and elders is their prime duty.

The interactions outside the family centred on fear and shame. While the men in the family are seen as protectors, men outside the family are seen as dangerous. However, the little girls are not informed why they should not talk to strangers or boys. Instead of explaining why it is simply demanded of girls that they restrict their behaviour. The restrictions are similar in many ways in all three areas where the research has been done. However, there are differences too. Almost all the interviewees from Badulla said they had been told not to speak to strangers or boys. The women from Colombo reported that they had been asked not to have affairs<sup>12</sup> but they were allowed to talk with boys. Some were able to invite boys to their homes as friends. There was a mixed response from the

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<sup>12</sup> I am using the same word used by the interviewees.

interviewees from Hambantota. Some said they could socialise with boys and some said they were not allowed to.

When reading the narratives of interviewees, what emerges is the underlying belief that the factors that discussed are in society as a part of Sinhala cultural traditions and values to safeguard women. Hence it is important to understand the image/s of woman in Sinhala culture. Within Sinhala culture, the social acceptance of women is based on '*lajja*' (shame) and '*baya*' (fear). Women who do anything socially unacceptable will be shamed and therefore they face the fear of being ridiculed. According to Hansi (age 41, Hambantota), her father always told them as girls they should have shame and fear in them and it is the dowry of girls. Very often interviewees mentioned that their parents asked them '*samajayen katandara ahannna epa. Apita lajja karanna epa*' (don't let society spread stories about you and shame us (the family).) Another indication directly related to shame and fear is protecting virginity. The girl who loses virginity before marriage is seen as a woman without fear and shame. Secondly, the culture asserts women are the prime socialisers with children because it is they who spend most of the time with children. Therefore it is their duty to teach the cultural values and traditions to the next generation. Thirdly, women are the symbol of culture. It is mainly through women that the Sinhala Buddhist national identity is manifested as will be shown in the following chapters. Even though women live in an modern era, their access to modernisation is limited because of the constructed identity of the 'Sinhala woman'. Hence unlike men, women have to shape themselves in fear and shame.

Sasanka Perera (1997) claims that 'Sinhala women are merely a repository for cultural knowledge and practices formulated by men'. He refers this situation to the fact that women are prime socialisers and 'cultural archives' of the society. Hence they are not perceived as initiators or creators of culture and not supposed to think but to carry out what tradition has prescribed for them.

Sasanka Perera points out a number of important notions he finds as dominant among Sinhalese as the perceived culturally appropriate patterns of behaviour for women. Firstly, what women should attempt to achieve is their 'correct place' in society, and not equal status with men. Secondly, demanding equal status is not acceptable in terms of Sinhala cultural values. It also seen as an impossibility because of women's physical and psychological differences. Many of the problems the Sinhala society currently face and the cultural deterioration that has occurred have been blamed on women because of their failure, particularly as mothers, to perform traditional duties due to their Westernisation. It is clear that these notions are connected with preserving and implementing the traditional and cultural values both in and outside the home. The general belief is that those traditions and values embedded in Sinhala culture for thousands of years have helped to shape the behaviour of Sinhala women.

## **Conclusion**

The interviewees had mixed feelings about their childhood. Many interviewees very clearly remembered the sufferings of their childhood. Economic hardships were the major causes of suffering for many of them. As a result of parents not

having a steady income and being a member of a large family, some of these girls had to earn money to support the family. Others have suffered from deaths in the family or being separated from the family. Many of the young interviewees said they were not happy because of the restrictions they faced. Some said life was good because they listen to parents and are obedient and as a result do not have to suffer. Nevertheless, the important fact is that almost all the interviewees reported their childhood was more carefree and happy when compared to their life as married women or life after puberty. I argue that the reason for this is that though girls learn the restrictions in their childhood, they neither realise nor do they try to interpret the actual implications of these controls and therefore they do not feel constrained by them until after puberty because it is after puberty that these restrictions become meaningful.

The stories of the interviewees clearly suggest that girls learn to behave and interact differently from boys within and outside the family. In interactions within the family, school and elsewhere, the notion of male superiority and male domination is instilled in girls' minds. Girls internalise that they are secondary to men, which is justified by the community by assigning a 'cultural role' for women. Hence traditions and culture play a strong role in determining women's role, which strengthens the gender differences within the Sinhala community.

Through observation and verbal information, girls internalise that they have a specific role assigned in the 'culture' and it is their duty to protect 'culture' by behaving according to 'traditions'. The data for this study points out that this cultural role is based on two main themes, namely, vulnerability of the female

gender and honour of the family. However, the data also suggests that there are other factors that influence the girls' experience of being female. The most prominent fact is class differences and, urban/rural difference and regional differences emerging as the other factors that are influential. However, my data also points out that though the process of becoming female is neither unified nor universal for Sinhala girls, their internalisation of the importance of behaving according to 'traditions' and 'culture' transcends all other boundaries. Hence the succeeding chapters will explore how image and actuality of Sinhala women's lives are shaped within a framework where politics, the economy and society change over time and vary from one context to another.

## Chapter Three

### Being a 'Big girl'

One of the most striking features of the data is interviewees' memories of attaining puberty and the ceremony which marks it. From the older interviewees to the youngest, women remembered how they felt upon discovering bloodstains and what happened afterwards. This clearly shows that attaining puberty was one of the very important events in Sinhala women's lives. It is also important to note that within the Sinhala community, male puberty does not have the same social importance as female puberty. This is probably due to the fact there are not such 'visible signs' of male puberty, as they do not menstruate. Hence men are regarded as pure. Many western writers state puberty is a transitional period for adolescence (Van Gennep, 1960; Gagnon and Simon 1974; Gross, 2001). As Gross (2001) points out, many writers of today describe it as one of multiple transitions teenagers experience at this age. In the case of the Sinhalese it is important to question why the puberty of females has such an important place in the community if puberty is a transitional period for both sexes.

However, in many non-western countries<sup>13</sup> attaining puberty is a turning point in females' life cycle and rites, rituals and ceremonies mark it.

According to Lalitha Karalliadde Witanachchi, (1999) the event of attaining

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<sup>13</sup> See: Bemba of Zambia: Richards (1956); Rauto and Saniyo-Hiyowe in New Guinea, Zogari in Manan Island: Lutkehaus and Roscoe (eds) (1995).



puberty is of major significance in a girl's life and is second in importance only to her marriage. As this chapter later shows the ceremonial practices vary among the community.<sup>14</sup>

How ever, there are some practices which are central to the ceremony today. Firstly, when a girl attains puberty an astrologer is consulted. He takes into consideration day, the age of the girl and place of occurrence to predict whether her future is going to be fortunate or not and what influence she will have on the fortunes of the family members, especially on the father. Secondly, he will give a date for and time for the ceremonial bath of the girl. Thirdly, the girl will be kept in a secluded place until the bath with another woman as a companion and no male is allowed to see her. Fourthly, a washerwoman will be called to supply the clean linen for the girl while she is confined. Fifthly, the girl will be taken outside and given a ceremonial bath under a milky sap tree or a citrus tree and usually the washerwoman does the bathing. After the bath the girl is covered by a clean white sheet from head to toe and led into the house. Sixthly, the girl

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<sup>14</sup> According to her there is a book titled as *Kotahalu Puwata* (story of puberty), which contains many details of the story of origins of the puberty ceremony. The Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhalese Manuscripts (Folklore Texts and Notes, Sinhlese and English Manuscripts, *Oriental*, the British library) contains several different documents of Kotahalu upata either on Palm-leaf or as hand written texts. The story was of a mythical origin and handed down in oral tradition for a long time. As the author of the catalogue of Hugh Nevill Collection, K. D. Somadasa clearly points out, the story was modified with the changing time. It is very clear that the various versions of the story do not feature some of the modern day practices. These versions do not mention concealing the woman from men's view and only say a hut was erected for her to perform the ceremony. Some versions say foster mothers guarded the woman (queen). It is interesting to note here that there are different versions on purification too. However, it is clear that the practice of today, bathing the woman was not mentioned in the stories as an important ritual. In some stories, the ceremony seems to be more concerned with the purification of the celestial robe mentioned in the story, which was dirtied by the bloodstains.

girl is led into a room with a clay vessel filled with clean water, where she throws back the cloth and looks in the water and sees her image as a woman for the first time since confinement (while in seclusion, the girls are not allowed to look in the mirror). Sometimes girls are made to look at a Jak tree full of fruits and the belief is they would not be barren. Winslow (1980) mentions that in one of the ceremonies she observed the girl was asked to comb her hair and look in the mirror. Finally, the girl emerges from the room dressed with new clothes and jewellery and makes an act of reverence to parents and all the elders at present. Then a feast will take place and all the guests will bring a present to the girl.

The evidence suggests that such ceremonies are very important because they contain significant social meanings and values. According to Van Gennep (1960), rituals of puberty are a process of initiation, separation and incorporation, i.e. a rite of passage. He points out that even though such rites have a sexual nature they are rites of separation from the asexual world, (childhood → adulthood) and they are followed by rites of incorporation into the world of sexuality and, in societies and social groups, into a group confined to persons of one sex or the other. Hence he argues that physiological puberty and 'social puberty' are essentially different and only rarely converge. The first chapter identified how girls find they are different from boys and, as mentioned in that chapter, when attaining puberty girls realise why such a difference exists as they come to realise the attached meanings to the expected social cultural behaviour of

women. Therefore, the main argument in this chapter is though the ceremony of puberty marks a new stage in Sinhala girls' lives, the ceremony is not a unique event but a small part in the whole process of the transition of girls into women and determining their gendered identity. Therefore, bearing in mind the importance of transition, initiation, separation and incorporation, this chapter analyses the social meanings of attaining puberty in Sri Lanka and how social meanings continue to influence and reinforce gender differences.

According to Lutkehaus (1995) early anthropological studies on female puberty rituals ignored the importance of examining them from an individual point of view (or women's point of view) and looked for broader structural understandings. As the main attempt of this thesis is to explore women's lives from women's point of view, this chapter will examine the process of attaining puberty and the ceremony of puberty in Sinhala community, centred on women. First of all, it will discuss the different interpretations of the ceremony and rites and rituals of the ceremony of puberty in order to understand why the views of certain writers differ from mine. To show that the rituals and the rites are not unique, and vary from region to region to I will look at the different information provided by the interviewees. Finally, the chapter will discuss the experience of interviewees and how they faced the transition followed by an analysis to discover whether the meanings have changed along with changing time and structure.

### **Different anthropological interpretations**

Anthropologists have observed the ceremony of puberty among Sri Lankans and provide different interpretations of the ceremony (Yalman: 1963; Winslow: 1980; Good: 1982). It seems that anthropological studies on the ceremony of puberty in Sri Lanka are centred on the ceremony itself and its impact on broader social structures. In other words, even though they refer to the status of women, all these studies examine the ceremony of puberty in relation to social structures such as caste, religion or marriage. Because these studies concentrated on these structures they tend not to examine the social conditions that precede and succeed the ceremony as they impact on the girls at the centre of the ceremony. As stated earlier, in my view, the ceremony is part of a continuous process of the cultural construction of the Sinhala woman and needs to be examined from a different point of view.

Yalman (1963) states that the main issue is the way in which ceremonies centre around female sexuality while male sexuality is not necessarily ritualised. However, he uses this to say the aim of the ceremony of puberty is to protect female purity because it was fundamental to the caste system in Sri Lanka and Malabar as the purity of caste was protected by filiation of the mother. He justifies his argument by pointing to the custom that women were strictly not allowed to have a sexual relationship with a low caste man while men were allowed to have sex with low caste women. He concludes that the reason for this is that purity of caste is protected through women. If a woman slept with a low

caste man she would be chased out of the *varige* (caste) and become a low caste woman. However, Winslow argues that when the focus is wider (including Muslims who do not have a caste system), the ritualisation of puberty and bilateral caste filiation do not inevitably go together (Winslow, 1980:603-04).

From the accounts of interviewees it is clear that marrying a member of a lower caste is still regarded as bad among some Sri Lankans, especially among some people in (up country) rural areas. However, the life histories collected for this study also show it is a custom that the Sinhala community does not strictly adhere to. For example, Amali, age 25, Colombo) said she had to stop her first relationship with a boy because his mother objected on the matter of caste. She said differences in caste did not cause problems in her current relationship. The question I want to raise here is if the ceremony of puberty is connected with the idea of purity of caste, why the ceremony has not disappeared with the decreasing attention on caste in Sinhala society today as mentioned in Chapter One.

Yalman also raises an important question in his essay.

But is this all we can say about the ceremony? Why is it that the puberty of women should be of such absorbing interest to make it a festive public occasion, feasts etc; when there is almost nothing for boys. Certainly not connected with their sexuality? When put the question into *my Sinhalese villagers*, they were surprised by my naïveté. Obviously, the girl starts bleeding and is polluted; how can you know what happens to a boy? When further pressed they would say that the rite has two related purposes. 1) It protects the fecundity of the womb of the woman. 2) This is necessary since the honour and respectability of men is protected and preserved through their women. (Yalman, 1963:32. Emphasis mine.)

Because of his interest in the caste dimension, it seems Yalman did not venture further more than raising the question. It is important to point out that he questioned men and not women. The people whom he questioned talked about men's honour and respectability but not caste. It is also important to emphasise as this study will show later, that Yalman carried his research in Sri Lanka from 1954 to 1956, at a time when a woman's chastity, purity and modesty was promoted as national honour as well as family honour. Thus it is not a surprise that men would say that the ceremony is connected with honour and respectability of men.

In footnotes he tried to translate the Sinhala version into English thus:

*Genu Lamainge utsava(magul) vadiyan tienni genu paksayan*  
 Female child ritual more have female side

*gotraya*  
 line

*Nambu rakini nisa Pirimi ko tena giyot pirimi*  
 Respect safeguard because male wherever place if gone male

*genu lamainge gatiguni naraka venavanang serama*  
 female child character-body polluted if become entire

*kattiyata leccai*  
 to the family shame.

If translated into English as a whole it means: 'there are more festivals (rituals) for girls because (the) respect of (the) community (line) (is) safeguarded (through) womankind (*genu paksayan*). "Wherever (we) go men are men." (If) the character of girls become corrupted/bad it is a shame for everybody.' (Translation and Emphasis is mine)

My translation suggests that some of the Sinhala words he has used put particular constructs which are misleading. The word '*naraka*' means bad or not good, and the Sinhala term for pollution is '*killa*' or '*apirisidu*' (unclean). The term '*kattiya*' does not necessarily mean the family and the nearest English terms for that is group or everybody. Therefore '*kattiya*' can be referred to as the community or a group and the Sinhala term for Family is '*pavula*'. Hence it is not clear whether the men he spoke to talked about the honour of family or honour of community or both.

However, it is clear that Yalman did not examine the assumption underlying his informants' accounts: that men can go wherever they want and they can do whatever they want but it does not affect their status as men. Women cannot go wherever they want or do whatever they want because their status is not the same as men's status within the community.

Winslow (1980) did her field research from 1973 to 1976 and attempted to examine the connection between religion and the ceremony and studied the puberty ceremonies among Sinhala Buddhists and Catholics and the Muslim community. She recognises that one major similarity between the three sets of rituals is the way that the physical commencement of menstruation is used to mark a major change in female social status. She acknowledges that the ceremonial practices are different according to different religions. So that, for example, within the Sinhala speaking

community, Buddhists and Catholics have different practices. She says that there are different practices due to the fact that girls go through the ceremony of puberty as individuals and not as members of a social set in contrast to some other cultures. What she meant by this it seems, is that there is not a collective ceremony for all the girls who attain puberty in the same area. Furthermore, she says that a collective ceremony is absent may be due to another common feature, that the menstruation rituals are the concern of the immediate kin group rather than of the village as a whole. It seems that she comes to this conclusion through observing two ceremonies of Buddhist families that were different from each other. One family had a low-key ceremony and the other family had a more elaborate ceremony and a big feast. As she noted, this may be basically due to the wealth of the family. Families who could not afford a big ceremony have a 'quiet' ceremony with immediate kith and kin but families who could afford it usually have a big feast after performing the rituals.

Winslow states: 'In sum, the three rituals are all concerned with structural transition, with protecting the health of the girl, with warding off demonic forces, and with the girl's new status as marriageable female' (Ibid: 58). What she meant by the three rituals is actually the three ceremonies she observed in families of three different religions. Nevertheless she observes that:

Similarly during the transition period the girl is carefully and auspiciously led through the details of the required behaviour of women. She must change from being at ease with men to circumspect and modest. This appears as an exaggerated avoidance of men during the transition (Winslow, 1980:614).



With that statement she concludes that 'the Sri Lankan rituals also confirm and legitimate the relevance of adult behavioural norms for the girl, further to ensure her an auspicious future' (Ibid.614). She also rightly identifies that category of 'woman' is different in three religious traditions.

Though she mentions that rituals are about women and the specific nature of femaleness affects the meaning of ritual, in her aim of trying to identify the ceremony with regard to religion she does not concentrate on the impact of the ceremony on strengthening gender differences. According to her:

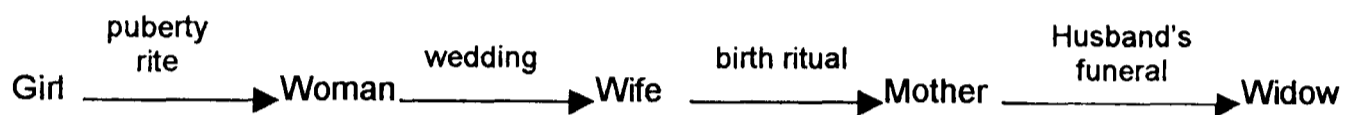
Differences appear in different emphasis. All three variants are concerned with restoring ritual cleanliness, with providing protection from potential dangers, and with defining and proclaiming adult female social status. But the Buddhist version emphasises the first concern in accord with a tradition that portrays fertile women as potent and dangerous (Winslow, 1980:620)

However, she does not explore why women are seen as 'potent and dangerous'. Furthermore, though girls go through the ceremony as individuals and it is not a collective ceremony, as in some other cultures, it is subjected to the public interest. As will be shown in this chapter, though girls have individual ceremonies, attaining puberty has a strong, shared social dimension. According to my interviewees the community participates in the feast without an invitation and everybody gives the girl either money or a present. When the girl goes to school she takes sweetmeats for classmates and teachers. Thus the girls themselves announce their new status publicly.

Anthony Good (1982), another anthropologist concludes:

As the exo-orientation increases, in other words as the ritual cycle — and particularly its first stage, the “puberty rite” — comes to put more emphasis upon resolution of the girl’s status vis-a-vis her marital relatives, this should entail a greater, more precisely defined (in genealogical terms) affinal role in the puberty rite. This should be associated with more pronounced patrilineality, a greater stress upon the giving of dowry, and an increasing tendency for post marital residence to be patri-virilocal (Good, 1982:53).

Good describes female puberty rites in South India and Sri Lanka as one stage of affinitive oriented cycle:



According to him this works to control and legitimate female sexuality in order to keep purity of women. He argues that all the practices (in South India and Sri Lanka) are concomitants of the caste system, and operate to maintain unambiguous caste identity (Ibid: 54).

Though he has done an extensive research on female puberty ceremonies in South India, which are similar to Sinhala rites only in a few ways, his account of Sinhalese puberty rites and marriage relies heavily on studies of other anthropologists such as Yalman and Leach. His model may work in the Southern Indian context but not in the Sri Lankan context because of some changes which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Yalman’s essay (1963) emphasises the ideas of the new status of the girl, warding off demonic influences whilst she is in seclusion and being marriageable. However, some of the rituals and rites he discussed in his papers have

disappeared today. Even the older interviewees did not mention the rituals Yalman mentioned in his study, for example during seclusion putting all the girl's polluted clothes, urine, menstrual blood and faeces into a cooking pot and after the ceremonial bath the washerwoman breaking the pot filled with pollution against a milky sap tree and so removing the danger from demons. He links his interpretations of some of these vanished practices to their symbolic meanings. According to him, girls were either kept alone during the confinement or only an old grandmother was allowed to be with her and he states that grandmothers were allowed to be with the girl because they were no longer fertile and beyond danger. He mentions keeping a rice pounder in her room and according to him it was an overt phallic symbol. The girl is bathed in milk and it symbolises the purifying the girl. He also mentions that the maternal uncle unveiled the girl when she reappeared (a ritual that has now vanished) and says this showed the rights of the maternal uncle as the father of her cross cousin, who has the right to marry the girl. He also states that the future marriage is often arranged at this time. Another practice that vanished from the ceremony of puberty today is the role of the washerman. Yalman says a washerman was also summoned along with the washerwoman; he decorated the house and purified the polluted clothes. Yalman also says that the members of the family must not see the girl when she was taken away for the ceremonial bath but he does not mention that males should not see the girl until after the ceremonial bath. Other residents of the girl's house were also regarded as polluted and had to avoid auspicious objects and acts. Apart from maternal uncle, astrologer and washerman, Yalman also mentions that the *Kapurala* (temple priests) made the girl gaze into the water

after the ceremonial bath. After the ceremonial bath the house was cleansed by applying cow dung and sprinkling turmeric water.

However, none of these is practised in Sri Lanka today. It is difficult to say, without evidence, how, when and why they disappeared but it could be due to the progress in health and education and due to diminishing role of the washerwoman as the centre figure of performing the rituals. Today many houses have proper lavatories inside or outside the house. Many consider it is better that the girl is bathed by the mother or an immediate kinswoman, perhaps because they do not want to give the valuable jewellery and other items used by the girl while in confinement to the washer woman as is the custom. Also there is no need to reward the washerwoman. There is no evidence to show in the interviews that marriages are arranged at this time, which is probably due to diminishing popularity of arranged marriages and the parent's interest in giving their daughters a better education. In modern day practice, except for the astrologer, men aren't involved in puberty rites and it is either the washerwoman or the girl herself who does the unveiling. This practice and not having a *molgaha* (rice pounder) in the room where the girl is kept is difficult to explain. However, today cross cousin marriage is highly discouraged in Sri Lanka due to the scientific discovery of the risk of giving birth to disabled children. The other practice, keeping only aged women is also not in practice and girls are kept with any available woman. In fact, according to Winslow (1980) little boys were kept with one girl she studied and according to her the girl complained that she had been used as a baby sitter. Again it is difficult to explain why such a change

occurred without a proper investigation. Nevertheless, the significant fact is that the practises surrounding ceremony of puberty changed and modified with the time. In Winslow's (1980) accounts, the two ceremonies she observed in Sinhala Buddhist family and Sinhala Catholic family differed from each other except in main features.

In contrast to these anthropological accounts my analysis of puberty is based on the stories of women and thus provides a clear picture of the impact of the ceremony on women's lives. It also provides a strong case to argue that the ceremony is still prevalent because it reinforces and strengthens gender differences within the Sinhala community.

The next section will examine the idea of *killā* (pollution) in relation to menstruation and how the beliefs changed with economic and social changes. The succeeding sections will examine the puberty ceremony of today, and variations of it according to regional and socio-economic conditions and, how it works to initiate, separate and incorporate girls.

Through this, I will explore the idea that the ceremony of puberty conveys the meanings of the set of restrictions girls learned as 'traditions' in their prepubescent years.

### Killa (Pollution)

It is clear that the Sinhala community regards menstrual blood as pollution. The major belief is that menstrual blood attracts demonic influences. Apart from that there were/are beliefs that menstruating woman would pollute certain religious places and ceremonies.<sup>15</sup> Women therefore are not supposed be in such places while menstruating. According to an old interviewee, Loku (age 70, Hambantota), puberty is a very bad pollution. She said Buddhism does not talk about pollution and she goes to temple while menstruating. Yet she admitted that though she goes to the temple she does not go the *Devale* (the place to worship Hindu or regional gods.). Namali (age 33, Badulla) said she does not go to *Bali* ceremonies because the witch doctor can tell if there is a polluted woman and he would come and beat the woman. When asked whether she had experienced this, she said once she went to a ceremony while menstruating but left as soon as she realised she was menstruating and the witch doctor said that someone had polluted the ceremony. Ramani (age 41, Badulla), a teacher, said she believes in the idea of pollution because the villagers believe in them.

According to Knox menstruation was regarded as a strong pollution during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Not only the woman, but also her house, was regarded as polluted and people would not approach the house of a menstruating woman. Far from

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<sup>15</sup> Winslow (1980) provides a long list of places and ceremonies in which women are not to be present, and events become polluted by their presence.

hiding the fact, woman would call to approaching people to avoid the house and Women would be purified after a bath (Knox (1981[1681]: 250).

Today the idea of pollution is not as strong, yet it still prevails in the society and works as a restriction on women's mobility. Many interviewees said that they do not attend religious activities without a body wash. Married older women said they did not even sleep in the same room with their husbands. Some young married women say they do not have sexual intercourse during menstruation.

Sera (age 39) from Hambantota said that women are not prevented from going to places because of menstruation and only a small percentage of people believe in such ideas. She is a prominent leader in her village and participated training on gender and development. She implied she does not believe in such ideas.

However, her daughter said she stopped worshipping at home (there is a small shrine at home) because of menstruation and does not go the temple on such days. Also she is not allowed to eat oily food during menstruation and not allowed to go out if she has had oily food.

However, it seems today the reasons for *kill*a are pragmatic rather than rituals. During the interviewing I found out that many women like to stay at home when they menstruate. Namali (Age 33, Badulla), said she does not go to work in the field because it is hard to bend and work in the fields. Rani (Age 34), a teacher in Hambantota said she does not go to school during menstruation. The main reason for this it seems that many women still use rags as sanitary towels. It makes movements uncomfortable and blood seeps easily through clothes and

stains outer garments. Namali (Age 33, Badulla) said she would like to use sanitary pads but she cannot afford to buy them. Some interviewees also indicated that they are embarrassed to buy sanitary pads in public. To my knowledge there is a strong opposition to unmarried girls using tampons because of the fear of breaking the hymen (hence the girl will not be a virgin) and one can find them in only a few shops. Today these are the factors may influence women confining themselves to home rather than the idea of pollution. Discovering a woman having her monthly periods has associations with shame and cleanliness.

The tendency today is not to reveal but to conceal menstruation because menstruation is seen as shameful. Girls who have attained puberty are advised by both women in the family and by female teachers how to dress and sit properly to avoid bloodstains on clothes. One old saying among Sinhalese is 'Genu jātiya Jara jātiya', which means 'womankind is the filthy kind.' This is based on the fact they menstruate and the menstrual blood is unclean blood. Even though the observation of prohibitions during menstruation are dying away, the idea of unclean blood is still prevalent within the community and women are still seen as unclean. This seems to be much stronger in rural areas than in urban areas. According to some young interviewees from Badulla and Hambantota, the boys do not sit on a chair that a girl who attained puberty sat on. According to some of them, boys crack jokes about such girls when they come to school after the ceremony or if they saw bloodstains on a girl's uniform. Geetha (Age 15) from Hambantota said one of her friends stopped coming to school



because after they had seen blood stains on her uniform, the boys kept tabs on 28 days (because they learn it in the lesson on reproduction) and, after every 28 days they taunted her and scolded her for coming to school on such days. This interviewee asked her mother not to have a big ceremony because boys would make jokes. However a young interviewee from a mixed school in Colombo said the boys do not joke about menstruation and if they see blood stains on a girl's cloth, they would inform another girl and never talk loudly about it or make jokes.

As Mary Douglas (1966) rightly pointed out, pollution ideas are related to social life and some of them are analogies for general view of the social order. Hence such ideas tend to take long time to change or disappear completely. Within the Sinhala community old beliefs relating to menstrual pollution have changed among many people due to scientific education of the nature of menstruation. Urbanisation is also another fact that can be mentioned as responsible for such a change. Nevertheless, In rural areas agriculture is still the main occupation and farming methods and system largely use traditional methods even today. In such an environment pollution has a strong impact. However, it seems that today the idea of shame has emerged as a strong dimension in place of pollution because today the community believes female body is subjected to shame.

### The puberty ceremony

Judging from the accounts of the interviewees, there are individual practices and regional differences in the ceremony. However, the rituals and rites were strictly adhered to except in one case. Chitra (Age 16, Badulla) said her father came to see her when she attained puberty and said he wouldn't mind any evil influence from her falling on him. At some places the clay pot that used for the ceremonial bath is also given to the washerwoman but in some places the washerwoman dropped the pot on the ground to break it. In some places instead of looking into a vessel full of water, the girl was asked to go three times around a mat full of traditional food with a lighted lamp. Then she had to unveil the cloth and blow out the lamp. In some places instead of the washerwoman, an aunt or the mother of the girl bathed her. Girls had to keep something made of iron with her all the time to ward off evil influences. The idea is that a girl can be easily possessed by evil demons until the ceremonial bath. In Badulla looking at a '*Kiri gaha*' (a tree, which contains sticky milky sap, usually a jack tree) is a must so that the girl will not be barren. The girl may not be allowed to sleep in a bed but must sleep on a mat on the floor. During the period of confinement girls' ate a strictly vegetable diet and was not allowed to eat any fried food or food containing oil. In Hambantota, the period of confinement is different from the other two places where the research was undertaken. There the girl is allowed to wash on the first day or in some cases to have a bath. The astrologer sets two auspicious times for the initial bath and ceremony. On the day of the ceremony the girl has to have a bath again. According to my interviewees, it was after the ceremony they

were confined to home for a period ranging from fifteen days to three months and during that time was not allowed to meet any males. However, the important fact is it seems that almost every Sinhala girl, irrespective of class differences, experiences the rites and rituals and celebration of puberty. It is a very much more social affair rather than a personal physical change and social meanings outweigh the physiological changes.

### **Social meaning of puberty**

Audrey Richards (1956) in her book, *Chisungu*, on female initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia points out that rituals, rites and symbols in such ceremonies are connected with sex, fertility, matrimony/motherhood and subordination. Though there is no overt expression of such ideas, it is clear that the Sri Lankan ceremony of puberty is connected with those. Hence it is not a surprise that the ceremony is still in practice and regarded as only second importance to a girl's marriage. Only one interviewee said it is nothing but a natural biological and hormonal change and we (the Sinhalese) tell the society what happened to the girl but it is unnecessary. Hence I argue that the ceremony of puberty reifies the norms, values and ideas of the Sinhala community on women.

The story of Ruwini (Age 26, Hambantota) shows how important it is for a girl for not only to attain puberty but to do so at the expected age. Eleven to Fourteen years is the common age for reaching menarche for girls in Sri Lanka, but Ruwini did not do so until she was nineteen years old, a considerably late age for

attaining puberty in Sri Lanka. According to Ruwini her parents were very worried and said maybe it was because that time period was a bad time in her life. The family thought it was not good that she wasn't reaching puberty and the parents sought both western and local remedies. They took her to doctors and they also visited astrologers. One astrologer said she had already attained puberty but did not inform the family. One person advised them to have a *Bodhi Pooja* (offerings to Bo tree). The parents organised a *Bodhi Pooja* and chanted *Seth Kavi* too (Verses which wish well for the person.). The doctors said if she did not menstruate soon it was because of biological facts.

However the most interesting fact is the interest and attitude of her relations and the rest of the villagers. She said villagers used to make fun of her and joked she was not going to attain puberty until the age of marriage and she could celebrate both ceremonies together. She said many, including her relatives, especially from her father's side, said to her face that she was not going to attain puberty and she would be useless without attaining puberty. At first she did not feel anything but later when all the girls younger than her attained puberty and when she went to those feasts she felt sad because she was subjected to other peoples' talk. They said she would not be able to produce children. Though she does not believe it she said there is a saying in Sri Lanka that if a girl attained puberty late she would be a barren woman. Even the boys in her school made fun of her. They asked her why is she was not becoming new like the other girls. Because when a girl attained puberty she goes to school wearing new clothes, shoes, jewellery and carrying a new umbrella. Ruwini believes that it would affect

her future. According to her, her parents are looking for a bridegroom for her and could not find one yet. Her story clearly points out how attaining puberty is important within Sinhala community and more crucially, it is not just an individual but a very public affair.

It seems that the ceremony of puberty conveys three important messages to the community. First it marks the initiation of the girl as an adult. Second, it conveys the message to the community that the girl is sexually active. Thirdly, it confirms the acceptance of the girl into the adult women's group.

When my children attained age I followed those customs as was done for me. But I think at a certain stage when my younger daughter attained age<sup>16</sup> there were a few people in the low country (she was born in upcountry area) who said ohhhh you shouldn't make such a fuss about this type of thing and so on. But now about twenty years later they find that is important. You inform the relations your daughter has attained age, she is a young woman, and she has to be looked after. That is telling the brothers you will have to look after your sisters. It is not just a meaningless thing. In a nice subtle way told the brothers, your friends will come but they (brothers) must look after...[after]( their sisters) you must look after the sister. And telling the neighborhood we have a grown up girl, she has to be looked after carefully, treat her with respect and you know you also feel important. I, even in Australia, my grand daughter attained age, I got a call and found the time (auspicious time), gave her a bit of jewelry and new clothes and I think it was good in that society also (Gaya, age 73, Colombo/in English)

Gaya mentions three primary ideas here: first, having a grown up girl in the family. Second, the girl should be protected and respected. Thirdly, the girl feels important (attaining age). Hence the discussion will follow up these three themes to explore the messages conveyed to girls when they attain puberty.

### **“ A big girl”**

All the interviewees said that they received only limited information about the physical changes their body would undergo during puberty or what first menstruation means. A few of the young interviewees mentioned learning about it at year ten school lesson on reproduction. Until two decades ago such lessons were not included in the curriculum. According to some girls from Badulla, some teachers chose to omit the lesson. Some taught it after school because the classrooms were in the open halls and other classes could hear what they were talking about. This illustrates silence in society on about menstruation.<sup>17</sup> Some interviewees learned about it from their mother, school friends or their elder sisters. Some did not know about until it happened. What the girls have been told by their mothers or elder women relatives was to inform an elder woman if they saw blood stains. Apart from that they received no further information. Hence it can be assumed that many girls have no idea why such physical changes took place. However, after attaining puberty girls are informed that they are not children anymore and they have become 'big girls'.

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<sup>16</sup> In Sri Lanka attaining puberty is referred as attained age

<sup>17</sup> However, recent women's new papers and some television programmes on health had medical discussions on menstruation and I believe girls today have more knowledge on the subject.

Q: Do you think that there is a difference in life before puberty and after puberty? Is there a change in your life after puberty?

A: (Silence). There is.

Q: How?

A: Now after becoming a big girl I didn't go out often. Even with my aunt I didn't go out a lot, anywhere. Mostly stayed at home. Before that we used to play. Now, younger brothers, we, younger sisters and elder sisters played with them together. We played having small shops. After attaining puberty we thought it was not good to do those, we are big children and stopped playing. And did whatever household work had to be done and stayed like that

Q: Why did you think so? You all are big children and not good doing playing as before?

A: No, mother and others<sup>18</sup> say so, not good playing now because you all are big children and aren't you all ashamed, mother and others said. They told us it was not good to be playful (Namali, age 33, Badulla/translated).

The girls who attained puberty are not considered as small children anymore.

Suddenly they have to leave the world they are used to and have to adjust to another life. Needless to say they feel the physical difference as they experience first menstruation. However, the different attitude in the family and society in general is seemed to be beyond their grasp. The rituals of the ceremony and the confinement to a room before that, ensure they feel they are not the same girls as before. Girls are not allowed to see males and or to look at themselves in a mirror while in confinement. According to Nimmi (Age 20, Badulla) she felt suddenly grown up. She felt even her face has changed. This may be because of coming out after a long confinement and not looking in a mirror as girls have been told not to look at their image. Apart from that her parents asked her not to

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<sup>18</sup> Here the term she used was Ammala (plural term of mother) as mentioned in the first chapter she is referring to her mother and other elders who advised her. Therefore I have translated it as mother and others.

be playful and suddenly her childish games had to stop. It was difficult for her to stop playing. This social change girls have to undergo is very different from the boys of the same age. Because the Sinhala community pays no special attention to the physical/social transition boys of the same age undergo and the boys are not subjected to as many restrictions as girls.

According to many interviewees they felt scared, ashamed and cried upon discovering bloodstains on their clothes. It seems this is due to two reasons. First when a girl is not made aware of what happens when attaining puberty and when she sees the bloodstains it makes her confused and frightened. Secondly, when such a change happens to the body, the feeling is that she is no longer the same child and furthermore, as part of the community she knows how the others who underwent the change have been treated. Hence attaining puberty not only initiates the girl into Sinhala society as a grown up but also reminds her that a different style of life is awaiting her to which she will be expected to conform. In particular, she is now a sexual being and thus has a different role.

### **From asexual to sexual**

According to Michel Foucault (1979) the human body is a target and object of power. Talking about modernising western societies, he says the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations. He points out what is underlying in those techniques:



To begin with, there was the scale of the control: it was a question not of treating the body, *en masse*, 'wholesale', as if it were an indissociable unity, but working of it 'retail', individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body. Then there was the object of the control: it was not or no longer the signifying elements of behaviour or the language of the body, but the economy, the efficiency of movements, their internal organization; constraint bears upon the forces rather than upon the signs; the only truly important ceremony is that exercise. Lastly there is the modality: it implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the process of the activity rather than its result and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement (Foucault, 1979:136-137).

Foucault introduces these methods, which operates to control and to assure the body is constantly subject to such forms to make it docile, to discipline the body.

Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) points that though Foucault shows how discipline produces docile bodies, he treats the body as if it were ungendered, as if the bodily experiences of women and men did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life. As Bartky rightly argues women's bodies are more docile than men's bodies and there are disciplines that led women to exercise self surveillance which produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine to perpetuate silence and powerlessness of women. However as Bartky, states, Foucault's argument can be applied to analyse the docility and powerlessness of women in any society and I will demonstrate how the body of Sinhala women is subjected to discipline and control to make them docile and powerless.

As discussed above, a notion of ceremony of puberty is disclosing to the world that the girl is an adult woman and ready to take social tasks expected of her. At this stage the social scripts a girl has learned in childhood come to their full meaning. Hence following Sandra Bartky's argument, I argue that within this context it is clear that what Sinhala girls understand as culture and tradition, works as a set of rules which have the effect of social and self discipline to make them docile and passive.

For the society the girl is now ready to engage in sexual relations and produce children. Because sexual intercourse or any other sexual encounters outside legal marriage are strongly considered to be bad and inappropriate within Sinhala society, the Sinhalese believe that the girl who has attained puberty will need to be protected from such experiences.

During childhood [...] mother and others were not scared even about me. That means [...] my existence was not a big problem for them. But after it is, after attaining puberty they said they have to protect me. After puberty they said when being a girl it is not good to this or that, not good going to this place or that, not good to dress like this, all that has been told to me (as advice)] after that. When small there was no difference between me and my younger brother. (Laughs) even there was no difference between me and my eldest brother. We played together. But after that ...where ever I go [...]To tell you [...] even visited a friend's home, parents don't let me spend lot of time there. After an hour or two they give a call and tell me to come back. That's how it is (Nelka, age 23, Colombo/translated).

After puberty a girl is expected to alter her behaviour and relations with males.

They are not forbidden to socialise with males, but are warned about the results if they go beyond certain limits. For example Sandun's (Age 43, Hambantota) mother asked her not have love affairs with boys and not to be alone with men.

Further she said if Sandun had sex she would become a woman and if a man touched her breasts it could be discovered just by looking at her breasts. (when questioned she said breasts drool if a man squeezed them). Ransi's (DoB unknown/ older, Badulla) mother told her that no one would marry her if people have talked about her, and that if stories were spread about her it would be an insult to their family. From the interviews it is clear that such kinds of advice are still common in Sri Lanka. According a number of interviewees, their familial relationships also changed after puberty. Girls who had been close to the father felt more distance. They no longer played with their brothers and brothers distanced themselves from the girls. Girls feel scared about being close to boys. This is as a result of instilling fear in girls in order to prevent them from being sexually active. Others said there was no change but their stories indicate how they changed their behaviour in the family according to the sex of the family members.

Moreover, the other social scripts that predominate in society to keep girls passive become more forceful and strong after puberty. Girls are not suppose to go out unless there is someone one to accompany them or parents feel that they are secure in going to particular places, for example to the tuition class or to a close relative's home. However, girls are very much discouraged from spending a night away from home or coming home late in the evening.

The dress code becomes stricter although there are urban/rural and class differences. All the interviewees said that they like to wear long, simple dresses

that cover their body properly. Girls who used to wear trousers stopped wearing them after puberty. There is a very strong opposition to girls wearing trousers especially in Badulla and Hambantota. Many interviewees said that they think it is an inappropriate and degrading dress for women because it is male dress. Some said they find it more modest and comfortable but are scared to wear trousers because villagers humiliate them and the men hoot at girls who wear trousers. Usually girls are not allowed to wear short dresses (above knee level) and sleeveless dresses. The girls from urban middle class families said they are not asked not to wear trousers or shorts. One girl said she is not allowed to wear transparent dresses. Many interviewees said women should dress according to the place and according to the culture. Wearing makeup is also considered as bad and women who wear make up are seen as 'fast women'. Hence it seems the general view is that women should dress modestly in order not to be sexually provocative. Such ideas are not applied to males in Sri Lanka. From the interviews it is clear that women believe that they should take care not to dress contrary to the way women are supposed to dress.

The accounts of my interviewees show that after attaining puberty, the behaviour of girls also change profoundly. Girls are advised to walk slowly, talk quietly, and sit properly and not to do anything that would disgrace themselves and their families. Some interviewees said they were advised by parents, relatives and also some female teachers to stop participating in sports specially high jump, long jump and running. Many interviewees said they have become more '*tanpath*' (*Tanpath* means a person not so loud, modest and decent in attire) after

puberty. These changes in behaviour do not occur solely because of this kind of advice. Girls are aware of the accepted social codes and they change themselves accordingly and begin to exercise self-surveillance. It seems that this is a continuum of different gender behaviour they have learnt in childhood. According to Ama (Age 29, Colombo) she started seeing a difference between men and women before puberty. When she was small she used to address boys by their names but when she was in year six/ seven she called them '*lamaya*' (child) because she felt calling them by names was wrong. It was a big problem for her but she couldn't understand it at that time, and the same thing happened with all the girls in her class. She attained puberty at fourteen. She had heard advice given to her elder sisters. She said though she was not given any specific advice when she attained puberty, she had put some restrictions on herself. She did sports and used to run home wearing shorts after practices but she stopped that and according to her, her behaviour altered according to what she has observed on other girls.

A: I thought now I am a child who attained puberty and I should behave differently in front of men and women. Eventually I have changed the way of speaking even.

Q: Why did you think like that? To change your behaviour?

A: I thought so [...] Because of our future [...] now I am a big child [...] because a change happened, I thought something like this [changing herself] should be happening. Thought this life after attaining puberty is more valuable than childhood (Rasi, age 15, Badulla/translated).

As she points out girls are aware of the kind of life that awaits them after puberty.

Unlike the boys they know they have to take care of domestic responsibilities and

have to be trained to be a proper wife/mother. Hence the ceremony of puberty re-emphasises the idea of domesticity as central to women's role in life.

A: Generally I have become more modest. Going out without permission was prohibited. Then the burden and responsibility of our life was increased in general. Then considering my future [...] I had to pay special attention to the clothes I wear.

Q: What does it mean?

A: It means that we have to improve our knowledge of what we know about how to behave and monthly [...] (menstruation) and had to take care of everything (taking proper care to conceal menstruation). We know what happen to us in the future after attaining puberty. [...] We know what happened to others (other women) and according to that we also thought shouldn't behave as earlier and should pay special attention to cleanliness and about domestic work and with that feeling, I thought that I should know things and should do something to learn them

Q: Why did you think like that? What made you think like that?

A: I thought so because of the social situation around me. When I saw how others behave, I felt that we should also be like that. Then [...] mother and others always told us not be playful as before because you are a big child. [...] They said so [laughed]. (Krisha, age 41, Badulla/translated)

According to many interviewees after attaining puberty they had to stop playing and learn domestic work. When not going to school or doing homework they engage in domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning. Only three interviewees said that they did not feel a change in life after attaining puberty. Yet through the interviews it was clear that they too are aware of the expected pattern of behaviour of adult women. However the experience may be different for girls due to different class and economic backgrounds.

Deesha (Age 16, Colombo), Geetha (Age 15, Hambantota) Rasi (Age 15, Badulla) are around the same age. Deesha was born to an upper middle class

family and her father works as a consultant and mother is a housewife. Geetha's father works in a small shop and mother works in a bank operated by a non-governmental organisation, which is connected with developmental work in Sri Lanka. Rasi's parents are farmers. To the question how they spent a day in general they said:

Now, if I go to school it is two o'clock when I come home. Have lunch, and watch the TV a bit. I am normally not a methodical person. Sometimes I have to feel [...] now, if I feel like studying, I take the book immediately and study. During holidays just spend the time on the TV, phone and the computer (Deesha/translated)

I get up [...] I get up at four in the morning to study. After that, I study until five thirty. At five thirty I put the radio on and listen to Pirith (Buddhist chanting). After that get ready until seven o'clock to go to school. The school closes at two o'clock and after finishing the work in school comes home around two thirty. It is three o'clock when I finish lunch and then clean and tidy home until three thirty. Then I go to have a bath and after that, cook the dinner. At that time I put the cassette player on. After the dinner I study until nine thirty and go to bed. Some days go to a neighbour's house to watch TV at eight (Rasi/translated)

It is five thirty when I get up. From five thirty to six thirty I study. After six thirty I do the domestic work. Sweep and tidy home and then go to school. School closes at two and after that I go to a tuition class if have a class and other days do domestic work[...] Because mother goes to committee meetings in the evening I do domestic work and stay at home."(Geetha/translated)

To sum up it is correct to assume that in Sinhala society people believe that after attaining puberty girls are potentially sexually active and ready for bearing children and domestication. Therefore the life of many girls is similar to both Geetha's and Rasi's experience.

As a result of widespread belief that girls should remain virgins until they get married it is considered that they need to be protected from having pre-marital sexual encounters. If a girl loses her virginity before marriage or if her sexual reputation was the subject of talk among people this is considered as a disgrace for the family and would jeopardise her future including her chances of marriage. Therefore girls need to be protected/restrained from sexual activities/harms because they have to be respected as potential mothers/wives. Thus the ceremony of puberty works as a primary tool of signalling to family members and the community more generally that they have to keep an eye on the girl to avoid any sexual 'danger' to her. Girls who have attained puberty are also seen as capable of being sexually provocative and therefore there is a need to keep attention away from them. As a consequence, the restrictions on behaviour and dressing are used by the public as well as by women themselves to police other women's lives.

Such ideas are still prevalent in society irrespective of the changes which have happened since independence. The focal aim is to create passive/submissive domesticated woman. Women who step out of such a framework are deemed to be bad women, women without shame and fear. Such women will lose respect in society, which would have negative consequences in both her private and social life. This is why it is important to explore what impact this series of concerns have on Sinhala women.



## Feeling important

It is clear that attaining puberty is a turning point in a Sinhala girl's life. All but one of the interviewees said that their lives changed after puberty and even the case of the exception clearly shows that her way of interacting with males has changed after puberty.

Clearly attaining puberty has two significant meanings. First it incorporates girls into adult society and secondly it makes them aware of their own worth. Both Yalman (1963) and Winslow (1980) point out in their studies that after puberty girls are considered as mature young women.<sup>19</sup>

Q: Was there a change of attitude in the people after you attained puberty? People who are like very close relations and so forth? Was there a change in the way of acceptance?

A: Yes. That [...] I felt that strongly. Because earlier when I said something people took no notice and ignored me. Sometimes even didn't see I was there. So those days, because I had lot of attention from childhood I always try to get attention. So it was a big thing for me from childhood. When no one pays any attention, I got angry. But now it seems that I am very well noticed. Now relations ask my ideas also, they accept my ideas too. Now there is such a situation.

Q: so what do you think of your childhood?

A: Mm my childhood was better than now. (Laughs)

Q: Why?

A: Mm, In childhood I think there are less complications no? Parents, parents are there for anything to help us no? Now those days I did not

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<sup>19</sup> Both Yalman and Winslow point out after puberty a girl is no longer regarded as a *kella* or *gatissi* (young child) and becomes a *lamissi*. Although *kella* is still widely used for unmarried girls regardless of age, the other two terms are very rarely used. *Gatissi* literally means small breasts and *Lamissi* means raised breasts.

have a big capacity to think, so whatever we did we were excused, so even if we did crazy things, could get away with it. Now have to think a bit before doing things (Deesha, age 16, Colombo/translated).

As Deesha expresses it, after attaining puberty the girls have access to the adult world. However girls face an ambivalent situation at this stage because as the restrictions becomes stronger and girls have to police their behaviour they feel loss of childhood. According to another interviewee she was not chased away from where the adults are having conversations as had happened in the past. Another interviewee said that after attaining puberty she could talk and make jokes with adults as if she belonged to their age group. She said for her it was like starting life all over again. Nevertheless, it is clear from the last part of Deesha's conversation above that this incorporation into the adult world is not an easy transition for girls. Madu (Age 17, Hambantota) said she did not understand many things before puberty but now she understands the problems she has to face from the family and the neighbourhood. A girl who has attained puberty has to face lot of pressure from society.

According to many interviewees they become aware of how they are burdened with the new responsibilities that girls have after attaining puberty. This is as a consequence of girls knowing that they are no longer children who are allowed to play around and they have to learn the way of adult women. As mentioned earlier even if a girl is explicitly not advised how to do so, she changes herself by following the implicit rule of society. The ceremony of puberty reinforces and internalises the expectation to become a passive, domesticated creature.

On the one hand this acceptance into adult world give girls a new value because they recognise that they have passed the most important step towards fulfilling the role society expects from a grown up woman: that is to become a wife/mother. As one young interviewee, Disni (Age 18, Colombo) said, she was happy because she considered puberty as the first step to becoming a mother. On the other hand physical changes in the body and the societal attention to that change also has a significant impact on girls' minds. About five interviewees talked about the bodily changes they had undergone but only one interviewee said she was ashamed of the growing breasts and tried to conceal them by hunching her shoulders when she walked. However what is most interesting is the impact of the physical change on the interviewees' way of thinking.

A: There is a big change between those two age limits. One is soon after attaining puberty there is a something like a chaotic condition, having said that, It was at that time I said that I started to behave like crazy, singing songs. I knew, the time that sang songs and collected paper cuttings. I think it starts in such a chaotic condition, after that I have understood from the girls I mix with, now some are, I am, normally I am not a person who run after boys but it was after attaining puberty we started to talk about boys: 'aah look, that one is beautiful and this one is handsome.' Because I remember from year nine everybody started to talk about boys and to giggle and they had their own jokes to tell. Except that, we, now that body changes, that changes the way of thinking. Now when we were small we didn't say 'Aney that one is handsome' and giggled Hee Hee. Because when we were small, around five years old, we were not like that. But, after that, every person, I think there is an increase of mental capacity, I think that and some things developed, that happens with the physical growth. There is a big difference between those two age limits. Because that is when we begin to see the world as a woman. See the world as a man. (Laughs) when small there is no big difference I think.

Q How [...] what you mean by seeing the world as a woman?

A: Now seeing the world as a woman means, now I have understood, me, there are my friends – boys, now even today as soon as they see me they

come and say 'aiyyo! Machang!'<sup>20</sup> it is like as going to have a physical fight, they enjoy it very much. Showing their strength. Now, women, when small we all have fights, hit each other. And I am not a person going to be shy, if I want to fight I will fight, if I have a chance I will but I am not going to fight with other girls to show my strength. So such changes. Changes occur in our behaviour. Now some times, the boys, I realise, normally there is a more tendency for drinking. I think it is the way they think that they can show their strength and maleness. That is what I see in my male friends. Like that they behave, as if they are very macho. Now, I don't have to show I am macho. (Laughs) because there is no importance in that for me, that's why. (Dilu, age 17, Colombo/translated)

Dilu is a girl from an upper middle class family in Colombo and her parents believe in men and women having equal status and encourage her.

Nevertheless, two important discourses on changing way of thinking can be derived from her conversation. First a woman should have feminine qualities.

*'There is no importance in being macho for me'*: she indicates that she can if she wants but she doesn't. The reason is that her understanding of the society tells her that it is not an appropriate behaviour for girls.

The second important fact is the changing behaviour of her and all the girls in her class towards boys. Fifty percent of interviewees from all three areas said that unlike in lower grades they started to get friendly and talk with boys during pubescent years. It is clear that girls like to increase their interaction with males after puberty. Chatu (Age 22, Hambantota) put it into words as 'life became beautiful and naughty' after puberty. Girls are conscious that their physical changes add power to their sexuality, that they are attractive to the other sex. It seems girls face a dilemma here: on the one hand the physical changes arouse

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<sup>20</sup> Machang is a term use by boys and men to show friendship. Some times boys call girl's machang if they are very friendly. Some times girls also use this term to call their girls friends but get scolded if elders hear.

their feelings i.e. the attraction for the opposite sex and on the other hand they are told to suppress those feelings and be passive. The social scripts on dress and behaviour constantly reminds her that she has to constrain herself.

Gagnon and Simon suggest that in western societies, not having such an initiation process create an ambiguous situation for pubescence. *'Adolescence in Western societies remains a period with ill defined beginning and end points'* (Gagnon and Simon, 1974:51. Emphasis is mine). According to them, ceremonies of puberty of the non-western societies, studied by anthropologists show that biological puberty was celebrated as a transition into a wide variety of adult roles including sexual and reproductive ones. However the western societies have tended to operate more independently of these biological events as necessary signals for transitions into adult roles. They also point out in the particular cultural conditions of Western societies, adolescence is largely a break with the past. (Childhood) Therefore the outcome of changes associated with this period and the psychosexual development are not associated with previously learned social and sexual scripts. Nevertheless, Gagnon and Simon (1974) say that the past (what is learned in the childhood) influences this period, but most profoundly through forms of gender training that has minimal sexual character. Hence the need to manage sexuality may derive not only from the intrinsic attractions of the sexual experiences but also from the increasingly important role sexuality will play in the conduct of both heterosocial and homosocial relationships.

The accounts of the interviewees on puberty shows that there is strong case to argue that attaining puberty is a landmark in constructing and controlling Sinhala girls' sexual identity in order to maintain unequal power relations of males and females. The girls should not exhibit any 'male traits' and should be feminine but at the same time their femininity should not appear as a sexual danger to men. As Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) an interviewee put it into words: 'Don't behave like boys (like we used to climb trees to (eat) guava) but don't be tomboys, (and) don't flaunt your beauty (either), dress modestly'. What she said echoes what almost all the interviewees said.

Though the ceremony of puberty marks the transition to adult roles it seems that girls who reach puberty in Sinhala society also face an ambivalence situation. On one hand they feel positive about becoming a 'big girl' and their inclusion to adult world. On the other hand there is feeling of nostalgia. In other words, they experience this in a negative way in terms of 'loss of childhood', particularly its freedoms. Girls from the Sinhala community are aware that their new status is a consequence of cultural conditioning. They are conscious that their lives are shaped within the framework of their tradition and culture. Hence girls' transition from childhood to adulthood is not an autonomous process. Even though the girls are accepted as mature women, they are not allowed to express their sexuality. Instead they have to guard and protect their sexuality.

### **'Passive Girls'**

The first chapter showed that a girl child is not encouraged to interact outside the family. It seems that when compared with the life after puberty, the restrictions are not so strictly adhered to in childhood. It also showed that girls spent most of their time in the family and the school. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they are totally confined to those two spaces. They may travel in vehicles or walk to school. Some go to market or visit relatives with parents. They may go on pilgrimages or may work to support the family if they are poor. These activities pave the way for girls to interact with the outer world. Nonetheless, the emphasis is that girls should not go out alone and shouldn't be at a wrong place at a wrong time or shouldn't associate with bad people and such prohibitions become stronger after attaining puberty.

However, as time passed, girls' access to spheres other than home and school increased. According to some older interviewees they got married right after puberty. However, with the introduction of the act establishing free education in 1943, education for girls became compulsory. Thus many girls today go to school up to Advanced levels and many girls go to private tuition classes if their parents can afford it. After secondary education, if they are not qualified for university entrance, they may attend vocational training. Hence their opportunities to socialise with males is higher than that it was six decades ago.

Hence the girls have to either submit to social expectations or resist them. Even though they grow up with internalised shame and fear there is a temptation to break prohibitions. For example, majority of the interviewees said they had love affairs still at school. They met their boyfriends in school, vocational training centres, on the bus or while going on a pilgrimage. Many of them tried to keep it as a secret from the family and teachers. However, there was a mixed reaction from interviewees about having a relationship with a boy at this age. The interviewees who were well past the age of attaining puberty said they now feel it was wrong to have affairs at that time and their parents were right. The reasons they gave were that, having affairs may disrupt education, it makes trouble for the family and it destroys the hopes parents have for a girl.

It seems that girls who had relationships know the repercussions of it through the verbal or physical abuse and threats they received from the family/relations and the community. Rosha (Age 16, Badulla) said her mother and others told that the relationship she had would affect her future marriage because when the groom's family inquired about her from the village, villagers would certainly tell them what she had done. Jeeva (Age 23, Colombo) another interviewee said she felt that she lost her respect within the community somewhat. Moreover, having a relationship with a boy may cause more restrictions on a girl's movements and this might destroy her future progress, as Ruwini's (Age 26, Hambantota) story shows. She had a love affair with a bus conductor when she went to be trained as a pre-school teacher. However when the family found out they forced her to resign from the job and a brother took her to a relation's house in another area



pretending it was a short visit and left her there until she broke up with the boyfriend. Her hopes of having a career were destroyed and she said her family is still suspicious of her and does not like her going out at all.

The interviewees of the same age level said it may not be wrong to have an affair but a girl should know the limit. Nelka (Age 23, Colombo) a second year medical student said she learned that sex influences the sustainability of a marriage. However she said according to the community it is not good to have sexual intercourse before marriage. She thinks that if a girl wants to understand the nature of her partner there should be a certain limit of intimacy, but one should not go over that limit. It seems it is correct to assume what interviewees meant by 'limit' is not having penetrative sex with a boyfriend. One teenage interviewee said it is not good to get physically close (kissing) because it is not certain that girl would marry the same person and the man may dump the girl after he had what he wanted (she meant penetrative sex). Another interviewee said it is not good to get physically close to a boy when a girl is a student because she might ignore her studies.

It is difficult to directly discern how the interviewees learned what the 'limit' is because it wasn't put as a question to them. However, it seems that interviewees themselves put together whatever information they gather quite possibly from peer groups or media and decide what the limit is. Nevertheless, it seems that there is no clear-cut version of what the limit is and it seems what they see as limit is something very vague.

However, all who admitted that they had or have relationships with boys were very keen to reiterate that they do not go out or did not go out with their boyfriends. Very few admitted they are and were physically close i.e. held hands or kissed. Even so, as a person from the same country and according to my knowledge and experience girls do go out with their boyfriends mainly to the cinema, the beach and the parks and for rural girls it may be the temple or a hidden path or a friend's house. Nevertheless, if caught they are subjected to punishments such as beating by family members or expulsion from school. One interviewee said her school found out that after school two of her schoolmates go to another friend's house to meet their boy friends. During the school assembly the girls' parents were summoned and in front of them they were advised and asked to pay homage to all the staff members. After that they were asked to go to all the pupils of the school and apologise. She said that the girls hung their heads in shame and cried all the time.

The women themselves are reluctant to break the dress code or to behave 'improperly' because that brings social humiliation on them. Many said they prefer to wear long dresses, which would cover them properly. Yet, it does not mean that Sinhalese girls will not wear clothes which society might disapprove of. What will be approved of varies according to the social status and education, urban/rural differences and also according to class differences. Wearing trousers is not seen as improper in Colombo while in the other two places the feeling is trousers are an '*aseelachara*' dress (roughly translated: an uncivilised dress).

Women are reluctant to wear short or sleeveless dresses or to wear make up. Only one young interviewee from Badulla said her brothers scolded her for not wearing fashionable dresses and say she looks like a 'godaya' (a term for uneducated rural people). Her family has high social status in the village because the father is a school principal and the mother is a teacher. However, she said she prefers to wear long decent dresses to avoid catcalls.

Ruwini (Age, 26, Hambantota) is a girl from a tightly controlled family. She said has been told that a sari is the dress for women according to Sinhala culture. Her father told her he would cut her fingers if she grew long fingernails or painted them. Nevertheless, she had long nails and her toenails were painted. When asked about it she said she hides them when she goes near the father. She also used to do sports but the family said not to participate in sports. She was told not to participate in running or high jump. Nevertheless, she wore a pair of shorts under her school uniform and participated in sports.

Thus it seems from my interviews that girls believe that they should discipline themselves according to restrictions and expectations of family and community and here again they are operating self-surveillance. It is clear that within family, school and society in general there are certain restrictions that are specific to girls and those restrictions have not changed though the time and space changed. Even though there are women who would like to wear fashionable clothes and make up they are reluctant because society sees such women as bad characters.

Nevertheless, there is a resistance within girls and their accounts show that they find strategies to flout the restrictions whenever they can.

On the other hand girls are aware that within the community there is a different set of punishment for boys and girls who break the accepted social norms and traditions. Therefore, the girls know they have to discipline themselves to avoid being branded as a 'loose woman'. One of the women's newspapers, *Navaliya*, (new woman) provided a supplement called '*Diyaniya*'(daughter). It publishes interviews with principals and head girls in some prominent schools of Sri Lanka and various articles written by women advising girls. A head prefect of a leading girl's school in Sri Lanka pointed out: 'the society (community) especially assesses girls as bad and that they always tend to do wrong. But boys are not considered as so and not get blamed as girls. Therefore girls should remember who they are and be careful with what they should do or should not do' (Perera, D. S., 2001-Translated)

## **Conclusion**

The discussion in this chapter supports my argument, that the puberty ceremony is connected with initiation, separation and incorporation of females into society – it therefore has a significant influence on defining gender roles and maintaining gender differences within Sinhala society as a part of a process which constructs Sinhala woman's identity. The discussion points to three important themes that interlink with the previous chapter, namely, the identity of girls as mothers and

wives, the sexual vulnerability and danger of girls, and how 'tradition' maintains girls' sexuality and identity.

It is universal within the Sinhala context for girls who reached puberty to learn domestic tasks. The domestic work they perform may vary according to their class backgrounds, but the ground rule is that a girl should learn these tasks. This initially strengthens their vision of their future position that has already been internalised by them, that women are born to be mothers and wives and their main role is to be carers and nurturers.

The 'silence' on menarche and the myths surrounding it help to maintain fear and shame in girls. Girls learn that if they do not behave according to the sexual scripts imposed on them they are considered as a bad women that pose a sexual threat to men. Not observing these restrictions puts them in a vulnerable position, and if discovered being sexually active before marriage, they betray the family honour. Therefore, the majority of the girls exercise self-surveillance on their own behaviour and control themselves through the fear of being shamed. Hence attaining puberty is a significant milestone in women's lives because it strengthens the already learned ideas of gender differences in mature girls' minds and shapes their future as grown up women.

The community imposes a 'silence' on girls by telling them the restrictions are part of their culture and 'tradition'. Even though there is no evidence of an overt resistance, the accounts of the interviewees show that although they are

constrained they try to find strategies to overcome them. However, as this chapter shows, in reality, these 'traditions' work to regulate Sinhala girls and maintain and reinforce their secondary position in society and thus constrain them. Hence it is important to investigate how and when the 'traditions' were created and became embedded in society. Where did these traditions come from? Were these ideas embedded in Sri Lankan society for two thousand five hundred years of history without changing as is the general belief? The next chapter will investigate the invention of 'tradition' and the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman'.

## Chapter Four

### 'We are not born but constructed'

#### Tradition' reinvented

The aim of this chapter is to argue that the situation of the Sinhala women today is a creation of the historical situation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which has consolidated the unequal power relations between Sinhalese men and women and the subjugation of women within the Sinhala community in the post independence period. It will examine the roots of the 'cultural traditions' and I argue that restrictions on women derive from an 'invention of tradition', which came from opposition to colonialism, imperialism, modernity or Europeanisation during the upsurge of the revivalist and nationalist movement in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hobsbawm (1983) point out that 'traditions' can actually be invented, constructed, formally instituted and can emerge in a less easily traceable manner within a brief period and establish themselves with great rapidity. Further more they say:

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm, 1983:1).

There is a strong case for arguing that, in line with Hobsbawm (1983), what the Sinhala community believes to be ancient traditions were actually invented during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As it will be examined later in this chapter, the structural changes in the first half of the twentieth century due to British colonial policies and reforms laid the foundation for modernisation in Sri Lanka. The colonial rulers believed they were civilising the Sri Lankans (Ceylonese) through which women would benefit. However, as I will argue later, the colonial ideology based on Christian values and male colonial officers' perceptions was compatible with the view of women depicted in the nationalist ideology. This had a strong impact on shaping women's situation in contemporary Sri Lanka.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part will attempt to reconstruct the pre-colonial situation for women and the second part will examine the consequences of colonialism and nationalism on women's identity/sexuality and their access to changing spaces and structures. The third part will focus attention on the growing debate on gender equality and women's correct place' within this context. These factors are historicised by reconstructing pre-colonial and colonial conditions under which they emerged. This historical view will give the reader a better understanding the ways gender differences have been redefined over time. Interlinking



these three parts provides a clear picture of socio economic and political changes and how they affected the lives of Sinhala women today.

### **Part I: Pre-colonial period**

The scattered evidence found in the chronicles, rock inscriptions and other historical sources such as letters of royal grants and ruins suggest that ancient Sri Lankans were a heavily agrarian community. Rice farming was the major agricultural activity and the ancient kings built huge reservoirs complete with a complex system of canals to store water to use during dry seasons. In addition there were gardens for growing vegetable and fruit. Cattle breeding was another economic activity, not for meat consumption but for transport and ploughing fields. Foreign trade was a royal monopoly but mainly conducted by the Muslims. Archaeological ruins and other evidence also suggest that there were very well developed engineering and architectural skills and arts and crafts. However, no evidence has emerged yet to show that women were involved in such work. Most women worked in agriculture, which was based entirely on family labour and community based collective labour. Though coins were in use, the internal trade was based on barter system. With the invasions from south India from the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, the rulers decided to move the capital into the Southwest region of Sri Lanka from the northern area, and the decline of agriculture started. The rest of the country was not suitable for large-scale rice farming because of geographical and climatic difficulties. Trade became the major source of income for rulers, especially the foreign trade, and export oriented crops such as spices

and areca nut had a special place in the trade with India and other countries. However, rice cultivation was not totally abandoned as it remained the staple food in Sri Lanka, but another method of farming was introduced, that is slash and burn cultivation in the jungles (*chena* cultivation). Within such a self-sufficient economic system, concepts such as wage labour and market oriented production were not as important as in colonial Sri Lanka. Even though the royal income was based on trade after the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it is probable that the commoners were not very much influenced by it because the spices were collected from the jungles and there was no royal order to cultivate them.

However, it is highly likely that women were not totally excluded from economic activities because their labour was necessary for the sustenance of the family and economic system in general. Within such a context, it seems the situation was more favourable for women. Evidence on ancient Sri Lanka shows women enjoyed the right to inherit family land and other special privileges. One of the earliest example is the rock inscriptions around 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C. reveal that women of noble families donated caves to monks, which would suggest that women in the upper strata of society held property.

Robert Knox, an English sailor was captured by the king of Kandy in 1660 and spent nearly twenty years in the interior of Kandyan kingdom as a detainee until he escaped. He was quartered in two different villages and learned the language and the way of Sinhala life. After his escape, he wrote of his experiences of life as a prisoner in Sri Lanka and his observations on the Sinhalese. According to

Robert Knox, during the fifteenth century children inherited land from parents, but the eldest son did not have a privileged right to all the land. In the cases where the eldest son inherited all the land, without dispute he had to maintain his mother and the other siblings until they were capable of looking after themselves. Knox's accounts also show that women not only had owned land under the pre-colonial tenure but also participated in growing commercial activities during that time. Knox says: 'Lands of Inheritance that belong to women are exempted from paying Harriots to the king. Women pay no Custom for things they carry to the Seaports. Neither is any Custom paid for what is carried upon any Female Cattle, Cow or Buffalo' (Knox 1981[1681]: 250). This account indicates that women not only had the right to own property, but also enjoyed special privileges in the trade activities they were engaged at early times.

Women also enjoyed legal privileges. Hayley says: 'Women were treated with indulgence. Those of low castes and slaves were occasionally whipped, and women of the royal villages sometimes received slight corporal punishment, by the authority of the *Gabada Nilamè*'. According to Hayley, women were never detained in the prison or house of officials (Hayley, 1923:131). Thus during pre-colonial period women were treated leniently under the law, possibly because they were considered as tender and weaker than men. However, it is important to note that the system of law did not treat all women equally and women of the upper strata of the society were treated better than the poor.

Scattered evidence also suggests women had access to education though it may not have had been on an extensive scale. Drawing on U. D Jayasekara's *Early History of Education in Ceylon* Elizabeth Harris says that Sri Lanka's education system came from India and, subsequently, education opportunities were available for women and Bhikkunis (Buddhist nuns) would have received a higher standard of instruction (Harris, 1994:36). Harris also reported that several British writers who studied ancient Sri Lankan chronicles mention records of educated Buddhist women (ibid.: 36) Since there are no records of a main centre of learning they may had been educated at home as Harris suggests.

There is no evidence to show that women were prevented from participating in politics. The evidence in the chronicles suggests that there were a few women rulers and warriors in the ancient times. Wilhelm Geiger's (1960) accounts based on chronicles and other historical evidence point out that women in royal families took politics into their hands by scheming with monks and other chief royal officers in order to decide who would succeed to the throne. Thus noble women did participate in politics to some extent and sometimes had specific ceremonial roles. During the consecration of the king, it was a maiden of the nobility who poured water on his head and pledged the support of the nobles to him and asked him to rule with justice and peace safeguarding the law.

Women also enjoyed certain rights and power within their families under the pre-colonial economic and social structures. Some historical researchers argue that the position of the family as a unit was respected and considered important in

pre-colonial Sri Lanka (Metthananda, 1990: Kiribamune, 1990: Risseeuw, 1991).

The family was an extended unit since collective labour was important in agriculture. Marriage between cross cousins was permitted but marrying a woman or a man from a low caste was not allowed. The children looked after aged parents, and accounts of Europeans show that family attachments were strong and children treated parents with respect and affection (Metthananda, 1990). The research carried out by many indigenous and foreign researchers indicate Sri Lankan women enjoyed more rights during the pre-colonial period. The records of European missionaries, officers and planters show that women were not confined to home. Constance Gordon Cumming recorded: 'the enforced seclusion of Zenana life is unknown in Ceylon where women enjoy freedom as absolute as their western sisters' (Cumming, 1892 quoted in Harris, 1994:47). A British planter and writer, William Knighton, in *History of Ceylon* says: 'if the sovereignty and priesthood, then, were not denied them (women), may we not assent, that no other right to which they could pretend would be debarred them' (Knighton: 1845, quoted in Harris: 1994:47). Such comments show that these Europeans were surprised by the degree of freedom Sinhala women enjoyed at that time. Records of other colonial administrative officers also show that women were not barred from public activities.

The reason for this might be the main religion, Buddhism, acknowledged that women have a special position as a wife and mother and also emphasised that the marital relationship is reciprocal with mutual rights and obligation (Metthananda, 1990). This has led to the saying that 'mother is the Buddha at

home' and the Sinhalese believe that a mother should be well respected.

Buddhism does not impose rules or regulations on lay life. The five precepts and eight precepts that are set out for lay men and women are self-pledges to refrain from sin.

Nevertheless, the scattered evidence indicates that women did not have an equal place with men. The concept of 'head of the family' may have not been there as Risseeuw (1991) points out, but there is evidence to show men's position in the family was higher than that of females and there was a clear demarcation of work and household duties based on gender, at least around the fifteenth century. In the official document entitled *In Memoranda of the Laws of Inheritance*, Sawers quotes a proverb in Sri Lanka according to which women are born into three miseries or great evils: first is to leave the place of their birth (when they get married), second is to the pain of the child bearing, and the third is to be under the husbands (Hayley, 1923). According Robert Knox's (1981[1681]) accounts, women served meals to husbands and waited until he finished his meal and ate what was left in the pot. It was not acceptable for women to sit on a stool in front of men. Men had the privilege to demand one another to do or not to do things in the name of the king, but if a woman did so the penalty was to cut out their tongues. By law, a man who found his wife and her lover was permitted to kill them both. Women participated in the work in rice fields and grew vegetables in the gardens and looked after cattle. It was their duty to keep the house tidy and clean and to do the cooking, bringing firewood and water and taking care of children. According to the accounts of John Davy, an English officer in the early

nineteenth century, 'men did laborious tasks in the agriculture while women did weeding and reaping but managing household affairs was entirely in a woman's hand' (Harris: 1994). This clearly shows that women had more responsibilities than men and there was no equal sharing of labour.

Even though the caste system existed in Sri Lanka for many centuries it was not based on religion as in India and therefore did not form a rigid social structure. The caste system of Sinhalese is a mild form compared to the caste system of Sri Lankan Tamils. H.L. Seneviratne (1999) attributes this to the influence of Buddhism. According to him, anthropologists do not consider the Sri Lankan caste system as a caste system in true sense and even Nur Yalman agreed with this (Seneviratne, 1999:18). According to Geiger (1960), the ancient chronicle *Mahāvamsa*, the chronicle of the Maha Vihāra temple, did not mention castes at all when describing medieval times. He says it may be partly due to the fact those chronicles were written by Buddhist monks who did not care for castes but mainly due to the way the social organisation was developed. He states that the chronicles divide lay society into two categories: Kulīnā and Hīnā, the former is for the noble clans, namely the royal clan and the civil and military government officials, the latter was for the people of the lower ranks, which belonged to non-agricultural professions<sup>21</sup>. According to him, the caste system was modified and mildly observed through these two classes. However, the *Mahāvamsa* mentions

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<sup>21</sup> Geiger(1960) did not mention the agriculturists. Though they were not regarded as aristocrats or nobles, they were/are known as goyigama caste and higher in social strata next to the nobles and regarded as kulina. Nevertheless there is a dispute among the Karāwa (fisher) caste and goyigamas (agriculturists). People of Karāwa caste maintain that they are higher in rank and Goyigamas dispute it. Ruwini, an interviewee said her relationship with a boy was opposed by both families because of this dispute.

'the four castes', the four Varnas of Hindus as paraphrase for the whole of society in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Geiger states that this was due to queen Kalyānawathi's separation and purification of castes to stop a social upheaval caused by intermarriages between families of lower and higher classes, which was repugnant to a more conservative and aristocratic mentality (Geiger: 1960): Thus the castes of the Sinhalese were not always pure and marriage beneath or above the caste was tolerated at least up to the thirteenth century.

However, caste had a major impact on women's sexuality and marriage at least by the fifteenth century. As Knox pointed out:

They are especially careful of their Marriages, not to Match with inferior Cast, but always each within their own rank: Riches cannot prevail them in the least to marry with those by whom they must eclipse and stain the Honour of their Family: On which they set an higher price than their lives. And if any of the Females should be so deluded, as to commit folly with one beneath herself, if ever she should be appeared to the sight of her Friends, they would certainly kill her, their being no other way to wipe off the dishonour she hath done the Family, but of her own blood.

Yet for the Men it is something different; it is not accounted any shame or fault for a man of the highest sort to lay with a Woman far inferior to himself, nay of the very lowest degree; provided he neither eats nor drinks with her, nor takes her home to his House as a Wife. But if he should which I never knew done, he is punished by the Magistrate, either by Fine or Imprisonment, or both also he is utterly excluded from his Family, and accounted thenceafterward of the same rank quality, that the Woman is of whom he hath taken (Knox 1981[1681]:203).

In his book, *A Sketch of the Constitution of the Kandyan Kingdom*, A British official of the nineteenth century says Kings prohibited this custom and in such a case the relevant parties should seek redress from the king and with time the practice of wife killing had diminished (John D'Oyly, 1929 quoted in Harris, 1994:29). When examining the caste system in ancient Sri Lanka it is clear from



the above quotation of Robert Knox, that both men and women were not allowed to 'pollute' their caste. The two differences are firstly that women were not allowed to sleep with men from an inferior caste while men were allowed to sleep with low caste women, and secondly the major differences between the punishments. Knox says that he never knew a man marrying a woman of an inferior caste.

Above all the influences of caste was most evident in marriage. It was unusual for a person to marry below his or her own caste. He was likely to be ostracised by his family as well as by his caste group. If a high caste woman ran away to live with a low caste man, group disapprobation took a more violent form and not infrequently the woman was killed because of a belief that by her death the stain on the family honour would be removed (Sirr, 1845 quoted in Wickremeratne, 1973:170).

Both accounts above clearly show that not only women but also men were not allowed to marry beneath their castes. However, it is evident that women's sexuality was more tightly controlled than men's and was far more severely treated.

Nevertheless, women were not totally confined to the home and they participated in religious events and other social events. Knox says that husbands were not jealous and especially the wives of noblemen in particular frequently talked and socialised with any men they pleased (1981[1681]:202). Robert Percival pointed out:

The natives of Ceylon are more continent with respect to women, than the other Asiatic nations and their women are treated with much more attention. A Ceylonese woman almost never experiences the treatment of a slave, but is

looked upon by her husband, more after the European manner, as a wife and a companion' (Percival, 1803, quoted in Yalman: 1967).

It seems that the legal rights and privileges that a Sinhalese woman had in marriage contributed to her respected position in the family. Hayley pointed out, 'The legal unity of husband and wife under the English law or the community of property under the Dutch law, find no place whatever in the Sinhalese system' (1923:285).

It seems several forms of marriage existed simultaneously and the Sinhalese practised polygamy and monogamy. Knox referred to Polygamy as while men had one-wife women were allowed to have several husbands (1981[1681]:248). Polyandry was in practice to keep the property intact. Usually in such marriages one son of the family brought a wife home and she became the wife to all the brothers in the family and each husband was the co-father of the children.

Monogamous marriages were divided into two categories known as *Binna* (uxorilocal) and *Deega* (virilocal). In *Binna* marriages, the husband settled down in the house of the wife's family while in *Deega* marriages a woman left her parental house and lived with the husband and his relatives. In *Binna* marriages, property belonged to the wife and her family and the husband was allowed to use it under certain conditions. He was liable to expulsion at any time by the wife's parents, or brothers if the parents were not alive. If the parents of the bride arranged the marriage, on their death the wife's consent was necessary to dissolve the marriage. In such cases, the children belonged to the mother's family and were allowed to take the mother's family name, and furthermore

women could bring another husband to her and reside on her parent's property. In *Deega* marriages, women lost their right to parental property but they were given a dowry, which consisted of moveable and immovable property, which the wife was able to reclaim in case of divorce. Therefore, rules were clear on the property rights and on divorce women enjoyed economic security.

Her position in marriage was further secured by not having state intervention. There was no legal requirement to register marriages, and divorce by mutual consent was accepted. As Knox described 'But their Marriages are but of little force or validity. For if they disagree and dislike one the other; they part without disgrace. Yet it stands firmer for the Man than for the Woman howbeit they do leave one the other at their pleasure'. Knox says both men and women commonly got married four or five times before they settled down and became content (1981[1681]: 248). As Risseuw (1991) also points out, the above account suggests that divorce took place not only by mutual consent but also at the instigation of either party.

The male children belonged to the husband and the female children belonged to the wife in the case of a divorce (Hayley, 1923:35-38). If the wife left the husband without his consent, she had the right to retain all the children or take some of them not exceeding the half their number or she could refuse taking any. Also she could claim maintenance at any time. If the husband left without the consent of the wife she had to take only one or two children and children were

entitled to an equal share of inheritance to his property (Hayley, 1923, appendix-one: 36).

The accounts of Hayley (1923) and Metthananda (1990) show that according to *Niti Niganduwa* (a Sinhalese treatise on Kandyan law), when a girl reached the age of twenty or was married she was no longer under the guardianship of her elders and they could not exercise any control over her inherited property.

Daughters of any age, while they remained under the roof of the parental home had a temporary joint interest with their brothers in the landed property of their parents. When married, the property of the wife was separate and was entirely at her disposal and the couple's respective properties remained distinct from each other, because, as stated in *Niti Niganduwa*, marriage does not create a community of goods. Therefore the husbands had no power over their wife's estate. In the husband's absence, the wife was regarded as the manager of his affairs and she was permitted to use his property for the benefit and maintenance of the family, and his money could be spent and his moveable goods could be sold to provide for the royal services due from his land. The wife could sell the produce or mortgage his land if necessary but the husband could not make such a use of his wife's property without her consent.

A daughter married under the *deega* system was entitled to share the parental property if she returned home destitute, though she ceased to be a permanent member of the family after she married. If a woman returned after the death of the father, brothers had to provide maintenance for her. If a daughter became a

widow or a divorcee, the father was obliged to provide her maintenance if she possessed no property and could not support herself.

Widows had a life interest in the estate of the deceased husband and were supposed to have the chief superintendence and control over the whole estate for life. In cases of a divorce, if the children were under the care of the wife, the father was expected to provide them with the necessities of life or set aside a portion of his lands to be cultivated on their account or some income from the proceeds of his manual labour (Metthananda, 1990: 55-57). The legal rights women enjoyed under the ancient law regarding property and marriage were more advantageous for women. However, her position with regard to economic rights and family rights was to be profoundly changed through the intervention of colonial rulers.

## **Part II: The colonial period**

### Colonialism

The structural changes that took place under the colonial powers, especially after the whole island came under the British rule in 1815, had a significant impact on women's position. When the British defeated the European rivals in South Asia and secured power in the region through their naval supremacy, Sri Lanka ceased to be an important strategic spot in the imperial plan of securing the hub of the empire; India.<sup>22</sup> Hence Sri Lanka was no longer an important colony and in

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<sup>22</sup> The imperial policy of the British for the Asian region in the late sixteenth century was preventing the French from filling the power vacuum caused by the decline of the

England, the economic reform movement protested about the 'irrational expenditure incurred by the mother country for her colonial empire' and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) was seen as a conspicuous example (Samaraweera, 1973:77)<sup>23</sup>. As a result, in 1829 the Colonial Office sent a commission of inquiry to Sri Lanka, known as the 1832 Colebrooke-Cameron commission. The proposals Colebrooke made on the Civil Service and economy had a strong influence on the development patterns of employment and economic activity in Sri Lanka. He believed that importing civil servants from England was a waste and proposed to open the civil service to qualified candidates from Sri Lanka, and since the language of government was English he proposed that there should be English language education (Ibid.: 84). He believed that the colonial economy should be free from government monopoly and should be open to private enterprise, and that the government should depend on taxation. He made proposals to encourage capital formation and investment. He proposed to revise the traditional land law, which the British saw as an impediment to individual

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Dutch power in the region. Being in the middle of the Indian Ocean and close to India, Sri Lanka was important in British naval strategy. During the monsoon its naval squadron defending India needed a place to lie to the windward of India and a safe harbour to shelter. Trincomalee, a natural harbour in Sri Lanka was ideal for this purpose and defending the British trade with India and China. During the peace times the Dutch allowed the British to use the port but in 1781 when the Dutch and the British went to war it was feared that the Dutch would let the French to use the harbour in case of an attack on India. The coastal area possessed by the Dutch was ceded to the British at the peace of Amiens in March 1802. However, after the first few years of the nineteenth century, Trincomalee lost its importance in the British naval strategy because by 1805 the French naval power was completely destroyed and there were no other European threat in the region.(De Silva K.M,1973)

<sup>23</sup> In the first two decades of the British rule, Sri Lanka was not a crown colony and there was no close supervision on the affairs of the colony. The frequent deficit in finances was a major problem and the colonial office sought the assistance of the imperial treasury to meet that. When Sri Lanka was no longer important as a strategic point, it was reluctant to grant more money.

ownership and to abolish *Rājakāriya*, which was based on compulsory service to the king.

Neither the Portuguese nor the Dutch tried to change the native administrative system but rather introduced a few modifications. The attitude of the British towards caste however was somewhat ambiguous. Since the British administration needed the collaboration of native officials they favoured higher castes, the British colonial policy maintained the *rājakāriya system* (services to king based on caste) for economic purposes. Hence they recognised and maintained caste distinctions on one hand but on the other hand, there was resentment about the practices that promoted social degradation for low castes. The British colonial government slowly and cautiously took steps to break down the caste system. In January 1821 the colonial government issued a proclamation announcing that any person or persons who killed a woman on the ground that she had had relations with a low caste man would be sentenced to death. The same proclamation announced that assaulting or harassing low castes for arrogating the privileges of caste, to which they were not entitled, would be punished with fines or imprisonment. By 1833, *rājakāriya* system was abolished and the government strongly supported the missionaries who started schools for low castes such as *rodiyās*. In 1845 and 1853 despite the strong opposition of the Goyigama caste, the government appointed two wealthy members of the Salāgama and Karāva as *Mudaliyars* (High ranking officials) (Wickremeratne, 1973:172-3) Hence the caste differences were slowly eroding in Sri Lanka from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Dutch had already introduced cinnamon plantations to Sri Lanka, but the plantations introduced by the British in the nineteenth century were on a far larger scale. As in the West Indies, tobacco, sugar, indigo, cotton and coffee were tried as experimental cash crops, and finally in the 1830s coffee became the most successful crop. The colonial government developed an infrastructure to assist the largely European owned plantation sector and barely paid attention to developing traditional agriculture. However, urban industries, services such as transport, postal, shipping and commerce thrived under the new system and created new jobs. Even though wage labour was introduced to some extent by the Dutch for the cinnamon trade, the concept only became well established under the British colonial economy.

The British colonial policy on recruiting locals to the civil service and absorbing wage labour into the economy was based on a preference for males. Peasant agriculture declined due to several factors: scarcity of land as a result of the colonial land policies and the emergence of large-scale plantations; grain taxes; importing rice; and the governments negligence in maintaining irrigation. The result was that collective family labour lost its importance and men emerged as the sole providers for the family. Risseeuw points out:

As the knowledge of the growing landlessness and subsequent unemployment became impossible to ignore, the colonial government policy aimed at absorbing labour into the emerging industrial sector and services in the towns. The concept of the male bread winner was not actually stated but all reports, plans and policies developed by the colonial government spoke only of employment for males(1991:75).



Inter-linked with this change, some of the other structural reforms brought about by the colonial rule were detrimental for women's right to own property. As I will point out below, the change of the pre-colonial land policy and change of marriage from several forms to monogamy were the primary tools in curbing women's right to inherit property.

As shown earlier, the pre-colonial system of marriage was not under the control of either the state or religion, and it was very much a civil affair. With the introduction of Christianity, monogamy was established and registration of marriage came to be practised in the low country areas. A British official noted that in low country area, higher number of people 'regularly in married state as it is usual in other parts of the world' and 'among those who live under the British Government, and profess Christianity, instances of divorce are extremely rare; and a husband is not permitted to marry two wives' (Cordiner, 1807 quoted in Harris, 1994:23). Under the Roman Dutch Law introduced by the Dutch in the coastal areas, the principle of monogamy was applied and it enabled the husband to acquire marital power over his wife and her property. Children in a non-legal family were considered as illegitimate and no relationship to the father was recognised. Hence the natural father was no longer obliged to maintain the children as under the traditional law (Risseeuw, 1991:60). The women in the upcountry area, however, enjoyed rights granted to them under the traditional law until the British captured the area in 1815. Risseeuw points out while praising the Dutch marriage law in low country areas as an 'enlightened' form, the British noted the traditional law in the upcountry area as a 'curious anomaly'. This view

stemmed from their western conceptions of civilised and primitive peoples, linked with their own theory of development and progress (1991: 19). According to the British, the rules of marriage and divorce were vague and therefore there was no clear demarcation between illegitimacy and legitimacy of children.

According to Risseuw, the British gathered information of local laws and customs by speaking to the local elite male officials, who themselves saw the advantage that changing marriage law would bring them. In other words, they realised that implementation of European law would prevent women enjoying rights to property and other advantages. *Sawers's Notes on the Laws of Marriage* notes the following:

Sinhalese Chiefs are unanimous on [about the old law of child custody] but they consider it a privilege to be exempted from the trouble and expense of bringing up the children - in short they represent the general feeling on this subject to be what are but too generally the feelings of the parents of illegitimate children in England towards such progeny (Sawers in Hayley, 1923: Appendix 1, p 36).

The British started to change the systems of marriage under Ordinance no.7 of 1846, which declared that bigamy was unlawful. In 1855, Governor Ward received a petition from the Chiefs<sup>24</sup> of the Kandy begging to change the marriage system, which was 'exceedingly unsuited to the present state of the Memoralists (writers of the petition)'. They stressed that Buddhism has no rules regarding marriage and hence the 'lax state of the law' on marriage. Risseuw (1991) quoted a part of a petition where the petitioners locate the problem of the traditional marriage system. The petitioners claimed that in numerous instances parents were reduced to complete poverty by the responsibility of supporting and

maintaining their married daughters that the existing marital laws put upon them and that there was no way to prevent husbands discarding one wife and taking another. The petitioners were shrewd enough to mention the abolition of polygamy and polyandry, which was abhorred by the Europeans. As Risseeuw (1991) clearly points out, their real objection was to the rights of daughters to return to the parental home if their marriage failed and thus regain rights to parental property. Initially, the British were reluctant to use the opportunity created by this because they realised that it was not a widespread desire and that the majority of the Sri Lankans did not understand the proposal. However, following a second petition in 1858 signed by 8000 'Kandyan Chiefs, Headmen and People' the British implemented the Marriage Ordinance 13 of 1859, according to which marriages must be monogamous throughout the island. Formal registration was required to legalise marriages. Children born after 1859 to parents unable to prove registration were regarded as illegitimate and would therefore have no right to inherit (Risseeuw, 1991: 30-46).

This situation was further aggravated by the British land policy of the nineteenth century and many women lost their access to land. The colonial rulers erroneously assumed that, as they thought was the case in medieval Europe, land ownership in Sri Lanka was based on the proprietorship of the State. Therefore, they suggested that the Crown had 'a catholic right to all the lands not proved to have been granted at an earlier period' (Roberts, 1973:124). Hence the Wasteland Ordinance declared that all the land for which the owners could not prove ownership would be Crown Land. Under the Sinhala system, the land

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<sup>24</sup> The high officials or ministers of the local administrative system

known as *Paraveni* (land owned through family) was heritable property and such property holders had to provide a limited service to the king as the sovereign but not as the overlord. Another title, *mudal dun pēruwak* (a piece of land bought with money) also indicates that there was individually owned land. However, as noted earlier, all children in the family had rights to land and therefore there were no absolute rights of ownership in the European sense since different individuals or collectives could have rights or privileges over the same piece of land (Roberts, 1973). Land was cultivated under a system called *tattumāru kramaya*, which was designed to rotate the land among shareowners for cultivation. The British called this 'undivided proprietorship' and viewed it with distaste (Roberts, 1973). In order to promote individual ownership the British, under the Ordinance 1863 no.10, in theory decided to give 'every inducement to landowners to seek a division, or if the extent [was] small and the number of proprietors great, a sale of the lands so held' though the administrators initially rejected the law of primogeniture as an alien concept to Sri Lanka (Ibid.) Later, with the support of the Land Commission Report of 1929, the Land Development Ordinance of 1935 introduced primogeniture, giving preference to the eldest son in case of intestate succession to state land allotments (Jayaweera, 1992:7).

According to Risseeuw, the British colonial administration did not like the forms of marriage in Sri Lanka and the 'subordinating and somewhat humiliating position of the husband in a *Binna* marriage unlike in the usual type of alliance in a patriarchal system' (Hayley: 1923, quoted in Risseeuw, 1991: 18). The dominant ideology in European countries was that marriage is a lifetime commitment of one

man and woman and the Christian ideal of faithfulness should be applied to the marriage also. From a British viewpoint, the marriage systems of the Sinhalese created the problems about the legitimacy of children and property inheritance. Though some English legal officials recognised that under the Sinhala marriage system women held a higher position relative to men than in other countries and the changes in established ancient law would be detrimental to women (Judge Burwick quoted in Risseeuw, 1991: 39-41), the British went ahead and implemented the laws on marriage. Earlier in this chapter it was explained how the new law resulted in profound changes on women's rights to property and right to work, and this led to the subordinated position rather than an equal partner to the property of the husband. The majority of Sri Lankans did not welcome these laws at first, but they slowly but steadily assimilated them as 'civilising the natives' was continued through administrative and missionary work in Sri Lanka.

Another concept that was asserted along with these changes and legitimised by the British was the concept of the head of the family. This was a consequence of imposing monogamous marriage and ensuring the individual ownership of the property. As Risseeuw points out 'They (the British colonial rulers) needed one, continuous owner of land per 'family', but in theory the sex of the future owners would make no difference. That this owner would be of the male sex was too obvious, and could therefore remain unsaid' (1991:53). The elite men who collaborated with the English were not in favour of changing the situation when the Married Women's Property Ordinance of 1907 was taken into discussion in the council in order to correct the harm done to women. They argued that the

women had not yet reached the stage of civilisation where they could benefit by the rights proposed in the Bill and that it would open the door to misconduct on the part of the wife (Risseeuw, 1991:62). However, the new law was passed and women regained the right to hold property, to be the recipient of court actions, to dispose of all movable and immovable property held before the marriage and acquired after marriage. However, women were obliged to maintain their husbands in cases where they had sufficient separate property while husbands did not (Ibid.60). Nevertheless, the idea that the man was the head of the family took strong roots in the community.

The British realised the detrimental effects of the Roman Dutch law on marriage because under this law women lost all the rights they enjoyed under ancient law while husbands gained marital power. Hence from 1859 to 1923 several ordinances were implemented to safeguard property rights and maintenance rights for women, although this did not help to restore women's earlier right to inherit property. The 1921 Married Women's Property Ordinance no.18 restored many rights women lost under the Roman Dutch law, but it was women in privileged classes that benefited from it. With their access to English education they were also able to enter professional work such as medicine and teaching. Even though main aim of the educating elite women was to provide ideal housewives to English educated men, it paved the way for some of these women to enter professions mentioned above.

The developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth century on property and marriage made many women marginal to economic activities. Nevertheless, as Risseeuw (1991) points out, this was not a uniform process and it affected women in different classes in different ways. Though the scarcity of land to cultivate became a major problem, the commercialisation of the economy provided opportunities for men. Because of lack of sensitivity of the colonial administrators to women's needs, the opportunities were mainly opened for males. However, this does not mean that women were totally excluded from paid work. Many urban and rural poor women ended up as home-based workers in home-based petty trades, which were regarded as feminine and casual jobs. According to Risseeuw, as a consequence, in the first half of the twentieth century women were categorised under the informal sector of the economy while males were categorised under the formal sector. The basic reason for this, Risseeuw says, was the British administrators' confusion of how to interpret 'female worker'. As she points, though the government census officials recorded a large number of female workers and petty traders, their initial conceptualisation of the female worker ignored this fact. As a result almost every census attempted to form a new definition of female worker.

The first census in 1821 did not record figures on female labour. From 1871, census reports added a column for working women also. In 1871, the column was empty and this was as a result of instructions given to the census officials to deal only with the 'head of the house' who was assumed to be a male. In the censuses of 1881 and 1891, respectively females were introduced as 'practically

all women without special employment were contained in the domestic class' and as 'wives and children not having any special occupation contributing to their maintenance were taken to be of the occupation of the persons on whose labour they subsisted' and this led to a misrepresentation of female income earners. In 1911, census data categorised women as non-earners. This was a consequence of colonial policy makers' idea of one earner per family and their recognition of men as head of the family and as providers. To adjust the error, the 1921 census introduced the concept of 'gainful occupation' but this was defined as 'an occupation, by which a person who pursued it, earned money or a money equivalent'. Risseeuw argues this was also had a negative impact on women as the new term was combined with the rule of noting only the 'principal occupation' of a family, i.e. the one to bring in the highest and most regular income. In the 1946 census this category was further redefined and divided as 'gainful occupation' and 'useful occupation'. Under this, any activity not practised regularly or which did not bring a steady income was excluded from the category of gainful occupation. This was continued in subsequent censuses until 1974. Risseeuw points out that the 1946 census report proves the establishment of the idea of 'male breadwinner', and excluded women who did odd jobs to contribute to the family income irrespective of their earnings, and the women were regarded as the responsibility of the head of the family, i.e. the man (Risseeuw, 1991:92-99.)

I would like to reiterate that there is strong case to argue that these developments had a profound impact upon deciding Sinhala women's position



within and outside the family as they were effective in changing the ideas of the community on women's place. Not only did colonial rule effect economic changes but also introduced new morals and values to the community, based on Christianity, which combined with these structural changes worked to restrict women.

The British colonialists believed that 'the introduction of purer morality must be the work of time' (Risseeuw, 1991:38). Along with the monogamous marriage the European ideas of civilised life combined with the Christian values and virtues such as chastity, fidelity and family honour were introduced to Sri Lanka. The accounts of the various European men and women quoted in Elizabeth Harris (1994) criticise the Sinhalese marriage forms and says sacredness of marriage and morals such as fidelity or chastity of women are not such important matters for Sinhalese. The view of many European men and women were that the liberal form of Sinhala marriage was a threat to chastity, family honour and sacredness of marriage.

One very good example of influence of colonial values and ethics on shaping Sinhala women's sexuality is the idea of the virgin bride. Nowadays, the Sinhala community strongly believes a girl should be a virgin on the day of her marriage and there is a custom of testing her virginity. On the day of the wedding the groom drapes a white cloth around the waist of the bride and they have to sleep on it on the first night. The next day, the mother and some female relatives of the bride and, the groom's mother would visit the couple accompanied by a

washerwoman. If there was no blood on the white cloth, it is considered that the girl had sex before marriage and was therefore considered to be a loose woman. Not having a bloodstain on the sheet would bring drastic results. Some may annul the marriage right away. Some mother-in-laws would announce it to the guests by not letting the bride wear a red sari and receiving her with white flowers on the day of the homecoming, and serving the traditional rice cakes (*Konde kevum*) with their heads broken. This public humiliation would continue to bring shame upon the bride and her family. Even if husbands decide to keep the wife, they use it as a weapon to insult the wife and the rift in the marriage would never be healed.

Today the community believes that it is an ancient tradition for Sinhala girls to remain as virgins until they got married. However, Robert Knox in 17<sup>th</sup> century said: 'They do not matter or regard whether their Wives at the first marriage be Maids or not' (1981[1681]: 247). As it seems that the old system of marriage was more liberal and people remarried several times before they settled for one long term partner, the idea of a virgin bride would not have been so important though a virgin may have been appreciated. Knox also says that incest and infidelity was not so rare and describes a habit of offering of wives or daughters to intimate friends or an important person if lodged in the house. Hayley (1923) provides an account of the wedding ceremony among the superior castes of but does not mention a virginity test. In *Sinhalese Social Organisation-The Kandyan Period*, Ralph Pieris (1956) describes various marriage ceremonies in Sri Lanka and according to him this was a custom only among the Karāwa caste in the low

country area. According to B. A. Ariyatilake the bible mentions virginity tests (Deut.22: 13 ff.) and the Sinhalese learned the practice from the Portuguese (Ariyatilake, 2000). Though it was not clear from what sources he learned that the Sinhalese learned the practise from the Portuguese the above sources disclose that virginity of the bride was not an issue until the twentieth century. As I will show later in this thesis, virginity tests have become a part of the 'tradition' and highly influential on Sinhala women's lives.

These ideas spread among the locals through the education based on European ideas and values. The English-educated, Christianised elite eagerly embraced this new form of social values, and slowly the rest followed the elite and assimilated them. The census of 1910 reported that the "habits of the natives" had changed considerably. Changes are reported in food habits, dressing, in amusements, religion and marriage (Risseeuw, 1991:51). Along with these, Christian ideas of morals and values on day-to-day life were inculcated in Sri Lankan people and they imagined those were part and parcel of their ancient culture and tradition.

As Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) an older interviewee pointed out, while teaching Christian morals and values to women, colonialists encouraged and supported the values and morals of the locals if they were compatible with their own values and ideas.

And then at Hilwood (Girls College) we had a very fine education at that time. Most of the teachers were European, but I want to tell you is, that

the Europeans maintained our culture. Our Sinhalese culture. Today I often hear people who are, people who have given up their culture saying all this is because of the British supremacy and they ruined our culture. Now, I was ten years in the boarding and so there were six of us (she and her sisters) in the boarding. Our [...] we had Miss Reed, Miss Chapman, Mrs Tyler, so many English teachers and only the Sinhala teacher was a Sinhalese. They saw that we were brought up respecting our culture. Which I would like to stress, you know, though they were foreigners, they may have converted (local girls) and some people became converted but it was not something rigid and forced. They (the girls) wore Kandyan half saree, [...] Hilwood was a school especially for Kandyan girls because Trinity College was opened for boys in the Kandyan area. And when parents found that when these boys went to Trinity and were educated they wanted educated girls to get married to. People (girls) who knew English, music, cookery, literature and that type were on the top in the 1920s, 30s and so on. At that time they did not think of people (girls) going out to work and earn but they wanted a good housewife. So they wanted to educate girls, then the missionaries felt well we (have) got to provide, we have educated the boys so we have to provide them with an educated wife. So they started Hilwood over about 120 years ago. And when the principal came, the school was run by the Zenana mission, Anglican of course, they [...] the principal actually went to the Kandyan homes, they were very particular that only the Kandyans would be there. Because, you see, they realised that we had our caste system and a Kandyan would marry only a Kandyan. So they did not want to break that because that would have upset the people. So they went to these Kandyan homes and brought Kandyan girls and taught them, you know, the cookery, English and their (the student's) English was very good. You should speak to people of [...] my mother didn't go to Hilwood but my grand aunts did and they would still talk about Westward Ho, Ivanhoe and Walter Scott. They learnt all that so thoroughly, of course we learned the Bible, we learned English and the English was really very good. You know, handwriting and [...] of course we wore the Kandyan sari with a little collared blouse and we had earrings, we had to have a necklace on us. When going to the Chapel, each one who did not have a necklace was pulled out. And the principal said "you are not a widow, you have to have a necklace". So, you know, little things like that [...] they thought [...] culture was not broken. (Gaya, age 73, Colombo/English)

This piece of conversation of Gaya's provides a fine example of what the community internalised as their culture and tradition was greatly influenced by the colonisation. As she says, being privileged people of an ancient Kandyan aristocratic family, the older generation of her family had access to English

education. It is highly probable that what her elders have learned in the schools had a profound impact on shaping their habits and thoughts and passed to the next generation as their own 'Sinhala traditions.' Hence Gaya did not see a difference between her experience at home and what she has learned in that missionary school.

As pointed out in the first chapter, the Dutch and the British started western types of schools in Sri Lanka. The main aim of the British education was to create a small western educated elite to be recruited into the lower ranks of the civil service in order to cut the imperial expenditure and so the British were not interested in promoting or investing in vernacular education. The English education was largely in the hands of missionaries. However, the Town Schools Ordinance (Ordinance No.5, 1906) and the Rural Schools Ordinance (Ordinance No.8, 1907) allowed the existing local government bodies to create facilities to extend compulsory elementary education in Sinhala and Tamil. The former ordinance gave the option to three municipalities and twenty-one local board towns to provide and manage vernacular schools and enforce compulsory attendance until the age of twelve (Jayaweera, 1973: 463). Nevertheless, there were major differences between the curriculum taught in English and other languages. While the English language based education was aimed at Cambridge exams and university education, the vernacular education was limited to the subjects of Geography, History, needlework, drawing, drill (exercise) and gardening. In 1922, the vernacular curriculum was expanded to include hygiene, physiology, linen embroidery and lace making (Ibid. 466). Hence the education

in the vernacular languages was a very limited elementary and vocational skill based education and students stood no chance of entering into the newly established University College in 1921.

According to Swarna Jayaweera, the local English educated elite were reluctant to agitate for education in vernacular languages. Though they were interested in introducing the study of Sinhala and Tamil, the majority were reluctant to have them as the medium of instruction. The elite was more interested in protesting against total exclusion from politics and in obtaining more extensive facilities for and access to higher education and prestigious employment. They wanted to identify themselves with the colonial rulers rather than with the vernacular educated (Jayaweera, 1973:474). This changed when the Free Education Act was introduced in 1943 and implemented in 1945. This paved the way for mass education by establishing co-educational secondary schools in vernacular languages as the medium of instruction. After 1958, vernacular languages were adopted in senior secondary schools too (Metthananda, 1990: 69).

However, as Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) states the colonial administrators and missionaries were interested in educating women mainly to provide educated wives for local preachers and the educated male elite and also to promote religious conversion. As the main aim of this education was to provide ideal housewives it was the women of the elite families who benefited from the female education in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Metthananda, 1990). However, Gaya says conversion was not forced on girls. Parents were

also interested in educating girls when they found that English educated men were interested in marrying educated girls. As illustrated by Gaya's story, the English did not try to change the culture or traditions and did not try to change the caste barriers. Her account also points out that besides preparing for Cambridge exams, they were also taught frugality, cleanliness, hygiene and mending clothes, which were ideal characteristics for European women at that time. Her account suggests that female education was aimed at providing educated partners for the educated men and neither the missionaries nor the colonial rulers, had in mind to preparing them for paid jobs and their own careers.

### Nationalism

There is a strong case for arguing that the nationalist creation of the ideal 'Sinhala Buddhist woman' went hand in hand with these colonial policies and so women internalised the idea that women have a secondary place in society. As I will show later, the nationalist leadership wanted the postcolonial state to be progressive and modernist, like a developed western country but on the other hand they needed symbols, values and norms, that would distinguish and separate the Sinhalese and Sri Lanka from the other: the western, imperial power. Hence this identity was constructed through culture. However, they could not totally discard the European values, ethics and norms they had internalised through Christianisation and Westernisation. It is highly likely that, for them, these values and norms were part of being progressive and modern. Therefore, though they were critical of adapting symbols such as dress code, names and habits that implied Westernisation and were opposed to Christianity, the

nationalist ideology was compatible with some of the western values and ethics. Therefore, as this chapter will show, when they reconstructed the postcolonial Sri Lankan culture, they incorporated western ideals of femininity into Sinhala culture along with the Brahmin ideology.

It is a known fact that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many key leaders of the nationalist movement, especially a prominent leader called Anagārika Dharmapāla, were influenced by the contemporary Theosophical Society in the western world. According to Kumari Jayawardena:

Theosophy was an interesting mixture of liberal views based on the “universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex caste, or colour” along with occultism and a faith in the “Masters of Wisdom”. It was also an amalgam of various aspects of the world’s religions, and a denial of the Christian, Eurocentric vision of the world (Jayawardena, 1986:122)

The founders of the Theosophical society, Colonel Henry Olcott and Lady Helena Blavatsky and another member Annie Besant visited Sri Lanka and had close links with leaders who were involved in the Buddhist revivalism and temperance movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While rejecting imperialism and calling for a ‘Swaraj (an independent country)’, Dharmapāla had a vision of ideal ‘Sinhala Buddhist society’. According to H.L. Senaviratne:

His image of the past society is based on the *Mahavamsa*,<sup>25</sup> although it is likely that the writings of British colonial authors, like Tennent whom he cites, gave him his first inklings into that society, as well as into *Mahavamsa* itself. The central political feature of that ideal past society was righteous and paternalistic kingship. The basis of social order was Buddhist morality or righteousness. The morality was also magically

<sup>25</sup> Mahavamsa is an ancient chronicle written by monk Mahānāma in 600 AD.



powerful: so long as it existed - and it always did when there was righteous kingship - the nation prospered and no foreigner could overpower it. The present state of kinglessness, in contrast, has caused a decline in Buddhist morality, which has resulted in the acceptance of foreign customs and mores, keeping the society in subjugation to an alien rule. Whatever the present depths are to which the society has descended, morality can throw off the foreign yoke and restore society to its former ideal state. What is needed therefore is a return to righteousness. It does not take much: living in accordance with Buddhist morality for a mere five years would restore Sri Lanka to its former glory, but a glory that so accommodates and conforms to modernity that, except for its unique cultural stamp, it would appear no different from a prosperous, developed, and modern nation. *That is, Dharmapala is envisaging here a society that is technologically advanced yet uncompromisingly moored within the moral and cultural framework of tradition.* From some of his remarks it is clear that the models that he has in his mind are Japan and the United States (Seneviratna, 1999:29-30. Emphasis is mine).

The 'nationalist' elite leadership was different from the English educated, westernised elite leadership who agitated for constitutional reforms within the framework of a British Westminster model of parliament. Leaders like Dharmapāla renounced their western names (his name was David) and Christianity. Nationalist leaders were more interested in religious and social reforms. More importantly, the forerunners of this movement were the 'new urban and rural elite' which consisted of the lower rungs of the middle class: the urban elite who were those accumulated wealth from investing in coconut, rubber, plumbago and trade; and the rural elite were notaries, schoolteachers and petty traders. As A.J. Wilson points out: 'Deprived of the opportunity of participating in the government of the country they diverted their energies to the temperance movement, which afforded them a training in the mechanics of organising and influencing public opinion on controversial issues' (Wilson, 1973:383). They unquestioningly accepted Dharmapāla's idea of ideal Sinhala Buddhist society. To take their message to society, they used available form of media,

(newspapers and radio) and formed grassroot organisations. One such organisation was Mahila Samiti' (women's associations) organised by urban upper class women to promote rural women's economic status by reviving traditional arts and crafts. However, it is clear that they used those associations as forums to revive religion and 'tradition'.

These nationalist leaders propagated the view that the Sinhalese are descendants of Aryans. Hence Dharmapāla introduced the 'Aryan Buddhist' woman into his ideal Sinhala Buddhist society. Though Dharmapāla accepted that society should develop benefiting from western scientific knowledge and technologies, he believed social structures should be based on the imagined 'Aryan, Buddhist tradition and culture' in which he assigned a specific role to women.

In his extremely influential pamphlet, the *Gihī Vinaya* — "the Daily Code for the Laity" which was published in 1898, Dharmapala clearly spells out how women's sexuality and their every day lives should be constructively regulated through practices of sanitation and religiosity, so that they could be suitable role models for their children (De Alwis, 1994:96).

According to Kumari Jayawardena, the freedom of the 'Aryan Buddhist wife' imagined by Dharmapāla was almost a reproduction of the stereotype in verses from *Kavyasekaraya*, a corrupted Hindu text, (which will be discussed later in this chapter): 'The Aryan husband trains his wife to take care of his parents, and attend on holy men, on his friends and relations. The glory of woman is in her chastity, in the performance of household duties and obedience to her husband. This is the Aryan ideal wife' (Quoted in Jayawardena, 1986:126).

Hence the impact of the emergence of the nationalist movement on Sinhala women cannot be measured in simple terms. Dharmapāla's imagined vision of the 'ideal Sinhala woman' had a tremendous impact on shaping the contemporary Sinhala community's idea of what a woman is. According to Malathi de Alwis this has resulted in posing a set of identities on Sinhala women, simultaneously operating to create a set of exclusions on her (de Alwis, 1994:94). She points out that Dharmapāla constituted Sinhala Buddhist woman in opposition to women in other religions and ethnicity. Dharmapāla argued that the Christian bible, Muslim Koran and Hindu texts degraded women and only Buddhism accorded freedom and respect to women. He also felt that woman's body is the maker of ethnicity, modesty and uniqueness. He attempted to constitute Sinhala Buddhist women in opposition to the completely Europeanised upper class Sinhala women as well as lower class and peasantry who were seen as vulgar and unclean. As Malathi de Alwis also points out his 'Aryan Sinhala woman' was a vision of a 'new bourgeois woman.' (Ibid: 95)

Through this discussion it is clear that what the Sinhala society today understands a 'proper woman' to be was constructed during the height of the nationalist movement. The findings of my archival research strongly support this view. The ideas expressed in newspapers of the early twentieth century clearly indicate the belief in the newly created myth of the 'Aryan Sinhala' woman and her place.

A Buddhist monk writes that:

There were no vulgar dances [Ballroom dance, Baila dance (A Portuguese dance)] among Aryan Sinhalese and such dances are

spread among respectable families today. Because of these dances women's chastity and shame/fear disappears completely and if a woman loses her shame and fear, there is no point of talking about other things (that she loses everything a good woman suppose to have). Especially women should be obedient to men and should have quiet and sweet habits and behave well (Vajirabuddhi, 1923. Translated).

Another man expresses that:

Women and men lean on each other. Because men are strongly intelligent and clever in doing things and because women are less intelligent and always cowards, men are considered as lords (swamiyan) and women are considered to be obedient servants of men. (Keekaru Atavesi). The good woman maintains a very beautiful home, helps men to get rid of their grievances, entertain parents, relations and teachers, does domestic work and therefore they are suitable helpers to men and bring comforts to them. Such a woman illuminates her clan and make the husband and relatives by serving them. Develop her nation and the religion by bringing up her children very well (Pangnadasa, 1923. Translated).

In another newspaper the writer points out that women's duty to the nation is to follow and be obedient to men.

Not only men's but also women's service is very important to develop a nation. Men will use their wise heads and tell what is need for development and women should progress the development by obeying (to what men said) (Rupasinghe, 1924. Translated)

Such ideas were readily acceptable to the mass public and they propagated the myth that that was how the Sinhala women were raised and behaved from ancient times. Therefore while accepting the changing social structures and accompanying modernisation, associated with men, and to a large extent with women, people came to believe that women should not change because they are the guardians of the so-called 'Sinhala Buddhist culture.' The idea of 'Proper

Woman' was strong in Sri Lanka even after the independence as one strong consequence of the emergence of nationalism.

For example one very popular women's newspaper, *Taruni* (young woman) carried a series of articles under the heading of 'The girl I like' in 1960s and young men enthusiastically wrote in about what the qualities they looked for in women. One man says this:

She is a woman who shapes herself according to the changing society. She is fluent in English. Get friendly with anybody very easily. Her walk is brisk and 'cat walk gait' which she modelled deliberately. All this makes her beauty double and treble. She is familiar with all the new fashions. **I Like her. But not for marriage. To get married I am looking for a girl who is completely different** from her. Men fancy such '*Saruwa Pittala*' [means glitter and glamour] girls. They have affairs with such girls and give them various gifts and presents. But they look for girls with different habits and customs (*gati guna*) to get married. (Original emphasis.)

[He goes on to say what he expects from a girl: she should be pretty and should have good habits (*gunawath*) because he should be able to display her as his wife without a shame in social functions and in society.]

Though some youths boast they do not want a dowry, when get married they expect a dowry. According to one thinker "the biggest folly of the man is bringing someone's daughter home and feed and dress her life time." Dowry provides the good foundation for the family life.

The biggest problem is paid work. The only work that a girl can do while protecting her youth, prudence and self-respect, is teaching. That also to a certain limit. I don't like women who do or did paid work because I meet such girls frequently when I go out.

She should be considerably educated though she doesn't do a job. It is difficult to explain anything to an uneducated girl.

Some girls proudly say that they don't know how to make even a '*kiri hodda*' (a simple gravy). But educated men laugh at them. (Do you think) a girl who doesn't know how to cook or sew, a woman? May be not domestic work but it is essential that a girl is not lazy to grow a bit of vegetables in the garden for consumption (De Silva, L., 1969. Translated).

Though the belief is that Sinhala woman from ancient times used to wear modest dresses that covered her decently and was not sexually provocative, it is an erroneous belief. Martin Wickramasinghe's *Purana Sinhala Stringe Anduma (the Dress of Ancient Sinhala Women)* also subtitled in English as "Dress and Ornament in Ancient Ceylon" (1993) analyses the ancient literature and paintings and shows that ancient Sinhala women did not cover the upper part of the body. He states that elite women did not cover their upper torso because they adorned their nudity with jewellery. According to him, even though some Buddhist Monks translated vedic Brahman literature on women's dress code, the ancient Sinhalese did not follow it. Wickramasinghe says ancient Sinhala women's dress evolved in five distinct stages.

- i. Did not cover upper part of the body.
- ii. Covered both upper and lower part of the body with two pieces of cloth.
- iii. Tying a piece of cloth as a brassiere and covered the upper part of the body with another piece of cloth.
- iv. Wearing a blouse
- v. Wearing a blouse and a sari (covered the blouse with the fold of the sari)

According to him there is no evidence to show that these changes occurred one after the other because even though some literature presents the accounts of the past, the evidence they present in those stories may have been influenced by the

contemporary times of the authors. Wickramasinghe believes that first three styles were in practice simultaneously.

Another important fact Wickramasinghe did not specifically mention in his book is the influence of caste system on the dress in ancient Sri Lanka. According to accounts in *History of Ceylon*, vol. 3, in the nineteenth century women of lower castes did not cover the upper part of the body. The low caste men and women were not permitted to do so. One British official recounted how he saw an angry mob of high caste men harassing a girl (from the padu caste) in a town in western province for throwing a kerchief over her neck and shoulders, forgetting 'her degraded lot in life' (Wickremeratne, 1973:171).

There is a strong case to suggest that restrictions on women's dress became prominent during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the national movement against imperialism emerged. Dharmapāla severely criticised the western European dress. It is known that it was he who introduced the sari as the Sinhala national dress. His mother was the first woman to start wearing it.

In the same way that he (Dharmapala) wanted to purify Buddhism, he wanted to purify the Europeanized men and women of Sri Lanka. In many of his speeches and articles, he constantly ridiculed the Victorian hats and crinolines that were worn by the women of the bourgeoisie and advocated the Indian saree as a suitable garment for Sinhala women as it covered their "black legs, navel and midriff"<sup>26</sup> (De Alwis, 1994:94).

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<sup>26</sup> Though the saree covers the legs it definitely does not cover the midriff and navel if the blouse is short and the saree is transparent.

A woman writing to a paper called *Mahajana Handa*, under the title of ' Stri Pakshaya saha Veradi Matha Nirakaranaya' [Womankind and Correcting Wrong Ideas] pointed out:

The security of our nation is on the hands of our sisters, and it is true that safeguarding our honour is also depending on our women. Our good customs (guna dharma) declined and our national dress disappeared during unfortunate time of the last few centuries. ... Certainly now it is time for us to pay special attention to what we wear. Women should wear Osariya but no other dresses. It is a very sad reason that especially women teachers (acharya pakshaye kantawo) are reluctant to give up wearing gowns.

"Nabiya nodakva,

Salu anda bolata dakva,

Nopava tana sakva,

Sina nomasen dasan dakva"<sup>27</sup>

According to Kavayashekaraya, a cloth that covers from navel to ankles, a blouse that made to cover the breasts properly and covering that blouse by the fold of the sari is the Aryan Sinhala Osary dress (Amarasinghe, 1921a. Translated).

When reading the women's newspapers and newspapers in general it seems such ideas were dominant at that time. However, as Martin Wickramasinghe shows, *Kavayashekaraya* is a partial translation of *Sanka Likita Dharma Sutra* of India into Sinhala by the Monk Rahula.<sup>28</sup> Therefore it clearly shows that the Sinhalese women did not have such a dress code as the community believed and it is a Hindu Brahmin influence.

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<sup>27</sup> Do not dress to reveal your navel  
cover up to your ankle  
do not your show your breasts  
do not reveal your teeth when laughing

<sup>28</sup> Kavyashekaraya was written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.



Furthermore, it seems that in pre-colonial and colonial times there was no visible distinction of men and women due to similarity of the way they dressed and the way men and women wore their hair. However, due to colonial influence the dress code and appearance of both males and females changed considerably. Women started wearing European dresses while men started to wear trousers and cut their hair. I would like to argue that this had a significant influence in establishing the gendered appearance of men and women. According to Elizabeth Harris (1994), the Europeans were confused about the appearance of men and women of Sri Lanka when they arrived because both men and women had long hair and used to tie it in a knot. The sarong men wore is draped around the waist in similar style as women draped clothes around their waist. Therefore, men were often mistaken for women. Hence the trouser and short hair became significant symbols in demarcating the appearance of men and women. It is highly likely that this is the foundation for men's protest against women wearing trousers.

Moreover, the articles written by women and Buddhist monks tell women how to behave while criticising the behaviour of contemporary women.

Girl children should be taught the mother tongue and to protect everything. [it is not clear what she meant by 'protect everything'] But women today do ballroom dancing, roam around with young men, cut the hair, which is a necessary thing for women<sup>29</sup> and dress in funny clothes (Somawatie, 1924. Translated).

It is true that European women learned to do the things that accorded to men by nature because European countries did not have experience the progress earlier [as our countries]. Because of that there are numerous

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<sup>29</sup> Sinhalese believe that long hair is one of the five necessary things that makes a woman beautiful.

women who end up in orphanages. There are much evidence to show that this [*doing things should done by men* - explanation is mine] brought severe uncivilised results. No one can change the natural difference between women and men (Padmaperuma, 1924. Translated).

In another newspaper, Mr. J. S. de Silva, from Waskaduwa wrote a letter in the form addressing a daughter. In it he says that girls have to take strongly into their minds that by newspapers and magazines it is proven that the world blames the womankind (*stri wargaya*). He goes on to say that as it is a truth that iron is meant to be corroded and as the same, women are blamed because of their own fault. What he expressed in this letter is that it is an inherent nature of women to do wrong deeds just like the metal iron naturally corrodes. Therefore, women have to keep in mind that they get blamed because of that nature and always have to be cautious in what they do and how they behave (de Silva, J. S. 1921).

The literate population of Sri Lanka was increasing at this time due to colonial education policies and there was a massive upsurge of newspapers in vernacular languages during the early twentieth century due to the revivalism of national languages.

| Year                | 1881 | 1901 | 1921 | 1946 |
|---------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Literate population | 17.4 | 26.4 | 39.9 | 57.8 |
| Male                | 29.8 | 42.0 | 56.4 | 70.1 |
| Female              | 3.1  | 8.5  | 21.2 | 43.8 |

Table 1: The percentage of literacy among the population: 1881-1946.  
(Source: Panditaratne & Selvanāyagam, 1973:301).

The vernacular literature did not target the 'new elite' educated in English because they could not read Sinhala. Hence it is clear the target readership were the urban working class and rural elite who were educated in vernacular languages. Table 1 shows that the literacy rate of women was growing steadily at this time and it is clear that there was a small but considerable percentage of women who could read.

However, it is clear that the vernacular literature including novels and women's newspapers targeted women. An ardent nationalist, novelist Piyadasa Sirisena, directed his writing to ridicule corrupted Buddhist monks, the upper class and especially women. 'In defence of these same traditional values he was opposed to the education and emancipation of women from their somewhat subordinate role in the conventional Sinhala family structure.' (Sarachchandra, 1973:349). T. G.W.Silva, another satirist constantly ridiculed women with his famous character '*Bhagalawatie iscole hāmine*' (Bhagalawatie schoolteacher). The media at the height of nationalism constantly advised women how to behave, how to dress and about their role as a Sinhala woman to the family and race/nation. The impact of such criticism had a deep impact upon the community. From newspaper articles it is clear that women themselves internalised the idea that they need to be corrected. One such article written by a woman to women's newspaper addressing 'Our Foolish Sisters' says: 'For a (long) time (our) brothers shout (and) scold (us). They are shouting at us because they love us. Because they (men) expect our assistance. (We) should take into our minds that they try to take us on the correct path because they are scared that if we go

astray our future generation would be ruined' (Padmawatie Menike, 1925. Translated).

When examining the newspapers from that time to today it seems such ideas took a deep root in Sri Lanka and were constantly presented in the media. For example, *Navaliya* [modern woman] (2001), a women's newspaper in its editor's column titled as 'brightness of woman's character' comes to four conclusions. Firstly, there are people (women?) who do not accept what the editor's column earlier wrote about women's character and they think that saying woman is the strength of the family is wrong and there is another character (husband), who has equal responsibility and (his) support is very useful for women to do everything.

Secondly, it is true that a wife needs the assistance, love and help of the husband but the question is whose responsibility is to build up such an environment? The wife must build such an environment and if she expects someone's (husband's) help for that it's a illusion because the raw materials to build up such a family environment is within the wife. Hence if she cannot build up a family life like that and if she blames someone else (husband), it is highly unfair. It goes on to say that the article is not trying to put more burdens on women's shoulder but tries to explain the burden on women's shoulder and help to strengthen the love and bond in the family.

Thirdly, there may be many women characters that talk about freedom and it is not impossible that problems are created because of that. It is more important to

bring harmony through love rather than creating problems by thinking of freedom. [In some families] women may be free but there will be no love and harmony in their families. Hence women have to decide what is most important.

Fourthly, a stone becomes bright because of the polishing. Like so, a daughter's, wife's, mother's mind need to be polished. That can be done and must be done by parents and elders. It brightens life (of women) (The Editor, 2001. Translated)

Hence, as a result of what the nationalist thought the place of Sinhala women should be, women were marginalised and constrained. The nationalists also used education as a tool to establish their ideas of women, and the religious revivalism of the late nineteenth century and the emergence of the nationalist movement had a significant influence on female education in Sri Lanka. The Sinhala Buddhist leaders resented Christian missionary domination of education and with the help of persons such as Colonel Henry Olcott, Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant, many Buddhist women of wealthy families came forward to establish Buddhist girls schools.

Many wealthy Buddhist women came forward to help in this challenge to foreign and missionary cultural domination, including Ms. Wijeratna of Galle and Cecilia Ilangkoon of Matara. The latter entertained Olcott and Blavatsky at her home in 1880, where a meeting of 2,500 persons was organized; she also joined the local Theosophical Society, financed the first editions, in English and Sinhala, of Colonel Olcott's Buddhist catechism. This book, which spearheaded the Buddhist educational campaign, became text in Buddhist schools and, according to Olcott, was very popular in Buddhist homes (Jayawardena 1986:123).

By the late 1880's, the Society for Women's Education had been established and it started the Sangamitta School for Buddhist girls. In 1889, a German woman, Marie Museaus Higgins, joined the staff and in 1893 she founded Museaus College to provide English secondary education for Buddhist girls. Anagāirka Dharmapāla (mentioned above) was also in favour of educating females. He was impressed by the western women who were involved in the theosophical movement and was aware of women's activities in Europe and the USA through his visits to those countries (Jayawardena, 1986: 126). He and the majority of the nationalists promoted female education.

However, the aim of Sinhala Buddhist education did not differ significantly from the Christian, English education and was certainly not aimed to encourage women's paid work. As Mary Musaeus Higgins said:

Happily in Ceylon woman has no necessity to enter into the rough and tumble of the world in competition with her male relatives. She has still to be wife and mother, and we have to train the growing girls in all that makes woman the goddess and the light of the home (Higgins, nd. quoted in Harris, 1994:33).

The nationalists thought the female Sinhala Buddhist education should be part and parcel of the development of the country and the nation. According to Kumari Jayawardena, there was a section among the nationalists who thought that the education of women should be geared for political awakening and women's emancipation (Jayawardena 1986: 125, 127). However, I would like to argue that the majority thought women's education should be aimed at providing good Buddhist wives in contradiction to the Christian other women, the westernised, Christianised Sinhalese women. What they expected from female

education was to produce a woman with good morals and manners, a suitable companion for Buddhist men. The following quotation clearly indicates what the nationalists expected from educating women: learn enough to be patriotic but be domesticated:-

Some mothers and fathers think educating girls is unsuitable. This is unwise. No one in the world today, even if they have a minimal education, would say so. There are women who have earned doctorates and honorary places in very great, developed European countries. Also there are associations in Europe, lead by women, which work for the welfare of the public. We have heard about the English ladies who boldly agitated to gain power to select MPs to the House of Commons.

Though it is considered that education is unsuitable for women, the ladies of the ancient times were clever in not only reading and learning religion but also in minor strategies. Women such as Vihāramaha Devi, Leelāwathi, Kalyānawathi, Ratnāwali, Ulakudaya Devi, Meniksāmi are examples.

Therefore we affectionately remind our Sinhala parents to act enthusiastically to teach our contemporary sisters as much as possible these things: reading and mother tongue, religion, Sinhala history and the things that should be learned by women: the arts of cooking and sewing, modesty, "nirahankārakama"<sup>30</sup>, obedience, respecting elders, tidying and cleaning the home, taking care of patients, bringing up and disciplining children.

Women should boldly come forward to talk about the ancient ladies, the progress of other women in the world and to explain the situation of the women of our race. (Amarasinghe, 1921b. Translated.).

Only the wealthy middle class and the traditional elite could afford to send their daughters to Sinhala Buddhist girls' colleges. It seems that many parents of the unprivileged sections of the society in the pre-independence era were reluctant to educate the girls and there was a preference for sons. Some of my older interviewees said that they were kept at home to take care of young siblings and to do domestic work. However, using the data gathered, I would like to argue

that sons were given preference not only because of the patriarchal nature of the community and domestication of women but also for other reasons.

It seems that there were two major reasons for parents' lack of effort to educate girls: not having enough money to meet the expenses of education and, most importantly, girls' education was considered a less profitable investment than that of boys. Therefore, as the quotation below points out girls' education was not seen as a necessity.

Among the Sinhalese, women have never been deliberately excluded from the acquisition of knowledge, but their education was not regarded as an accomplishment, attainable only by the few – never as a necessity (Denham: 1912, quoted in Harris, 1994:39).

Until the end of the 1960s, though there were free food programs, unlike today the government did not provide free textbooks or materials for school uniforms and the majority of the parents in Sri Lanka were not in a position to provide such needs. According to Harris (1994) a report of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East recorded that in 1821 to 22, the Girls school held on the veranda of the Mission house in Baddegama area had a larger and more regular attendance than that of the boys school because of the gifts of clothing.

Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) started teaching in Anuradhapura Central School because of the appeal of the principal in 1953 when her husband was stationed there as a government officer. She said:

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<sup>30</sup> This term means the opposite of vanity. However it has multiple meanings such as not being self-aware, not to look down upon people because of one's status and not to be proud in front of relations.



A: They made a good use of it [her teaching]. When the Ordinary Level results were out about ten boys were passed for the first time. So the principal said we could start the Advanced level classes. So I said I'd teach [...] now, they couldn't do Advanced level in English. It was beyond them. So I said I'll teach geography but I can do Ceylon history and European history or Government too. Even though I had not done them for the degree I could teach those four subjects. The principal said he would do Sinhala. So we started. For the first time we sent one boy to the university unfortunately he is dead, P.B. Wannināyaka. He became a civil servant, secretary to the minister of post and telecommunication and retired two years ago. He got into the university, next year out of three, two got in. Sirisena and Padmadeva, and one became a lecturer.

Q: Were there any girls in that class?

There were [...] the girls are [...] unfortunately what happened was [...] you see, these are all [...] they were not wealthy people. So it was expensive for them to educate a girl. The girls came to the central school but if there was a drought and the parents didn't get money, the first people to be withdrawn from education were the girls. They had to stay behind and their parents' kept them from school [...] and there were one or two continued [...] I sent one as a dental nurse [...] got her to apply for the job [...] and they didn't like to take these girls as teachers either. You see, for about the first two or four years this is what happened. The girls were withdrawn. Because they preferred to educate a boy and then expect him to support the family (Gaya, age 73, Colombo/English).

Gaya, this interviewee's response points to an important fact. Educating girls was expensive for parents because it was not easy for girls from poor families in rural areas to be employed. They did not have the same opportunity for paid work as the lower middle class women who went to urban schools.

However, it was not only the material expenses that mattered. When a girl was educated, parents had to find a man suitable for her status as an educated person and therefore had to provide a larger dowry in order to raise the woman to the man's status in marriage.

Some parents say this also: 'when we spent more money on a girl (on a girl's education) and gave her a better education we have to give her to a man in a better position. (And) then need to provide a bigger dowry. Because of that it is enough to educate a girl a little. If there is a chance to get a high profile job, she can be given in marriage even if there is no large dowry. But women can't get a job in a place other than teaching or in a post office or a hospital. So it is enough educating them a little' saying that sometimes parents prefer to keep their girls in ignorance even if girls are more intelligent than the boys. The reason for this is demanding a dowry (Senānāyaka, 1923. Translated).

The administrative system created by the British colonial rulers, which was called Ceylon Civil Service, was hierarchical and mainly male dominated. Though the civil service was gradually opened to local men to cut colonial expenditure and later in response to pressure from the English educated elite, women were not involved in it. According to Harris (1994) some European women who were heads of schools protested against this and questioned why government departments and commercial offices were not opened to Ceylonese women, as was the case in England. The quotation above clearly indicates that women were excluded from high profile jobs and so parents considered it was pointless to spend money on their daughters' higher education because of the preference for males in the prestigious government service.

To sum up I argue that as a consequence of the structural changes brought by colonial rule, and the emergence of nationalism as resistance against imperialism, a new image of a 'Sinhala woman' was constructed which had a deciding impact on shaping the lives of Sinhala women today. Under colonialism women's secondary position in society deteriorated further as a result of changing laws and transplanting ideologies and concepts from their christianised

industrialised societies to Sri Lanka. However, from the viewpoint of the coloniser that meant 'civilising' the natives and 'liberating degraded women'. In the section on nationalism it was shown that some restrictions on Sinhala women are actually a result of Hindu and Brahmin influences in Sri Lanka. Nationalist leaders combined an 'imagined' historical representation of women with the colonial experience, and glorified the pre-colonial Sinhala Buddhist society, while asserting that women's place was in the home. The result of such influences meant that women had unequal and different access to some features of modernity introduced by colonialism. Both the colonisers and the Sinhalese males collaborated taking the view that notions of modernity were applicable to them (males) and constructed modernity differently for women. In fact, because of both the colonial and nationalist ideology of women's place, many women lost equal access to spaces other than home.

There is a strong case to argue that the idea women have a 'correct place' emerged in the early twentieth century. This 'correct place' is rather a caricature of imposed Christian values and imagined Sinhala Buddhist values. However, there was a growing sense among a small but significant section of women that this imagined 'correct place' had a detrimental impact on women's access to spaces other than home and her place at home. The next section will explore the protracted debate on women's place and women's resistance to being confined to the home.

### **Part III: The debate on the rights of women**

#### Women's place

It is generally accepted that the idea of equal rights for women caught the attention of women and the rest of the public and government of Sri Lanka in the mid-seventies when the United Nations declared the year of women. However, there is clear evidence to show that a debate was going on about the subject from the beginning of the twentieth century. While the women of the upper middle class forged an alliance with other left wing or socialist oriented political leaders to fight for women's rights to education, the franchise and paid work, there was another section of women who voiced their protest about the role of women propagated by the nationalist leaders. Though there is no clear evidence to show who they were or whether they formed organisations or used political fora to convey their ideas, it seems it is correct to assume these women were Sinhala educated petty bourgeoisie, who may have been most affected by the constraints created by the nationalist leaders, quite unlike the westernised upper middle class women. These women cleverly used the available fora such as the newspapers for voicing their opinions and there is also evidence to show that they used events such as school prize givings for that purpose.

Kumari Jayawardena states that both Buddhist and Christian education had opened women's eyes to the constraints of the traditional life. I have argued however, that this education was designed to confine women to the domestic

sphere. Jayawardena gives an example from a 1914 journal called *Buddhist Companion* where in the form of a dialogue between two women, it criticises the 'traditional Buddhist view of women' as depicted in old Sinhala writings. It says 'Our Sinhala men are still trying to confine us to the kitchen. They are not interested in teaching us anything beyond that.' (Jayawardena, 1986:127). Men and even some women, were agitated by women's protests and their opposition was evident in strong views on the subject expressed in the newspapers. Though they did not use the term 'equal rights', women talked about women's independence as parallel to the nation's independence. Opposing this view, in an article entitled 'The dawn of independence in women's world', a Buddhist monk, Habarādoowe Pannasena, says:

What independence a Sinhala woman should have needs to be examined. Western women have extremely corrupted characters because of the unlimited independence they have gained. That is why the ancestors were against the independence of women. Women should try to live in harmony with their neighbours. Taking care of parents, older relations and monks/Brahmins lovingly and kindly is useful for both worlds [the present life and after life]. Women should perform religious duties daily, morning and evening, should have happy religious talks together with the people at home, should put seeds of noble characteristics in small sons and daughters by teaching them the tales of life stories of heroes [presumably the tales of national heroes]. The noble women gain independence by doing such things (1934. Translated).

A letter was sent by a man to a women's newspaper criticising a speech of a former women student at a prize giving at a Buddhist School. He claimed that she blamed men for all the faults in the world. According to him, she had said that the 'only reason for women to be bad and go astray is men. The evil men of early times insulted women and threw them downhill only because of their

personal hatred of women. It is unwise to say women are promiscuous and it is a myth generated only in recent times'. As a response to this, the writer of the article defended men by saying that it was the noble men and rishies (wise men) who said women were promiscuous, and that the opinion of the pundits is that women must be under the authority of their parents when they are small: under the authority of husband in youth and under the authority of) children (sons) when old. In his opinion women would not have to be under the authority of men if they were not promiscuous (Wijayaratne, 1925. Translated).

A letter written to another newspaper argues:

Actually women are cleverer in learning than men, and women should be educated. But it is disagreeable getting used to being involved in committees and organisations. It harms the harmony and peace in the family. There will be fights instead of peace. Women who get involved in such committees and organisations cannot bring up children properly either. For these reasons, we think it is wise for an educated woman to just take care of domestic work and take care of her children (Wijayasekara, 1933. Translated).

From these quotations it is clear that during the first three decades of the twentieth century the question of women's independence became a prominent topic of debate in which opponents criticised the modern western woman as the 'bad other' in relation to the 'good Sinhala woman.'

On the other hand, there was strong opposition from some women to the notion of women in general as being bad, vile and promiscuous, and to the attempt to bar women from access to spheres other than the home. Nevertheless, as it seems even these women were careful to stress that being independent did not mean that they wanted to be completely free as individuals. The argument put

forward by these women for wanting access to education, paid work or politics was that it was necessary for the development of the country and the nation.

However, they stressed that they did not want to cross the barriers of 'culture and tradition' while doing so.

In an article entitled 'Getting the (women's) head knocked after stroking the (men's) head', Mallika Senaviratne of Nuwaraeliya Kulagana Samitiya (Nuwara Eliya Noble Women's Committee) says that 'it is the so called most noblest, excellent and senior male fraternity (pirimi paksaya) who say that women are weaker and less wise than men are, not good to socialise with, violent, dishonest, destructive and tend to do wrong as soon as they have a chance'. She asks, 'are they an honourable group that don't do any wrong deeds?' and 'Is it correct to blame (women) after getting help from women in sickness and in disasters?' She concludes by saying that if the wish is for the progress of the country and the nation, room should be made for mother-kind's (Senaviratne, M. 1925.

Translated)

In another article in the same paper Srimathi P. Florence Abhayagunawardena writes:

Many men regard women as submissive and keep them aside. (Men) think that women are fragile, get frightened easily and are not firm. *Some women have become like that because in everything, women are trained and considered as a cowardly group.* It may be a question among a certain group of men (*sahodarayan*) to what kind of independence it is that women want. The independence we demand is not like an independence that women in some countries have; to do things or go out on our own accord or to do things that would harm peace in the family but to get involved in the tasks that men can do for the sake of the greater development of the country (Abhayagunawardena, 1925. Translated. Emphasis is mine).

The debate on women's status or rights did not stop after independence but became even stronger as more girls went to schools and were qualified to do paid work. There was no opposition to educating girls because the nationalists had established the idea that women should be educated to assist men to develop the country and nation and to produce well-behaved patriotic children. Yet there was protest against women doing paid work or sports and wearing sports clothing. In an article called 'Is this Dress Bad?' in the newspaper *Vanitha Viththi* (Women's News) the writer says:

A true woman will never ever compete with a man or try to absorb the male habits and custom. Although she excels in her status or education, she will never destroy her femininity. However, the girls nowadays tend to be enthusiastic about doing difficult sports that for men only before. Hence, they need a new dress that would protect them from shame and fear. It is vile to wear short dresses like divided skirts and do sports like volleyball because the imagery and the feelings it generates are vile and they are not suitable for the culture of the country to show the bodies of young grown up girls in public, shamelessly and without fear. (Vanitha, 1957)

An article entitled 'Do the Sweet Potatoes Planted by Trouser Clad Women (kalisam kāriyan) Produce Bigger Yams?' which criticised the calling of applications for a women's farming school (govikam vidyalaya) in Kundasāle, says: 'when there are thousands of educated men in the country it is totally inappropriate to have a farming school for women wasting lakhs of rupees of public funds, because is not suitable at all to the country's civility'. The article questions whether women are more suitable than men for farming or that sweet potatoes planted by girls wearing trousers would produce bigger yams (Anonymous, 1957. Translated).



Articles such as those discussed clearly show that, at this time, the idea that women's place was at home and that they should be docile and modest acting with shame and fear, were established as part of the Sinhala 'tradition and culture.' When reading Srimathi Abhayagunawardena's article (quoted earlier), it appears that some women were aware that the constraints they had to endure were not 'natural' but imposed on them by men in the name of tradition and culture. It is also clear that some women began to openly question the inferior status of women. One woman writing to a newspaper which had published articles criticising women who agitated for independence, stated:

Saying that women are slaves of men, is it because when the husband comes home she gets up from where she sits? Is it because she eats after the husband? Is it because she goes to bed after him and gets up before him? If women think this as an indicator of women not being independent, it is a misunderstanding. Devotion to the husband (*Pati Bhaktiya*) is not an indication of Sri Lankan woman's slavery. It is a feature of how we shape ourselves and our culture (Roopa, 1957. Translated).

The changes in the twentieth century brought slow but steady changes for women. In 1931 women gained the right to vote. The educated elite middle class professional women engaged in politics since early days of nationalist movement. According to Kumari Jayawardena, many of them were wives of nationalist and labour leaders (Jayawardena, 1986:128). In 1935, a woman entered the Parliament for the first time. However, as Jayawardena (1986) point out women's representation in the national legislatures has never have been more than four percent. She also mentioned that 'the few women who have successfully contested and made a name for themselves in the political process

have generally entered politics as the result of the death of a father or husband, inheriting, as it were, the male's mantle of power' (Jayawardena, 1986:129). The number of educated women and women working outside the home was steadily increasing. The rate of literacy among women in 1946 was 43.8% and this rose to 53.6% in 1953 and to 63.8% in 1963 (Department of Census and Statistics, 1972:28). When the University of Ceylon was established in 1942, it was open to both sexes and by the end of the 1950s the number of universities increased. In the same era, vernacular languages were introduced to the secondary level education as a medium of instruction (Metthananda, 1990: 68-69). The percentage of women's enrolment in universities increased from 10.1% in 1942 to 18.7% in 1950 and 24.1% in 1960. (Source: University Council reports cited by Jayaweera, 1990: 101).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the early census data on the participation of females in the labour force was inaccurate because of the categorisation of work first as 'gainful occupation' and in the introduction in 1946 of the term 'useful occupation'. When the latter term was introduced, any activity that did not bring a steady money income or was not practised regularly enough did not come under gainful occupation. As a result of this the recorded female labour force participation rate went down drastically from 35.2% in 1921 to 18.1% in 1946 (Risseeuw, 1991: 96). However, the rate rose to 21.1% by the end of the 1960s. This was mainly due to the fact that the government service opened up to women when British colonial rule ended.

Amidst these changes, women found that men resented the opportunities they gained, and that men and some women were trying to ridicule women by using arguments that women have 'natural weaknesses'. Such arguments caused a backlash from a section of women because they understood that the aim of this was to confine women to the home and reinforce their subjugation. However, because of the recent strong influence of nationalist ideology, these women also expressed the view that the independence they were seeking was not for the progress of women as individuals but for the progress of the country and nation.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, they were cautious to mention, like the above quoted woman Srimathi Abhayagunawardena, that they were not going to be a threat to the Sinhala culture and tradition or become an example of a 'bad' Sinhala woman.

It seems that in the 1960s, the debate became stronger and more intense. There was also a significant change in the usage of terms. When reading women's newspapers at the end of the 1960s, instead of the term 'independence' the term 'equal place' appears. There was no clear evidence in the newspapers to indicate why such a change had taken place. However, one fact that may have had a strong influence on this could have been the Socialist and Marxist political ideologies introduced to Sri Lanka in the first half of the twentieth century, which could be worth further research. The communist and socialist political parties gained a following and there was much propaganda carried out by both the Soviet and Chinese embassies. There was free distribution of literature on communist ideology. Freely distributed magazines in Sinhala depicted women

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<sup>31</sup> I am using the term nation instead of race or ethnic group because at this time Sri Lankans identified their ethnic groups as nations.

working shoulder to shoulder with men glorifying equality in society. I still remember seeing the magazines called 'Soviet *Deshaya*' (Land of the Soviets), 'Soviet *Kamkaruwa*' (Soviet Proletariat) and 'China Today', which showed happy pictures of women working in factories and farms. Such imaginary must have had some influence on perceptions of women's place in society. Another important fact that may have contributed to such changes was Sirimavo Bandaranaike becoming the first woman Prime Minister in the world on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1960. This significant election followed in the wake of the assassination of her husband, the late Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike.

In an article in *Taruni*, a women's newspaper, One woman says:

It was many years ago that women in Sri Lanka decided that they should also progress and work to be equal with men. That was even before the women in recently more developed Asian countries thought about it. But even today we cannot be happy although our women have progressed to a great extent (Gunaratne, 1969. Translated).

The introductory paragraph in this article entitled 'Lankan women who shouldn't be invisible' talks about the recently highly developed Asian countries<sup>32</sup> and concludes that the reason that Sri Lankan women have not progressed so well lies in the *social system*, *social pattern*, education pattern, and not guiding women on the correct path (Emphasis is mine). She says, nevertheless, that the awareness and interest (of women) has gone beyond such limits. She also concludes that women cannot progress because of several other key factors. Women are interested in, or have access to only a limited range of jobs. The

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<sup>32</sup> In my view she must have been referring to China

public does not have a good understanding about the service that women can offer and thinks that women do not have the strength to go forward and break some barriers. She argues that women should get involved in various economic and social activities and should become a lifeline for maintaining the country, society and economy. She criticises the fact that even though the government spent massive amounts of money to teach science, none of the scientifically educated women made any significant contribution for the nation by coming up with any new inventions. She laments the fact that women lack interest in applying for bank loans to start collective domestic-handicraft businesses or to start collective co-operative farming settlements. She points out that the biggest victory women have achieved was a Sri Lankan woman becoming the world's first woman Prime Minister and questions why Sri Lankan women should stop there.

In my contention that this article clearly shows that her ideas were influenced by communist countries and the social and economic systems those countries had adopted. Some of ideas of this writer became popular in Sri Lanka at that time. In the 1970s Ceylon became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (1972), the government adopted the planned economic system of the socialist countries and there was a failed attempt to create co-operative farms following those of Soviet Russia.

However, I argue that what is most important is that this article clearly manifests the ambivalence in women due to the dilemma of having limited access to

modernity and believing in what I have termed an 'imagined' culture and tradition. The writer of the above article says that having access to some jobs does help with women's progress in their private lives but it does not help the general progress of women. She thinks the home based collective arts and crafts industry is better than single paid work because she believes such arts and crafts can be a major source of foreign income for the country. Further she says that one job that women can do, but should not do, is climbing trees and, as assigned by society, men should also not practise midwifery, which is only a women's job. She ends her article emphasising that women should shape themselves to be able to participate in the country's development, but while keeping their own culture should not be afraid to break other barriers.

The reason for this, I assume stems from the fear and shame internalised by women, which is imposed on them by the community through the ideas, norms and values as identified as 'culture and tradition.' The 'traditions' significantly symbolised the distinction between the Western and Sinhala culture and by breaking 'traditions' women insult the family and the community's honour (or honour of the nation). Ridiculing women through the media who wanted to be free from barriers must also have had a significant impact on women to be cautious when protesting about constraints. For example, T. G. W. Silva, who called himself 'the greatest satirist of the Sinhale', in one of his satirical stories used the idea of a mad woman to say that women lost the respect and honourable treatment from men because they forgot that they were women and

started to compete with men and to say they were not second to men (Silva, T. G. W., 1969).

However, in this period, some women became bolder and criticised the prevailing ideas about women within the community. They wrote articles and composed verses that were published in newspapers side by side with the articles that told women how to behave and what to do. Wasanthā Gunatilaka challenges in her verses the idea of confining women at home and says that this era is over (Gunatilaka, 1969). Another writer under the pseudonym of 'Rancho Nona' in an article titled 'Let us go to Work and Keep Men at Home', asks how it is that the husband is considered as the 'god' of the wife in an era when women work and earn just like men do. She asks, if a woman can be the ruler of the country why women cannot be heads of their families. She also says that everybody needs freedom and women sacrificed their freedom to men for thousands of years but nothing useful has happened (to women). She asks whether the life of women is worthwhile if they cannot live or dress the way they want, and says that when women wear a dress journalists and '*kavi kola kārayo*'<sup>33</sup> never leave them alone but no one criticises the way men dress. (Rancho Nona, 1969).

There was a protracted 'battle of verses' in the same newspaper from September 1969 to December 1969 about women's place in society. It all started when a male teacher called Piyasena Ranwala wrote saying that women should have an equal place in society. Both men and women took sides. Some people argued

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<sup>33</sup> At that time there were people who composed verses on current issues printed and sold them. The people who sold them used to recite them aloud in public vehicles.

that women have the right to equality while others said women should not have an equal place but the correct place. The critics ridiculed the teacher who started the debate by saying that he is a 'Woman' and asked of men who supported him whether they had lost their minds. The above account shows that though there was no clear leadership or movement, there was an important debate on gender equality. This clearly shows that Sri Lankan women's demand for equality was not imposed on them by the United Nations in 1975 when it was declared that this was the Year of the Women. This also challenges another common argument in media that the demand for equality is a consequence of the influence of western feminists or upper middle class women in Sri Lanka (Editorial, 1984).

It seems such ideas gained ground because of inadequate research on the decades of 1950s and 1960s. Kumari Jayawardena states that 'the women's movement' in Sri Lanka was not imposed by the United Nations (Jayawardena, 1986, 1989). However the evidence she used to show this was the activities of the upper middle class women political leaders of the first two decades of the twentieth century within nationalist and leftist politics. She says:

In Sri Lanka, the women's movement was not imposed on women by the United Nations or by Western feminists, but has an independent history. Women participated in the cultural revival of the 1880-1910 period, educated themselves and began to enter the professions, (the first woman doctor qualifying in 1899), and in the 1920s, the Women's Franchise Union led the demand for female franchise, which was obtained in 1931. In subsequent years, many organisations including the **Women's Political Union**, and the **All-Ceylon Women's Conference**, agitated for equal rights. Women were also active in trade unions in the 1920s ... By 1975, women had already made important strides, not only in obtaining political rights, but also in education, employment, literacy, life expectancy and health (Jayawardena, 1989b: 2. Original emphasis.).



Most of the women she mentions belonged to the elite and as shown earlier they had access to education and other modern changes and were very often active in politics under the shadow of their fathers, brothers or husbands. These women formed political unions affiliated to leftist political parties and nationalist organisations, headed by English educated elite males. That leadership did not question the tradition and culture imposed by the male nationalist leaders and they agitated for political rights and rights for education and paid work. After they achieved their aims during the movement for independence, there was a 'lull' in women's politics until Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the Prime Minister. As a consequence of this, the public today including many women's writers believe that the demand for equality surfaced after the UN proclamation in 1975.

Kumari Jayawardena points out that:

The women's movement in Sri Lanka, in its origins and development, was essentially a result of the movement for national independence and therefore reflected most of its characteristics. Independence was achieved through a process of peaceful negotiation and gradual advancement. In association with this movement, women were able to win rights to education, suffrage and juridical equality. Thus the case of Sri Lanka demonstrates the possibility of some advancement through a gradualist programme of reform. But this very ability also imposes certain limitations on the movement. It remained limited in involvement to bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie women; since it existed and worked within the social parameters, it did not question the patriarchal social structures, or the role of the family in the subordination of women. In these respects, it offers a contrast to countries like Japan where women were compelled to question the very basis of family and sexuality and morality. The other women to organize themselves and evolve their own methods of struggle were the urban working women. They sought to obtain some measure of change in the existing system of power relations, but they too were unable to push their understanding beyond economic relationships (Jayawardena, 1986:135-136).

Though Jayawardena is right in claiming that the 'women's movement' was confined to the upper classes and the proletariat, she does not talk about the women who voiced their concern about not being able to enjoy the fruits of independence as fully as men. This is probably due to the fact there was no prominent leadership of lower middle class women. They were followers of the elite women leadership and active at the grass root level. However, they were the section that were most affected by the 'imagined' character of the ideal Sinhala woman. The elite women were already contented with and had access to Westernisation and modernisation, which the nationalists thought inappropriate for Sinhala women.

As Kumari Jayawardena pointed out, urban working class women were more concerned about their prime needs, basic work rights and the wage problems, which are basically economic oriented, because they were guided by the male communist and socialist trade union leaders and political parties. The well-established communist and social political party leadership believed that equality could be achieved through economic changes. It was the Sinhala educated lower middle class women who found they were in neither place. On the one hand their education made them qualified enough for a type of paid work other than being a labourer or a housewife. On the other hand, education made them aware that what has been said about the ideal Sinhala woman constrained them when the basic structures changed. Premalatha Gunaratne who was quoted here was perfectly right when she said that the awareness and interest of women had gone beyond the constraints imposed on them. At least a section of both men

and women in the lower middle class were strongly opposed to this situation and the discussion here shows that there is a strong case to argue that they questioned the very patriarchal social parameters Kumari Jayawardena has mentioned.

The reason for them 'vanishing' in history could be assigned to the fact that they did not have a strong prominent leadership or a political movement powerful enough to convey their ideas to the community, which could have had a strong counter impact upon the ideas, values, norms and beliefs that well established by that time. As I have shown here the influence of media on reinforcing and promoting the constructed images of Sinhala women was very powerful. The other reason may be the volatile political environment of Sri Lanka. As a consequence of communal clashes among Sinhalese and Tamils and the influence of the political party Janathā Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front) on the Sinhala youth at this time. At the end of the 1960s the Marxist-Communist oriented JVP (Peoples Liberation Front) was secretly arming, training and lecturing youths with the aim of instigating a revolution. In 1971 there was a JVP inspired armed uprising that failed, and many young educated women were involved in it.

However, as a consequence of the 'silence' of women, the idea that women have a 'correct' place in society and that they do not need an 'equal place' became strongly rooted within the community. Secondly, it also generated the myth that fighting for equal rights is recent and it is a westernised upper middle class

bourgeois trend. The stories of the interviewees very strongly indicate that the impact of this on Sinhala women was considerable. From the oldest to the youngest interviewees said that it is good for women to come out of home and engage in work other than household chores, yet they believed that they have to behave according to their 'culture and traditions.'

It was after 1975 that various women's organisations demanding equal rights for women emerged. Women of all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka established non-governmental organisations to voice their demands and to challenge discrimination against women. There has also been an interest in retrieving Sri Lankan women's history and research on contemporary women. According to Wickramagamage (1998) 'women's organisations have mushroomed in Sri Lanka since 1970s' because of the policy and programmes of major organisations such as the United Nations and partly due to donor interest in funding organisations that espouse women's cause. However, the women's groups that emerged since 1970s are different from earlier women's organisations because, as Wickramagamage points out, 'these organisations are ... animated by a notion of rights and desire for change in women's status' (Wickramagamage, 1998:4). As she says, many of these organisations are located in urban areas, mainly in Colombo. While it is an advantage to remain in close proximity to both funding agencies and the national level decision making bodies, this distances women's organisations from the majority of women who live in rural areas. Another problem according to

Wickramagamage (1998) is that since these organisations are run by educated upper and middle class women, their class affiliation distance them from the lives and concerns of women from other social and economic groups.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion in this chapter indicates that gender identity was not static and changed along with wider historical changes. My research strongly shows what the Sinhala community believes today to be men's place and women's place was constructed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Though it is not the prime concern of this study it is important to note that it was not only women's identity that was changed during this period. I would argue that the colonial introduction of such concepts as primogeniture, the male breadwinner, the head of the family and different dress codes for men constructed a new masculinity for men. Taking on board some of the ideas of the colonial rulers nationalist leaders established and maintained this new masculinity by asserting that men are leaders and thinkers and women are carers and nurtures who should safeguard the 'culture and tradition' created by men in the name of 'Sinhala Buddhist culture'.

This indicates that although, since independence, women have access to spaces other than home, the impact of the deep-rooted developments of the early twentieth century strongly influence what women can do, where, and on what basis. Therefore, the succeeding chapter will examine women's situation in the

post independence period focusing on four key areas, education, paid work, politics and family.

## Chapter Five

### I live for others

Chapters Two and Three discussed what Sinhala girls internalise about being a female in the Sinhala community during their formative years, i.e. from childhood to puberty. As already discussed, what they have already learned through advice and observation indeed has a strong impact on their later life. The Fourth chapter also discussed how emerging nationalism at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century impacted on women's status within the community. The nationalists either ignored or were not aware of the fact that the influence of Indian culture and four hundred years of colonial domination had a role in shaping the Sinhala culture and invented a 'tradition', which was remarkably similar to the colonial ideology of women. This laid a strong foundation for the belief in an imagined pure Sinhala Buddhist culture and 'tradition' within which women become signifiers of that culture and tradition. As a consequence, obedience, chastity, quietness, passivity and modesty have been promoted as the virtues and customs appropriate for a good Sinhala woman, and motherhood and domestic life glorified as their prime roles.

This chapter explains the ways in which the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' impacts on women's lives at home and in public. I begin with education because it is generally perceived as paving the way to paid work. I will then examine paid work within the context of equal access to education and move on to another area, politics because it signifies women's involvement in decision making. Finally I will examine women's place in the family in relation to the

spheres of life, because, in my view, access to other spaces has an important impact upon women's place at home. The key questions in this section are that if women are not barred from education, paid work and politics what prevents them from enjoying equal access to these areas and why do they believe that they should play a secondary role at home?

## **Education**

The establishment of free education up to university level, nationalisation of the majority of the schools, and the provision of welfare services such as free food, school textbooks, and cloth for uniforms has made it possible for parents to send their children to school. At the same time, women have had access to government service and other types of paid work hitherto not available for them. This has made their education more valuable. As a consequence, the preference for educating sons has died out.

As Table 2 shows, another positive consequence of free education was that the higher education (university education), which was limited to the elite or middle class families only, was gradually opened up to people of lower classes too.



| <i>Occupation of the Parents</i> | 1950        |               | 1970        |               |
|----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
|                                  | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> |
| Professional Management          | 55.5        | 69.5          | 8.9         | 11.3          |
| Teaching                         | 12.6        | 7.2           | 9.8         | 10.5          |
| Middle level: Clerical           | 20.3        | 20.3          | 15.3        | 14.3          |
| Small farmers & Rural workers    | 6.3         | 1.4           | 31.5        | 27.9          |
| Urban workers                    | 4.2         | 1.4           | 16.2        | 15.0          |
| Unemployed                       |             |               | 8.3         | 8.5           |
| Unspecified                      |             |               | 10.0        | 10.2          |
| Total                            | 100.0       | 100.0         | 100.0       | 100.0         |

Table 2: Proportion of university students from different backgrounds<sup>34</sup>.

Source: Jayaweera, 1973: 172.

Table 2 above shows that in the 1950s the number of university entrants of whose parents were in professional and management level jobs was very much higher than those from other backgrounds. Nevertheless, by the 1970s even some unemployed parents could manage to send their children to universities because of the welfare programs. However, according to research on education, having equal access has not eradicated the gender gap in education as the table and the figure next page shows.

<sup>34</sup> The columns 1,2 and 4 do not add up to 100.

| Census Year      | 1953 | 1963 | 1971 | 1981 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Percent Literate |      |      |      |      |
| Total            | 69.0 | 77.0 | 78.5 | 87.2 |
| Males            | 80.7 | 85.7 | 85.6 | 91.1 |
| Females          | 55.5 | 67.3 | 70.9 | 83.2 |

Table 3: Population (10 years and over) by literacy and sex, census years  
 (Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2001a: Table 21.1)

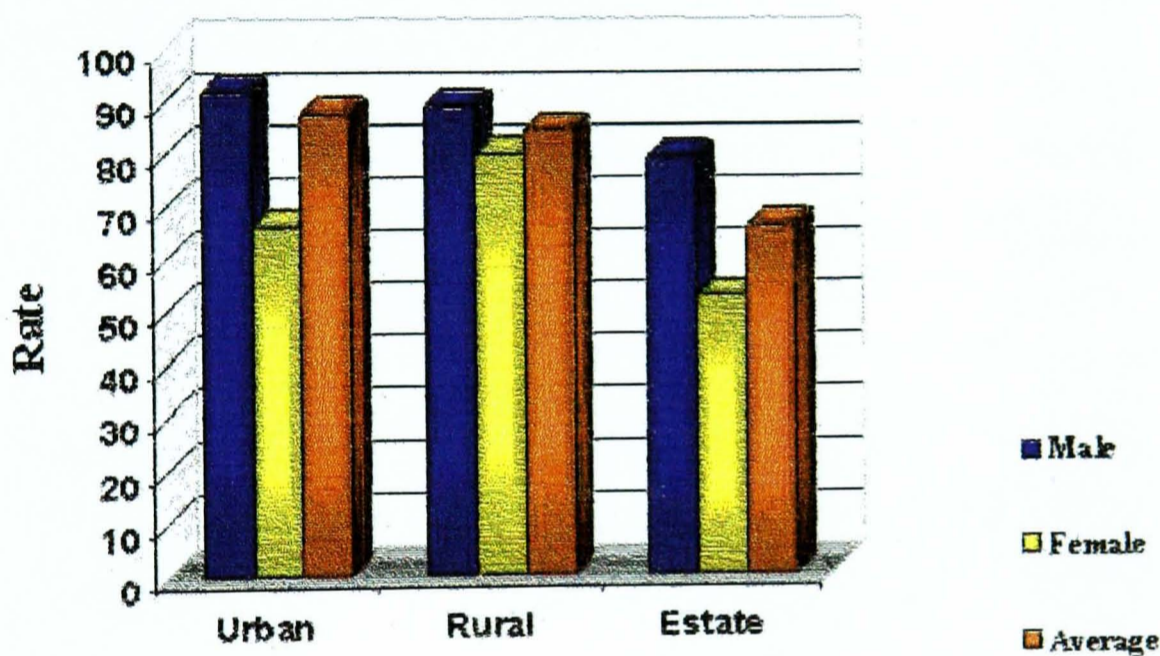


Figure 2: Literacy rates of persons over 10 years, census 2001  
 (Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2001b)

Both Table 3 and Figure 2<sup>35</sup> above show that there is a gap in the literacy rate among men and women. Table 4 shows the findings of a survey done by the Department of Census and Statistics in 1990/91, which makes interesting

<sup>35</sup> This graph is divided in to three main parts, urban, rural and estate (plantations). From the beginning there was a difference in education in the first two areas and the plantation sector. Educating estate workers was not on the agenda of the planters in order to prevent them seeking employment outside the plantations. This still has an impact on estate workers.

reading. It shows that the main reason for the gender gap in the literacy rate is the significantly higher number of illiterate women over forty-five years compared to the number of illiterate men in the same age group.

| Age group   | Rate of illiteracy among Males | Rate of illiteracy among Females |
|-------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 10-14       | 7.6%                           | 6.8%                             |
| 15-19       | 6.1%                           | 6.1%                             |
| 20-24       | 8.7%                           | 8.4%                             |
| 25-29       | 9.2%                           | 11.2%                            |
| 30-34       | 8.4%                           | 10.4%                            |
| 35-39       | 8.9%                           | 14.7%                            |
| 40-44       | 8.0%                           | 15.6%                            |
| 45-49       | 9.5%                           | 22.7%                            |
| 50-54       | 10.3%                          | 30.9%                            |
| 55-59       | 14.9%                          | 37.6%                            |
| 60-64       | 16.0%                          | 42.2%                            |
| 65 and over | 22.7%                          | 53.0%                            |

Table 4: Rate of illiteracy among males and females – Population Census of 1990/91

(Department of Census and Statistics, 1996: p.20, table 2.3).

This clearly shows that the gap between the illiteracy rate among young females up to thirty five and males is not very large as a consequence of equal opportunity in education, while the rate of illiteracy among women over 45 years is more than twice the figure for males of the same age, because they did not have the same opportunity as younger women today. One positive consequence

of equal access to education is that there is no large gap between urban and rural education. In 1953, the urban and rural female literacy rates were 74.1% and 52.4% respectively. In 1971, the urban female literacy rate was 81.5% and the rural female literacy rate was 67.9%. By 1981, the two rates were up to 91.0% and 79.9% (Jayaweera, 1990: 103; table 5.5). The above graph of the census year 2001 shows that the literacy rate of rural females exceeded the literacy rate of the urban females.<sup>36</sup>

The factors that are highly likely to influence this trend are as follows: many factories, small workshops and construction work are located in urban areas and since the liberalisation of the economy in 1977, more work is available in the urban areas than in the rural areas. According to the oral interviews done for this study, in rural areas parents tend to send their girls to school because there is no major work available other than rice cultivation, slash and burn farming, and casual labour such as brick making. As Swarna Jayaweera points out, employment opportunities have a major influence on female education. Since there are only few economically viable alternatives, the participation rates of girls in secondary and senior secondary level are higher than that of boys (Jayaweera, 1990:100). However, fifteen percent of primary school aged boys and fifteen percent of girls are not at school. According to a UNICEF sponsored study, in low income slum and shanty urban areas, 21% and 23.7% of male and female children respectively between six and eight years of age, and 22.7% and 21.7%

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<sup>36</sup> The plantation sector has not been taken into consideration because the population is comprised of Tamils and this study does not concentrate on Tamil women.

respectively of children between nine and fourteen years were out of school (Ministry of Education and UNICEF report, 1984, quoted in Jayaweera, 1990:99).

Even though welfare measures have been taken to reduce the inequalities created by the colonial education, the school system has not changed a lot. The resource distribution is far from equal at the urban and rural levels and between urban prestigious schools and non-prestigious schools. Though schools were nationalised in the 1960s, some are still fee-paying schools. Among the nationalised schools, the old and prominent girls' and boys' colleges are far ahead of the rest of the schools in Sri Lanka. These schools are based in urban areas and mainly take middle class children. Though there is a year five-scholarship programme, which helps children in less advantaged schools to enter the good urban schools, it is difficult to enter the prestigious schools under the marking scheme used to grade the exam. The students with low marks are given entry to nearby national schools. Some parents from the rural areas may also be reluctant to send their children to a far away school because they cannot afford travelling or boarding fees if the students do not get into the limited school hostel facilities. According to Swarna Jayaweera, the government does not give priority to reducing regional differences, and cuts in educational funds affect the education in general. Around 20% of children do not have access to primary schools within two kilometres of their homes. Only 5.4% of nearly 10,000 schools in Sri Lanka provide a senior secondary science education and of these only 3.5% are located in the rural areas. Between 30%-50% of schools in disadvantaged districts have poor facilities (Jayaweera, 1995a: 97). This

unequal distribution of resources was clearly manifested during the 1980s insurrection under the slogan used by students '*Kolambata kiri apta kekiri*' (Milk for Colombo and kekiri (a rural vegetable like cucumber) for us). Many interviewees from rural areas talked about not having regular teachers for compulsory subjects such as maths, English and science. Teachers tend to request a transfer to either a school in an urban area or to their hometown as soon as they finish their compulsory term in remote areas. As a consequence of this, some schools have more than enough teachers while many schools do not have enough teachers. Taru (Age 42, Badulla) said they did not have a teacher for English until up to grade eight and they did not know the alphabet. When a teacher finally came, he asked them whether they had been scraping coconut all that time (a phrase used for people who know nothing). She said he was very strict but good. However, he also left after three years, probably completing his term in a remote area.

According to Swarna Jayaweera, micro studies have indicated that early school leaving is concentrated in low-income urban neighbourhoods, remote villages and settlements, and in plantations (1995a: 104). Though the education is free, poverty works as a constraint against achieving the best in education. Many parents cannot afford to buy materials needed for classroom exercises. Since there is stiff competition in Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations, especially in Science and Commerce streams, students tend to go for private tuition classes to get better results. Yet many parents cannot afford private tuition for their children, as they have to struggle to earn enough for food. Badra

(Age 38, Badulla) cried bitterly when she mentioned that her parents had pawned their paddy field to educate her.

The idea that women should not travel alone also works as a constraint for girls who can afford to have private tuition. It was clear from interviews done in Badulla that parents did not like sending girls alone because they might find boyfriends but this was not the case in Hambantota or Colombo. The good private tuition classes are in Badulla town, which is 20 miles away and many parents do not like sending girls alone that far. Nimmi (Age 20, Badulla) said that although she was allowed to go to tuition classes in Badulla she stopped because she felt that she could make better use of her time by studying on her own rather than travelling to Badulla, a journey that took 2 to 3 hours by bus. However, some girls from Hambantota said they went to tuition classes in Mātara, about 30 kilometres from Hambantota.

Rupasinghe's research on gender differences in achievement at secondary school level in Sri Lanka concludes that the difference between boys and girls is very insignificant when compared with the differences within and across the different types of schools. It is the differences among the individual schools and the type of schools that generate disparities in education. Her study finds that the differences among schools arise due to influences such as the social and economic factors, level of parental education and occupational category (especially the educational level of the mother), motivational factors; facilities

available in school; teaching standards; teacher expectations and the status of the school (S. Rupasinghe, 1989:14).

There is an imbalance between education and the economic changes that took place after independence. Still a large number of students in senior secondary education study arts subjects, which do not cater for the demands of the growing private sector, which has been the main engine of economic growth since 1977. The arts stream was popular because the government service was regarded as the most secure and prestigious occupation during the colonial period, and for some time afterwards, and Arts graduates were mostly employed in the government sector. Business was regarded as less prestigious at that time and it was only in the 1960s that the University of Ceylon offered courses on Business administration or Commerce because such fields were not regarded as suitable for University education (Richard et al. 1971: 219). There were fewer facilities especially in rural areas to study science or commerce and the same still prevails with the cut down of expenditure on education. As Swarna Jayaweera points out:

An artificial dichotomy between social and economic development policies, however, led to increasing disparities between educational expansion and economic growth, and to a situation in which education was claimed to be dysfunctional in the context of an economically developing society vulnerable to the pressures of global policies and crisis. Educational expansion slowed and, despite the availability of free educational facilities and supportive welfare measures, pockets of educational deprivation now exist amidst relatively high levels of educational participation and literacy (Jayaweera, 1990: 98).

Therefore it is clear that it is not only the socially constructed gender differences, but the social and economic constraints that are major causes of depriving of



women in Sri Lanka from the benefits of fully participating in education. However, from the accounts of the interviewees, education means more to them than a road to social mobility. Interviewees have emphasised the importance of education as a qualification for paid work but they also emphasised a variety of non-economic benefits of education for women.

### Education and aspirations

Many writers indicate that education in Sri Lanka, especially higher education, is regarded as an avenue for more prestigious employment and therefore an avenue for social mobility (Jayaweera, 1991, 1995a, 1995b; Aturupāna, 1996, Rupasinghe, 1989). Within such a context, educational participation is important for females to enter the public sphere. According to research published as *Women, education and occupational mobility* (Jayaweera, 1991), access to the secondary, and especially to higher education determines and ensures occupational mobility. However, according to the same study, social class inequalities affect women's achievements in education. According to the studies done on the urban sector, women in low income neighbourhoods have not completed secondary education and are engaged in the same low income activities their mothers and grandmothers were engaged in, mainly preparing food for sale, sewing or domestic labour. In contrast the educational level of upper middle class and middle class women in urban areas acts as a tool for occupational mobility. In rural areas, a minority of secondary school leavers have middle level or semi-skilled production jobs, while the majority are unemployed or

engaged in economically nonviable self employment or unpaid family labour (Jayaweera, 1995b: 48-180). Hence it is clear that three main variations, namely, gender, class and urban/rural differences have a decisive impact upon women's education and occupational mobility.

Interviews for this study show that women view the importance of education in a variety of ways and there are both shared and divergent views. Some women in both urban and rural areas view education as a way of having access to paid work and therefore having better status. Mothers advise daughters to concentrate on studies and as Upsara (Age 18, Colombo) said, keep girls free from domestic work to study because of their desire for a better life for their daughters. Chitra (Age 16, Badulla) said her parents asked her not even to think of working in rice fields. Rosha (Age 16, Badulla) said people did farming earlier because they were not better educated but it cannot go on forever because the world has developed. Therefore to live in a good society, good education is a must. Bindu (DoB unknown/older Hambantota) an illiterate older interviewee said she wished to educate her children because she did not want them to be a wreck like her. Deesha (Age 16, Colombo) said her mother always urged her and the sister to have the maximum possible higher education. Though her mother belongs to an upper middle class family and married with a large dowry, she felt her husband has been able to keep her under his thumb because she doesn't do paid work. These accounts show how mothers reflect on their own situation and make efforts to help their daughters to have a different life.

I think education is very important. To understand society education helps as much as experiences. Like the same education is invariably essential and important to have a certain status in society. A woman should educate herself as high as she can. She likes to be an independent person in society. She doesn't like anyone putting restrictions on her. Therefore one should have an ability to stand up with one's own strength. The basic education is very important to enable people to face problems. (Disni, age, 18, Colombo/translated)

All interviewees in Colombo argued that education makes women independent and strong. As Amara (Age 37, Colombo) said, 'I consider education as very important. When one studies hard and goes up the ladder, one does not have to bow the head to anyone. I don't think one has to be proud because of being educated but you are accepted by anybody if you are educated. Then one has confidence.' Ama (Age 29, Colombo) said if women are not educated they cannot see beyond the things imposed by the society and therefore they get lost in the symbolic world and rotate their lives around the same things and are not aware that there are other things in the world. Nelum (Age 24, Colombo) said education helped her to come out of the structure she was confined in, and now she does not hesitate to discard any idea that would be an impediment to her progress in life. She realised she has to modify traditional ideas on women in order to make her life comfortable.

I think I suffered because I was not able to have an education. I was determined to educate my children and to put them at a higher level because then they could have a higher status in society, because of the knowledge and understanding gained with an education people could achieve everything. It is not only to have a job. But children would have the knowledge of how to live and they would know about society. I am ignorant because I was confined to home. My children are more intelligent than I was at that age (Seetha, age 49, Badulla/translated)

The majority of women from all three areas said that education is not only a way to find employment, but also helps them to understand society and the environment they live in and makes their interactions with others better. Nelka (Age 23) from Colombo said that with the technical developments of the twenty-first century, in the near future people will start to use facilities such as banking or using computers more than today and it is vital to have an education. Dilini (Age 16) from Hambantota said that if only men are educated, then women will always have to ask them to explain things. Upsara (Age 18, Colombo) said education makes life successful. Rasi (Age 15, Badulla) said at the time she entered school, she did not know what a television was and they did not even have a radio. Hence it was the school education that helped her to understand the world better. Amila (Age 28, Hambantota) said education helps people to understand how to face society, how to behave with other people and how to socialise.

About ten women said education helps to maintain a good healthy family and help to educate one's own children. They said women should know about hygiene, and healthy practices such as boiling drinking water. Namali (Age 33, Badulla) said she was able to help her children with homework since her husband went to school only up to grade eight. Women also think that day to day experiences are also an education and as important as school education. Taru (Age 41, Badulla) said even being interviewed for this study is an education for her and she learned something by seeing a micro cassette, and talking to a woman from a different area.

The unanimous conclusion of all women interviewed is that being educated gives a better status for a woman within and outside of the family. Namali (Age 33, Badulla) said her mother was not included in decision-making because she was not educated, but in her own family she makes most decisions because she is more educated than her husband. In rural areas, women with better education are always selected for important posts in various committees for community development. Priya (Age 25, Colombo), a married university student, said when she was dating her husband, her husband did not have respect for her and always thought he knew more than her, but with her higher education he views things differently and respects her. Seena (Age 36, Colombo) a lecturer, said that in her village, she is the most respected member in her family because of her education.

The discussion here shows that gender *per se* does not work as a constraint to hamper women's access to education, and it is poverty and inequality of social status (class difference) that are the major impediments for female education in Sri Lanka. Women regard education as one of the essential and important dimensions in their lives, not only because it enables them to have paid work but also because they believe it broadens their minds and helps them have better social understanding. The above accounts also show that having an education enables women to earn respect within the family and in the community. Hence it can be assumed education helps women more than as a qualification for paid work and is an important aspect in shaping women's lives.

The next section will look at the nexus between paid work and education and why there is a gender gap in paid work if education works as access to paid work. My argument in that section is that the cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' has a huge impact upon determining women's paid work.

### **Women and employment**

As shown earlier the gendered attitudes and policies of the colonial rulers had far-reaching effects on determining women's access to capital resources and paid work. The structures created by the British did not change drastically after independence. Nevertheless, de-colonisation and having access to education created more job opportunities for women of all classes. In 1946, only 18.1% of women were recognised as gainful employees. However, although Risseeuw (1991) points out this discrimination in census reporting carried out until 1974, subsequent census reports show an increase in women's labour force participation.

| Year | Total | Male | Female |
|------|-------|------|--------|
| 1963 | 45.9  | 69.2 | 20.0   |
| 1981 | 44.4  | 64.8 | 23.1   |
| 1997 | 48.4  | 65.4 | 31.7   |

**Table 5: Labour Force Participation Rate**  
(Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2001c)

52.0%. One notable factor is that the rate of female labour participation increased every census year while the male participation rate has been static. However, half of the total population is female and the data clearly show that the percentage of employed males was more than double the percentage of employed females. The rate of unemployment is 7.0% for 2001 census year and the percentage by sex 5.3% and 10% respectively for males and females, although the rate of unemployment declined steadily from 1992.

It can be argued that there are two main reasons for the rising but still relatively low level of female employment. The level of female employment is rising because of women's interest in participating in new employment avenues in the business sector, which has been developing faster than the public sector after 1977 due to the introduction of free market economy.

However, on the other hand, there is still a high rate of female unemployment and research done on paid work shows that gender construction is the major reason for that. Swarna Jayaweera states that gender based 'occupational crowding' in socially constructed appropriate 'feminine' jobs has been a characteristic feature of the labour market in Sri Lanka as in other societies (Jayaweera, 1995a: 169). According to the 2001 census on employment statistics of corporations, statutory boards and public private companies, women outnumber men in jobs such as nurses and midwives, lawyers and legal officers, librarians, stenographers and typists, data entry operators, secretaries, receptionists, sales persons, personal service workers (beauticians, hairdressers,

day care attendants) and estate labourers (Tamil). Men greatly outnumber women among senior executives, managers, engineers, architects, business professionals, physical science and engineering technicians, audio visual and electronic controllers, life science technicians, modern health associate professionals, house keeping (in hotel industry) and restaurant work, building construction and metal and machinery workers, industrial plant operators and stationary machine operators, mining, transport, factory labour, and in administrative associate professionals. There are no women at all employed as ship and aircraft controllers and technicians and as drivers and mobile machinery operators. The number of women is almost half that of males in the fields of computing professionals, university and higher education lecturers, accountants, auditors, office clerks (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001d: Table 4.17). This clearly shows that women's paid work is largely limited to service oriented areas and that women are employed in a narrower range of jobs.

Many women researchers believe the gender based school curriculum is a factor that affects woman's choices of career (Jayaweera, 1995a; Amarasooriya, 1993). In secondary education some life skill subjects are introduced into the common curriculum. The subjects varied in the past three decades but they are mainly woodwork, metal work, pottery, weaving, needle work, home-science, agriculture, commerce and book keeping, and aesthetic subjects (western/eastern music, art, dancing). However, the subjects are not reserved for girls and boys as the above authors point out and choosing the subject is entirely a student's responsibility. However, the choice is limited according to subjects offered by the school, which



seems to depend on the urban/rural differences and availability of teachers. According to the interviewees, gender based preference was not always the case. Only a few older interviewees said that they had selected home-science because it is useful for domestic work. One younger girl said that she had selected home-science because it is an easy subject to pass but some others said they thought it was a useless subject. Commerce was the most popular choice for younger girls, especially girls from the urban areas because they think it is a useful subject if one wants to enter the commerce stream and is a good qualification for a future career.

Several studies point out that there is no direct gender based discrimination in women's access to paid work or promotion, but attitudes in general have an indirect influence. A study done by Chanuri Jayasena (1996) found that male managers do not feel that there is a marked difference in the capabilities of the two gender groups, but by preferring to delegate authority to the male subordinates they indirectly prevent the females from assuming greater responsibilities and rising to higher levels in the organisational structure. However, the interviewees for this study said they did not face any male discrimination in their career, and that it was women who felt jealous and were being obstructive when they received promotions. Three interviewees who worked in both private and public sector were promoted to higher levels in their careers and none of them had a university degree. The reasons they have cited for their promotions were dedication to work, being responsible and obtaining

professional qualifications by participating in training programmes, sitting for diplomas and other professional courses.

It seems that the high rate of female unemployment and low labour participation is inter-linked with the education girls receive and their career aspirations. The majority of female university undergraduates are in the arts stream, which does not cater to the growing industrial and business sector. As in the early times, women still prefer service oriented jobs because they believe such jobs are feminine, they can do a service to the country and jobs such as teaching make it easy to manage both paid work and domestic work because teachers can go home after 2 PM. However, the interviews show that job preferences among young girls differ according to urban/rural differences. The young interviewees in rural areas still give preference to teaching, nursing and being a doctor. The girls from urban areas preferred jobs in banking, accounting, and the computer science field. The urban girls have more clearly defined career aspirations. The urban middle class girls have more options and opportunities to make choices for their future careers. The upper middle class girls prefer going abroad for university education because it is considered better than the local university education. Hence the urban and upper middle class women have a better chance for breaking the glass ceiling effect in careers while the majority of women are trapped in low paid or underpaid service oriented jobs or are unemployed.

It appears that women's limited aspirations in their career are based on two main facts. Firstly as Risseeuw (1991) pointed out, the concept of a 'female worker' is still not fully grasped in Sri Lanka. The interviewees point out that women themselves believe that their place is at home and with the family, and this should come first. The media, including women's newspapers, continuously point out that women working outside the home destabilise the family and marriage. Chanuri Rodrigo's study on career patterns and attitudes to work of women in management (1998) indicates that the majority of women choose paid work because they want to support the family or they believe they could give their best to the motherland by working. Only 18.5% of the sample of Rodrigo's have said they work because they get money to spend on themselves. Kaushi (Age 39, Colombo) and Amara (Age 37, Colombo) left their jobs when they were promoted to managerial level. The main reason they cited was that they wanted to spend more time looking after children because they felt their children had been neglected because of their work. Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) retired early when she was promoted as a Senior Assistant Director in an important financial institute in Sri Lanka. By retiring early she received a large lump sum of money, which she wanted to use for her daughter's wedding and dowry. Rani (Age 34, Hambantota) said she would give up her job to look after children if her husband had a better paid job. She said she has postponed her training because of her children.

Two studies on women and employment (Chanuri Jayasena, 1996; Madiwaka et al. 1990) and this study find that women receive maximum support from their

family members and husbands for higher education, training and paid work if women opt for it. However, they also suggest that women themselves are reluctant to take jobs with high responsibilities because it hampers their domestic duties and my own research supports their findings. Hence I would like to argue that it is the women's internalised ideas on motherhood, domestic work and responsibilities as a woman that affect and limit their role in paid work.

The gender-gap is widest in vocational training, which is aimed at students who could not go to universities. Swarna Jayaweera (1990) says that while there is no overt discrimination in vocational education, training institutions appear to operate in a conceptual framework that places women in a supportive role in the family and in the economy. She points out that the majority of women students are enrolled in teacher's colleges, nursing schools, accountancy and secretarial courses, institutes of social work, dress making and industrial sewing, home-science, and traditional crafts. However, one has to bear in mind that it is women themselves who choose these courses, which teach skills that are in low demand in the economy in general.

The main reason for this, I would like to argue, is the attitude of the community towards women engaging in 'non-women oriented' paid work. While doing the research in Hambantota, I was informed that the World University Service of Canada launched a non-traditional vocational training programme for girls with the collaboration of the Hambantota technical college and the National Youth Council, which are the main institutions for vocational training in Sri Lanka. Boys

were also allowed to participate but on the condition that a certain number of girls should be included in order to get the Canadian funding. The Youth Council programme was non-traditional tailoring for girls, which means they are trained to sew men's clothes, including men's suits which is generally considered as a male job. The course in the technical college offers tinkering, painting and welding training for girls. The interviewees said that first they had objections from the family, relatives and schoolteachers. However, after participating in a meeting to raise awareness among parents, they had given consent. One girl dropped out of the technical college while I was there.

The other two interviewees talked about how the villagers and boys in other courses in the technical college taunt them. One reason is that they have to wear trousers while on the training. Madu (Age 17, Hambantota) said some of the boys saw her wearing trousers and shouted at her 'Akka (sister) has become aiyya (brother)'. Villagers wonder why they wanted to be trained for male jobs and how they can work in garages or tailor shops. She also said some boys at the technical college make obscene jokes about their training. Some boys thought it was another step forward for women while some thought it was strange and not suitable for women. Some villagers saw Madu talking with a small boy and said 'Oho, go on talking with him, you may be able to get welded by him in the future.' It seems that men showed their opprobrium for being 'non feminine' by connecting her training with sexual intercourse. Neluka (Age 20, Hambantota) said her villagers laugh at her and asked her whether she is going to work in a garage and going to scrape rust. This clearly shows how hard it is for women to

penetrate into non-traditional vocations, which unfortunately have a greater demand in the changing economy. The World University Service carry out a 'Gender and Development (GAD)' training for both girls and boys who are enrolled in these courses. The girls said the GAD training opened their eyes and now they think that they could do what men could do. However, Jaya (Age 27, Hambantota), who is employed at World University Service said families are reluctant to send girls for non traditional vocations and when she tries to encourage people in her area they say that they wouldn't mind sending their daughters to do computer training programme but other courses offered by the World University Service are not suitable for girls. However, not having sufficient knowledge of English is a problem for girls to enrol in computer training programmes.

The girls attending non-traditional vocational training also said that the boys who are trained with them have a better understanding of them now. However, the World University Service does not survey how this training helped women to deal with the outside world when they start a career. Also from reliable sources, I was able to gather that some male employees in the World University Service resent this awareness-raising programme.

In both Hambantota and Badulla, various development programmes promote self-employment for women. However, they are limited to poultry rearing, growing vegetables, preparing and packing food for sale, and crafts, which have

the lowest demand in the area. As Jayaweera pointed out (1990), at the policy making level women are still confined to traditional feminine types of occupations.

In summary, it appears that, though women have access to paid work they are trapped in 'feminine' service oriented jobs because of their own internalised perceptions and the hostility of the community to women participating in occupations considered as low status and inherently male. Within this context, female education does not meet the demands of the changing economy and thus creates a high level of female unemployment and underemployment. Barbara Rogers says the division of labour between men and women in different societies is based on perceived gender roles rather than the sex roles and determined by culture rather than biology (Rogers, 1981:12). Stressing her point, I argue that the main reason, which my discussion here also clearly illustrates, for the high rate of female unemployment and underemployment is the strong influence of the invention of 'tradition' and its influence on the community's perceptions of 'male' and 'female' types of work. The accounts of interviewees on paid work also show that the constraints on paid work have shifted over time but lack of economic opportunities and cultural constraints limit women's full economic participation.

Feminists in Sri Lanka argue that women's low participation in parliamentary politics hinders making policies that would eradicate gender inequality. In their *Women's Manifesto*, the women's organisations in Sri Lanka says that 'More women are needed in parliament and local bodies, especially at decision making levels, to put forward the many issues affecting women, and to take gender-

sensitive positions on matters of national and international interest' (Women's Organisations in Sri Lanka, n.d.: 2). The next section will examine the reasons for women's low participation in politics arguing culture is a major constraint for women.

### **Women and politics**

Vicky Randall states that women's low participation in politics is universal especially where 'political power is concentrated' (Randall, 1987:95). This is the case in Sri Lanka, where in general, women's political participation at grass root level as activists is increasing but they are under-represented in political parties as leaders and at decision making level. There were and are no formal barriers for women to contest or engage in political activities. Women of the upper class and proletarian class visibly engaged in politics during the early twentieth century. Partly as a consequence of their activities, Sri Lankan women won the right to vote, enter into parliamentary politics and many workplace rights. However, there was no demand for women's full participation in politics. It is well known that many upper middle class women entered politics through their fathers, brothers or husbands and worked in their shadows. Selvy Thiruchandran (1997) states that unlike in other Asian countries such as India, gender was not on the programme of any early nationalist movements in Sri Lanka. My assumption is that what she meant by this is that the nationalist movement did not include the women's question in their agenda. I would like to argue further that the gender biased attitudes of the male nationalist leaders actively, overtly and covertly discouraged women's participation in politics by saying that the



Aryan Sinhala Buddhist woman's duty for the country is to be an ideal Buddhist housewife, and that such a woman achieves her independence by being in her 'correct' place in society. There was no place for strong women leaders in this utopia.

Women became Members of Parliament or Ministers, including the late Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, and her daughter is the present president of Sri Lanka. However, many of them including president Chandrika Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga entered politics when their father or husband were assassinated, and often they would back their political position on the pledge to carry out their father's or husband's vision of politics. The idea that women should serve the country and nation by taking care of the family and raising patriotic children is also not absent from these women's minds. Malathi de Alwis (1994) points out that women politicians extended the role in the family to the nation by affirming that their duty for the country is social welfare work.

However, published research on women and politics in Sri Lanka shows that the proportion of women in parliament is very low and the main reasons for this are motherhood and domestic responsibilities, attitudes of the community, the violent political culture and slandering during elections (Liyanage 1992; De Silva, 1995a, 1995b; Thiruchandran, 1997). Because women's attitude towards politics was important at the end of interviews I asked from several women what they thought about participating in politics because the majority did not speak early about it. The response from many interviewees was that they do not like to be politically

active. They thought politics was for men. This is not because they thought men were more intelligent than women but because of the violent political culture and the attitudes of people towards women's active political participation in Sri Lanka. Podi (Age 54), an older interviewee from Badulla said she preferred to cast her vote and be quiet rather than dancing on the roads with her clothes raised. What she meant by this statement was that politics is very much a public affair and women have to behave in an 'un-feminine' way and, therefore, it is not appropriate for women.

It seems it is very difficult for women to be active participants in politics with the increasingly violent political culture of the post independence era as women's experience of violence differs from men. During the last general election in December 2001, the clothes of a woman participating in a political procession were forcibly removed and she was paraded around half-naked. Another woman's house was torched and she received death threats after she participated in a parade posing as President Chandrika Bandaranaike. Though the violence politics is not based on gender and both men and women have to face it, women particularly find it difficult because mud slinging and sexual harassment have a more profound impact on women than men.

Two interviewees spoke about their experience in politics for this study. One is an active member of the United National Party, which was the opposition party until December 2001. The other was an active member of the Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Party), which staged two unsuccessful uprisings

in 1971 and during the late 1980s. Their accounts clearly shows the difficulty women face when actively engaged in politics. Though this was not expressed explicitly, it is clear that one's gender has an influence on participating in politics.

The first woman said one has to forget that one is a woman when contesting in an election. She contested in local elections under the United National Party. At that time she was working in a non-governmental organisation funded by foreign aid and working independently in her area. Even before she filed her nomination papers, she was summoned by the Director of that organisation and was informed that they would have to ask for her resignation if she filed nominations because a Deputy Minister from her area asked the organisation not to keep her. The director asked her not to contest but she went ahead because she did not want to betray her party. She lost her job and was unemployed at the time the interview was done. She was also harassed by other candidates of her own political party during the election campaign, mainly because of the competition even among candidates from the same party. They covered her posters by putting their own posters on top of hers. She said that she had heated arguments with them. Once when she went for a propaganda meeting in another area around midnight, she found that the road was blocked with logs to prevent them from going to the meeting. The driver begged her not to proceed but she was determined to go to the meeting. However, she lost the election. She thought being a woman is not an obstacle but one needs heavy financial support and one should be bold enough to face the harassment.

The other interviewee was an active member of the JVP during the 1980's insurrection. JVP was a banned political party at that time and was conducting secret recruitment and political classes in order to stage their second uprising. She became a member during her school days. She did various duties (which she did not disclose) for the JVP and used to come home around 2 a. m. (JVP was active at night), but the family did not protest because the JVP did not tolerate critics and would not hesitate to kill. However, she had to go into hiding because her villagers informed the armed forces about her. While she was in hiding, the government ruthlessly cracked down on the JVP with the help of paramilitary groups. Her family managed to put her in a school in the same area after the insurrection.

However, the army tracked her down there and took her into custody. She and another girl were forced to remove their clothes and they were suspended naked from the roof by tying their wrists, and they were taken down only to eat a little amount of food, and were also sexually harassed by the soldiers. She said there was no vaginal penetration but the drunken soldiers put their penises all over the girl's faces, mouths and underarm. The other girl that was arrested with her said it isn't worth living and she thinks what the girl meant was that there is no point of living if vaginal rape has taken place. The interviewee said she was more concerned about being alive than about her virginity. After ten days she was rescued by the head mistress of her school hostel. The head mistress used her influence as she was having a sexual affair with the Captain of the army camp. The other girl spent three months in the camp. When this interviewee was

released from the army camp, the JVP had threatened her because they believed she was released early because she betrayed the JVP. After a while she left the JVP because she understood that women have no significant place in their politics. Women were used to design posters, to take messages and they were supposed to carry out men's orders. She said the male members did not want to listen to or respect her opinions.

The two harrowing experiences of these women show why women are not willing to be active in politics. The accounts of these two interviewees show that women in Sri Lanka face violence in party politics differently from men. Unlike men they have to face the threat of sexual harassment and it is highly likely that the social humiliation associated with that generates fear and reluctance in women about becoming actively engaged in politics. Another factor is that still women are not seen as strong leaders and the importance of their political participation is measured through femininity rather than ability. During the general election of 2000, the Minister of Women's Affairs appealed for more women to contest elections because she said that it would curb the election violence. In writing to political parties, she said, 'When election activities are conducted under the leadership of womenfolk, there is a tendency to lessen thuggery and unruly behaviour' (WIRE, 2000).

It seems that having the world's first woman Prime Minister, or even having a woman as the President of the country, did not do much to change the situation. Having more women members in parliament is also not going to help if these

women continue to preach the same gender biased attitude of the community. A newly elected middle aged female Member of Parliament was interviewed on television just after the last general election and was asked what she would do to improve women's status. She said she would work for women, not to achieve equal status but to safeguard their 'correct' place.

In the next section I am moving from the public domain to the household. As I have mentioned earlier, in my view, women's accesses to spaces other than home has an impact on deciding her place at home. The accounts of the interviewees on education and paid work confirm this.

## **Family**

As in many societies of the world, the family is the basic social unit in Sri Lanka. The gender relations and roles in a family have a large impact on deciding women's relations and place outside the family. Therefore I intend to examine women's place within the cultural invention of the 'Sinhala woman' and to examine women's agency on manoeuvring within such a context. I will explore five key components to bring out what interviewees' reflections on lives of women today have highlighted, namely, the dominant ideas on women's sexuality, their place at home compared to men in decision making, finance, division of domestic labour, and the idea of male superiority.

I would like to reiterate the point that, along with these morals, ethics and values brought to the island through colonialism, the propaganda of nationalists

concerning men and women's place in society worked to reinforce and further weakened women's place in the family today. In Sri Lanka, generally family is regarded as very important and marriage is expected to be universal and monogamous. The discussions in chapters one and two demonstrate how the Sinhala girls' sexuality is shaped and moulded according to the accepted values, norms and beliefs of the community. The girls are trained for taking domestic responsibilities and strongly advised to safeguard their virginity until they are given in marriage. The interviews suggest that these two areas of life are the most important conditions for women to earn their "correct" place in society. A woman who is not a virgin on the night of her wedding is regarded as a loose woman and a woman who cannot fulfil her domestic duties is not a proper woman. A saying in Sri Lanka says that even to get the work done by domestic helpers a woman should know what are the domestic tasks and duties. The media and the community continuously project images of how women have to suffer if they were not virgins, and the idea that it is a woman's sole responsibility to take care of home and children.

The idea of the totally submissive, obedient, tolerant wife and good mother has been very strongly presented in women's newspapers since the early twentieth century. In articles with titles such as 'to the daughter', 'to the newly wedded bride', 'to you married sister' (written by both men and women) these newspapers told women how to behave after marriage. In summary, those articles require women: a) To be chaste and very obedient to the husband. b) To behave like a mother and a slave to the husband. c) Even if they find a wrong deed done by

the husband they shouldn't be angry and should tolerate even his extra marital affairs and or beatings in the name of the children. d) Not to talk back to her husband. e) Not to discuss a husband's wrong deeds with other people. f) When he comes home from work to get up from where they are sitting and provide him with hot water to wash and tea with a smiling face. g) Not to think of leaving their husbands. h) After marriage women should cease thinking 'I am', 'Mine' and 'Me' and instead should think in the terms of 'We' and 'Us'. After the 1970s the language of the newspapers became more restrained. The idea that women also work to provide for the family is introduced but still the accepted idea is that it is women's prime responsibility to take care of the home and they should learn to be tolerant.

A writer says that according to a leading physician, Dr. Sriyani Basnayaka, Sri Lanka is the only country in the South Asian region that practices virginity tests (Weerawarne, 2000). It is difficult to say when this started to be practiced. As pointed out in the first two chapters, girls have to follow various restrictions, curtail their socialising with males and, above all, limit their freedom of movement in order to remain as virgins. According to a paper presented by Dr. Sriyani Basnayaka, a widely prevalent myth in Sri Lanka is that a bride who is not a virgin will faint on the *poruwa* (a podium erected for the couple to stand while the marriage rituals are performed). She says that three main categories of people visit the Family Planning Association's clinic with virginity problems. They are: mothers who bring young daughters fearing their hymen may have been damaged, young girls who fear their hymen may have been damaged and



couples with post nuptial virginity problems. According to her, some mothers request certificates from her to testify that their daughters did not lose their virginity by premarital sex, which indicates social ignorance on the subject of the hymen. According to a survey done by Dr. Basnayaka (1989), even though 71% of the sample had heard of the hymen only 29.5% knew what it was. There was no significant difference between urban and rural areas and 21% of men and 31% of women believed the hymen developed only after the onset of menarche. Only 24% of the total sample were aware that all women do not bleed at first penetration, and among men only 17% knew this fact. In the same survey, the sample (2466 respondents) was asked whether they thought it was good for a girl to have to prove virginity and 63% said yes. Sixty five percent of the women thought it was a good custom. This may be due to the fact that family honour and attention is attached to the custom. Both her family and in-laws hold a woman who is proved to be a virgin in high esteem.

Some traditions are good. Now [...] to say [...] the most important thing [...] there is a tradition in our country that all women do not have sex with men before marriage. I consider it as great and I like it. I think it should be kept. I think according to our tradition we have a wedding and if a girl can have the wedding as a girl (because of the belief a girl becomes a woman after losing virginity) I think it is beautiful (Seena, age 36, Colombo/translated)

This is an opinion of a university lecturer, and the same idea was strongly expressed by all most all the interviewees. Nelka (Age 23, Colombo) a medical student, said that after attending the lectures she has come to know that sex influences the sustainability of a marriage, and it is good to have a certain limit of

intimacy with the partner but society says it is not good to have sex before marriage and therefore one should know the limit.

This shows that when such ideas become imagined traditions and internalised in a community, the reality does not matter. The other important fact is that the idea of virginity applies to women only. It seems this is because it is women who have 'visible signs' to prove virginity. According to Dr Sriyani Basnayaka (1989), only 56.2% of the respondents of the survey knew that the correct definition of the virgin is a girl who never had sexual intercourse. What the majority believes is a girl who bleeds at her first coitus is a virgin.

However, my data suggests that virginity tests do not play an important part in Sinhala marriage. Only five of the married women faced virginity tests.

According to Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) a woman of an upper middle class family, they do not follow it because it is an uncivilised practice. The majority of married interviewees in Badulla did not have a virginity test and they said it is not a common practice in the area. However, women who married men outside the area, and women who married into the area, had virginity tests. It is highly likely the reason for this is not knowing the 'character' of the woman from outside the village. One woman from Badulla said it is only a practice among the middle class families. This is probably due to the fact that the more elaborate the ceremony is the greater the tendency to test virginity and it is middle class families who tend to have lavish ceremonies. Many women from Badulla and Hambantota did not have virginity tests because they ran away with their

husbands. One woman said she did not have the test because her mother-in-law was not alive and there were no sisters-in-law in the husband's family to conduct the virginity test. Two women from Hambantota said they had premarital sex with their husbands. One girl did not go home and ran away with him because she said she could not face the family after that. The other woman said they had the consent of the parents and the man visited her home. When the marriage was impending, they were alone at her home with a sleeping father because the others went to see a devil dance. The husband forcibly had sex with her and on the night of the wedding he cut his finger to put blood on the white cloth. Even if the tests are not in practice, the idea that the bride should be a virgin is strong. Many said husbands would know whether they were virgins or not and if they couldn't prove their virginity it would ruin the happiness and harmony in the family.

Women's attitude towards marriage has not changed a great deal; however, the age of marriage has changed and women prefer to have smaller families. In 1946 the average age at marriage was 18.1 years and it rose to 23.5 in 1970s and to 24.4 in the 1980s but has not changed significantly in the last few years (Dallas Fernando, 1975:187). The fertility rate went down from 5.0% in 1963 to 2.3% in 1999 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001e). Women today prefer to have a stable financial background, hence they like to have a good education and if possible a good job before getting married. As a consequence women tend to get married later. Another reason for getting married late is not having an income or proper dowry to get married within current norms, because

still marriages between people of the same social level are highly esteemed within the community. The interviews show that caste still has an influence on marriages. Two women said they had to give up their love affairs because they belonged to lower castes than their boy friends. One woman was forced to stop her affair because her boy friend is beneath her caste. However, the majority of women prefer to get married after having a relationship. Only one interviewee said she would not mind getting married by a proposal<sup>37</sup> because all her family got married by proposals.

Another idea that was strongly presented in the interviews was women should be tolerant for the sake of children and the continuation of marriage in the name of children. Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) said if she were not tolerant she would never have been able to give her daughter in a good marriage because then she may have been seen as a bad character. She once left her husband but came back because of the children. Many women put family and children before anything else.

Women also think it is very important to be seen as decent and respectable by their children, elders and in the community in general. As a result of this any subject relating to sex or showing affection for each other in front of others is seen as vulgar and culturally inappropriate. Interviewees in Badulla said holding hands, kissing, cuddling and sitting together in front of others is against tradition and culture. An interviewee from Badulla said people tell tales even if they see a

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<sup>37</sup> Marriage by proposal means finding a prospective partner through a marriagebroker or a newspaper advertisement.

married couple scrubbing each other's back. Only one interviewee said she and the husband kiss in front of the children and not in the presence of others. She said 'I may be wrong but I think it is important to show children that parents are in love and affectionate to each other. It will make their lives happy.' However, the general view irrespective of class or regional differences is that 'if we behave like that, children will be disrespectful and will not be obedient to us and we will put elders and others in an embarrassing situation.' The notion behind this is the fear of children undermining parental authority. This silence on sexual behaviour works as a constraint on women. Women constantly have to be watchful of their own behaviour. Women who are sexually molested find it hard to talk. One interviewee was sexually molested when she was kept with some relatives because her parents are separated and she suspects she may have lost her virginity. She is scared to get married and though she had affairs when she grew up she stopped them when marriage was mentioned. She said she was scared to talk about it with her mother or other family members. Another interviewee's stepbrother had sexual intercourse with her eldest sister when she was thirteen. She spoke about it to the interviewee many years later. At that time she didn't understand what had really taken place but now believes she lost her virginity because she saw blood on her garment. She is getting ready to get married but is scared and does not want to talk to her parents.

All the interviewees, except the widows, said either the father or the husband is the head of the family. Rani (Age 34, Hambantota) said her name is put on the documents as the head of the family because their home was built on the land

that belongs to her, but her husband has the authority at home. The idea that the man should be the head of the family and he should be presented as the authority was strongly presented in the interviews. Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) and Deepa (Age 38, Badulla) are the providers for their families (husbands were and are not in paid work) but said husbands are the heads. Both of them make decisions in their families and take total care of family matters but said they get the consent of the husbands before they implement their decisions. Saman (Age 39, Colombo) said she makes all the major decisions on their business and her husband never does anything without asking her first. She is in such a position because the money invested in the business and their property was the money she earned when she worked in the Middle East.

The majority of the interviewees said both husband and wife make decisions together but in the most cases the last word is the father's or husband's. Even so, if women strongly object men listen to them. Only two interviewees said the father alone made decisions. Five interviewees said they make decisions alone. One widow said her sons make decisions but her opinions are respected. Only one interviewee said her parents make mutual decisions on matters such as decorating the house and children's education but on matters such as finance control, investments and other affairs both make their own decisions. Her father is a businessman and the mother is a director of a company and an owner of a factory. According to her, her parents have their own different lives. It seems women's education and paid work influence their participation in decision-making in all three areas. Namali (Age 33, Badulla) said in her parental family the mother

was not included in decision making because she is illiterate and in her own family she makes most decisions because her husband is not as educated as her. The interviews also reveal that when older children are well educated and or in paid work parents include them when making decisions irrespective of their gender.

In all three areas women are the financial keepers<sup>38</sup> of the family and the husband or father or sons give money to them. In Badulla many women said they keep the money and give it back when asked. One interviewee said she had to give money back even for gambling. In Hambantota the majority of women decide how to spend the money and they give money back according to the needs. One woman said it is the money she earns that is spent on children's needs and the husband only brings food home. The urban middle class families have set expenditures on paying bills, insurance, children's needs such as private tuition and they are managed by the women. In Badulla and Hambantota, though women identified themselves as housewives, many of them do various other income generating activities such as sewing, casual labour, food sales, artificial flower making in addition to their contribution to agriculture. The majority of them are connected with various development programmes conducted by governmental or non-governmental organisations. They have formed 'small groups' in order to have savings schemes and collective labour.

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<sup>38</sup> Research on Western women show that this is the case for them also. See: Pahl (1989).

The money they earn is entirely spent on the family. As noted earlier in this chapter, women view paid work as an extra income to maintain the family. Even young girls said they look for paid work because they want to take care of their parents and ease their burden. It seems because of this women's paid work is not seen to be as important as men's paid work. A few older interviewees said their husbands or the male members of the family did not allow them to do paid work. However, this is not the practice today. Though families and husbands support and encourage women to work outside home, if there are problems regarding managing household work or taking care of children it is women who pull out of their jobs. Seena (Age 36, Colombo) said her husband's income is enough to maintain their family and whenever they have problems with getting domestic help her husband suggests that she should stay at home. She said she doesn't want to leave the job as a university lecturer because she likes her field of study. At the time of the interview Seena was getting prepared go abroad for higher studies. She said she accepted a scholarship, which will allow her to come home after six months and continue the studies because her husband cannot go with her and she has to leave the children. Her mother, her sister and her husband's sister's daughter were going to stay at her home to take care of domestic work and children. This may lead us to conclude that the community still thinks taking care of domestic work is the prime responsibility of women.

The idea that men are providers and women are carers leads to an unequal division of labour at home.

I get up at four in the morning, clean the hearth and start the day. Make tea and offer it to the Buddha and worship. We eat leftovers of the dinner for



breakfast and then I wash pots. I finish the domestic chores by eight thirty. Then I go weeding. I come home around eleven and prepare lunch. Sometimes I go weeding again. In the evening I have a bath and worship Buddha and then prepare dinner, serve it and go to bed around nine at night. If it is rice planting season I go to bed around eleven, because I have to prepare food for helpers. Sometimes I start to cook dinner at seven at night because we have cows and have to tie them or cut grass for them. If I have body pains because of weeding I take a nap in the evening sometimes. Sometimes I read a Bana potha in the evening. (A book of Buddhist doctrine) (Taru age 41, a farmer in Badulla/translated).

I get up around 4.30 to five in the morning and cook lunch because my husband takes lunch to work. I make tea and wake him up. He irons his clothes. I want to sweep the garden before six. Then I prepare a packet of lunch for my husband and tidy the home. I wash clothes and finish domestic work around ten. Then I play with my daughter. At noon I have lunch and have a nap after lunch. In the evening I tidy home and wash pots. Sometimes husband brings take away food and if not I prepare the food to cook when he arrives. We go to bed around nine, nine thirty (Amila, age 28, a young housewife from Hambantota/translated).

I get up around six thirty. Me and Roopa (a girl adopted by her mother) feed my son. I check whether the son's things and husband's things and snacks are ready. My son goes to school at seven thirty. After that I take breakfast and clean the home. I keep the TV on and if I hear a good programme on I watch it too. Then I read a book or newspapers. I have not a lot of work to do because Roopa does it. I wash clothes if there are any to wash. Around 10 clock I go to school to pickup my son and sometimes he has extra classes or stay for sports. Sometimes he asks me to play with him. I allow him to play until six o'clock. After six I help him with his studies and at seven thirty feed him. When husband comes home we chat together. My son goes to bed at eight thirty and he wants me to go to bed with him so I also brush my teeth have a wash and put a night dress on and go to bed with him. After he fall asleep, if there is any, I prepare things class teacher asked ([t is a custom that class teachers get help from mothers who do not work to prepare diagrams, charts, pictures for lessons] or discuss with husband about family matters and make plans. Then I give instructions to the girl what to cook for the next day and go to bed around nine thirty (Kaushi, age 39, from Colombo. She gave up working as an accountant in a private company/translated).

These three accounts are of daily life of women in three different areas, three different backgrounds and different classes.

Both Taru and her husband are farmers. Amila ran away with her husband at nineteen because her parents opposed her affair. She said she had to do so because her husband threatened to commit suicide. After marriage her family disowned her for a long time. She worked in the Middle East as a housemaid because her husband did not have a permanent job. For three years she sent all the money to him believing what he said in letters. When she came back she found out that he had lied to her. Though he managed to build the house it was not finished and he had wasted most of the money. While she was away her husband stayed with aunts and she thinks he spent money on them. Though she is sad she said she doesn't blame him because there was no one to cook for him. Apart from this daily routine she makes bricks to complete the house and said she doesn't let her husband do it because he is tired when he comes home from work.

Kaushi left her job because she found that her female colleagues, including the director of the department (a woman), increasingly becoming hostile to her because she is married to the director of finance of the company and she was invited as his wife to functions, to which her senior colleagues are not invited. She said her son made it easy for her to leave such a good job because at that time her son started to walk and needed full time attention.

There were many extreme stories. Ransi (DoB unknown, Badulla), an elderly interviewee, belongs to one of the first families who settled in Deniya under the farmer's settlement scheme. She was around thirteen when she got married.

Both she and her husband lost their parents by the time they got married. The village was nothing but a jungle when they came. They started preparing rice fields, slash and burn cultivating and cleared the jungle to make a garden. For three years her husband was not well so she had to do all the heavy work in fields and the garden. She gave birth to nine children and five died. There was no one to take care of the children. She said she got up at three in the morning and went to bed at 11.30. During planting and harvesting she went to bed around 1.30 and got up at 3. She had to cook for 10-20 people. She had to husk the rice with a pounder because there were no mills. The nearest town is twenty miles away and no proper roads or vehicles to go there. She had to grind chilli and other spices. In between that she took care of the children and washed clothes for all of them. She said it is a sin to ask a man to wash clothes. She served meals, fetched firewood and drew water. Her husband went to the market because she said he would not allow her to go alone.

Many women in Badulla start their day around four in the morning. During slash and burn cultivation they have to start the journey to the hills (3-4 miles) early in the morning to get there at around seven in the morning. They bring firewood home from there. They have to draw water from wells because there is no water supply scheme. During droughts they have to walk two to three miles to fetch water. Men do help with domestic work such as cooking, washing, taking care of children and taking children to hospitals. They do such tasks when the wife has to do field work or when there are no grown up daughters to do the tasks. Men mostly do shopping and they even buy clothes and underwear for wives and

daughters. Only a few women said they would accompany their husbands or fathers when they go shopping. When there is no fieldwork, men usually gather in boutiques to play daam (a board game) and chat.

In Hambantota women who don't do paid work are mostly at home because they have no fields to work. The men mostly work in salt pans. Women are engaged in food sales, sewing and casual labour. Many women who went to the Middle East as housemaids came back and stayed at home. Men do help with cooking, cleaning, washing, taking care of children when the help is needed. The majority of women go to market and shopping in Hambantota either alone or with the husband.

In both areas women provide labour for building their own houses. They make bricks, mix cement, help the builders and cook for them too. In addition to doing the bulk of the domestic work they continuously look for ways and means to earn a few extra rupees. One woman said she stopped buying the women's newspaper she used to buy. One popular method among women to save money is having a *Seettu*<sup>39</sup>. A group of women get together and decide the amount of money (usually ranging from five rupees to a few thousand) and draw numbers to decide the order of the *Seettu*. Each month women give the agreed amount of money to the organiser and one woman gets the money. Women use this money to buy household items, building houses or their children's needs.

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39 This was a term used for official documents in early times.

In Colombo women get support from husbands only if there is no other family member or servant to help with work. If women are housewives they seem to get very little help from husbands. Women go to the market and shopping alone or they go together. In families without any other help both husband and wife share the domestic work.

Ideas about getting help from men for domestic work seems to be changing slowly. Only Ama (Age 29, Colombo) said that she and the husband share domestic work on fifty-fifty basis. This is mainly due to her understanding and politics. Women do not think sharing household work is a responsibility of men also. Hence apart from Ama women who get help from their husbands showed their gratitude and said how other women think how lucky they are. Women still think it is their duty to do domestic work. Priya (Age 25, Colombo) said even if she has a very bad headache she couldn't go and lie down if there are pots to be washed. She said she thinks it is her grandmother's influence and she never keeps dirty pots until husband comes home from work.

Education does not mean learning lessons (at school). Earlier families were not broken even if it was difficult for women. Now they quickly get divorced. They (women) kept the family together because they were considerate of many things. That is how they were. Sometimes even knowing that husband has a mistress (women) did not break the family because they didn't think only about themselves. They thought a lot about the unity of family and not being able to live alone (being a single mother) things like that. What I see as women being independent is not thinking like that. Doing a job is only one side of the life. I don't know whether it is good to be just a career woman. There are such women, somewhat dominant characters. I feel that there is a vacuum in those women's lives (Priya, age 25, Colombo/translated)

She said today women are very open and they set other things such as jobs as their priority. They have their own ideas about relationships and their own space. She said she thinks it is not simply being independent; it is rather being not bothered about the family or children.

The qualities women are looking for in men are also changing. Only one girl said she needs a man who could protect her because she thinks women are weak and need protection. The main qualities women look for in men are honesty, being faithful, being a non-smoker, teetotaler and no gambling. The majority of the urban women and a few women from other areas said a man who has a good understanding is important. However, the majority of women felt the husband should be a person they could respect and look up to at a time of crisis. Girls who said they are strong, having a bad temper and talk too much said they would like to marry a man who could control them though they don't want to be subordinated.

However, the idea that women should be under the husband was covertly but strongly presented in the interviews.

A: What we saw at home was that father was the head. Mother never thought to go against his ideas. I think even now that it should be in practice to a little extent. We should give husband [...] my priority is my husband and not me.

Q: Why?

A: I think it is the influence of my mother. I never think I should go over my husband. I think it is necessary to have his support most of the time. But at some instances I respect him as my husband.  
...As women we have more equality today. I think I have equality at home. It is good to share everything and be equal but I don't like the way some

women think about equality. They think they should not be submissive to men. Doesn't have to be but when you live with a husband, I think there should be a respect for the husband, it helps to have good family relation. (Seena, age 36, Colombo/translated

What Seena said clearly expresses how women's observations of their parents' relations shape their own familial relations in marriage. Furthermore, she also pointed out another important factor that was implied by the majority of my interviewees: respecting and obeying the male partner preserves harmony at home and in marriage. Paradoxically women don't want to be subjugated but they think should be submissive to their husbands. Seena also said women would 'only receive love from their husbands if they take care of his every need lovingly' and 'will be respected if only they respect their husbands.' Her words powerfully imply the idea that women will be looked upon and respected if only they behave according to their 'correct place.'

The idea of male superiority was represented across the interviews irrespective of socio economic backgrounds, age or geographical differences. My interviews show that the age gap between the husband and wife and man's social and economic status are crucial for maintaining male superiority within the Sinhala community. Many young interviewees said women should not marry a man beneath them in education, age or in economic status. Deesha (Age 16, Colombo) said 'If I have a job I don't have to do as what as my husband says. But because he will be a little older than me, there should be a respect for that.' Later she said she is 'never going to marry some one beneath her.' Meenu, another young interviewee said:

I like to marry a man who could control me. Not strictly controlled but when married generally a woman should yield a little to the man I think.[...] I am not undermining women but if not so it would be like two men living together. When a woman takes a decision she should listen to the man. I don't like being trampled (by a man) but in general giving first place to the man is good and it is good to have a little gap between (husband and the wife). Not the education or other things but in their relationship there should be a little difference. It means she should be submissive to him. She shouldn't behave so he becomes a laughingstock for others. I should be able to show him as my husband (Meenu, age 24, Colombo/translated).

It is highly likely that women's passive acceptance of the idea that men are superior to them and that they should be submissive and modest and they are dependant on men justifies violence against women. The interviews show that verbal abuse is very common. Another important fact is women's attempt to soften their versions of suffering at the hands of husbands. This is because of the saying that a woman shouldn't discuss her husband's fault with outsiders. After the interview Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) said, 'I don't know whether what I did was proper. You know talking about my husband like that.' Such women show their sorrow, anguish and burdensome feelings only when asked how they feel about being a woman. Some of their answers were: 'I think it is a sin to be a woman. Women have to suffer every day and there is no comfort.' (Karuna, age 53, Colombo) Neetha (Age, 57, Colombo) said, 'My daughter said if she were me she wouldn't have tolerated the life I am living. But I don't repent it and if I had been intolerant my children's lives would have been very different today'. 'Some women protect their status, their jobs, and their husband's self respect and live with whatever problems they have.' (Ramani, age 39, Badulla).



Some interviewees said their husbands are good because husbands scold them when angry but do not hit them. The women who are abused said it is because they talk back to their husbands and it would not happen if they guarded their mouths. Women talked about their experiences without showing emotions as if battering is a matter of day-to-day life. Karuna's husband was a heavy drinker and used to beat her for the slightest reason. He always complained about the food she prepared, clothes she washed, not having money to drink and battered her. She said compared to the suffering she had endured now as a widow she is having a comfortable life and did not want to remarry because she did not want to get abused.

Hansi's (Age 41, Hambantota) husband started to beat her when she was eight months pregnant with her first baby. She tried to commit suicide and when she was in hospital he cried and said he would jump into her grave to be buried with herself if she died. She said she realised he loved her and went back to him. The beatings started again and she tried to rekindle an affair with her ex boyfriend. When her husband found out he forced her clothes off and chased her nude around the house beating her and inserted a big wooden pole in her vagina. She still suffers pains from that beating. Her husband told the eldest child to tell one of their aunts that he was going to kill the mother. The aunt rescued her and told him he was responsible for his wife going astray. However, she said she doesn't get sympathy or respect from the neighbours or her own children because they think she is a loose woman. She said now she is not afraid of him anymore because she earns her own money and beats him if he beats her and

stops cooking for him. When he asked for a divorce she said he could divorce her but could not force her out of the home. They live without fights now but she is understandably very unhappy about her marriage.

In summary, the discussion on family life shows gender-biased attitudes, which are imagined and understood as 'long lasting traditions' which work to reinforce and strengthen women's secondary position within the family. However, this does not mean that there is lack of resistance among women. Knowing the impact of losing virginity on their lives deters women from having sexual pleasures but they have strategies to avoid 'trouble'. The rising age of marriage indicates that, though women accept the universality of marriage they side step it until they are in a more secure position with a good education, possibly employment, to have a better position in the family. Although the notion that the head of the house should be a male is strong it is not a universal case for Sinhala women. As the accounts of the interviewees show, having a better education, paid employment or carrying out an income generating activity enable them to manoeuvre their position in the family against the husband and covertly undermine the notion of head of the family.

Nevertheless, the majority of women's internalisation of the concepts and beliefs held in the community regarding their role in the family prevent them from looking upon themselves as individuals, but see themselves as being burdened with a higher responsibility for the than that of men. Ramani, a school teacher (Age 39, Badulla), said 'If we try to live 'correctly' women are not a great burden to the

country. If we 'control' the house, 'control' the husband and take care of children we are not a burden'. What she said here is that if women live according to the expected behaviour of the community, take household responsibilities and prevent their husbands going astray,<sup>40</sup> she brings no problems to her family or the community. Today familial relations are largely influenced by the factors such as education and working outside the family. In *The Domestication of Women*, Barbara Rogers (1981) states that in the western world gender distinctions and interaction between men and women in the family are based on their respective economic relations outside the family and the position assigned to them by social class, education and other external factors. It seems being educated or working outside the family increase Sinhalese women's power. Yet culture and tradition still play a large role in determining women's secondary place in the family.

## Conclusion

The accounts on the pre-colonial and colonial period show how Sinhala woman's position in the family and the community shifted according to the structural changes which happened over time and their accessibility to spaces other than home. The colonial experience and the resistance over colonial rule led to the social construction of a 'Sinhala woman' that have had a decisive impact on the lives of Sinhala women in the post independence period. De Alwis says 'Her (Ceylonese/Sinhala) woman) cultural re-inscription within colonial modernity and

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<sup>40</sup> A saying in Sri Lanka is a woman should know how to correct her husband. If a husband commits adultery, wastes money or drinks heavily people would usually say "it is the wife's fault she should know how to correct him" When such problems occur a woman should not get angry and she should plead with her husband and try to please him in order keep him at home.

patriarchy must also be understood as not merely contested and unstable but as still in process' (De Alwis, 1999:187). The discussion based on interviewees' accounts on education, paid work and family life clearly indicates that concepts, norms, values and ideas that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as 'tradition and culture' act as constraints on women's lives today.

According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) women in the western part of the world underwent 'individualization boosts' because they were increasingly released from direct ties to the family and therefore have more freedom to make decisions and more freedom to make choices. However, they point out that this does not mean that social inequalities have been completely eradicated.

According to them, the process is 'incomplete', though women have made 'progress,' western women are trapped in a peculiar *intermediate stage* (2000:56. Original emphasis). Women are no longer defined in terms of family life dependant on a male provider yet women still perform more domestic tasks<sup>41</sup> than men do and their position in labour market is less protected and least stable. According to the authors this 'no longer' but 'not yet' situation generates numerous ambivalences and contradictions in women's lives (pp. 54-55).

If Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2000) argument is relevant to the late-modern western societies, one may ask what relevance does it have for Sinhala women? It seems the situation of the Sinhala women of today is not very different from

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<sup>41</sup> Women's 'double burden' of paid work and home. See also: Hochschild (1989).

that of western women even though the circumstances that have lead up to it are different.

Though women may appear to have free access to spheres other than home in reality they are not free to make choices on their own because they have internalised that they have a correct place in society and have to operate according to that place. On the surface it appears women have accepted the situation. However, when reading the 'hidden meanings' in the texts, the interviews strongly indicate that women feel oppressed by the situation

It seems women of today are trapped between tradition and modernity. On the one hand they appear to have access to modernity, but on the other hand the idea of the 'traditional role or image' of Sinhala woman continues to be maintained within the changing time, space and structure. The restrictions and perceptions the Sinhala community place on women are strongly internalised by women and therefore they are reluctant to break away from these restrictions and perceptions even though they are aware of how they are constrained by them in the name of culture and tradition. Sunetra (Age 23, Hambantota) said she has learned how to work with men and thinks in spite of the sex difference, women can do anything men do if they are determined. However, she said she cannot wear trousers in her village. While in the GAD programme she discovered that wearing trousers is not a bad dress for women, but in the village a lot of people think that is so and they will laugh at her. She said she cannot face that and she feels she cannot change their ideas by she has learned. The internalised shame and fear are constantly in their mind, and it is difficult for her to behave

'differently' because of the fear of social and familial exclusion. Teruni (Age 32, Hambantota) spoke about how ridiculed she felt when she took a group of insurance agents to her old school to start an insurance scheme for the teachers. Her boss was dressed in a smart coat and a short skirt and was wearing make up. Teruni said the staff instead of listening to the discussion watched her boss getting up and walking away to answer her mobile and were nudging each other. According to her they couldn't make a deal because of her boss's appearance. The business sector looks for smart looking, energetic outgoing women. The family, school and media and the rest of the community tells women to be modest, delicate and be invisible.

It seems that the concept of individuality assigned to modernity has very little appeal for Sinhala women. The idea that man is the breadwinner and head of the family is strong, though women have gained access to the labour market. Women were breadwinners even during the colonial period. Even though only women of the privileged classes had access to education and bluestocking jobs, the women of lower classes also had to come out of their homes to work because of the need for survival in a money oriented economy. This has doubled their burden because, as the discussion shows, they have to manage all the domestic tasks/ childcare and the responsibilities of their paid work. In addition to this women have to take the blame if the marriages fail. *Priyāvi*, a women's newspaper in 1976 reported that the divorce rate had gone up because of 'women are having more job opportunities'. According to the article married women who travel to towns from rural areas start extra marital affairs and this

leads to divorce (Regional news, 1976). The media very often points to women's paid work as a major reason for the deterioration of children's discipline and the disintegration of the family.

Though education seems to be an avenue which opens access to the kind of courses that challenge women to stand up for themselves and actively confront their own situation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 59) this has not reached Sinhalese women. The interviewees saw education as an avenue for understanding society and living according to it. Instead of challenge and confrontation, women prefer tolerance and obedience, as a strategy to avoid violence and disharmony. Young interviewees mentioned sexual harassment in public vehicles but said they are scared to confront it because others would criticise them. They either try to move away or suffer in silence. Off the record, one interviewee talked about young girls getting sexually harassed by high officials at her work place. She pleaded with me not to mention the work place because she still works there. Rani (Age 34, Hambantota) a schoolteacher said the male members of the staff make 'double meaning jokes' or sometimes touch them. She said it is something normal and avoiding it does not give women special privileges or a good reputation. Men make the joke and forget it but if a woman saw men touching women or making jokes, it goes further than that. These accounts show that the majority of women are reluctant to break the barriers.

Women are eager to do paid work. They believe it is good to have an income of their own. In that sense it seems paid work gives women some autonomy.

However, they do not see paid work as an individual achievement but as extra income for helping the family. When the need arises it is women who give up their careers. All the interviewees who left their jobs said they enjoyed working outside the family because they had the chance to meet more people and gained new experiences. However, they gave up their zest for their careers to be at home with the children because of this belief that this is their prime duty.

Many interviewees said being a woman is not an obstacle to what they want to achieve. This is because they have access to education and paid work or because they can choose a partner. However, in all interviews it is clear that they do not have free choice. Women's sexuality and public and familial relations are governed by a set of rules and restrictions and they would be ridiculed and named as shameless and fearless if they made choices that go beyond those rules and restrictions. The idea of the docile woman still dominates in the minds of men. They do not see women as strong enough to be leaders. Nelum (Age 24, Colombo) spoke about her experience with some male student leaders in the counselling office of her university. Once they organised a cultural event and the boys said to her 'come tomorrow, there is some work to do, should be done by the girls you know, (have to) serve the visitors, make tea and tidy the stage.' She said the girl members go to the office mainly to do clerical work and sweeping. They are not allowed to organise or lead any activities. Upuli, (Age 23, Colombo)



another university student said her boy friend asked her whether he could accompany her to the interview in case we talk about 'anything important'.

Women's spatial mobility is also limited by attitudes of the community and women themselves. It is shown that middle class women could achieve higher mobility in their careers through education because of their privileged situation. The majority of women are confined to service oriented jobs which are considered as women's jobs or give more free time to do domestic work. The idea that women should not go out or travel alone has a strong impact on choosing a career. Two interviewees said they found jobs in Colombo but their father or brother opposed them taking the job. Women are also afraid to travel alone. Women from rural areas are scared of living in urban areas because of the fear of sexual harassment. The increased attention paid to rape by the media generates more fear in women. Television programmes and newspapers discuss how the victims are helpless and how they are treated as prostitutes by the police or further suffer attempted molestation by the police officers. When I visited a police station in one area, upon my questioning, the WPC who is assigned to the women's section, smiled and said, 'these police officers are young you know. They like to gather around and hear the story.' The social humiliation and knowing they would not be helped, or might suffer further sexual harassment by the defenders of justice, makes women self policing and curbs their movements.

In general it seems women live for others. The common expression of women was 'I live for my family'. They talked about taking care of parents, children and

serving the country as their prime ambitions. Women in rural areas spend whatever free time they have on some income generating activities. Only two interviewees said they use that money for their own needs. This has a strong impact upon deciding women's lives when they get older. Hence the next chapter will explore the lives of older Sinhala women to examine how their status at a younger age influences the later life.

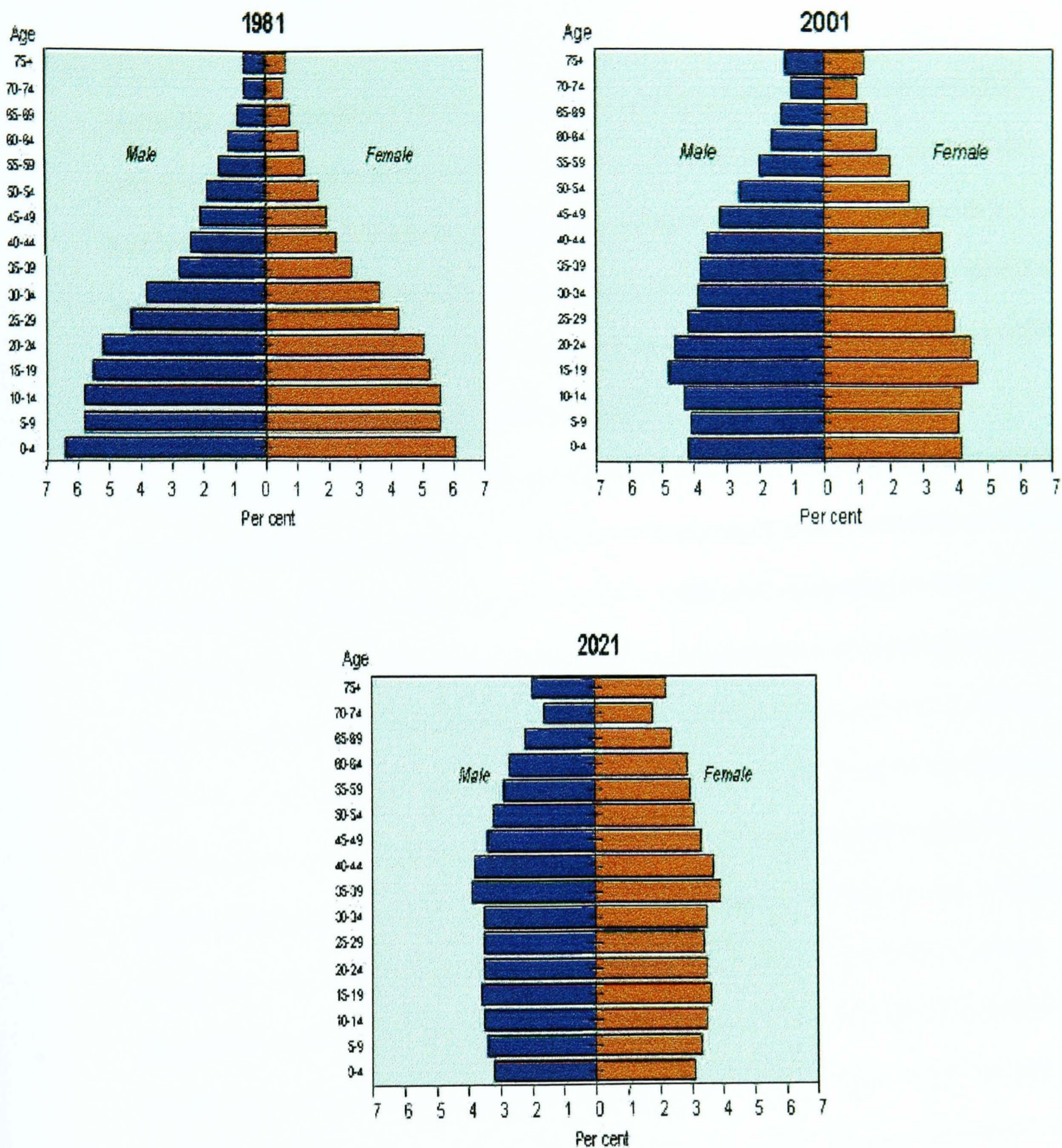
## Chapter Six

### Everything has changed but we adapt

The previous chapters showed how Sinhala women's identity and sexuality is shaped by ideas, norms and values of the community whilst also discussing how women's life styles, roles and expectations were controlled and constrained. The aim of this chapter is to explore the situation of ageing women within this frame and to examine the ways in which older women situate themselves within the changing context of the post independence era. Women over fifty years were chosen as 'older women' for this study, with twelve out of sixty six interviewees coming under this category.

This study includes a separate chapter on older women for three main reasons. Firstly, because of the demographic changes that occurred in Sri Lanka during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The changing patterns of demography are remarkably similar to the demographic patterns of developed countries, a typical feature of a modernising society. As a report of the Women's Bureau in Sri Lanka (1985) pointed out, the standards of life attained by the people of Sri Lanka, especially the physical quality of life have been impressive. According to the report, this is due to the set of welfare measures, such as free health service, food subsidy policies, family planning and immunisation campaigns, adopted by the successive governments since Independence.

According to the 2001 census, from 1960s onwards, a steady decline in the fertility rate of women lowered the increase of the Sri Lankan population. Up to 1960s the life expectancy of males was higher than that of females. However, there is a reverse to the pattern thereafter. In the early eighties life expectancy of females increased to 4.4 years more than that of males (67.7 years for males and 72.1 years for females). Though women's life expectancy rate has increased from 30.7(1920-22) to 55.5 (1952) and over sixty after 1962, (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001e) it still remains low compared to the rising level of life expectancy in the developed world. However, another important demographic factor that should be taken to consideration is the age gap between married males and females. Due to cultural conditioning, in Sri Lanka the practice is for the man to marry a woman younger than himself. The age gap between husbands and wives in Hambantota and Colombo is insignificant compared to the wide gap in Badulla. In Badulla the age gap varied from five to thirteen years. While walking to meet one of the interviewees, when the age gap between her and the husband was mentioned, her sister in law said 'why should we get an old woman for our brother?' This indicates the likelihood that a high proportion of women will be widowed when they are older. A study on ageing in Sri Lanka also confirmed this fact showing 22.5% of men over sixty are widowed compared with 42.1% of women (De Silva and Kotalawela: 1997). The age pyramid diagrams (Figure 3) clearly show that the population of Sri Lanka is changing from a 'young' or youthful population to an 'older' population.



(Projected)

Figure 3: Population Age Pyramids

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 1999

Therefore, as in western countries, the older population can no longer be treated as a minority.

Secondly, it seems that it is the state and nongovernmental organisations that take the prime responsibility for working for the welfare of the older generation. Following the United Nations interests in ageing the Sri Lankan government established a National Committee on Ageing in 1982. Its objective is to develop policy initiatives in order to create a healthy environment for older persons within cultural mores and religious practices (SAARC, 2001). According to the summary report on Sri Lanka, the government has taken various steps to ensure the welfare of the older people. However, the women's affairs ministry conducted only one forum discussion on ageing in Oct. 1998 and, according to the web site of the women's affairs ministry, there were no programmes on ageing on the ministry's policy planning or activity programmes (Ministry of Women's Affairs, nd.). Various charity organisations and non-governmental organisations funded by foreign donors collaborate with the state in developing policies regarding the elderly population. In my view it is highly likely that this will lead to the creation of universal policies and that could be detrimental for women because it would neglect the fact that older women have a different social and cultural position within each ethnic community in Sri Lanka. More over as this chapter shows, even the position of older women within one community is not universal as they have different lives.

Finally, It seems that women's writers or feminists have paid very little attention to ageing women. A survey by the Centre for Women's Research in 1997 found that only three major studies had been carried out on ageing in Sri Lanka since

1980, However, and none of these studies paid specific attention to women or conducted an in-depth analysis on the consequences of caring for the caregivers (De Silva and Kotalawela, 1997). According to Sara Arber and Jay Ginn (1991), the lack of sociological research on older women, even in the western part of the world, is striking compared to the richness of work by feminist sociologists.

However, their recent research on ageing has redressed the neglect. Likewise, there is a need in Sri Lanka to understand existing perceptions of older women and their experience

Hence, this chapter will explore the situation of women through the accounts provided by the interviewees. First it will examine their position in relation to their early experiences in life. Secondly, it will examine how having or not having access to resources determines the lives of older women. Thirdly, it will examine how these women positioned themselves according to the changes that happened over time.

### **The past affects the present**

When reading the life stories of older women collected for this study, one striking common feature was how the achievements and hardships of their lives shaped the situation they are in today. Gaya, a seventy-three year old interviewee from a privileged background, reminisced on how having access to a typewriter when she was around ten years old determined her life. She was born into a traditional elite family and her privileged background helped her to have access to spheres the majority of women of her age had no access to at all.

...but for holidays I used to go to Bandarawela. And my grandfather [...] He was a very interesting person. Very learned and I had a rather [...] you know, I was the third in the family. So I felt the two elder ones were often favoured. For anything there, "loku dennā geniyamu" ("let's take the two elders") So if there was no room in the car, well, the two elder ones had to go. Then the three little ones (the younger sisters) were always petted. So I am caught in the middle neither here nor there. And my understanding father used to tell me "Gaya neither fish less nor fowl are all alone" So there was certain loneliness in me. And how did I overcome it? I started reading books. Specially poetry.

[Her grandfather used to order clothes, shoes other luxury items for the family members from England especially during Christmas.]

Once a huge box came. And then opened it. And there was a big black thing that was pulled out of the box and it had the gleaming word, golden letters 'Remington'. It was a typewriter that he had ordered. One that had been kept on a table. And I was very thrilled, grandfather used to keep it on front veranda, put this paper and roll it and typed. I used to watch these magic words. I had never seen a thing like that. I was intrigued. He looked hard at me, I was really involved in, so he had [...] he used to talk in very archaic way. He said " would you like to be my scribe?" so I said yes! I would have been about nine or ten, so he gave me paper, told me how to address an envelope.

... So learned to do [how to write] then he would dictate letters and I had to copy them. And I think that created an interest. And then we had English classes

[at grandfather's house. she, her five sisters and two young uncles and an aunt were in the class. They read English classics.]

That was also a [...] laying the foundation for what I was going to be. This love of words. ... One of the prizes he gave me was a lovely green inkstand.[...] Onyx inkstand, pale green colour... a pen holder and ink well. Those days there were no ballpoint pens or fountain pens, you have to dip it into the ink and [...] and a bottle of Quink ink. Well, he gave me that ink. The bottle of ink and write on good paper notepaper. And you know he didn't live to see me writing but I have to be very grateful to him.

...As I grow up you see, I told you, I belonged to a Kandyan family. People got girls got married when they were 17 or 18 but a few went to teach one or two went to nursing but that was not considered [...] our people didn't like girls becoming nurses, they prefer them to be teachers or matrons or so. Now, I was very keen to go to the university. No one in my family had been to the university. And I was only seventeen, passed my senior exam. The principal said that I should go to the university. So my father was debating. He didn't know whether it was too expensive. He was a



government servant. He could manage to pay up but we were family of six so it was not that easy.

... Anyway I sat for the university entrance. I had passed and still I was not sure whether I was to go to the university. Till I got a letter to say that I have been awarded an exhibition for geography. I had come first or second in geography. With that came as people kept... starting to tell my father "congratulations, it was in the newspapers, it is such an important thing, yes she should go to the university" so that's how I went to the university (English).

She has become an award-winning journalist cum writer and a teacher. She met her husband at the university and she made life long friends at the university who were, in her own words 'very upright, steady sober people who did very good jobs.' She was employed as a teacher but she gave up teaching six months after her marriage. She thought about becoming a housewife because it was more important to look after her first child than be employed. However, her husband was transferred to Anuradhapura, a remote area in the north central province. One day the director of education to the area and the principal of the Anuradhapura Central school visited them and said 'we have no graduates (in the school to teach) but we have a graduate here in the house doing nothing' and they asked her husband: 'our boys and girls are wanting a graduate teacher would you mind your wife coming and teaching?' She did not agree at first and said that though she had servants she did not want to leave the child. The director talked of how her father had helped the peasants in the area and how her husband is helping them now said she also would have a chance to help the peasants. She agreed to teach a few hours and gradually started to work longer hours. She taught in several outstation schools for a while and received a transfer to a school in Colombo. She taught there for nine years and then received a letter from the education ministry notifying her she was transferred

because she had stayed in the school for too long. According to her there were teachers in the same school, that were well established themselves there by teaching there for twenty or twenty-five years, but the teachers like her were considered outsiders.

She served in outstations for long time and wanted to stay in Colombo. She said, 'I thought all this work I did (in outstation schools) it has meant (nothing) whereas people living in Colombo, educated in Colombo, they had all the plums. Not that I wanted many plums but I wanted to remain in this school. So while I was so sad and you won't believe that in one-week I was transferred to six schools. Letter after letter that means there was no co-ordination in the department. I thought it is not worth working here.' She saw an advertisement in newspapers seeking teachers to work in Nigeria. She went to Nigeria but by a mistake she had been sent to a vocational training school instead of sending her to the women's teaching school she was supposed to teach at. She was the only female in the vocational training school for boys and within the miles of the school. She taught English to the boys there until she was sent to the women's school. She spent two years in Nigeria and decided to come back because she was lonely. By that time her two daughters were married and her two sons were studying in Vienna and USA. She got bored after staying home for three weeks and with the prompting of a journalist friend she applied to a newspaper agency and became a journalist. She said, 'So I think when I look back on my life I feel I have not wasted my life, I have been able to be of service.'

Her social position and education helped her to integrate into non-traditional roles that were evolving during the 1940s. Having been able to perform roles other than those traditionally assigned for a woman, she finds her life was useful.

A fifty-three years old interviewee, Karuna's (Age 53, Colombo) reminiscence of the past was a sad story compared to Gaya's. She was born into a poor family in a rural area. Though she was born twenty years later than Gaya in an era where women were gaining more access to non-traditional spheres her unprivileged background was a barrier to bettering her life.

A :Our mother died when I was small. She died and father brought a stepmother.

[Her father battered their mother to death. While he was in prison her mother's elder sister took care of the children. He was released soon from the prison. She vaguely remembered that he hit mother and she fell. The neighbours came and said her mother was dead. She said now she has no connection with her father.]

Q Do you have brothers or sisters?

A: Had a brother, he also died. One sister was at an orphanage. She also married and she is also living away. They don't come to see me and I don't visit them either. They don't know where I am. Both our brother and mother died.

Q: Where is your Village?

A: My Village is Ingiriya.

Q: So how old were you when your mother died?

A:I was three years old.

Q: Three? Do you remember your mother?

A: No, slightly, I know that I had a mother but don't remember her shape or features either.

Q: Do you remember things about your childhood?

A: When my mother died [...] I didn't go to school. There was no one to send me to school. My stepmother looked after me a little. Father used to get drunk and make trouble, scolded and hit us. So I left home. I stayed in a Bungalow when small as a servant. I stayed there a while and then came to Dehiwala. I didn't go to school and worked as a servant. Those madams now helped me.

Q: So your father wasn't interested in sending you to school?

A: No he was not interested in keeping me or my brother and sister. He didn't want to keep us with him because stepmother had two children. He used to abuse stepmother too. In the end stepmother went to pick tea leaves. She came home in the evening. She took us back to home for a while and taught us to pick tealeaves, replant and I earned about ten/ fifteen rupees a day.

Q: How old were you then?

A: about ten years.

Q: Did you help with domestic work too?

A: Yes, if when my stepmother came home, things were not done she scolded me [laughed].

Q: Do you remember what you did?

A: Washing pots, drawing water, sweep and tidy then looked after my stepbrother. Those were things I was asked to do. But there was no abuse, stepmother cared about me. But father abused her too. Because of that we all became lost.

Q: Your stepmother's children went to school?

A: Yes both of them, daughter and the son.

Q: How did brother and sister separate from you?

A: My brother drowned when he went to bathe in the river. Then there was no one to look after us, my mother's sister gave my sister to the orphanage. She was so small and didn't understand anything, I was able to understand things. I don't know which orphanage.

Q: How was your life as a servant?

A: The first house where I worked, people were bit strict. They hit me, scolded me, then I was about ten to fifteen and an age one could understand things. Sometimes, if I lied they burnt me. At that time I was able to understand things (and) a superintendent who worked near our place took me and my aunt's daughter to Colombo. They treated me well, looked after me and they still care about me.

Q: Did you work there for a long time?

A: Yes.

Q: Did they teach you to write?

A: They did but it was difficult to learn properly while working. They taught me how to sew, cook to keep home tidy and clean and the way to live in society. Then they gave me in marriage. He worked in a garage as a painter. He also died. It was after that I came to work for the urban council (translated).

Her husband earned sixty rupees (about six pennies) a day and they had to manage rent, day to day needs and maintain two children with that money. Her husband did not allow her to do paid work because there was no one to take care of the children. She had to take the responsibility of managing their domestic affairs with the money he gave her and then had to give him money for drinking. He was a drunk and severely abused her. She was married for twenty years. She feels free now and said she lives happily after the death of her husband. After he died one of the politicians he supported helped her to get a job with the urban council as a sweeper. She said because of lack of education she couldn't work as an office assistant or work in the canteen. However, the job is good and it has benefits such as a pension. She has two men and one woman as co-workers and men and women receive equal pay. The vendors at the market where she sweeps are good to her and brought food and drinks to her once when she was hospitalised. She said, 'I never had a comfortable life.'

These two accounts demonstrate the ways in which class position and social and economic environment of these older women influence their later life. When examining their lives it is clear that class, poverty and urban/rural differences had a profound influence on determining women's access to resources, and generating unequal power relations within the family and society.

### **Access to resources**

Unlike the interviewees from rich, educated middle class families, the majority of older women from poorer backgrounds did not have a chance to better their lives through education. Apart from Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) and Neetha (Age 57, Colombo), who were respectively from a wealthy traditional elite family and urban middle class family, all the other interviewees either did not have an education or were not educated beyond first or second grades in primary school. Many older women talked with sadness about being deprived of a good education. The main reasons for not sending women to school were: poverty and separation of parents, that they were needed to care for siblings and to do domestic work, parents did not want to send girls if they had to walk two or three miles to school; and. Those who went to grade one or two talked nostalgically about their time in school. Neetha, a fifty-seven year old woman from an urban middle class family said her aim was to go to the university. However the younger children faced hardships, as they were a family of seven children. The sister closest to her age was at the university and she realised father couldn't afford to send two children to the university. She passed her HSC prep (High School Certificate preparing for university entrance) very well and applied to a major financial organisation and

was selected. She decided to take the job and gave financial support to the sister who was at the university. She said she is still sad about not being able to have a university education.

Not having access to education was a major impediment to women's paid work. However, as shown in the fourth chapter, women who were educated had an opportunity to be employed in service oriented careers. Loku (Hambantota), a seventy-year-old woman, said her parents stopped her from going to school when she was in grade six. She had a chance to work as an attendant in a hospital but she was scared of seeing people die. Later when hardships occurred she worked in a nearby plantation as a casual labourer. According to her, many of the girls dropped out of school at that stage. Four or five girls continued their education and she knew that one woman became a teacher.

Nevertheless, the majority of women were engaged in farming. The older interviewees of Badulla and Hambantota were among the first settlers in the area, arriving around the 1950s under settlement schemes, and they faced numerous hardships. They worked with their men shoulder to shoulder when the need arose therefore the gendered division of labour was blurred. However, women did not receive land because husbands were the head of the families. By that time the custom in Sri Lanka was to distribute land among the male members of the family. Hence women in farming areas did not have access to the most important capital, land.

**Resource distribution:**

When examining the situation of older women regarding their access to resources, it shows that the conditions created during colonial rule had been decisive. The son preference in distributing family land, not having access to education, and the idea of motherhood and living for others control their individual access to resources.

Apart from Neetha (Age 57, Colombo), Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) and Karuna (Age 57, Colombo), none of the other older interviewees were engaged in permanent paid work. A few did casual labour such as working in salt pans, brick making, working in plantations or did self employed jobs such as preparing food for sale. The majority were cultivators. However, the husbands were the owners of the fields. Women brought with them a few items of household furniture and jewellery as dowry but only two women said they received land as part of their dowry. According to the majority of young and older interviewees it was usually the men in the family who inherited the land or were going to inherit the family land. Punchi (DoB unknown/older, Badulla)<sup>42</sup> said when her mother was alive she divided the land among all the children but did not follow a legal procedure. Since her death the youngest son took hold of the property and does not like to divide it. Some interviewees owned the land after their husbands died and some of them had already divided the land among their children. Podi (Age 54, Badulla), however, said she did not want to divide the four acres until she dies. This may be as a result of fear that she may be ill treated by the children once



they get their share. Ransi (DoB unknown/elderly, Badulla) said she had divided half the property between two of her sons who lives with her, but one of the sons who lives in another area and who is also wealthy is troubling her because he has not received any family land. She wants to divide the land in her name among her sons and two daughters and said that her daughters would get less than the sons. Usually a son inherits the family house and many women are living with extended families. Both Gaya (age 73, Colombo) and Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) own houses in their own right. Both of them have worked in foreign countries and earned substantial amounts of money. Gaya's savings were spent when one of the sons needed a kidney transplant. The money Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) earned was spent on her children. As mentioned in the chapter five, she retired early because two of her children were planning to marry and settle abroad and needed money. She had to give some money to her husband also because he was unhappy that she left her job early and she was scared that he might create trouble for their children. She did not tell him how much money she gave to her children. Karuna's (Age 53, Colombo) family occupied government land and little by little built a house. They have not yet received the deeds and she said the house would be given to her eldest son. Among other women only one interviewee said that she had saved some money<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to note here that the majority of the older interviewees did not know their birthday probably because registering birth was not practised regularly.

<sup>43</sup> As already mentioned I was cautious not to ask direct questions about financial status and put my questions on earnings at various times in indirect ways such as 'are there any income generating activities here?', 'what do you do when not doing fieldwork or domestic work?' 'Did you learn an art or craft' etc. This led to a discussion on family income, what they do with it and financial difficulties.

The above account shows that women do not intend to save money for their future security. This may be due to the fact that parents' anticipate that their children will look after them when they are old. In addition, Buddhism emphasises the role of parents and urges children to take care of them when they are weak. The majority of women still live with one of their children when they get older and children may visit women who live alone in the family home from time to time. However, as they have very little access to capital resources, it seems it is highly likely that they become dependants of their children.

Nevertheless, the life stories of the older interviewees contradict the norm of total dependency. The older women do continue to support and maintain the families in many ways and earn money in order to support themselves. Despite their old age, many are still economically active. After retirement, Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) started to teach English to some government officials. Loku (Age 70, Hambantota) grows crops to sell and for consumption and in addition she is a practising shaman. She learned the art from a man in the area and people come to her for help with petty illnesses or if they think they are affected by evil looks or sorcery. She said she could earn one hundred rupees (about 80 p) by blessing a pot of water. Sudu (DoB unknown/older, Badulla) sells firewood because they do not possess rice fields. She brings firewood from the jungle about three miles away and chops it up for sale. Her unmarried son does not like chopping firewood and does not support her at all. They only have a small garden and she cultivates it for family consumption. She said she has chosen to sell firewood because there is nothing to do. Bindu's (DoB unknown but said she is 59,

Hambantota) husband died when the children were small. Now her two sons are married and she said that they can not take care of her because they have families and so she doesn't blame them. She works in the salt pans when the work is available and apart from that she does casual labour. She said she does not like being idle but there is no regular work available all the time. If she does not work at least she gathers firewood for domestic use. Ransi (DoB unknown/elderly, Badulla) said her children ask her not to work because she had a hard life but she helps with tending the garden.

It was clear from the interviews that women loathed being wholly dependent on children. Their earnings are spent on the family of the children they stay with. Punchi's (DoB unknown/older, Badulla), three children built their houses on the same compound and she said they always share food with the children's families. If they buy dry fish it is not less than five hundred grams because they want to share it with the children. Her husband is not very well and she still does casual labour to earn money. However, there are some days they do not have enough money to buy food. The majority of the families receive Samurdhi, a government benefit for low-income families but it is only about 250 rupees a month (less than £2.00). It is clear that many of the younger generation are not in a position to take care of their parents and maintain their own families with the income they earn. Hence older women have to find ways and means to not only to help themselves but also to help their children.

## Familial relations

The majority of older women experienced a more restricted and limited life when they were young compared to the lives of women born later in the post independence period. The majority of them had a very short childhood and married when they were 13-16 years old and started families<sup>44</sup>. It is women who were burdened most because they had to undertake the bulk of the domestic work. Families were large, as there were no effective family planning methods. Women gave birth at home because there were no hospitals nearby. According to Podi (Age 54, Badulla) women cooked food for the family, did other domestic work right through their labour pains and then prepared hot water and the other necessities and gave birth without assistance<sup>45</sup>. According to her pregnancy was an embarrassing event and women tried to conceal it as long as possible. She said that when there were visible signs of pregnancy her husband used to smile and say 'maybe there is a child on the way' and she also smiled and said nothing.

Compared to Sinhala women of today their space was mainly limited to the home and the fields. According to Bindu (DoB unknown, Hambantota), her mother and brothers used to lock her and her sister up at home when they went to work.

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<sup>44</sup> Even though the child marriages were in practice it was not for religious reasons. It may be due to the fact that men and women did not live long. For example according to the census 2001, the life expectancy of male and females were respectively, 32.7 and 30.7 years in 1920-22 and 46.6 and 44.7 years in 1945-47.

<sup>45</sup> This was always not the case. There were older women in the village who came to assist when women gave birth. According to my colleague his father helped his mother in delivering babies.

Ransi (DoB unknown, Badulla) recounted how her husband travelled to see many parts of Sri Lanka but she couldn't go because she had to take care of the family.

Women faced various forms of abuse too. The accounts of all the older interviewees, apart from Gaya's, points that they suffered at the hands of their fathers, brothers and, when given in marriage, by their husbands. Many talked about the drunkenness of their husbands and their adultery and how they suffered because of these issues.

All the older interviewees apart from Gaya thought being born as a woman is a sin and a suffering

It is our sin to be born as a woman. Otherwise why we suffer from sadness and filth [menstruation]? How much we suffer at childbirth. Now those women who have caesarean feel only that pain [of the wound]. We were not like that. We suffered days and felt life is not worthwhile and it was not one or two children we had and we were fed up with life. So today it is only two or three per family (Ransi, DoB unknown/elderly, Badulla/translated).

It is better to be born as a male than a female. It depends on merits and sins of the previous life. Men do not have troubles like women in anything. Men just have to do their job. Women have to carry the entire burden after marriage. Having children and women have to manage everything at home (Bindu, DoB unknown/older, Hambantota/translated).

What both of these women expressed were similar to many older women's accounts. It was interesting to note how they compared their lives as young women to lives of young women today. They spoke of medical facilities, transport facilities and women having the opportunity to do paid work today and said at their time it was not so. Not having choices trapped them into the

drudgeries of domesticity. Therefore, in my view, the only discourse available for them to make sense of their situation was religion, which told them that they were born as women because of their previous sins. Older women have internalised this idea and comport themselves by saying what they endured was their fault of sinning in previous life, which was not expressed by the younger interviewees. The older women's comparison of life after their husband's death clearly shows how they felt when free from burden.

Apart from Gaya (Age 73, Colombo), all the women who lost their husbands said they felt free after their husbands died. For Karuna (Age 53, Colombo) Loku (Age 70, Hambantota), Ransi (DoB unknown, Badulla), Bindu (DoB unknown, Hambantota) widowhood meant getting rid of a life long burden and abuse. Karuna said she is free and lives in joy since her husband died because when compared to the sufferings she had with him life is comfortable now. Podi (Age 54, Badulla) said,

After husband died my life is better than it was before. I am free now. When he was ill I couldn't visit a neighbour without a troubled mind even. Because I had to look after him. Now even if I come home very late there is no one to ask me where I have been. That is a relief and also I could go and stay for weeks meditating if I want (translated).

Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) talked about how helpless she felt about doing marketing because her husband used to do the marketing while she waited in the car. She did not know the quantities or prices. Her children trained her to do her own marketing. However, none of the other interviewees said they felt helpless after their husbands died. It is highly likely the reason for this is women were

involved in income generating activities and it was they who took the sole responsibility of taking care of the families. Hence, the absence of the husband does not make women feel weak and helpless.

Even though they were not explicit, the accounts of older interviewees clearly show that marriage was a matter of convention and obligations and demands of the marriage highly constrained them along with other restrictions they experienced.

A study done on older women in slums of Southern India by Haleh Afshar and Fatima Alikhan<sup>46</sup> indicates that older women had gained status and grown into positions of relative power and influence and that age has given them dignity and an important place in the family. However, the situation of older women within the Sinhala community differs from these southern Indian older women. As it will be shown later in this chapter, the older Sinhala women have an authoritative role as advisors to younger women and they earn respect as seniors.

Nevertheless, the interviews for this study show that neither they receive power, dignity or authority in their families nor were they regarded as heads of the family.

Nevertheless, they have internalised life long prejudices and believe in them.

They think men should be revered and respected because their status is higher than that of women. Woman's prime duty is the family and she should be tolerant and put up with anything for the sake of the family and the children. As Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) said,

What I saw was my mother treats father like god. Even today I serve a cup of tea to my husband and my daughter asks why I do so. It preserves peace at home. When women are obedient there are no fights. I would never have been able to bring up my children if I fought about the ways of my husband (translated).

Older women from rural areas believe being a man is a rare chance and it is better to be born as a man. According to Krisha (Age 47, Badulla) when he was ill her husband said she should never suffer in another life again like in this life and wished that when born again she would be born as a man. She said if a man made such a wish for a woman he would not be born as a male in his next life and therefore even a one in hundred would not give such a privilege to a woman. As Ransi (DoB unknown, Badulla) remembered seven days before dying her husband said 'because of the care you have given to me, I don't hope to have you as my wife in other lives but you should be born as a sister to me' (what her husband meant was by being a sister to him she will end serving him as wife and he will protect her). He also said he knows how she suffered so he requested her to be devoted to religion to end the sufferings in afterlives.

Apart from being providers, older women play a significant role as carers. Punchi (DoB unknown Badulla) said when her daughters and daughters-in-law go to do fieldwork they leave their children with her. She feeds them with whatever is available and looks after them until the younger women come back from the fields. When one of her daughters went to the Middle East as a housemaid she looked after her children for a while. After a dispute her son-in-law took back the children to their home but she still goes there to see them. As soon as she

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<sup>46</sup> This is an unpublished paper still at the stage of revising



retired from the newspaper agency she was working for Gaya Age 73, Colombo) went to Australia to look after her twelve-year granddaughter. She said she was 'not baby sitting but she (granddaughter) couldn't be at home alone.' Bindu (DoB unknown, Hambantota) is taking care of her eldest daughter's child because her husband is dead. As is the usual custom their family home was given to her youngest son and she lives with his family. Her interview suggests that she is having problems at home. She cooks for herself and her grandchild. When she has no work available she does not stay at home but visits a neighbour to talk. She said 'Sometimes I want to leave home but I can't leave my grandchild although I can leave my children.' Loku (Age 70, Hambantota) also looks after her son's children because their mother is dead. Two of her children have built houses in the same plot of land and she said her daughters in law help her with washing clothes.

Five interviewees had taken care of their husbands when they were suffering from long-term illnesses before dying. They said they looked after their husbands like 'mothers'<sup>47</sup>. They prepared medicine for husbands, fed them and bathed them. Doctors guaranteed Podi's (Age 54, Badulla) husband would live only eight years but he lived fifteen years as a result of her care. He drank poison to end his suffering and for two years she and the family was upset though it was not their fault. She said if it was her fault that he died villagers would have

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<sup>47</sup> This is another example of internalisation of existing ideas in society. It is highly likely due to cultural influence of India the Sinhala community also categorised "Wife" in to several connotations as a) Wadhaka Bhāri-nagging wife, b) Swāmi Bhāri-wife being the head of the family, c) Mātru bhāri-being like a mother, d) Bhagini Bhāri-being respectful to husband like a sister, e) Sankhi bhāri- being like a friend, f) Chora bhāri-wife who acts like thief and conceal things from the husband, g) Dāsi bhāri-being like

'played drums' (spread stories). However, one man said her husband committed suicide because she became devoted to religion and was not interested in having sex.

Women did not talk about their role as carers in a critical tone, yet the accounts of women who undertook such care strongly imply that they feel burdened since taking care of the grandchildren or sick husbands can limit their freedom. Though they did not voice this explicitly they said 'I cannot go to the temple to observe Sil (eight precepts) because of the grandchildren.' 'This is not easy work' or 'I want to leave home when this daughter is given in marriage and live in an *ārame* (a place established by Buddhist monks or nuns for lay people to stay and meditate either for a short or long period).' They also perform other domestic tasks in addition to caring for children and the sick people. However, on the other hand it seems that doing so helps women not to feel a burden to their children or just a dependent.

Women from villages did not mention participating in any community or charity work apart from going to the temple to observe Sil and participation in group meetings organised by the non-governmental organisations which are working to improve economic development in their areas. The main aim of forming small groups is to encourage women to save money and provide small-scale loans for their needs such as building or repairing houses, to apply for electricity or water supply or to pay their debts. Only the more privileged women, Gaya (Age 73,

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a slave. Such ideas are still prevalent and accepted by both men and women. Out of these categories, c,d,e and g are considered as the best role of a wife.

Colombo) and Neetha (Age 57, Colombo), engaged in voluntary social work after retirement. Gaya works with a women's non-governmental organisation and Neetha does charity work for a house for the aged, a village for the blind and the displaced Sinhalese villagers in the areas ravaged by war and she buys books for poor children. It is likely that only older women from well to do families have the financial capacity and spare time for community and volunteer activities

All the same, class and wealth influence the older women's lifestyle and their position in the family and community in Sri Lanka. When talking about how they would spend a normal day Neetha (Age 57, Colombo) said,

I get up at around five thirty in the morning and make tea for all. I have a servant and she cooks food. I clean the bathroom and sweep. During the day I might go to see the doctor or for marketing. After lunch and dinner I meditate (translated).

Seetha (Badulla) a fifty-year-old interviewee said,

I get up at four in the morning. Then I prepare food and go to work in the rice fields. Sometimes I go to the market. Otherwise it is working in the garden, non-stop, from the morning to noon (translated).

Another role of older women that emerged in the interviews is being advisors especially to their granddaughters. Priya (Age 25, Colombo), a young interviewee said, 'It was my grandmother who advised me mostly. Even today I shape my family life according to the pieces of advice she gave me'. It seems the seniority of age gives older women an authoritative place among younger women in the community. Gaya's (Age 73, Colombo) interview shows how her grandmother influenced the shape of her life as a girl and how she now influences her granddaughters' lives. According to all the interviewees,

grandmothers are one of the advisors in their lives. In this way older women help to preserve and pass on traditions and culture.

However, further investigation shows that older women have mixed reactions to the women's situation of today. Gaya (Age 73, Colombo) felt that values today have changed. She thinks that working mothers are more interested in buying expensive clothes than providing nutritious meals to children. They buy ready-made junk food for children and forget that health is important. Young women of today have succumbed to the beauty culture promoted by the media and through the influence of friends. All the interviewees talked about how they were not allowed to go out alone when they were young and how women can go anywhere today. Their conversations show how women find it difficult to accept the fact that they are also individuals. The 'traditional' idea presented to them, that women should give priority to the family, their husband and children before themselves led these women to criticise women who like to take care of themselves as individuals.

Nevertheless, the interviewees were reflective when they compared their earlier situation with the situation of today's women. Women from rural areas think there is no fear and shame in younger women and they freely associate with men. Punchi said unlike in her time women are not afraid to walk around with men even if they are not married and women do not hesitate to ride on push bicycles or on motor bicycles with men. According to Podi (Age 54, Badulla) today women go out and may engage in sexual activities and do not get pregnant like

in her times because there are ways and means to avoid pregnancy. She said only a foolish woman would get pregnant today.

However, they were concerned about changing morals and values because they see this as the negative consequences of the progress of women as it generates male violence towards women. They understand the risks and sexual vulnerability of younger women in a society, who experience a tension between tradition and modernity. Society has changed but simultaneously stereotypes of women have failed to change along with it. They talked about rising incidents of rape, sexual harassment and the problems girls' face after losing their virginity. They are aware that the sexual reputation of women is still important though restrictions may not be as strictly observed as in their days. Otherwise they said women are progressing and it is good.

According to Bindu (DoB unknown, Hambantota):

There is a change in everything, the way girls dress, travel and the way girls and boys socialise. Those things did not happen in our times. So I think it is better than that of our time but sometimes think it is bad also. The girls and boys of today are too much but I think it is the way of nowadays and girls get raped because of this.(translated)

My daughters socialise a lot more than I did at that age and they live a very different life to me. Their habits and ways are different from mine. There is a change and it has good things and bad things. Girls face a grave situation because the increase of rape (Seetha, age 50, Badulla/translated).

Women are also aware of the second-class status they have as a result of their internalised ideas and experience that make them believe that men are born to have better status than women. Podi (age 54, Badulla) discussed how religious stories tell women to be chaste and how the stories paint women as creatures

who have no ability to control their feelings. When asked whether there are any such stories about men she said there are no stories of men. She said the women talked about the same question when they observed Sil at temple. She thought the stories were there to scare women and said, 'it is men who do wrong but their faults were never discussed. If men don't do wrong, will women pull into the same faults? Why do people only write about women's faults? Didn't men do wrong at all?' Conversations like this indicates those older women are not judgmental and feel some solidarity with the progress of women of today.

### **Culturally prescribed behaviour**

Nevertheless, it seems many older women follow the culturally accepted behaviour of being religious and ageing gracefully and piously. In Gaya's own words,

So now I am trying to break the ties of personal attachments [...] (as prescribed in) Buddhist philosophy and get ready to leave (die) at any time. No, it is not a pessimistic thing, leaving it (life) happy, without any complications for my children. They understand and I helped them, but not be afraid of what is around the corner and that (knowing that she helped her children) and the Buddhist philosophy helps me (English)

Neetha also said she understands that a person develops strong emotions because of attachments. She was depressed when she was young but she turned to religion to be strong enough to bring up the children. Now she has no strong emotions because she had cut her personal attachments to others. Her husband still abused her but she could wish him peace in his mind. Podi said she is devoted to religion because she is fed up with her life. When thinking of her hard life, the sufferings and the deaths of her first two sons, her mother and

father in law (when she just got married), it reminds her life is not worth living. She goes to temple to observe Sil. It seems women find solace in religion to forget the sad memories and to gather merits so the next life won't be as bad as present life.

Many writers point out that the ageing is seen in a negative light in western societies (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Walker & Maltby, 1997; Phillipson, 1998; Ganon, 1999). As a result there is an attempt to look youthful. The consumer culture produces various manufactures ranging from beauty products to plastic surgery to 'avoid ageing.' However, in Sri Lanka, both men and women do not face such a situation within the Sinhala community. Buddhism advocates that birth, ageing and death are inevitable. Hence the majority does not accept 'try to be young' and if an older woman or man dresses or behaves in a youthful way, the community looks down upon them. This is expressed in the saying that the 'monkey tries to climb trees even if it is over sixty years old (*'Hata pannath wandura gas bada gānna hadanawā'*). On the other hand, both religion and culture advocates respect for age and seniority. Hence, unlike in the western societies older women do not yet feel constrained by having to look youthful.

### **Cultural Change and negotiations:**

The western countries started to experience modernity around the sixteenth century and as a result the peasant population was transformed into an urbanised industrialised population by the end of nineteenth century.

Modernisation of Sri Lanka did not go through the same phases and, as shown in

the fourth chapter, it was introduced to Sri Lanka through colonisation. Today, Western societies under going another transformation, which is variously identify as post modernity, late modernity or reflexive modernity. As a consequence of rapid advance in technology and globalisation the late modern economic, cultural and political developments do have an impact on Sri Lanka too. Thus slowly but inevitably this brings about changes in the values, ideas and life styles of people in Sri Lanka. Hence it is important to understand how older women feel about the change because it determines their adaptation into the changing environment around them.

There is a change. When we were small never wore dresses above the knee length. We never bathed in public. Never walked alone with boys. Without parents or a brother never went even as far as two or three miles. It is not so now. Girls even go to Colombo alone. We can see it. There is no fear and shame as in our times and everything is open. Men and women were together only when they went to bed. But now you can see them together even under trees (meaning: couples do not mind being together in public). The country has developed too. When I was small I thought there were people inside the radio. Then I saw the gramophone. I saw the train only after I had two children.

The home, village, the country, the world, people, even the way of talking, dressing and other goods and the furniture is also different. Only except for us. But we adapted to this change. And will adapt to tomorrow's change. I know the way to talk in the village, how to talk in the town and how to talk with ladies or gentlemen (urbanised and educated women and men)(Podi, age 54, Badulla/translated)

There was no school in this interviewee's area at that time and she learned the alphabet from the monk in the temple. She taught herself to read and said she can read well now.

The important theme emerging from the last part of this conversation is the interviewee's desire to identify with modern changes. The interviews in general



show that women welcome the changes and older women from rural areas rather like to identify themselves with the 'modern ways of life'.

In an isolated incident one seventy-three year old interviewee from the same area tried to paint a picture that women married in their twenties and marriages were monogamous, registered, and long-lasting. According to her children she married when she was thirteen, even before attaining puberty, and she was the third woman their father had taken. The 'denial' clearly shows her desire to identify with the 'modern' and 'civilised' way of behaviour. This also confirms the fact that how the community discarded some practices as 'uncivilised' and unacceptable as a result of new ideas and ways that were integrated into the community as a result of colonisation and Christianisation.

## **Conclusion**

According to a report from the Centre for Women's Research -Sri Lanka (De Silva and Kotalawela, 1997), Sri Lanka has the fastest increase in life expectancy in the South Asian region. The report also indicates that women's large-scale participation in the labour force and the migration of female workers to foreign countries reduces the capacity of families to look after elderly people adequately. However, women still comprise less than half of the labour force and the interviews for this study show women give priority to their role as carers. Hence it is highly likely that taking care of older people by the family and children is not going to change in the immediate future. The community believes it is a shame if one's parents have to seek care in institutions. My interviews show that the

majority of women live with their children when they get older. The study published by the Centre for Women's Research shows many male and female elders who never married tend to seek help in care institutions (De Silva and Kotalawela, 1997:87). It also confirmed the fact that traditional ways of taking care of older people i.e. living under the care of children is the most sought after and preferred way of living when getting old.

In western societies older women have more freedom to make choices because many of them have their own income and property when they retire. They have more time and money at their disposal for leisure or they may go into higher studies. The accounts of older Sinhala women show that many of them still have to earn a living. Since the majority of the present generation of older women did not have a proper education their chance of pursuing a higher education is very small.

Hence, compared to the situation in developed countries the majority of older people in Sri Lanka depend on their children's economic and moral support. The women especially face this situation because the majority of them do not have economic resources and they have to rely on family support when widowed. The situation for women is not going to change quickly though many women of the present generation are engaged in paid work. As discussed in the fourth chapter, even when women earn money, they choose to spend it on their children and the family because they believe they should earn money to support the family. Hence when they get older the majority of them may not have sufficient funds to

take care of their own needs. Therefore, older women lose the independence and ability to control their own lives. This was implicitly presented in their accounts and as shown earlier women do feel burdened by living with and being dependent on their children. Yet they do contribute to families as providers and carers. According to the findings of the report of Centre for Women Studies (De Silva and Kotalawela, 1997) the main activities of elderly females who live with families are household work and looking after grandchildren. However, the report also reveals that elderly people are irritated with, boredom, inactivity, and dependence on others and being ruled by others has a major impact on their lives apart from sickness. This indicates that living with children limit the space of older people and it constrains them.

Though State and nongovernmental organisations provide residential care for the elderly, it is mainly limited to providing lodging and food. Moreover it seems the conditions of many of these homes are not very satisfactory. The state support the maintenance of the elders in many of these homes by paying a monthly sum of 150 rupees (= £1). There are some homes run by provincial councils too. There are a few institutions that have a section for paying residents or are only for residents who pay a fee. The two institutions which admitted paying residents charge between rupees 2600 to 3600 per month in addition to other payments. The report by the Centre for Women's Research (De Silva and Kotalawela, 1997) shows that buildings in many of these institutions are not in a good condition as many residents requested repairs to the buildings. The most prominent activities for the elders it seems are the routine work provided by many care institutions,

cooking and gardening and religious activities. Needless to say, it is women who do most of the domestic tasks. Other than the routine work, they engage in income generating activities such as making wicks for oil lamps, making brooms and lace work or packing joss sticks. According to the same report elders living with families or care institutions, not having a sufficient income is a problem for the majority of older people in Sri Lanka. It also shows that poverty is a major problem for many families in providing care for older people. According to the report the older people wished to have an allowance of money and some expressed their wish to go back to work

Earlier Western perspectives on ageing painted elderly people as dependent and unproductive members of society. The attitudes and theories of social gerontology have changed because of the changing roles of the welfare state in late modern societies. Instead of looking to the state to provide care for the elderly, positive attitudes have been taken by social research to focus on the abilities and needs of the older generation as individuals and not as a homogenous group. As Gilleard and Higgs point out, 'while the elision of the relationship between physical decline and ageing remains, social gerontologists stress the 'artificial nature' of modern society's treatment of older people as one that can be overcome' (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000:14). Though the conditions are different in Sri Lanka, this chapter clearly points out that the older generation is certainly not a homogeneous group. Class, gender and urban/rural differences determine their position within the community. Older women are in a more vulnerable position because their contribution to the family and economy has not

been acknowledged by the community. Therefore there is a need in Sri Lanka for a more cultural understanding of ageing, which it seems has not yet happened.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

Patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformation that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between women and men (Deniz Kandiyoti, 1991:104)

My attempt to historicise gender and culture strongly indicate that in keeping with Kandiyoti's statement, gendered relations in Sri Lanka were fluid and shifted with changes that happen with overtime. However, within the Sinhala community the ideas that women are sexually vulnerable and born to be wives and mothers are strongly rooted in the 'traditions' which work to maintain women's sexuality and identity. Nevertheless my study indicates that women attempt to find strategies to cope with and resist their subordination and discrimination, which I would like to name as bargaining with patriarchy following Kandiyoti. However, it is an uphill task within a community that believes women have behaved the same way for two thousand five hundred years of history. In my view, if they had a better understanding of the situation they are in, women would find better ways to resist discrimination and subordination and to express their desires, hopes and needs as individuals. Bearing this in mind I will conclude what my study reveals about Sinhala women's lives today.

The restrictions on Sinhala women imply that the attitude of the community is that women are sexually vulnerable. The data gathered for this study show that this assumption continues through different stages of Sinhala women's lives. For girls and young women virginity must be safeguarded until marriage and thus

they are protected against sexual experience and the risk of rape lest loss of virginity dishonour the family. However, it does not stop there: fear of sexual harassment and rape and the associated shame continue to constrain women's mobility. Along with this, the stereotypical attitude that women's priority should be the taking care of the family dominates the Sinhala community. Therefore women are not seen as individuals who strive for their own achievements but are expected to live for others.

These two ideas are the foundation of the so-called 'correct place' of the Sinhala women. Hence the women who control their sexuality and give priority to nurturing and caring are considered as worthy of the respect of the community. Women are not considered to be equal to men because they are seen as sexually vulnerable, weak and not capable of being leaders. This has led to an emergence of set of informal restrictions, which control and constrain Sinhala women in order to maintain unequal power relations and to reinforce to gender difference between men and women. These restrictions were legitimised and justified by the community by attesting them as centuries old 'traditions' of Sinhala Buddhist culture.

My findings strongly supports the hypothesis that the 'traditions' that constrain Sinhala women today are not centuries old as imagined by the community, but the product of late nineteenth and early twentieth century of colonial domination and emergent of nationalism. The view of the male nationalist leaders regarding women's sexuality and identity did not differ from the view of male colonial rulers

in Sri Lanka at the same time period. Yuval-Davis points out people's 'culture and tradition' is an essential dimension, which in different national projects acquires a significance because it helps to identify people as members or non-members of a specific collectivity. Gender symbols play a particularly significant role in this, because the gender symbols generate gendered relations of power and construct manhood and womanhood as well as sexuality (Yuval-Davis, 1998:23). The articles in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) show that inventing 'traditions' occurs as a response to novel situations and when old ways are no longer viable or available because they are deliberately not used or adapted. Both these arguments can be applied to the Sri Lankan situation at the time of the emergence of nationalism. The nationalist leaders rejected European symbols to distinguish Sri Lankans as members of a Sinhala Buddhist nation. The structural changes brought by the colonial domination rejected the old ways and imposed new ways. However, the nationalist leaders did not reject European values and ethics regarding women's sexuality and identity because they were compatible with their own ideology of the role of women in the post independence period. Hence the idea that 'correct place' of women was actually produced by fusing European values and Hindu Brahmin ideologies. The evidence of the pre-colonial period clearly indicates that fear and shame were not part and parcel of the culture. Showing body parts of women would not have been regarded as sexually provocative when women did not cover their breasts but adorned them with jewellery. Socialising with men was not regarded as a danger.



The idea that women are sexually vulnerable may also have been absent<sup>48</sup> because virginity was not tested and sexual relations were more liberal. Menstruation was not regarded as a shame as today and women did not try to conceal it. The evidence also indicates women did not have an equal place against men. However, it is clear that women's sexuality and identity largely differed from that of women in the post independence period.

The Sinhala girl child learns her 'correct' position in the family and community through the observation and interactions with the others in family and society. The two main institutions that have a huge influence on the girl child, family and school, prepare her for future life by introducing disciplines and restrictions, which are exclusively constructed to control and constrain Sinhala women's sexuality and identity. Attaining puberty is a turning point in a Sinhala girl's life because this gives a meaning to the restrictions she has already learned. The girl who has attained puberty is considered as potentially sexually active and therefore ready to begin an adult life. Hence girls police themselves by following cultural restrictions and the family and the community police the girls by naming and shaming them as women without 'shame and fear' if they are not behaving 'correctly'. On the other hand, girls are oriented towards marriage and domestication by insisting domestic work should be their priority. This process varies according to class and urban/rural differences but the aim is universal.

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<sup>48</sup> I do not imply here that women in ancient Sri Lanka were not subjected to harassment. However, I argue virginity per se was not a reason for harassment or women's self-surveillance of behaviour as in contemporary Sri Lanka.

In an article entitled 'Alternate space – war against lovers; Sasanka Perera discusses the harassment and hostility young lovers face by officials and the community for showing affection and intimacy in public. Security officers in public parks chase away young couples; in some holy places notices are put to prohibit 'unmarried couples' entering. He says:

Often when you ask some of the others, fathers and teachers as well as police officers why are they taking a moral high ground with regard to the youthful activities of love and intimacy of their children, one tends to get a series of common predictable answers. One of the most common of these answers is that public expression of intimacy as well as the very notion of love is not one of our traditions (Perera, 2002).

Furthermore, he points out that such ideas were introduced to the society during the British colonial period and in pre-colonial *Sandesa* poetry and folk verses notions of sensuousness were freely and creatively expressed, as were ideas and expectations of love and intimacy. Most importantly, he points out another reason for preventing love and intimacy among youth: to 'properly protect them to avoid them getting into trouble'. As he says this is mostly articulated with reference to young women. The themes of love and intimacy, sex and reproduction are considered as cultural taboos. The findings of this study support his view.

Hence it is clear that the ideas, norms and values that emerged during the colonial period as 'tradition' constructed the gender relations of today and reinforce and strengthen the unequal power relations between men and women. This study shows that women are far behind men in participating in economic, political and other social activities though there are no formal barriers. Even though women of all ethnic groups comprise 51% of the population in Sri Lanka,

underemployment and unemployment of women is higher than that of men. Research on employment shows that women still tend to seek jobs in service oriented sectors and leave their career to look after family needs. Women have internalised the idea of male superiority.

The life stories have shown that women themselves believe that they have to follow the ways the community expects them to follow. As I have already mentioned my interviewees assert that they were not 'bad' women to be controlled by restriction. Although my interviewees, especially young girls, expressed the desire to be smart and outgoing they felt they should not be because of the familial and societal views do not approve of such women. Women have to 'live up to the myth' of being a 'Sinhala woman' and according to what the Sinhala community believes as their 'correct place'. The fear of social and familial rejection prevents them breaking barriers. This generates ambivalence in women because in the post independence period the political, economic and social changes that took place paved the way for women's access to modernity. In response to the question how do they feel being a woman all the young women said they are happy to be a woman but feel constrained by not having the freedom to move, to do things like men do and fear of sexual harassment.

Because the role which the Sinhala community approves for women is that of nurturer and carer, women have not understood the full meaning of the idea of individuality which is associated with modernity nor that they are individuals who

have the right to full fill their own desires. Even though women do want to have equal access to spaces other than home, they give priority to home and this limit their freedom of choice. This has a detrimental impact on women when they are ageing. My study indicates that older women have to earn to support themselves and very often the money they earn was spent on the family of the children they are staying with. Though they prefer staying with children being dependants is a burden for them and it also limits their choices.

Nevertheless, my research also indicates that women were not totally ignorant of the situations they were or are in, and in some cases women reject and resist their secondary status. The interviewees accounts point out that resistance is covertly expressed in their daily lives by having 'love affairs' or premarital sex, flouting the dress code, refusing sexual pleasure to husbands etc. However, the rejection and resistance seems not to be widespread. The main reason for this, it seems, is that women's internalisation of the existing ideas of 'culture and tradition' make them believe that they have to behave according to the 'correct place', because this 'correct place' has neither been questioned nor has been subjected to critical examination.

The study also showed that the voices that questioned women's subjugation and discrimination against them during the early half of the twentieth century had not been powerful enough to convey their ideas to the community. This seems to be due to two reasons. First, the ideas and norms that took root in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were well established within the

community. Secondly, the media including women's newspapers, constantly reintroduce and promote the stereotyped images of women.

However, after 1975 two main institutions took the initiative to eradicate gender imbalance in Sri Lanka, namely the state and the non-governmental organisations, including women's organisations, which are funded by international aid. The state, as mentioned in Chapter One, made constitutional amendments and subsequently established women's bureau and women's affairs ministry. The various non-governmental organisations provide the economic and social development of women. Raising awareness among women is an agenda on the programmes of both the state and the non-governmental organisations. However, it seems still these programmes have not achieved their aims.

A newspaper article entitled 'Women's affairs and bi-partnership' points out that the newly elected government in year 2001 has a very little reference to women in its manifesto and on International Women's Day it has been said women should be accorded their '*nisithena*' – appropriate ('correct place') place. Under the title basic rights, the government has only said that it shares a 'national plan of action with all ministries for the purpose of gender mainstreaming' and about drafting legislation for a national commission for women. It also pointed out that none of the Women's Affairs Ministers ask questions in parliament regarding women's issues and women are not included in the Constitutional Council or in the Peace Process which works to end the ongoing war in Sri Lanka despite the appeal of women's organisations (Cat's Eye, 2002).

Another state intervention is the introduction of Sex Education to schools, already launched in several areas as pilot projects. However, it is regarded sceptically by parents and also by teachers. The principal of one of the schools I visited said the sex education provokes student to 'experiment' what they learn so she opposes it. One of the teachers in the same school who was involved in the project in the Badulla area said once some of the officers from the education department visited the area and asked the secondary school students to write down the questions they would like to ask and most of the questions were sex related. The officers said this was the highest number of sex related questions they have received in a school.

Gender and reproduction was also introduced to students from year eight onwards under 'health and physical education'. Though the aim is to increase awareness among students about the adulthood and myths and truths of it and to help them to understand and make choices from the information that pump through media and available cultural concepts, it seems these curricula are also designed according to the ideas and beliefs of the society. For example in the teacher's handbook for year nine homosexuality and having multiple sexual partners are identified as 'improper sex habits' (National Education Institute 1999:12). The curriculum for year eight shows that children are taught not to have a sexual relationship until they get married. In the year ten curriculum, 'imitating improper fashions' has identified as one bad consequence of close friendships with selected friends at school and in neighbourhood. Hence I argue that the policy makers at national level instead of eradicating inequality reinforce

the ideas, norms and values that prevail in society and therefore gender mainstreaming at state level become meaningless.

It also seems that the women's organisations, which tend to address issues of women in Sri Lanka also, not have been able to get rid of such ideas. A study done by Peiris on women in local groups show that there is an 'inability' or reluctance of people in general to break away from the accepted traditional norms of a 'women's place is in the home'. Most importantly, she points out that the aims and attitude of the state and non-governmental agencies also do not differ from the general attitude of the community. For example, one of the objectives listed by a Women's non-governmental organisation was 'improving standards of women in the traditional framework of good mothers and well behaved disciplined young women' (Peiris, 1993: 13). She also pointed out that often men were invited as 'knowledgeable' persons to 'lecture' the grass root level women's groups. Her findings show the difficulty of getting rid of what women internalised as being a woman. I would like to argue that 'silence' on 'tradition and culture', which generates such stereotypes, prevent many women at grass root level activities from understanding how and why they are being oppressed. Hence I reiterate that today it is more important to understand the major reasons for inequality rather than pointing out gender differences in various areas.

The feminists and their organisations are also accused of being dominated by westernised upper middle class women who aim to profit from foreign funds and

do not give priority to Sri Lankan women's issues. The general belief is that they try to impose a western ideology, which has no relevance to Sri Lanka.

Some argue that women's issues struggles should be within the context of broader political action that seeks to change the social and political system. This is also argued as a necessary pre-condition to eliminate sexism. Those who advocate this view often interpret women's issues, movements outside such broader struggles as fissiparous of the social bases that can and should be organized in such struggles. In Sri Lanka, and other South Asian countries, the character of the women's issues movement is sometimes supportive of such interpretation. The movement is dominated, if not wholly confined to, by bourgeois and petty bourgeois women who were attracted by women's issues because it gives them a break through in their professions; it is often an "in thing" in the "developing strategy game". It also confers a kind of radical chic status on these women with social identities not perhaps entirely uncomparable with learning to play the piano in colonial times. The performance continues to be in the main, in the drawing rooms, and the allegros are in the sparkling conversations. To some the perks of travel, participation in international seminars, research grants, career advancement, etc. remain additional rewards (Casinder et al, 1982:90-91).

It is true that women's organisations that were established during the late seventies reawakened the interest in gender inequality that prevails in Sri Lanka and have worked to develop an equal and just society. However, accusations such as noted above seem not without foundation. Swarna Jayaweera, one of the prominent women activists and researchers in Sri Lanka notes that: 'Women's groups have not been able to transcend class and other socio-economic, socio-cultural, and political divisions in macro society and the value systems entrenched interests of these groups, in order to support overriding national concerns and issues' (Jayaweera, cited in Keating, 1994:6).



I would like to argue that it is largely for this reason is that the work of women's organisations is directed at a level that has little relevance to ordinary women of Sri Lanka. Many of the research publications are published in English and aimed at international and academic attention. Most of the research is limited to areas such as development, education, health, law, house maids in the west Asia, female workers in the Free Trade Zone, women affected by the civil war, areas that generate more interest at international and state level. While conducting my research I have not found any consciousness-raising programme on how and why gender inequality prevails in Sri Lanka. It seems to me that feminist organisations are paying less attention to grassroots activities. For example, one prominent women's organisation which has a grassroots women's society in the Colombo area near to its own location has confined its work with the society to occasional training and guidance sessions. Ama (age 29, Colombo) said she interacted with women activists but they did not add anything to her knowledge. She joined with some number of prominent feminists to start a movement to raise consciousness among women in rural villages. According to her she was sent to such areas but they avoided participation. She did not know what she should discuss with those women in villages at that time. Later she got to know that the feminists started the project just to get funding.

Kumari Jayawardena states that: 'the most notable thing being public and official acceptance of "women's rights" and "women's Public role" and the decline (but not disappearance) of obscurantist ideologies which relegate women to the private sphere. Along with this, there have been many positive developments for women who have achieved distinction in many fields" due to the activities of women's groups around 1985-95' (Jayawardena, 1995a:396).

However, this study shows such 'achievements' are still limited to a small number of women in Sri Lanka and ideas, norms and values that have a negative impact on women strongly prevail in contemporary Sri Lankan society. Two articles published in the *Sunday Times*, an English broadsheet in Sri Lanka discussed the views of men and women in upper class circle on women having equal status with men and about feminism. The views of the interviewers and the many interviewees show their negative attitudes towards feminism and women having equal status. One article starts with 'So what is the image that comes to mind when you think of feminists – angry protests crying out against the injustice toward their sex? In the West, the early feminist movements and even the on – going gender wars have been aggressive and often irrational, sending out to the forefront the bra-burning, man-hating women and political protesters' (Perera, R. and Williams, 2002). The other article shows that men believe women use the idea equality selectively for their advantage. It also shows that men believe women are biologically inferior to men and their notions that men are the 'superiors' and 'rulers' (Nasry and Perera, 1999). Out of sixty-six interviewees for this study only a few women acknowledged that they know women's organisations are operating in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, when they did refer to organisations the names they mentioned are of the organisations which provide counselling or work for children, which are not feminist organisations.

Hence the agencies that work to eradicate gender differences in Sri Lanka have to consider the progress of their work in consciousness raising among women and find new strategies and procedures which are effective. Because as long as

negative ideas of women prevail, they will be detrimental for women and impede their progress towards economic, political and social rights and winning respectability as equal citizens/human beings. This especially is a necessity in the situation where 48,000 women in the North and 25,000 women in the South are widows due to ongoing war and the insurrection in the South during 1980s.

As the opening quotation from Kandiyoti (1991) claims, the unequal power relations and secondary status of women are open to change and resistance. Despite the beliefs of the community in the continuity of 'traditions' this study strongly indicates that traditions have changed, have been modified as a concomitant of economic, political and social changes. The older women compared their lives to women of younger generations and their reflexivity clearly points out that the changes do occur. Though the younger interviewees tended to narrate their lives the way it is they also have been reflexive when responded to the question 'what do you think of being a woman? Many of them thought that their lives were better than those of their grandmothers or mothers because they were not being confined to home as the women in older generations had been.

All my interviewees, including older women, desire to be identified with modern ways and would like to benefit from modernity and equal social, political and economic participation. As Teruni (age 32, Hambantota) stated '*A girl should be allowed to mix with others from her childhood and should be allowed to mix with everybody. She should be allowed to do any task, what ever she likes to do and participate in any organisation. No matter what ways she uses if she can do it. It*

*is not good blocking her way to stop her'* (translated). There is a need to grasp the reality of women's position: that women perform roles other than being mothers and wives and that they are engaged in activities other than domestic work, which require them to be outgoing, smart and energetic. My study strongly indicates that the Sinhala community needs to understand that it is inappropriate to evaluate women within the norms associated with their 'correct place' and they entitled to be respected as equally as men.

The accounts of both young and older women's strongly brought out the tensions arising from living in modernity and believing in 'tradition'. As the historical part of this study indicates inventing tradition constructed the identity of the 'Sinhala woman' today. The influence of invented 'tradition' on deciding contemporary women's place in the home and spheres outside the home transcend social economic and geographical boundaries. However, as my study shows women's experience of unequal power relations and subjugation varies, primarily in relation to class and urban/rural differences. Hence in such a situation, as is already debated by feminists, attempts to form universal movements to solve women's issues will not be fruitful. Earlier studies on Sri Lanka mainly focused on gender disparities and in recent years focus has become more wider as women began to research on historical developments in constructing gendered identities in Sri Lanka. My study has taken a step forward for an understanding of the lives of contemporary Sinhala women by both investigating the nexus between history and gender and examining the impact of cultural construction of the 'Sinhala woman' on Sinhala women's lives in the post independence period.

In my contention open discussions on factors which constrain women and how and why such constraints prevail will be more effective in raising women's consciousness of their subordination and of discrimination against them. Having a better understanding that these constraints are culturally constructed will enhance Sri Lankan women's agency and their opportunities for resistance.

### Appendix I: Interviewees from Colombo

|    | <b>Name</b> | <b>Year of birth</b> | <b>Marital Status</b> | <b>Occupation</b>      |
|----|-------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1  | Meenu       | 1976                 | Single                | Undergraduate          |
| 2  | Priya       | 1975                 | Married               | Undergraduate/teacher  |
| 3  | Kaushi      | 1961                 | Married               | Retired                |
| 4  | Neetha      | 1943                 | Married               | Retired                |
| 5  | Karuna      | 1947                 | Widow                 | Cleaner                |
| 6  | Saman       | 1961                 | Married               | Business               |
| 7  | Gaya        | 1927                 | Widow                 | Retired                |
| 8  | Nelum       | 1976                 | Single                | Undergraduate          |
| 9  | Disni       | 1982                 | Single                | Student                |
| 10 | Upuli       | 1977                 | Single                | Undergraduate          |
| 11 | Upsara      | 1982                 | Single                | Student                |
| 12 | Dilu        | 1983                 | Single                | Student                |
| 13 | Jeeva       | 1977                 | Single                | Undergraduate          |
| 14 | Anu         | 1963                 | Divorcee              | Garment factory worker |
| 15 | Seena       | 1964                 | Married               | Lecturer               |
| 16 | Netra       | 1961                 | Single                | Officer in an embassy  |
| 17 | Ama         | 1971                 | Married               | Editor                 |
| 18 | Nelka       | 1977                 | Single                | Medical student        |
| 19 | Deesha      | 1984                 | Single                | Student                |
| 20 | Amara       | 1963                 | Married               | Retired                |
| 21 | Shoba       | 1977                 | Married               | Undergraduate          |
| 22 | Amali       | 1975                 | Single                | Undergraduate          |

### Appendix II: Interviewees from Badulla

|    | Name   | Year of birth   | Marital status | Occupation            |
|----|--------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| 1  | kalu   | Not known       | Married        | Farmer                |
| 2  | Podi   | 1946            | Widow          | Was a farmer          |
| 3  | Ransi  | Not known       | Widow          | Was a farmer          |
| 4  | Chitra | 1984            | Single         | Student               |
| 5  | Namali | 1967            | Married        | Farmer                |
| 6  | Punchi | Not known       | Married        | Farmer                |
| 7  | Tamara | 1961            | Widow          | house maid/<br>farmer |
| 8  | Bimal  | Not known       | Married        | Was a farmer          |
| 9  | Seetha | 1951            | Widow          | Farmer                |
| 10 | Ramani | 1961            | Married        | Teacher               |
| 11 | Taru   | 1958            | Married        | Farmer                |
| 12 | Sumi   | 1959            | Married        | Housewife             |
| 13 | Nimmi  | 1981            | Single         | Unemployed            |
| 14 | Daya   | 1959            | Married        | Housewife             |
| 15 | Rosha  | 1984            | Single         | Student               |
| 16 | Rasi   | 1985            | Single         | Student               |
| 17 | Deepa  | 1962            | Married        | Teacher               |
| 18 | Krisha | 1953            | Widow          | Farmer                |
| 19 | Seela  | 1959            | Married        | Housewife             |
| 20 | Badra  | 1962            | Married        | Unemployed            |
| 21 | Niru   | 1975            | Married        | Housewife             |
| 22 | Sudu   | Not known (50s) | Widow          | Selling firewood      |

### Appendix III: Interviewees from Hambantota

|    | Name     | Year of birth | Marital status | Occupation           |
|----|----------|---------------|----------------|----------------------|
| 1  | Anupama  | 1973          | Single         | Unemployed           |
| 2  | Maduri   | 1983          | Single         | Vocational trainee   |
| 3  | Hansi    | 1959          | Single         | Self employed        |
| 4  | Sriya    | 1961          | Married        | Housewife            |
| 5  | Sandun.  | 1957          | Married        | Was a house maid     |
| 6  | Jaya     | 1973          | Single         | Secretary            |
| 7  | Amila    | 1972          | Married        | Was a housemaid      |
| 8  | Kiran    | 1978          | Single         | Vocational trainee   |
| 9  | Dilini   | 1982          | Single         | Vocational trainee   |
| 10 | Bindu    | Not known     | Widow          | Labourer             |
| 11 | Chatu    | 1978          | Married        | Housewife            |
| 12 | Rani     | 1966          | Married        | Teacher              |
| 13 | Teruni   | 1968          | Married        | Unemployed           |
| 14 | Sera     | 1961          | Married        | Officer in a bank    |
| 15 | Geetha   | 1985          | Single         | Student              |
| 16 | Neluka   | 1980          | Single         | Vocational trainee   |
| 17 | Ruwini   | 1974          | Single         | Unemployed           |
| 18 | Asha     | 1981          | Single         | Student              |
| 19 | Loku     | 1930          | Widow          | Labourer/ Shaman     |
| 20 | Rosi     | 1961          | Single         | Technical Instructor |
| 21 | Suneetha | 1977          | Single         | Vocational trainee   |
| 22 | Samanthi | 1984          | Single         | Vocational trainee   |



## Appendix IV: Chronology of key events in Sri Lankan history.

- 1993 Women's Charter (commitment of state of Sri Lanka to eliminate gender inequality)
- 1982 Ministry of Women's Affairs was established.
- 1978 New Constitution guarantees right of gender equality.
- 1975 The United Nations declared the Year of Women.
- 1959 Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected as the world's first woman Prime Minister.
- 1948 The Independence.
- 1944 Free Education Act.
- 1942 The University of Ceylon was established and opened for women.
- 1931 Universal franchise was granted.
- 1927 Women's Franchise Union was formed.
- 1880 Religious revivalism.
- 1892 First female medical student entered the Ceylon Medical College.
- 1870 The Ceylon Medical College was established.
- 1840 Five Girls' Schools started.
- 1833 Colebrook-Cameron Reforms.
- 1815 Whole Island comes under the British colonial rule.
- 1796 Arrival of the British (1796 –1948).
- 1638 Arrival of the Dutch (1638 –1796).
- 1505 Arrival of the Portuguese (1517 –1638).
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka.

## Glossary

|                     |                                       |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Aiyya</i>        | Elder brother                         |
| <i>Akka</i>         | Elder sister                          |
| <i>Amma</i>         | Mother                                |
| <i>Anda</i>         | Dressed                               |
| <i>Apala</i>        | Bad fortune                           |
| <i>Ape</i>          | Our                                   |
| <i>Apita</i>        | Us                                    |
| <i>Badu</i>         | Goods                                 |
| <i>Baya</i>         | Fear                                  |
| <i>Bolata</i>       | Ankle                                 |
| <i>Chena</i>        | Slash and burn field.                 |
| <i>Dakwa</i>        | show                                  |
| <i>Dasan</i>        | Teeth                                 |
| <i>Duwa</i>         | Daughter                              |
| <i>Epa</i>          | Don't                                 |
| <i>Gabada</i>       | Store                                 |
| <i>Gaha</i>         | Tree                                  |
| <i>Gei (Gedara)</i> | House                                 |
| <i>Genu</i>         | Women                                 |
| <i>Gindara</i>      | Fire                                  |
| <i>Hadanawa</i>     | Try                                   |
| <i>Hata</i>         | Sixty                                 |
| <i>Hatte</i>        | Blouse                                |
| <i>Hāmine</i>       | Respectful term of address for women. |
| <i>Honda</i>        | Good                                  |
| <i>Iscole</i>       | School                                |
| <i>Jatiya</i>       | Nation/specie/line                    |
| <i>Jara</i>         | Unclean                               |
| <i>Karanna</i>      | Do                                    |
| <i>Katandara</i>    | Stories                               |

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <i>Kiri</i>      | Milk  |
| <i>Kramaya</i>   | System  |
| <i>Lajja</i>     | Shame   |
| <i>Lamai</i>     | Children  |
| <i>Mahila</i>    | Women   |
| <i>Mudal</i>     | Money   |
| <i>Nabiya</i>    | Navel   |
| <i>Nilame</i>    | Respectful term of address for upper caste upcountry men. |
| <i>Pirimi</i>    | Men   |
| <i>Pitata</i>    | Outside   |
| <i>Putra</i>     | Son   |
| <i>Redda</i>     | Cloth wears by women.                                     |
| <i>Salu</i>      | An old Sinhala word for cloth                             |
| <i>Sina</i>      | Smile/laugh   |
| <i>Samajaya</i>  | Society   |
| <i>Samiti</i>    | Organisations   |
| <i>Tana</i>      | Breasts   |
| <i>Wadura</i>    | Monkey  |
| <i>Wikunanna</i> | To be sold  |

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