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Mapping the Carceral Geographies of Working-Class Communities in Colombo, Sri Lanka

Urban Planning, Marriage, and Domestic Violence

Asha L. Abeyasekera

I am grateful to Vraie Cally Balthazaar for assisting me in my research, and I am indebted to my interlocutors' generosity without which ethnographic research would not have been possible.

VISITING KOMPANNA VEEDIYA

1 To visit Heshani, we drive along Vauxhall Street (major road), turning at Kew Road (minor road), and then again at Police Lane—a narrow "jeep-track" that can only accommodate three-wheelers (tuk-tuks). Heshani's house is down one of several footpaths that branch off from Police Lane located in the heart of Colombo's commercial district of Kompanna Veediya—home to the city's oldest working-class community. Narrow two- to three-storey houses jostle each other on either side of every footpath. Most houses are built on one perch or less (one perch = 25.29 square meters = 272.21 square feet). The few who have two perches (rarely three) have multiple households or rent out rooms. There are no backyards or front gardens; the only greenery is to be found in potted plants on doorsteps and balconies. If we look past the crisscrossing clotheslines and electricity and telephone wires, we see Colombo's skyscrapers looming over the neighborhood: the Lotus Tower, Sri Lanka Insurance, Dialog Axiata, Hyde-Park luxury residencies, and the City of Dreams integrated resorts —their office cubicles and bathrooms bigger than the houses on Police Lane.

2 Heshani is visiting her maternal uncle, who lives a few doors down, when Vraie Cally Balthazaar (my research assistant) and I arrive around 9:30 am one day in November 2021. We chitchat with Heshani's neighbors while we wait—we know each other from our numerous visits over the past year. It is quiet. Most residents are at work, their children at school. But the signs of everyday life are everywhere: a woman is hanging

her laundry on a wire rack outside her front door; two women sit by their doorsteps—one on a low stool cleaning vegetables on a rush mat balanced on her lap, the other on a plastic chair with her grandchild on her lap; an elderly man and a cat are napping on a *kandiya*—a raised platform built across the front of most houses where women sit to chat in the evening.

3 Heshani has taken the day off so she can speak freely with us while her husband and three sons—aged thirteen, fifteen, and seventeen—are away. Up until today Heshani has presented herself as an even-minded and conscientious woman, well-regarded by her neighbors for the public awareness work she does with local government authorities for improving public amenities in the community. She has previously shared her financial struggles, but always in a matter-of-fact way. As a domestic worker, she works six days a week. But on this occasion, I am taken aback when Heshani starts to cry immediately after my first question— "tell me about your childhood home." Tears turn to sobs as she tells us how her father, though poor, "cherished" her, ensuring that she was educated up until the high school diploma, enrolling her in the public library so that she could indulge her love of reading, encouraging her to find work as a clerk in a corporate office, and not pressuring her to get married. "This home in which I was cherished," Heshani tells us, "I suffer every day, [but] I can't, I *won't* leave because this is *my* house." Heshani's story of domestic violence at the hands of her husband, and her brother who is laying claim to the house, unfolds in the course of the next few hours.

4 Heshani's house is one of the smallest we visited. Built on just a quarter perch of land, its width exceeded the length of our outstretched legs by barely a foot as we sat on the hallway floor. The hallway opened onto an alcove kitchen and a narrow stairway leading up to a bedroom, a tiny balcony, and a shower-room. While observing the place, I was reminded of Mythri Jegathesan's (2019:100) question about the "line-room" houses of Sri Lanka's Tamil plantation workers: "how was it that life had continued to grow and live in such debilitating spaces?" Like Jegathesan, I see signs of a carefully tended home: photographs of Heshani's sons receiving medals for rugby and cricket proudly displayed on a floating shelf alongside a statue of Buddha and joss sticks; ironed school uniforms draped over a dresser; schoolbooks neatly stacked on a plastic shelf; a kitchen full of various utensils; the freshly swept tiled floor; a low cabinet displaying crockery. This was Heshani's home, but it was also her hell. As I will illustrate in this paper, marriage and kinship, poverty and urban planning had entrapped Heshani spatially, socially, and psychologically.

HOME AND HOMEMAKING

5 The home is the central focus of my ethnographic study of Kompanna Veediya—a poor multi-ethnic, multi-religious working-class community earmarked for eviction under Sri Lanka's Urban Regeneration Programme (URP). My aim was to foreground women's homemaking practices under conditions of precarity as a form of emotional labor that is both generative—sustaining life through family, kinship, and community—and destructive in the way women absorbed the precarity of 'evictability' (Van Baar 2017) and the violence of evictions. During fieldwork I began to see the home as the spatial epicenter "through which multiple forms of violence flow and coalesce" (Brickell 2020:2). At the same time, I was attentive to the way Colombo's poor working-class

communities are represented and perceived as slums and shanties where only "bare life" persists (Agamben 1998). In Sri Lanka, home and personhood are entwined: to refer to the home is to refer to the substance of the person, where the home is a potent emotional force and "an everyday language of love, affection, sentiment, and memory" (Thiranagama 2011:19). Jegathesan (2019:100–101) observes how the dismissal of Tamil plantation workers' "line-room" homes as "not [being] a home" elucidates the "power of dispossession [that] works by rendering certain subjects, communities, or populations unintelligible, by eviscerating for them the conditions of possibility for life and the 'human itself'" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013:20 quoted in Jegathesan). I too found myself "brushing up against a representation of dispossession that did not accommodate the generative signs of life, investment, and desire" I was observing (Jegathesan 2019:101). Having spent most of 2021 in the homes of 12 women—who form the core of my ethnography—enjoying their hospitality and building close relationships through everyday chitchat, political debate, shared intimacy, and light-hearted banter, I became deeply conscious of the multiple ethical demands that the ethnography placed on me: drawing attention to the conditions and consequences of dispossession, *while* advocating for decent social housing as a fundamental citizenship right *without* undermining their sense of self and belonging. These houses were the women's ancestral homes, this community their natal village (Thiranagama 2011). It is to the first of the three ethical demands that this paper draws attention.

6 My investigation into the relationship between marriage and carcerality foregrounds spatiality as a critical condition through which carceral power is realized. I regard the home as the spatial epicenter where state and intimate forms of violence converge, examining how urban planning and social housing policies have historically shaped—and continue to shape—carceral experiences for women within the institution of marriage. More specifically, I focus on how state power, exercised through urban planning, produces the "carceral geographies" of working-class homes and neighborhoods in Sri Lanka's capital city (Shabazz 2015). In this paper I trace the historical continuities between mechanisms of constraint built into the architecture and urban planning of colonial and post-independence Colombo and the forced evictions authorized under the post-war URP since 2010. Urban planning, I argue, not only spatially contains the poorest segment of the city's working-class in the capital city; it also plays a constitutive role in shaping intimate relations. The confined architecture of "shanty" homes—enclosed neighborhoods hemmed in by corporate conglomerates—the denial of legal tenure, prohibitive real-estate prices and the looming threat of displacement can be understood as carceral geographies that have functioned—and continue to function—where working classes reside in Colombo with far-reaching consequences for kinship and marital relations. By drawing attention to geography as a lived experience that plays a critical role in the production of intimate relations (Brickell 2020; Shabazz 2015), my aim in this paper is to explore how geography, urban planning, and kinship converged in women's life histories to produce specific forms of carcerality within marriage.

7 I begin the paper by situating my ethnography of Colombo's working-class homes within the anthropological scholarship about the meaning of houses in Sri Lanka. A discussion on why "carceral geographies" is a critical conceptual framework for analyzing the specific living conditions of Colombo's poor will follow. The section on ethnographic fieldwork describes my methods and my ethical positionality as an

indigenous feminist anthropologist. Using the framework of "carceral geographies," I then provide a spatial history of Colombo's working-class communities. The three life histories that follow make a case for why carcerality is a productive lens of inquiry for examining marriage in South Asia by highlighting how spatiality structures marital life.

HOME AND BELONGING IN SRI LANKA

8 Notions of home, personhood, kinship, and community are intimately entwined in Sri Lanka. The Tamil *ur* evokes a person's being and belonging by simultaneously referring to a person's place of birth, natal village, the material structure of the house, the land, and community (Daniel 1984). *Ur* is an ordinary, everyday colloquial Tamil word used to refer to the home and natal village by Tamils and Muslims from northern and eastern Sri Lanka (Thiranagama 2011), hill-country (*Malaiyaha)* Tamils (Jegathesan 2019), and my Tamil and Muslim interlocutors. *Ur* is the substance of personhood (Daniel 1984) —"because one is a person, one had an *ur*"—"it was a materially emotive way of reckoning belonging" (Thiranagama 2011:151, 152). Thiranagama's (2011:136–37) explanation for why the forced eviction of Muslims from their homes in Jaffna by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is a "profound [...] rupture of a particular kind [...] a ripp[ing] out of the social fabric of the local"—resonates with the sense of loss my interlocutors communicated about imminent evictions. The rupture of kinship and community—of being and becoming—are expressed through questions about personhood because "different homes/*ur* are felt to produce different persons" (148).

9 Jegathesan (2019) illustrates how this attachment to place can supersede sociohistorical experiences and politico-legal realities of dispossession. This is an important framework for Colombo's poor working-class communities whose history is similarly marked by dispossession. Just as Tamil plantation workers had to "create and build their homes out of constructed spaces that were formerly incommensurate with their life's desires [by transforming them into] places that can accommodate their desires" (102), so did the residents of Kompanna Veediya who had been brought in to build the colonial capital of Ceylon. Jegathesan's emotive ethnography elucidates the way dispossession coexists with rootedness, the hostile industrial landscape made hospitable through the affective labor of homemaking.

10 Luke Heslop's (2026) ethnography *In a Merchant's House* uses the home as the primary lens to examine how families reproduce themselves through class, kinship, and care. For Heslop, the home—the Sinhala *gedera*—is at the same time a material structure, a social project, and a moral landscape where kinship, belonging, and citizenship are enacted and their vicissitudes experienced. Fractious kinship relations, Heslop (2022) artfully illustrates, can play out on two registers: disharmony that is felt but rarely confronted between male kin in Heslop's merchant family and through a ghostly haunting of the *mahagedera* (family home). Here the ethereal and the material converge in making the house itself "the site of disorder and vulnerability" (407), illustrating that, in Sinhala families, kinship and houses are mutually constituted. The material condition of the *mahagedera*, Michele Ruth Gamburd (2020) shows for families in southern Sri Lanka, symbolizes the state of kinship relations where a desolate or derelict house can represent families dispersed through migration.

11 Tharindi Udalagama's (2024) ethnography of marriage in a Sinhala village in north-central Sri Lanka describes how women and home are mutually constituted. A "good

woman" keeps a "good home;" a "good house" exemplifies a woman's reputation, status, and capacity for nurture and tolerance. She illustrates why women endure domestic violence in silence because public disclosure provokes public censure: a "problem house" is attributed to a woman's misfortune, while the breakdown of marriage and of kinship ties is a result of her supposed lack of fortitude. As I have discussed elsewhere (Abeyasekera 2023a), the everyday activities and rituals within the home, even amidst domestic violence, are undertaken by women to maintain and restore equilibrium within kinship and the community (Daniel 1984). Gamburd's (2000, 2020) ethnographies of migration also illustrate the gendered obligations of building homes and maintaining kinship. While migration is a means of escape from poverty and domestic violence for women, the scholarship illustrates that this provides a temporary reprieve at best, and women can never fully detach themselves from obligations to kin and home (Kottegoda 2004)—an observation I will return to later in this paper.

THE CARCERAL GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME: URBAN PLANNING, MARRIAGE, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

12 In his historical geography of Chicago's Black Belt, Rashad Shabazz (2015) presents urban planning as a critical mechanism through which the state exercised carceral power to contain Black people, with far-reaching consequences for masculinity and gender relations. Shabazz's description and analysis of Black people's kitchenette homes—their architecture, layout, and location—resonates with the working-class homes I visited in Colombo. Shabazz describes how "kitchenettes"—tiny one-room flats with shared public bathrooms and toilets—located in sprawling housing projects in racially segregated neighborhoods trapped Black people in prison-like conditions, by bringing carceral forms of control into the home. "Their tight and incommodious geography," Shabazz argues, "[was] an assault on Black dignity" (2015:33). In Black men, it gave "rise to anger, resentment, hostility, violence, and a desire to flee their confines" (Shabazz 2015:33). For Black women, the consequences were "domestic violence, sexual assault, and even premature death" (Shabazz 2015:34). His thesis—that the carceral geography of Black Chicago was produced by racist housing policies—offers a productive framework for identifying the mechanisms that produced the cramped working-class communities in Colombo.

13 Dominique Moran, Jennifer Turner, and Anna K Schliehe (2018:677) theorize that the carceral is composed of three conditions "that bear on the nature and quality of carcerality:" detriment, intent, and spatiality. "Detriment" is conceptualized as the "lived experience of harm" that plunders the "various types of opportunity or potentiality that would otherwise have been available" to a person (Moran et al. 2018:677). "Intent" is defined "vis-à-vis detriment, to refer to the agent intending it," such as the state (Moran et al. 2018:678). Finally, they posit that "it is *through* spatiality that the carceral is achieved" (Moran et al. 2018:679 *emphasis in original).* Using this conceptual framework, I argue that urban planning was intentionally used by the Sri Lankan state to spatially confine low-income working-class communities in Colombo with gender- and class-related consequences. The life histories I examine in this paper reveal how women's lives are repeatedly "punctuated" by domestic violence over the course of their lifetimes (Ramamurthy and Gidwani 2021). I show that the cramped conditions of working-class homes, along with their confinement within enclosed

neighborhoods, with no room for an extension, often gave rise to acrimonious inheritance disputes among kin—the violent repercussions of which were frequently inflicted on women's bodies. These restrictive living conditions also severely curtailed women's opportunities to escape both kinship abuse and marital violence.

14 I find Michel Foucault's ([1970] 2001) conceptualization of "conditions of possibility" productive for thinking beyond linear causality. Rather than suggesting that urban planning directly causes domestic violence or acrimonious inheritance disputes, I propose that it functions as a "condition of possibility"—a structuring and spatial arrangement that enables such forms of violence to emerge and to persist among the working-class poor. Foucault defines "conditions of possibility" as the social, cultural, and historical circumstances that make possible certain forms of knowledge, power relations, and social practices (Smyth 2011). Foucault's focus is not on causal determinism but on the "epistemological field"—the underlying conditions that shape how social phenomena and subjectivities emerge and are made intelligible in the modern era (Foucault [1970] 2001:4).

15 The use of a Foucauldian lens to explore the relationship between marriage and forms of carcerality is productive for expanding my previous work on women's homemaking, domestic violence, and urban planning (Abeyasekera 2023a, 2023b). In examining the gendered production of home, I argue that domestic violence should not be read as a disruption of the home as a sanctuary of safety and belonging, but rather as a "condition of possibility" for its very production (Abeyasekera 2023a). Cultural norms that idealize the mother and uphold the triumvirate woman-home-suffering, I asserted, compel women to produce[2] and sustain the home under threat of violence. In exploring the relationship between urban planning and familial violence, I proposed the term "intimate evictability" to illustrate how the state's practices of "evictability"—the governance of unwanted citizens through the perpetual threat of eviction (Van Baar 2017) —interface with the domestic sphere to produce intimate, gendered forms of vulnerability (Abeyasekera 2023b). I demonstrated how hostile state-citizen relations, shaped by the state's post-war URP, permeate the domestic sphere, giving rise to gendered forms of familial violence. This work foregrounded the ways in which the effects of urban planning, forced evictions, and domestic violence—dispersed across multiple spatial and temporal scales – are ultimately borne by women's bodies within the intimate confines of the home. In this paper, I use the conceptual frame of "carceral geographies" to examine the effects of urban planning in shaping intimate relations. Carceral geographies, I show, not only structure urban marginality but also form the conditions of possibility for domestic violence to produce carcerality within marriage.

16 To do this, I describe how successive Sri Lankan governments exercised state power through urban planning to spatially contain the poorest segments of Colombo's working-class. Drawing on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) theorization of carcerality as state-sanctioned production of space that renders certain populations disposable, I show how cramped housing within enclosed neighborhoods, combined with the absence of legal tenure and prohibitively high real-estate prices, restricted residents' ability to improve their living conditions. I argue that this carceral spatiality creates possibilities for carceral conditions to emerge in the domestic sphere, specifically within marriage. Here, the everyday anxiety of making ends meet, combined with the cramped conditions of poor working-class homes that afford little privacy, and densely populated neighborhoods with no dedicated spaces for rest or recreation, can have a

pressure-cooker effect on marital relations. When tensions trigger violence and persist as a daily event, cultural norms combined with the need for a home and the lack of alternatives owing to unaffordable housing make it almost impossible for women to escape.

17 Building on Doreen Massey's (1994:2) insight that "geography matters to the construction of gender," feminist critical geographers have highlighted the influence of geography in the production of gendered subjectivities and gender relations, while also showing how gender plays a constitutive role in the production of space. As Katherine Brickell (2012:227) argues "the home is a vital space for understanding the micro-geographies of social and spatial uncertainty which influence, and are influenced by, wider structural forces." Compiling a critical geography of home cannot only uncover the "multiple and overlapping geographies through which oppression and domination are produced," it can also reveal the role gender plays in shaping the way they are experienced and the capacity to negotiate them (Brickell 2012:227). Brickell's (2020) "dual lens" of domestic violence and forced evictions as forms of spatial exclusion and expulsion in post-conflict Cambodia is vital to my analysis. Domestic violence, notes Brickell (2020:4), is one of the most overlooked forms of displacement and marriage, the "foremost social relationship through which domestic violence and forced eviction are articulated." By examining the way women navigate precarity to ensure family survival through the "adjustive work of homemaking," Brickell (2020:9) further shows how marital violence and eviction emerge as interwoven sources of containment and disciplinary power.

18 Feminist critical geographers have long challenged the "home as a haven" thesis, revealing the domestic sphere as a potential site of danger, entrapment, and enforced confinement (Blunt and Dowling 2007; Brickell 2020; Pain 2014; Warrington 2001). Within this body of scholarship, domestic violence is theorized as being entangled in broader hegemonic structures of violence and militarism. Rachel Pain (2014) argues that domestic violence and global terrorism are interconnected mechanisms of political control exercised through fear. Domestic violence is also understood as a form of "slow violence," whose incremental and accumulative effects unfold every day—embedded in ordinary events dispersed across time and space (Brickell 2020; Nixon 2011). A focus on urban displacement reveals how contemporary placemaking is shaped by precarity, producing multiple vulnerabilities along lines of gender and class (Gardner 2022; Hinkson 2017; Sassen 2000; Brickell, Arrigoitia, and Vasudevan 2017). While the term "carceral" is not always explicitly used, it is implicit in critical geographies of home, which frame the domestic sphere and marriage as sites of carceral confinement in the way domestic violence creates the conditions of carcerality—detriment, intent, and spatiality (Moran et al. 2018). By focusing on the home, my aim is to make explicit how urban planning functions as a technology of carceral containment that shapes working-class life in Colombo to produce carcerality within marriage and kinship.

ETHNOGRAPHY[1] AS METHOD, THEORY, AND ETHICS

19 From November 2020, my research assistant and I followed the lives of 12 women living in Colombo's historical neighborhood known as Slave Island or Kompanna Veediya (Company Street). My interlocutors represented the multiethnic and multireligious demography of this community—Malay and Moor Muslims, Hindu and Christian Tamils,

and Sinhala Buddhists and Christians. Selected with the help of a gatekeeper—the head of a community-based women's collective—the women, aged between early 30s and late 60s, were all employed, married, and had children. Contact was initiated during lockdown via telephone calls, and when lockdown was lifted, we visited the community throughout 2021, regularly spending time in the women's homes. When lockdown was imposed, we kept in touch through WhatsApp chats, telephone interviews, and photo diaries—snapshots of their "lockdown lives" that they shared via WhatsApp.

20 As an indigenous anthropologist researching intimate relations, I had come to realize from my first ethnographic study that I had to privilege my social identity as a Sri Lankan over any "professional" identity in how I formed and maintained relationships (Abeyasekera 2017). During fieldwork I did not downplay who I was—an urban educated middle-class woman with financial stability; I believed that all relationships required that I stay true to the principles and values that informed my way of being in the world —an approach that had fostered meaningful relationships beyond the timeframe of fieldwork. In Kompanna Veediya, many of the women had worked as domestic workers and therefore knew firsthand the socioeconomic disparities that existed between us. We never refused a snack or meal but always took a small bag of groceries when we visited.

21 As a feminist anthropologist working mostly with women, I privilege both the ethic of care and the ethic of vulnerability. In Erinn Gilson's (2013) work, vulnerability is foregrounded as an ethical imperative. Vulnerability, she argues, has been reductively understood as "liability to injury, weakness, dependency, powerlessness, incapacity, deficiency, and passivity [...] deeming it a quality or condition that is bad" (2013:5). This negative charge can precipitate both offensive and defensive violence. It is by being open that we can reclaim vulnerability as our basic human condition. Working in a poor neighborhood during COVID-19 was an experiment in reclaiming vulnerability. Our need as researchers to form social ties after almost a year of social isolation was mirrored by the women's eagerness to share the interminable quality of 2020 marked by the exhaustion of homeschooling and the claustrophobia of family life. Our eagerness to "hang around" without rushing back to our own claustrophobic lives was greeted with warm hospitality. "To be vulnerable", Gilson reflects, "is to be open to being affected and affecting in ways that one cannot control" (2013:2). Even our more formal interviews about children, health, and finances were conversations where we shared anecdotes from our own lives. As fieldwork progressed, the Principal Investigator agreed with us that fieldwork was unethical if we did not respond to the economic hardships caused by the pandemic. Regardless of whether any fieldwork was conducted, vouchers for use at a local supermarket were distributed monthly over an 18-month period. The sustained relationships and the ongoing activism that emerged from this project attest to how being vulnerable "is both extraordinary and mundane, conducive to both empathy and outrage, a product of injustice and a virtue one develops to contest injustice" (Gilson 2013:2).

22 The life-history interviews my paper draws from were conducted between October and December 2021. To trace participants' housing histories, I used a hand-made life-journey map as a visual aid—a long spiral divided into segments representing the decades of their lives, from birth to the present. As participants marked the homes they had lived in during each decade, the mapping exercise elicited richly textured narratives that wove together critical life events, spatial transitions, and significant

relationships. In the preceding months, only one woman had shared the fact that her husband was violent. I had never intended to research domestic violence—none of my questions were designed to elicit narratives about abuse. Reflecting on the home appeared to serve as a catalyst—a natural entry point for talking about kinship violence and marital strife. The life-history discussions typically lasted between two to three hours. Although we had visited these participants' homes many times before, it was during this exercise that we explicitly asked for a tour of their houses. These guided tours revealed how marriage, mothering, and kinship are continually negotiated within the constraints of cramped housing.

23 My commitment to focusing on and retelling life stories resonates with Carole McGranahan's (2022:289) view of ethnography as "not just method; it is also theory. That is, to know something ethnographically is not merely to assemble data but to recognize as theoretical the cultural ways we shape the world and meet each other in it." While specific theoretical frameworks can shed light on important aspects of a person's life, a single framework can never encompass the whole of their life history. The life histories this paper draws upon have been analyzed by me through feminist counter-readings of 'home as haven' (Abeyasekera 2023a), and the percolation of state policies of evictions and "evictability" into the intimate sphere (Abeyasekera 2023b). Here, I use the concept of carceral geographies to explain how urban planning is an enclosure technique that engenders carcerality in marriage. My ethical commitment in retelling these stories in each of these instances is not to privilege only the data that fits in neatly with my analysis, but to capture the complexity of their whole lives. I wish to respect the many hours they committed to telling us their life stories—assembling complex events and intricate experiences for each decade of their life-journey map.[2]

TECHNIQUES OF ENCLOSURE: A SPATIAL HISTORY OF COLOMBO'S WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITIES

24 The origins of Colombo's working-class communities can be traced back to the island's colonial occupation, during which the city emerged as a key port under Portuguese, Dutch, and later British control. From the late seventeenth century, the Dutch United East India Company (VOC) used Ceylon as a site of exile and labor, housing rebels, convicts, slaves, and indigenous soldiers from the Indonesian Archipelago and Malaya. These groups were settled on what came to be known as 'Slave Island' and were put to work in and around the Colombo port (Perera 2016). Under the British, South Indian workers, recruited to work in the docklands, also settled close to the port. Although the British colonial government introduced legislative measures to address sanitation and the city's growing housing crisis, these reforms did little to improve the living conditions of the working class (Perera 2016; Samaratunga and O'Hare 2013). The stark geographic divide between the "white" colonial enclave of Colombo Fort and the surrounding "Black City" exemplifies the exclusionary spatial and carceral logic of colonial rule (Perera 2016).

25 In the decades following Sri Lanka's independence, the state introduced institutional and legal mechanisms to control rents, provide housing loans, and support new building projects in Colombo (Niriella 2010; Gunaratne et al. 1991). However, these measures primarily benefited the urban middle classes, particularly civil servants (Niriella 2010; Gunaratne et al. 1991). The state did little to improve the homes and

neighborhoods of working-class men and women whose labor sustained the city via its ports, railroad workshops, printing presses, factories, warehouses, municipal services, and in the homes of the middle and upper classes (Abeyasekera and Gunasekara 2022), illustrating how carceral logics classify certain populations as disposable (Gilmore 2007).

26 It was only in 1970, with the election of a Left-leaning coalition government, that a social housing policy aimed at benefiting the urban poor was implemented. Pieter Keuneman, a member of the Marxist Communist Party, introduced the "Ceiling on Housing Property Law," which sought to limit the number of houses any individual or family could own and to disrupt exploitative landlord-tenant relations by transferring ownership to tenants (UN-Habitat 2018). Keuneman's vision aimed at radical structural change in the political economy; however, instead of issuing ownership titles through the land registry, the government acquired much of the private land occupied by tenement communities in Colombo, effectively bringing the working-classes under greater state control (UN Habitat 2018; Fernando, Kearney, and Balakrishnan 1979).

27 In 1977, the Urban Development Authority's (UDA) "Slums and Shanty Improvement Programme" introduced a "special projects" provision that allowed low-income households to build homes *in situ* on plots as small as 37.5 square meters, without the provision of additional land (Joshi and Khan 2010). The "Million Houses Programme" sought to legitimize informal low-income settlements in Colombo by improving infrastructures (roads, wells, community centers), expanding essential services (water, electricity, schools, and local governance), and issuing residence permits with postal addresses that formally demarcated individual parcels of land (Abeyasekera and Gunasekara 2022). This duality—recognizing the citizenship rights of the urban working-class poor through tenure security and improved living conditions without allocating additional land or regulating the housing market to provide affordable housing—characterizes the persistence of the state power in spatially containing working-class communities.

28 My ethnographic life histories revealed several strategies that families employed to accommodate growing intergenerational households within the confined geography of working-class neighborhoods. Although inheritance laws vary across Sri Lanka's ethno-religious groups, I found that matrilineal inheritance was the dominant practice in the community I studied (Abeyasekera 2023b). Daughters typically inherited the natal home, while sons moved into their wives' households. When there was more than one daughter, homes were subdivided or extended vertically with an additional floor. Sisters were expected to compensate their brothers, often by migrating overseas for work and sending remittances to support wedding expenses, housing renovations and extensions, and small-business ventures. Here, migration is a livelihood and household survival strategy that families collectively deployed (Gamburd 2000; Kottegoda 2004). In large families, siblings frequently rented nearby properties within the same or adjacent working-class neighborhoods, enabling them to stay close to both kin networks and sources of livelihood.

29 The tenure security and citizenship rights gained by Colombo's urban poor since the 1970s ended abruptly under the post-war Rajapaksa regime. Central to the government's vision of transforming Sri Lanka into the "miracle of South Asia" was the making of Colombo into a "world-class city" (Samaratunga and O'Hare 2013). Beginning in 2010, under the slogan "Houses for People and Land for Investment," the URP aimed

to “liberate” key economic corridors by evicting working-class communities scattered across the city (Abeyasekera et al. 2019). Within months, homes that had housed generations of working-class families were demolished with help from the military, and residents were forcibly relocated to state-built high-rise housing on the outskirts of the city (Collyer, Amirthalingam, and Jayatilaka 2017). The URP’s compensation scheme deliberately disregarded the multigenerational living arrangements that working-class communities had carefully developed over time (Abeyasekera 2023b). These arrangements included incremental housing extensions and informal demarcations to accommodate expanding families and establish separate households. By adhering to a rigid “one house for one house” policy—rather than compensating each distinct household—and by failing to recognize tenants' rights to ownership, the URP effectively dismantled the fragile socio-spatial ecosystem that underpinned these communities.

30 In the following section, I draw on the life stories of three women as case studies to explore the tensions that emerged from these economic and spatial negotiations, and the resulting acrimonious kinship relations and marital violence in the home. By tracing the continuities between earlier planning logics and contemporary policies, I show how these tensions have intensified over the past decade under the URP, further entrenching the carceral dimensions of Colombo’s urban landscape—one in which working-class communities have been historically contained.

SURVIVING ENCLOSURE: HOSTILE HOMES AND VIOLENT MARRIAGES

31 In this section I present the life stories of Saumya, Heshani, and Surekha. A life story approach makes visible the historical, social, and cultural circumstances that shape women’s intimate relations and life conditions. By asking women to use “home” as the motif through which to narrate their life stories, I was able to trace how spatial confinement influenced customary inheritance practices and shaped kinship and marriage. Segmenting their narratives into decades and critical life events revealed a strong correlation between the URP and the escalation of familial and marital violence. Taken together, these life stories reveal the entanglement between marriage, urban planning, customary inheritance laws, and carcerality. I illustrate how carcerality takes shape both through the enclosure of working-class communities and the reduction of domestic space. Carcerality, I show, is at once composed of bounded neighborhoods and compounded by cramped housing. It is the recurring tension between entrapment and escape that threads these stories together.

32 The stories also highlight how all three women chose repeat migration to escape the carceral conditions of their marriages. Economic migration as domestic workers and to do other low-skilled jobs does not offer an escape, however, from carceral domestic situations; women are involved in arduous labour, face multiple forms of exploitation and abuse, and yet always have to return home (Weeraratne 2014). I will show how understanding migration as only a temporary reprieve from the carceral conditions of their marriages underscores Naseem Jivraj’s (2025) theorization of “carceral escapes”: the temporal and spatial recurrence of carcerality; its porous effects across experiences; and the embeddedness of the carceral within strategies of escape.

Saumya

33 Saumya—39 years old in 2021—was a Sinhala-Buddhist woman with three children—two daughters aged 20 and 14, and a 10-year-old son. She lived on Morgan Road, a minor road that was accessed after several turns off the main road. It was a relatively small neighborhood of about 30 houses hemmed in on one side by the steep boundary walls of two private sports clubs. The road ended abruptly at both ends, sealed off by tall gates—one leading to a corporate warehouse and the other to the Government Quarantine Station for Animals. Saumya's one-storey house covered half-a-perch. The entrance hall contained a small sofa that had been pushed against the wall to make room for stacking egg crates from the small business Saumya ran. There was one bedroom in which two single beds, pushed together, took up most of the space, and a tiny kitchen. The toilet at the back was shared with neighbors. The front of Saumya's house was filled with potted plants that spilled over onto the road.

34 After her father's untimely death when she was three months old, Saumya's paternal grandmother unofficially adopted her. Her grandmother's property seemed to have played a critical role in shaping Saumya's rather unusual childhood. Saumya's grandmother had inherited her natal home, which stood on two perches of bare land. Saumya's father was her eldest son who had lived with her after his marriage. The grandmother did not have any daughters; therefore, according to Saumya, she became "besotted" with her first granddaughter. When Saumya's father passed away, her grandmother did not want Saumya's mother—Mala—to return to her natal home, taking her granddaughter with her. Hence, she arranged a second marriage for Mala and built her a small house adjacent to her own. What was unusual about the arrangement was that Saumya had to live with her grandmother, who limited Saumya's interactions with Mala after the latter's second marriage. "She was extremely protective [...] She always kept me very close to her." Her grandmother often told her that she was protecting her from being ill-treated or abused by her mother's second husband. It was in a deeply saddened voice that she told us, "I never had a childhood with a father or a mother [...] I would only talk to my mother if I met her outside." This meant that Saumya experienced her grandmother's overprotectiveness as coercive control and emotional abuse. Saumya was also told that she would inherit both houses, and a room her grandmother had subsequently built on the same property to rent out. Saumya endeavored to not sound ungrateful—inheriting three properties in a community where people struggled to accommodate growing families in one house represented a windfall. It guaranteed Saumya a home and regular income. But gratitude did not equate with affection. Saumya astutely interpreted her grandmother's strategy to "claim [Saumya] as her own" as a consequence of her not having daughters—the grandmother needed Saumya to take care of her when she became old and feeble. "She wanted me to never leave her side [and] to look after her in her old age." The convergence of kinship obligations, customary inheritance laws, and matrilocal residence practices had created a situation of coercive obligation for Saumya. It reached crisis point when her grandmother fell ill and Saumya was pressured into marrying an unemployed man she detested.

35 Saumya described her schoolgirl self as a bright and popular student who had many friends and male admirers. Saumya recounted how a young policeman, keen to marry her, had intended to visit her grandmother accompanied by his mother to ask for her

hand. For Saumya, it was a chance to escape. As a Sinhala man with a higher socioeconomic status than Saumya's, the policeman would follow the customary practice of patrilocal residence, offering Saumya a way out of the natal home in which she felt trapped. But Saumya's grandmother had no intention of letting Saumya escape. Saumya recounted how her grandmother had taken Saumya out of school after her GCSEs (aged 16) and had forcibly married her to a man "with nothing." Saumya had a vivacious personality, but she described herself as "timid [...] I was so scared all the time, like a child fearing punishment." The coercive control and emotional abuse her grandmother had exercised over her from early childhood explained why Saumya could not refuse the unwanted marriage. For a poor, unemployed man, the prospect of marrying a woman with property was undoubtedly appealing. In an effort to ensure that he had a steady income—and to mitigate any sense of inadequacy that he may feel for moving into his wife's home—Saumya's grandmother even purchased him a three-wheeler (auto-rickshaw) he could use to operate a taxi service.

36 If her childhood had been restrictive, marriage left Saumya completely immobilized. When Saumya's grandmother passed away shortly after the birth of her first child, Saumya became the victim of extreme domestic violence and coercive control at the hands of her husband. "I was so scared of him. I was so young. I was like a small child being controlled by a cane," she recalled. The abuse became so unbearable that, while pregnant with her second daughter, Saumya poured kerosene oil on herself in an attempt to set herself alight. "I didn't want to have any more children with him," she said. Saumya intimated that she had been subjected to marital rape, particularly when she attempted to avoid sexual contact with her husband. He had insisted that they have a son, believing it was necessary to prove his virility to his family.

37 Saumya's initial strategy was to encourage her husband to migrate to the Middle East for work. When we first spoke to Saumya, he had been working overseas on and off for about 14 years, which gave Saumya a much-needed reprieve from physical abuse. Here, Saumya's experiences of carcerality are not constant, but ebb and flow with time as her husband comes and goes. About ten years into this arrangement, however, he had started demanding that Saumya reimburse all the money he had remitted. When he stopped sending her money, Saumya had set up a wholesale egg business, which had proved successful, allowing Saumya to manage the household and her children's expenses. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, her husband lost his job in 2020, bringing an end to Saumya's temporary escape from her carceral marriage. In 2021, once air-travel restrictions had been lifted, Saumya had to fund her husband's return from the Middle East. Once back home, he started demanding that Saumya transfer the legal ownership of her natal house and the three-wheeler in his name, pay an outstanding loan he had taken out, and hand over her egg business to him. When Saumya learned that her husband had a second family—a wife and child outside Colombo—she realized that he planned to divorce her and to relocate them to the city. In working-class neighborhoods marked by an acute housing shortage and the lack of affordable housing outside its confines, his strategy hinged on seizing control of Saumya's home through violence and eviction. Saumya described how "he would follow me around [the neighborhood] shouting and asking me for money [...] He would lock me inside the house, then he would stay outside so that I couldn't even leave via the back door."[3] She stopped leaving the house, fearing that if the neighbors became aware of the violence, her children would suffer the stigma and shame. Here, the need for a home increases Saumya's physical carcerality as well as the violence. Women like Saumya often endure

domestic violence in silence, fearing community ostracism if they disclose their suffering (Udalagama 2024). When the lockdown was lifted, Saumya was staying with a relative for a brief respite. She told us how, on her return, her husband severely assaulted her. "I was in the kitchen scrubbing the floor when he came and said, 'why did you come back?' and he kicked me in the chest. I just collapsed and woke up in hospital."

38 His eviction strategy worked. Unable to endure the violence, Saumya left her natal home and rented a house miles away from central Colombo, a place she could afford only because her oldest daughter had started working. But her husband continued to terrorize her, demanding that she transfer the natal home she inherited from her grandmother to his name. Here, we see how carcerality permeates Saumya's escape and is embedded in the very structure of escape. Saumya showed us a CCTV recording of her husband standing outside the gate with a plastic tube threatening to beat her if she stepped outside without the money he needed to pay back his loan. In December 2021, Saumya transferred the legal ownership of the three-wheeler to her husband, but not her home. But without her egg business as a source of income, she could not meet her husband's demand for money. In early 2022, Saumya decided to migrate to Singapore as a domestic worker. Her intention was to earn enough money to pay her husband to leave her natal home. Here, Saumya's devised a carceral escape plan that she hoped would finally release her. She believed that if she could help him to buy his own house, she could reclaim her home. So far Saumya remains trapped. Although she has temporarily escaped her husband's physical violence, its effects have followed her into exile, separating her from her children and her home.

39 Saumya's carceral escape from a violent marriage, while necessary for her survival, has imposed a heavy burden on her eldest daughter, who now has to assume the responsibility of caring for her two younger siblings in Saumya's absence. The children who continue to live in the rented house are displaced, unable to return to their mother's home, now rendered hostile and uninhabitable due to their father's unlawful occupation and violence. The situation starkly reveals how carceral conditions persist across time, space and generations, as Saumya's daughter is confined to her caregiving role, which enables her mother's escape. Saumya's story also vividly captures the way the carceral is embedded in everyday domestic arrangements, where patriarchal control over property even in situations of matrilineal inheritance operates through coercion and the threat of violence. The natal home that Saumya inherited is both a site of entrapment and an object of struggle, illustrating how intimate and structural forms of violence mutually reinforce each other in the production of carceral experiences. As her community is marked for eviction, Saumya faces a difficult choice: if she transfers ownership of her natal home to her husband, she risks losing state compensation at the time of relocation. Although she inherited two properties—the house her grandmother built for Saumya's mother when Saumya's father died, and the room built for rental income—it is unclear whether, under the URP (described in the previous section), these properties qualify Saumya for a second state-built apartment. Even if Saumya were entitled to two flats under the URP, accepting the second apartment would mean displacing her mother and her family from her second marriage.

40 Saumya's life story sheds light on how urban planning, kinship obligations, and marital relations have produced conditions of carcerality throughout Saumya's lifetime. It

reveals the way state-led urban regeneration projects extend carceral governance into the intimate sphere, transforming home and marriage into a contested terrain of survival, negotiation, and loss. Migration—at first her husband's, then hers—illustrates the way carceral escape is entangled in recurring carceral experiences and reproduced across generations, entrenching cycles of control, confinement, and displacement.

Heshani

41 Heshani's story illustrates how kinship disputes over property and domestic violence turn marriage into a carceral institution. Heshani—49-years-old in 2021—was a Sinhala Buddhist and the mother of three sons aged 17, 15, and 13. In contrast to her married life marked by domestic violence, Heshani recounted her childhood as being "very happy. My father loved me very much. He was my best friend [...] He brought me up like a flower [...] When he died when I was 25, it was the end of my happiness." Heshani had a contentious relationship with her mother. She gave the impression that her mother favored her brother. Her mother, however, could not challenge her husband's decision to transfer the natal home to Heshani's name because it was Heshani's father who had purchased it from his landlord. Soon after her father's death, Heshani migrated to the Middle East as a domestic worker, remitting money to renovate the house and to finance her brother's wedding. She told us that she was too grief-stricken to return, and did not visit "even for a holiday" until her mother started exerting pressure on her to get married when she turned 30. Heshani believes her mother felt ashamed of having an unmarried daughter.

42 Heshani was bitterly angry with her mother for choosing a husband without doing a thorough background check. On her wedding night, Heshani found out that her husband was already married. She told us, "from the beginning it was very difficult [...] he drank, he gambled, he owed money to people, and he hit me all the time." I asked Heshani why she did not leave—after all, bigamy is illegal in Sri Lanka unless you marry under Muslim Law, and, therefore, the marriage was never legally valid in the eyes of the law. Moreover, as the legal owner of the house, she had the authority to ask him to leave. Her response— "I felt so ashamed that people will tell stories" —reveals the way shame, as a deeply gendered affect, operates as a mechanism of social control. Like Saumya, Heshani endured domestic violence in silence out of fear of community rejection (Udalagama 2024). As Udalagama (2024) notes for women in rural Sri Lanka, this silencing is rooted in the way women are socialized to feel personally responsible for making a marriage succeed and creating a "good" home, regardless of the harm they endure.

43 Heshani's story reveals that silence borne out of shame can nevertheless be isolating, further entrapping her in a cycle of domestic violence. For Heshani, being a mother meant enduring a violent marriage to secure "a good future" for her sons. She believed that her sons needed a father, even though he was not the breadwinner. It was Heshani who worked six-days a week as a domestic worker and gave tuition in the evening to the neighborhood children to make ends meet. Her husband was a petty trader who gambled most of his earnings. Describing him as "always sleeping," she contrasted his inactivity with her grueling schedule: "I cook, clean the house, and go to work." When the children were younger, Heshani had tried to escape by going back to the Middle East to work. But she had returned within a year because she found it unbearable to be

away from her sons—an example of how escape is possible, but kinship norms and love for her sons pulled Heshani back into a violent marriage. She told us that her husband hit her every day, and the violence escalated during COVID-19 when he was stuck at home. As described in the introductory section, Heshani's home was one of the smallest I had visited, and during the tour of her house I wondered how five people managed to share the single room upstairs. When Heshani told us that her oldest son had asked her to file for divorce, I asked her delicately why she had not followed his advice. Heshani's response—that her husband had nowhere to go—gave insight into the role cultural norms and urban planning play in creating carceral conditions in the lives of working-class women in Colombo. Like Saumya's husband, Heshani's husband could not afford to rent a house, and his natal home belonged to his sister. In August 2023, Heshani shared the "good news" that she had in fact filed for divorce. But Heshani could not simply kick her husband out—"after all, he is my sons' father", she told me. Heshani was perhaps waiting for one of her sons to move out and to take responsibility for the father—a pattern I had observed in families where marital violence endured. For Heshani, even the law could not guarantee a final escape, revealing the deep structural foundations of carcerality for women in poor working-class neighborhoods.

44 The direct effect of Sri Lanka's URP exacerbating kinship tensions over property became apparent when Heshani told us that her brother, who was living with his wife after marriage, had recently started demanding his share of the natal home. Although Heshani herself did not make this inference, the timing coincided with the issuing of eviction notices in neighboring communities. As described in my account above of the spatial history of Colombo, the URP compensated only residents who could prove ownership of their homes. After years of relative peace between the siblings, it was no coincidence that hostilities had resumed at this precise moment. Heshani described how her brother began intercepting her on her way home from work, assaulting her and threatening to report her to the police unless she paid him LKR one million. She sold all her jewelry and managed to pay LKR 800,000, yet he continued to harass her, demanding the remaining amount, along with an additional LKR 150,000 for their mother's eventual funeral.

45 Heshani's story underscores how gendered norms of marriage and motherhood trap women in cycles of violence with little hope of escape. Kinship relations play a critical role in upholding these norms, framing them as duties and obligations. Yet, reciprocal obligations of care are often abandoned when property becomes contested in the context of state-led eviction and resettlement, illustrating how urban planning functions as a "condition of possibility" that binds kinship and marriage to the carceral. In such moments, familial bonds are weaponized, and women like Heshani bear the brunt of both structural displacement and intimate violence.

Surekha

46 Surekha – a Malay-Muslim – lived in her childhood home with two never-married maternal aunts At the age of 61, with three sons in their mid-30s, she was one of the oldest participants in the study. Surekha's customary claim to her maternal grandmother's home meant that she had to share it with two unmarried aunts. The two-storey house was part of a row of working-class houses on Vauxhall Street—one of two main roads that ran the length of Colombo 2. Built on three perches of land, the

house was divided into four sections: Surekha's aunts rented out half of the front to a "communication"—a shop that sold stationary and phonecards, and provided printing and photocopying services; they occupied the main house made up of a porch, hallway, a bedroom, and a kitchen—all in a row; the back contained two rooms that were rented out; and Surekha lived in one of the two small room upstairs, and her brother the other.

47 Surekha's early life demonstrates how kinship obligations and maternal neglect were detrimental, robbing her of her potentiality. She left school to work at the age of 13 because her mother had had six children after Surekha. Her mother eventually migrated overseas but, according to Surekha, "she never sent me any money. I can say I never took bread off her. It was I who earned and provided for my siblings." Although, as a daughter, she had inheritance rights to her maternal grandmother's home, Surekha wanted to escape, and did so by getting married at eighteen. Here Surekha's decision to marry, like Saumya's intention to escape her grandmother's control with her first admirer, demonstrates that marriage, like migration, offers the possibility of escape from miserable domestic situations. Yet, as Surekha's story illustrates, breaking out and getting away are nearly impossible. Carceral escape, as discussed in the editors' introduction, highlights the way carcerality persists across space and time, its effects seeping from one experience to another, embedding carcerality "in the very fabric of escape".

48 In the first year of her marriage, her mother-in-law ill-treated her by depriving her of food even after she found out that Surekha was pregnant. If Surekha complained to her husband, he would assault her. Soon after the birth of her first child, Surekha decided to escape by migrating to the Middle East for work, leaving her son with her aunts. Here, Surekha temporarily escaped her carceral marriage, only to get pregnant again when she returned a year later. Surekha intimated marital rape when she told us that her second pregnancy had prompted her to permanently move out of her husband's home, which she thought would release her permanently from domestic abuse. "I just got into a three-wheeler and went around until I found a place to live [...] I found a small hut and thought this is better than living with [my husband's family]," she told us. But living alone did not curb her husband's violence; he would abuse her when he came to visit his sons. Surekha migrated for the second time, leaving both children with her aunts. Although Surekha escaped the carceral conditions of her marriage, her experiences with multiple abusive employers demonstrate the recurring nature of carceral experiences both structurally and interpersonally across time and space. Surekha had worked in the Middle East since the age of 19, therefore for nearly 25 years, to provide for her sons. She said her only happiness in life was that they were educated—they had studied up to their GCSEs—and she had paid for their weddings.

49 After her final trip to the Middle-East, Surekha returned to her maternal home. For a while, the home promised a permanent respite from all she had endured since childhood. According to Surekha, tensions within the household escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the loss of her daily-wage job as a hospital attendant left her unable to contribute financially. These tensions manifested themselves through spatial confinement. Surekha's aunts asked her to stop using the kitchen, citing the cost of gas. She was allowed to use the bathroom only once a day and had to carry water upstairs for cooking. Isolated from the rest of the household, Surekha kept a small hot plate in her room, preparing one-pot rice meals when she could afford groceries. On most days,

she survived on a single *roti* from the corner shop and cups of coffee to stave off hunger. She refused to burden her sons, knowing they too were struggling. With no access to the main house, Surekha spent most of her days confined to a small, windowless room. The possibility of respite and escape was short-lived, and Surekha's home, like Heshani's, once again became a site of carcerality. For Surekha, home became a space that embodied both material deprivation and social exclusion. Her life illustrates the way neither repeat migration nor divorce can fully liberate women from the harm endured since childhood—harm rooted in the carceral spatialities produced by urban planning in Colombo.

CONCLUSION

50 The overall aim of this paper is to examine the role geography plays in shaping the intimate relations of Colombo's multi-ethnic and multi-religious working class and in producing carcerality within marriage. I used the framework of carceral geographies to foreground how the Sri Lankan state exercised power through urban planning, spatially containing the poorest segments of Colombo's working class. The motivation for my writing within this framework is inspired by activism that emerged following the ethnography. I continue to work with the community, drawing attention to the Sri Lankan state's lack of political will for providing decent homes to the city's poor by investing in social housing. The URP continues to transform Colombo into a 'world-class city' that excludes the poor working-classes.

51 Drawing on the work of critical feminist geographers, I argue that post-war urban governance in Colombo operates through logics of containment. These logics are rooted in the island's colonial history and intensified by the Sri Lankan state's efforts to discipline low-income working-class populations in the aftermath of the ethnic conflict. I traced back over the history of urban planning in Sri Lanka, how it spatially confines working-class communities to small, under-developed areas across the city through physical restrictions, denial of legal tenure, the absence of affordable housing, and deregulated property markets, effectively producing carceral geographies that extend from the urban landscape to the intimate space of the home. This carceral spatiality not only entrenches urban marginalization but also forms the conditions of possibility for domestic violence,.

52 The life stories of Saumya, Heshani, and Surekha—analyzed within the framework of carceral geographies—reveal the way the entangled relationship between kinship, marriage, home, and state policies of urban planning and urban regeneration has shaped their experiences of entrapment. Yet their life stories also reveal how a single framework cannot capture the complex multi-faceted lives they have led, nor their vibrant personalities. Surekha was involved in local politics, campaigning for a female candidate. She always made us laugh with her risqué jokes. Saumya was an astute political commentator—ever ready to give us the latest gossip about local government officials, while ranking them by their good looks and competence. Heshani was busy advocating for a community hall and, in her spare time, liked to read Sinhala fictions while listening to classical music.

53 The lives of all three women's exemplify remarkable resilience and agency, using migration to temporarily escape the carceral conditions of their lives. For Saumya and Surekha, the damage they suffered in childhood intensified through marriage. By

contrast, for Heshani, the natal home, once associated with a happy childhood, was transformed into a marital space that constrained and immobilized her. She chose migration to escape, but kinship and motherhood eventually pulled her back. Surekha, too, turned to migration to escape the violent conditions of her marriages, but her need to return home ultimately shaped the conditions of return. At the time of writing, Saumya remains overseas, working to save enough money to negotiate her husband's departure from her natal home. Yet she too must eventually return—only time will tell whether her temporary escape will disrupt the intergenerational reproduction of carcerality.

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NOTES

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2. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh.
3. All interviews were conducted in Sinhalese. They were translated into English by the author.

ABSTRACTS

Taking the home as the spatial epicenter where state and intimate forms of violence converge, this paper examines how urban planning and social housing policies in Sri Lanka have shaped carceral experiences within kinship and marriage for low-income working-class women living in Colombo. By mapping the historical continuities between mechanisms of constraint built into the architecture and urban planning of colonial and post-independence Colombo and the forced evictions authorized under the post-war Urban Regeneration Program from 2010 onward, I uncover how state power, exercised through urban planning, produced the “carceral geographies” of working-class neighborhoods. Drawing on ethnographic life histories, I show that urban planning not only spatially contains the poorest segment of the city’s working class, but that it also plays a constitutive role in shaping intimate relations. I argue that carceral

geographies not only structure urban marginality but also create the conditions of possibility through which domestic violence engenders carcerality within marriage.

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Keywords: carceral geographies, urban planning, social housing, working-class communities, home, domestic violence, Sri Lanka

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