

CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME AMONG IDP WOMEN IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

When we were asked to leave within 24 hours we hardly had any choice. No body left their homes with our own consent. We left everything that we owned and came to Puttalam. We had been here since 1990. But it is not like living in our own home.

Fathima Beebi (aged 55)

I was seven years when all those happened. I do not have any good memories of my home. But I always liked to play with my friends in my home. Last month my parents visited our home in Mannar. But, I prefer to stay here. It seems that they are interested in going back.

Majida (aged 27)

This paper focuses on the experience of and relationship with home in the context of internal displacement. The overall objective of this study is to find out how house and home are sites of change and contestation that impact on gender roles among IDP women of different generations in the war-related internal displacement context in Sri Lanka. By using internal displacement, gender and work as the points of departure for investigation, this research aims to understand how women contribute to making a home and sustaining livelihoods in the place where they live. In order to achieve this objective the research asks: What do the internally displaced women perceive as their 'home'? Are there gendered differences supporting definitions of home in identifying

what constitutes home and where one thinks one belongs?

In 1990 almost all of the Muslims in the North were forced to leave by the LTTE. There were about 80,000 Muslims who were given a few hours to leave the place they considered home. They made their ways towards government-controlled areas in Vavuniya and Anuradhapura as well as Puttalam on the north-western coast. Over the course of two decades they have continued to live in what are generally called open camps in Puttalam which have not been affected by the conflict. With the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 May, there is now a desire within this community to explore their right of return.

Methodology

This research is based on six qualitative interviews with IDP women from two different generations. Clare et al. (1997: 92) think that qualitative techniques 'can provide detailed understanding of socio spatial experiences'. In this study I used in-depth interviews to explore the 'subjective understanding' and 'experience' of forced migration and home from a gender and generational perspective. Subjective understandings and experiences of forced migration are shaped by broader socio-economic and political contexts. At the same time, individual

understandings and experiences can also differ considerably, as each individual has his or her own expectations, capabilities and interests. In depth interviews are useful in obtaining data on 'subjective understanding' and 'experience'.

Literature Review

Mallett (2004: 63) defines home as a place, but also as a space that is inhabited by family, people, things, and belongings: 'a familiar, if not comfortable space where activities and relationships are lived'. Mallett (2004) also points out that there has been a proliferation of writing on the meaning of home within the various social sciences recently. She has reviewed the literature on house and home and finds that home is variously conflated with or related to house, family, self, gender, and migration. She shows how home, be it defined as a dwelling, a homeland or even a constellation of relationships, is 'represented as a spatial and relational realm and to which they generally hope to return' (Mallett, 2004: 77).

While citing the works by geographers Relph, (1976) Buttimer (1980), Tuan (1977) and Seamon (1982), Jeanne Moore (2000: 207) calls for a 'greater focus on the context of home, and development of a contextual understanding of the concept of home which transcends the material characteristics of domestic space'. This facilitates a more holistic interpretation of house and home and how they are entities that comprise inter-related qualities of people, environment, place, and time. Inspired by the work of geographers such as Blunt (2005), Blunt and Varley

(2004), Yeoh and Huang (2000), Little (2002), Massey (1995), and also other scholars such as Kottegoda (2006), Vimaladharma (1997) and Bowlby et al. (1997), I wish to contribute to the understanding of what is home from a gender and a generational perspective in the context of displacement in Sri Lanka.

Discussion and Conclusion

The interview results show that home is a virtual place, a repository for memories of the lived spaces. It locates lived time and space, particularly intimate familial time and space. Therefore, for many internally displaced women, leaving home is not only about acquiring security during a war, it is also symbolic of leaving behind a sense of identity, culture, and an individual and community history. The narratives also revealed that the meaning of home had several connotations for women; hence, its leaving, its abandonment and its making are important. Displacement from home evokes a deep sense of loss and resentment as well as despondence. Rather than adhering to the feminist position considering home as a place of oppression, this study also shows that home as a positive locus of identity for women.

The qualitative interviews conducted in *Puttalam* reveals that the issue of right to return is not only a national one but also largely decided by gender and generation and also the meanings attached to home in the changing political, cultural, social, and economic contexts.

References

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