Meaning and Critique in Women's Narratives of Care and Work

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Arguments about the economic benefits of women's labour participation go hand in hand with assumptions about the personal value of women's work, often framed in terms of empowerment and choice. Yet this notion of choice and empowerment elides not only the deeply unequal and often exploitative circumstances of women's waged labour (Jegathesan 2022; Kodikara 2022), but also the webs of relations and values within which women's actual choices are caught. At this moment, when policymakers unproblematically frame women's labour force participation as part of the solution to Sri Lanka's economic crisis, it is important to consider what waged work and unwaged care work mean for women at the intersections of class, ethnic, and other salient social differences, as well as how these diverse meanings shape women's labour choices.

As feminist anthropologists have vividly shown, this means attending closely to the economic *and* affective relations in which women are embedded; to women's desires and moral sensibilities; and to the economic, ideological, and familial pressures that structure choice (e.g. Abeyasekera 2021; Hewamanne 2020; Jegathesan 2018; Udalagama 2018). This also includes thinking about the magnitude of and the values that shape care work —what does it take to meaningfully care for a child or an elderly parent? What moral and social value is assigned to fulfilling one's obligations of care? How does care work spill beyond the home into the extended family, the neighbourhood, or the community, creating other kinds of value beyond the economic?

Drawn from a larger project about the social impacts of government counselling services in Sri Lanka, the brief ethnographic sketch below shows how such questions resonate in the narratives of one group of women, as they negotiate the competing pressures (and desires) to engage in waged work *and* unpaid care work in a context where historically there has been little systemic support to do both. The current crisis has further entrenched economic vulnerability and placed even greater demands on these women's capacities to support and care for others. Their narratives articulate the threads of critique that are woven into women's enactments of care work. They also invite reflection on the tension between recognising women's complex subjectivities and commitments—including to gendered roles and values centred on family and domestic life—and the risk of reproducing the ideological link between women and care work.

The women who shared with me their reflections had come into the orbit of government counselling services through mental health awareness programmes as well as the village-level *Samurdhi* and women's societies in which many of them were involved. At the time of our conversations, between 2018 and 2019, all were in their thirties or older and lived in villages on the outskirts of Kandy. All had been married and most had children. Except for one grandmother, none was employed outside the home when we met, though some had rich work histories and many were presently engaged in self-employment, including running small shops or sewing businesses. Even before the current crisis, their ingenuity and hard work could not always resolve their financial difficulties. Most of the women relied on the support of relatives as well as loans in order to move toward cherished life goals—especially building a house and educating their children (Udalagama 2018). Below I introduce one of their stories, which reflects the significance but also ambivalence attached to care work in many women's lives.[i]

"I say that to create a family, the most, 90% of that is the woman's responsibility," Shiromi[ii] said, concluding a brief example about avoiding marital conflicts that she had just shared with me and Rebecca, my friend and research assistant. I asked whether she feels this is just how it is or whether she thinks it should be this way. Shiromi replied, "I'm saying that's how it should be," and then qualified, "speaking from *my* experience, it should be like this." As we sat in Shiromi's front room, which was still under construction with exposed cinder blocks and windows waiting to be framed, our conversation meandered from Shiromi's colourful and independent past to her present life centred on her husband and the quiet, slowly growing intimacy of their shared home. Shiromi had worked for nearly 15 years before marrying in her late 30s. After finishing her Advanced Level course, she moved to Colombo where she worked various sales jobs before leaving to work in the garment industry in the Middle East.

Eventually, Shiromi returned to Sri Lanka and found a job at a local grocery store. It is there that she was introduced to her now husband. They moved to his natal village where, with the help of Shiromi's savings, they managed to buy land and start building. Now, Shiromi was at home. In her spare time, she did small side jobs and engaged in community service through the local women's society. In the course of our conversation, she shared many stories about what seemed like a new kind of work filling her days—adjusting to married life and building a family. This process was not a given but a deliberate effort to cultivate a shared life together. Waking before sunrise to cook breakfast and lunch; handwashing clothes; sweeping; tending to the vegetable garden; arranging *Awurudu* celebrations; cooking and physically caring for a relation who fell ill; keeping track of family occasions such as her mother-in-law's birthday and ensuring a proper gift is offered. In Shiromi's daily care work, emotional and physical labour were folded into one another.

Sharing another anecdote, Shiromi recounted how at one point she deliberately arranged the sitting room in such a way that, in the evenings, she and her husband could see each other and talk *while* she cooked in the adjacent kitchen rather than his sitting at a distance and watching television (TV). With a hint of satisfaction, Shiromi remarked that she herself does not watch much TV, only the news. She keeps busy with her work, and when her husband is home, she would rather give her attention to him.

In Shiromi's reflections, care work—including efforts to nurture the bond with her husband—appears as more than tasks and chores she is expected to perform; it is an effort connected to a sense of personal transformation and the ethical choices this entails. At the same time, her narrative hints at the extent and normalisation of women's labour at home. Shiromi rearranges the furniture so she and her husband can talk while she is cooking the evening meal. As she points out later on in the conversation, after coming home men can just rest, but for women, "even when you're going to sleep, sometimes you have to be thinking about what you're going to cook the next morning." The trope of the housewife indulging in teledramas reflects the expectation that a woman keeps busy. When Shiromi says that she does not watch TV except for the news, she is highlighting not only her industriousness but also the moral stakes of her work.

At the very end of this first meeting, we asked Shiromi whether there was anything else she would like to share that perhaps had not come up in the conversation. Smiling as if she were about to tell us something that might surprise us, Shiromi said that with her education and experience she *could* get a job, and then she and her husband wouldn't have to worry about money. As she explained:

> I could work now, but I don't because if I went to work, it would mean waking up early, cooking, getting the house in order, doing all of that, then going to work and then, after work, coming home in the evening and again having to do house work—that would be exhausting. From the beginning I said, if you [the husband] are helping me with housework, then I will go to work. Otherwise, I'm not doing it.

Recounting a moment when she had been offered an administrative position in a nearby town, she recalled telling the manager, an acquaintance of her husband: "*Malli,* I can do a job but then I have to do both, the job and housework. First, if I earn, my husband's spending might increase. Second, I will be too tired."

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Image Source: *Photograph taken by author of a home in one of the communities where the research took place.*

Notes

[i] Thank you to Rebecca Ann Roche for assistance during all of these conversations and subsequently, with transcribing and translating them from Sinhala to English.

[ii] Names are pseudonyms.

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