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Marriage Choices and Traditions among the Sri Lankan Migrant Workers in Bahrain

Pilihan Perkahwinan dan Tradisi dalam Kalangan Pekerja Migran Sri Lanka di Bahrain

Mohamed I.M. Aslam*, Iyad M.Y. Eid** and Rohaiza Rokis***

Abstract

Family and marriage in Sri Lanka have endured far-reaching changes in recent decades. Starting with the migration from Sri Lanka, particularly after the 1970s, is one of the contributing factors in such family changes. Given that Sri Lanka has been giving greater importance to family and marriage, the present paper attempts to investigate changes in marriage choices, traditions, and marital relationships due to migration. The qualitative research method was utilized, compiling data through semi-structured interviews with thirty Sri Lankan migrant families using a purposive sampling technique, which was analyzed on a thematic basis. Based on the findings, migration was the cause of change in marital choice and traditions since migrants become economically independent and cherish new cultures. The marriage contracts and couple matching among migrant workers had not been spelt out their ancient traditions of Sri Lanka, which leaned more toward love matches. The study has identified the women who migrated as housemaids had formed families

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with Pakistani and Indian migrant workers, even accepting religious exogamy after arriving in Bahrain based on self-desire. These migrants concealed their personal choice and married without their parent's concerns and presence. The present study identified that wedlock without proper documents caused their children to be undocumented. Furthermore, the current study revealed that migrant workers who married other nationalities failed to establish fruitful families as their lives ended in divorce due to the lack of knowledge about marital partners and cohesive relationships with them. These findings are significant because of the dearth of literature on marriage migration among Middle Eastern migrants and the range of post-marriage challenges that migrants face in that particular destination. The information explored enriches the literature with a new sociological and empirical study.

Keywords: Migration, Sri Lankan Families, Love Marriage, The Middle East.

Abstrak

Keluarga dan perkahwinan di Sri Lanka telah mengalami perubahan yang meluas dalam beberapa dekad kebelakangan ini. Penghijrahan dari Sri Lanka, terutamanya selepas 1970-an, adalah salah satu faktor yang menyumbang kepada perubahan dalam sesebuah keluarga. Memandangkan Sri Lanka memberikan perhatian yang tinggi kepada keluarga dan perkahwinan, kajian ini menyelidik perubahan dalam pilihan perkahwinan, tradisi dan hubungan perkahwinan yang terkesan akibat penghijrahan. Kaedah kajian kualitatif telah digunakan bagi menyusun data yang didapati melalui temu bual separa berstruktur dengan tiga puluh keluarga migran Sri Lanka menggunakan teknik persampelan bertujuan yang dianalisis secara tematik. Berdasarkan dapatan kajian, penghijrahan merupakan punca kepada perubahan dalam pilihan perkahwinan dan tradisi apabila migran menjadi bebas dari segi ekonomi dan menerima budaya baharu. Kontrak perkahwinan dan padanan pasangan dalam kalangan pekerja asing tidak mengikuti tradisi Sri Lanka yang lebih cenderung kearah memilih pasangan atas dasar cinta. Kajian ini telah mendapati bahawa wanita yang berhijrah sebagai pembantu rumah telah membentuk keluarga bersama pekerja asing daripada Pakistan dan India. Mereka turut menerima eksogami agama selepas tiba di Bahrain oleh sebab keinginan diri. Golongan

migran merahsiakan pilihan peribadi mereka dan berkahwin tanpa penglibatan dan kehadiran ibu bapa mereka. Kajian ini mengenal pasti bahawa perkahwinan tanpa dokumen yang betul menyebabkan anak-anak mereka tidak mempunyai dokumen sewajarnya. Tambahan pula, kajian semasa menunjukkan bahawa pekerja asing yang berkahwin dengan warganegara lain gagal mewujudkan keluarga yang bahagia kerana perkahwinan mereka sering berakhir dengan perceraian. Hal ini kerana kurangnya pengetahuan tentang pasangan suami isteri dan kesatuan dalam hubungan antara mereka. Dapatan daripada kajian ini adalah penting kerana terdapat kekurangan literatur tentang penghijrahan perkahwinan dalam kalangan migran Timur Tengah dan cabaran-cabaran selepas perkahwinan yang dihadapi oleh migran dalam kawasan tersebut. Maklumat yang didapati daripada kajian ini dapat memperkaya literatur bagi kajian-kajian sosiologi dan empirikal.

Kata Kunci: Migrasi, Keluarga Sri Lanka, Perkahwinan Cinta, Timur Tengah.

Background

The family is considered the primary social and functional unit in all human societies, where sexual relationships are socially approved among couples and children are nurtured until they find their own families¹. Islam portrays love and compassion as the highest objectives of conjugal life². Marriage is the best practice in the family in which a family is built so as to have a harmonious relationship between men and women. The ties that are created by marriage ensure the smooth function of society by transmitting the culture and expanding the family chain. However, families face far-reaching challenges in preserving family values and ensuring family functions in the globalized world, characterized by a market-oriented economy, liberalizing the global

¹ Rahul Sharma, "The Family and Family Structure Classification Redefined for the Current Times," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 2, no. 4 (2013): 306, <https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.123774>.

² ar-Rūm 30:21

culture, and making imperative changes in human interactions³. Since the global market is open, it causes increasing migration and displacement, all of which make family changes evident.

Migration has been a rapidly growing phenomenon in recent decades, and international migrants can be found everywhere⁴. Among those migrating, Sri Lankan migrants constitute considerable in the Asian and Middle East corridors. According to a report published by the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment⁵, the main authoritative body registering migrant workers, nearly 90% of workers were employed in Middle East countries in 2018. Although the studies that tackled Sri Lankan migrant workers have been increasing over the last three decades, which have identified migration-related phenomena such as migration motives⁶, migrants' vulnerability in the destination⁷, and the contribution of remittances to the families left behind and transnational mothering⁸, most of these studies limited focusing on individual migrant workers, mostly female migrants' experiences⁹. A body of literature based on various migration corridors has documented that binational

³ Alphonse Kasongo, "Impact of Globalization on Traditional African Religion and Cultural Conflict," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2010): 309–22.

⁴ Hania Zlotnik, "International Migration 1965-96 : An Overview," *Population and Development Review* 24, no. 3 (1998): 429–68.

⁵ (SLBFE, 2019)

⁶ Asha L. Abeyasekera, 'Youth Mobility and Overseas Migration in Sri Lanka', in *The Challenges of Youth Employment in Sri Lanka*, ed. by Ramani Gunathilaka, Markus Mayer, and Milan Vodopivec, 1st edn (Washington, D.C: The World Bank, 2010), pp. 139–68.

⁷ P. Hewage, C. Kumara, and Jonathan Rigg, "Connecting and Disconnecting People and Places: Migrants, Migration, and the Household in Sri Lanka," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 1 (2011): 202–19,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2010.532741>; Shirani Hetti Arachchi, "Violation of Migrant Women Worker's Rights in Middle-East," *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 2, no. 2 (2013): 332–47, www.ijac.org.uk.

⁸ Ayako Kageyama, "Extent of Poverty Alleviation by Migrant Remittances in Sri Lanka," *South Asia Research* 28, no. September 2006 (2008): 89–108,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/026272800702800105>; Judith Shaw, "Housemaid Remittances in Rural Sri Lanka: Development Policy Issues," in *17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia* (Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 2008), 1–17; Swarna Ukwatta, "Sri Lankan Female Domestic Workers Overseas: Mothering Their Children from a Distance," *Journal of Population Research* 27 (2010): 107–31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12546-010-9035-0>.

⁹ Abeyasekera, "Youth Mobility and Overseas Migration in Sri Lanka."

marriages between people entering the labour market have been increasing with the increase of migration¹⁰. Furthermore, many authors have drawn attention to the various impacts of migration on migrant families, the marriage formalities, and the changes inside the family, such as the husband-wife and parent-child relationships¹¹. Given that researchers have paid attention to the family and its success, divorce has received their attention, which the marriage migrants face, particularly female migrants who alliance with other nationalities¹². Sri Lankan society is not an exception to these challenges. However, the experiences of migrant families and marriages have not been examined either by migration or labour researchers in Sri Lanka.

Given that Sri Lankan society gives greater importance to the family, documenting changes in migrant families receives the foremost attention in this research. The family has been a strong unit in Sri Lankan culture and every society whose members are bound by legal, biological, and emotional ties¹³. Society's structure and social order are maintained in Sri Lanka by the mainstream ethnic groups of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Christians, by embracing legal marriage, wedding customs and traditions¹⁴. Sri Lankan marriages are foregrounded by cultural values and backgrounded by religious morals and law, which are restrictive in nature. For instance, in the traditional marriage culture of Sri Lanka, the bride and groom must obtain their parent's consent before

¹⁰ Eleonore Kofman et al., "Introduction Issues and Debates on Family-Related Migration and the Migrant Family: A European Perspective," in *Gender, Generations and the Family in International Migration*, ed. Eleonore Kofman et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 13–54.

¹¹ W. A. Dumon, "Family and Migration," *International Migration* 27, no. 2 (1989): 251–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.1989.tb00255.x>.

¹² K. Caarls and V. Mazzucato, "Does International Migration Lead to Divorce? Ghanaian Couples in Ghana and Abroad," *Population* 70, no. 1 (2015): 127–51, <https://doi.org/10.3917/popu.1501.0135>; Jennifer E Glick, "Connecting Complex Processes: A Decade of Research on Immigrant Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (2010): 498–515.

¹³ Bruce Caldwell, "Marriage in Sri Lanka, A Century of Change" (Australian National University, 1992).

¹⁴ Luc Bulten et al., *Contested Conjuality? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka*, *Annales de Demographie Historique*, vol. 135, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.3917/adh.135.0051>; Caldwell, "Marriage in Sri Lanka, A Century of Change."

being allowed to marry, and the cast and wealth are notable concerns¹⁵. Muslims are obliged to comply with the legal impediments that Islamic law commands, such as the prohibition of polyandry¹⁶. However, the changing social world and the growing of non-agricultural sectors to earn money, thus facilitating exposure to the outer world, brings imperative changes in the family, such as self-choice of marriage partner, delaying marriages, and exogamous marriages even with different nationalities. Starting migration from Sri Lanka, particularly after the 1970s, is one of the contributing factors in such family changes¹⁷. Romantic relationships and exogamous marriages have been observed in the migrated destinations, particularly in the Middle East. For instance, Sri Lankan domestic workers who stay outside their employers' homes in Jordan keep romantic ties with male workers from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Egypt, and Bangladesh and often marry them¹⁸.

Although the few facts related to marriages and family changes have been highlighted, the pattern of how they form their families and subsequent consequences due to these marriages has received less attention in the literature. The consequences of cross-border marriage are significant as it leads to many challenges, such as women who marry outside of the traditional practice of arranged marriage, losing family

¹⁵ Ramesha Jayanththi, *Changing Notion of Love and Sexuality of Sri Lankan Family: The Challenges from the British Colonial Ethical Hegemony* (Germany: Ruhr University of Bochum, 2021).

¹⁶ Saleem Marsoof, "The Muslim Law of Marriage Applicable in Sri Lanka," *Law College Law Review*, no. 13 (2006): 33–52.

¹⁷ Michele Ruth Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids* (New York: New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Elizabeth Frantz, "Of Maids and Madams: Sri Lankan Domestic Workers and Their Employers in Jordan," *Critical Asian Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 609–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710802505323>.

support at the beginning¹⁹ and facing divorce²⁰ and legal precarity²¹ subsequently. Since Sri Lankan society has been giving greater importance to the family and marriage, and Sri Lankans have been migrating from the restrictive conjugal setup, it would be significant to investigate the changes that occur in marriage choices and the marriage formalities that migrants follow. Accordingly, taking migration as a frame, which causes the changes in the family and challenges its smooth running, the family is being explored in the present research. Then Bahrain is a case history that exemplifies what has been found before with empirical evidence that most readers unexpected.

Sri Lankan Families and Marriages

Marriage traditions among the mainstream ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Christians, vary since each ethnic community marries based on their own religious and cultural values. Nevertheless, the common feature identified among them was that they complied with common marriage procedures that the territory defined as Sri Lankans. The present section attempts to accumulate the literature on various marriage practices in Sri Lanka in order to compare them with the migrated community.

Early writers on Sri Lankan marriage, such as Yalman (1967)²², Leach (1966)²³ and Tambiah (1966)²⁴, have discussed Sinhalese marriage practices and kinship patterns even from the Kandyan

¹⁹ Cecilia Menjivar and Olivia Salcido, "Immigrant Women and Domestic Violence - Common Experiences in Different Countries," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 6 (2002): 898–920, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124302237894>.

²⁰ Gunnar Andersson, Ognjen Obućina, and Kirk Scott, "Marriage and Divorce of Immigrants and Descendants of Immigrants in Sweden," *Demographic Research* 33, no. 1 (2015): 31–64, <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2015.33.2>.

²¹ Govert Bijwaard and Stijn van Doeselaar, "The Impact of Divorce on Return-Migration of Family Migrants," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, no. June 2001 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2157994>.

²² Nur Yalman, *Under the Bo Tree: Studies in Caste, Kinship and Marriage in the Interior of Ceylon*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2799469>.

²³ Edmund Ronald Leach, *Pul Eliya: A Village in Ceylon. A Study of Land Tenure and Kinship*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

²⁴ S. J. Tambiah, "Kinship Fact and Fiction in Relation to the Kandyan Sinhalese," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 95, no. 2 (1965): 131, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2844423>.

kingdom in central and north-central Sri Lanka. Among the Sinhalese racial community, during the Kandyan kingdom, one of the surprising findings was the practice of polyandry marriage, which is called '*eka-ge-kema*' (eating in one house), which is adding another husband into a woman's marital life. Sharing food among the woman's husbands was a primary expected obligation of that woman in the family²⁵. In polyandrous marriage rituals, husbands were quite embarrassed, thus limiting their consolidation to land and labour instead of shared sexuality²⁶. In fact, polyandry marriage was a matter of sharing the wealth among the family members or the mechanism to shrink the wealth within one family. Anthropological studies that focused on marriage practices during the eighteenth century inform that polyandrous during that time was very rare²⁷. Studies conducted in the early 1990s did not even attempt to analyze polyandrous since that practice was nonexistent²⁸. The foregone findings show that the community was reluctant to accept polyandrous over time, and the Sinhalese marriage system changes are apparent. Similarly, Muslims are reluctant to practice polyandry marriage since, during the subsistence of the first marriage, a married woman cannot legally contract a second marriage as per Islamic marriage law²⁹.

Polygamy was also practised among different racial communities, but among the Sinhalese, some had married sisters who were in the same family³⁰, which is paradoxical with Islamic polygamy practice. Muslims must consider the legal impediments that Islamic law has thought when contracting any type of marriage, monogamy and polygamy, even in Sri Lanka, which may be on account of consanguinity or the ground of affinity and fosterage³¹. Notably, Sinhalese and other racial communities, except Muslims, cannot legally practice polygamy in Sri Lanka. Though Islam has allowed marrying four women at a time, Islamic teachings say that marrying a woman and her sister at a time, his

²⁵ Steven Kemper, "Polygamy and Monogamy in Kandyan Sri Lanka," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 11, no. 3 (1980): 299–323.

²⁶ Kemper; Tambiah, "Kinship Fact and Fiction in Relation to the Kandyan Sinhalese."

²⁷ Bulten et al., *Contested Conjugalities? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka*.

²⁸ Caldwell, "Marriage in Sri Lanka, A Century of Change."

²⁹ Marsoof, "The Muslim Law of Marriage Applicable in Sri Lanka."

³⁰ Kemper, "Polygamy and Monogamy in Kandyan Sri Lanka."

³¹ Marsoof, "The Muslim Law of Marriage Applicable in Sri Lanka."

wife being then alive, and any of her paternal aunts or a woman and her maternal aunts are forbidden³². Currently, Sri Lankan Muslims follow the Muslim law contained in the statutory framework of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act of 1951, which is consistent with the basic principles of Islamic law and morality³³. Generally, until the sixteenth century, Sri Lankan society married based on mutual agreement and traditional customs, and there was vagueness in identifying legal marriages³⁴.

As the Portuguese and then Dutch landed in Sri Lanka from the sixteenth century onwards, some European customs were introduced, which were opposed to Sinhalese cultural norms and traditions³⁵. The customs, such as marriages through an official ceremony performed by a church minister, which was practised from 1580 onwards, and the European concept of illegitimacy that the Dutch introduced were somehow strange to the Sinhalese. For instance, children of women who had married lower their cast were considered illegitimate³⁶. In fact, this marriage custom was introduced indirectly to control Christian marriage with a non-Christian and to ensure the intergenerational transmission of feudal services attached to the land³⁷. Notably, Muslims were legally forbidden to form a marriage contract with a non-Muslim man and a marriage contract with a non-Muslim woman, except with a woman following a revealed religion such as Christianity or Jews, collectively known as *Ahlul Kitab* (people of the book)³⁸. Besides, in the eighteenth century, when marriage registration was introduced, this caused many to skip undocumented marriages and marriage practices that culture does not value. It is pertinent to note that Leach (1966) stressed that although governmental pressure was incurred on village

³² Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, ed. 1991

³³ Marsoof, "The Muslim Law of Marriage Applicable in Sri Lanka."

³⁴ Nadeera Rupesinghe, "Navigating Pluralities Reluctantly: The Marriage Contract in Dutch Galle," *Itinerario* 42, no. 2 (2018): 220–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115318000311>.

³⁵ Bulten et al., *Contested Conjugalities? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka*.

³⁶ Bulten et al.

³⁷ Bulten et al.; Rupesinghe, "Navigating Pluralities Reluctantly: The Marriage Contract in Dutch Galle."

³⁸ Marsoof, "The Muslim Law of Marriage Applicable in Sri Lanka."

peasantry to comply with the law, very few did so and registered their marriages³⁹.

Though the Sri Lankan community's marriages were restricted by law to a certain respect, some cultural facts, such as couple matching, dowry, believing in astrology or horoscope, and wedding ceremonies, could not be restricted by any legal or political forces. The Sri Lankan community follow various customs, which are culturally rich, based on the ethnic community that they belong to. The typical marriage practices that many authors agreed on was that parents arranged most marriages for their daughters' past puberty, and the residence type was either based on *Binna* (uxorilocal) or *Diga* (virilocal) marriage, which lodging the husband with the bride's family or the wife's residence with the groom's family⁴⁰. Apart from that, Sri Lankan Buddhists believe that marrying a person by looking at astrology helps to cope with the fear of marrying the unknown, granting a moral guarantee that marital union will persist⁴¹. A study conducted among Muslims in the Kutali community in the Monaragala district asserts that love among them is considered inevitable in village marital choice and sometimes an acceptable motive for marriage⁴². Another ethnographic study on the Puttalam Muslim community emphasizes that Marrikar families are still willing to endogamy marriage practices to maintain their uniqueness⁴³. The above findings show that a community cannot easily be transformed from what it perceives as a change and its original norms.

The Sri Lankan marriage system includes dichotomous practices, either arranged marriage, which occurs mainly with family members' involvement, and love marriages, which start with love prior to marriage

³⁹ Leach, *Pul Eliya: A Village in Ceylon. A Study of Land Tenure and Kinship*.

⁴⁰ Anju Malhotra and Amy Ong Tsui, "Marriage Timing in Sri Lanka: The Role of Modern Norms and Ideas," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58, no. 2 (1996): 476, <https://doi.org/10.2307/353511>.

⁴¹ Asha L Abeyasekera, "From ' Arranged ' to ' Choice ' Changing Marriage Practices in Contemporary Sri Lanka," in *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage in Sri Lanka: Gender, Intimacy, and Change Workshop*, 2015, 1–37.

⁴² Victor C. De Munck, "Love and Marriage in a Sri Lankan Muslim Community: Towards a Reevaluation of Dravidian Marriage Practices," *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996): 698–716.

⁴³ M.S.M Anes, *History and Life Style of Muslims of Puttalam*, 1st ed. (Colombo: Kumaran Book House, 2009).

and end with marriage with or without concern of the parents⁴⁴. However, marriage based on love or personal choice was not a solitary practice in society. Families' involvement in traditional marriages in Sri Lanka was vital. In this traditional marriage culture of Sri Lanka, the bride and groom must obtain their parent's consent before being allowed to marry, and the cast and wealth are notable concerns⁴⁵. Furthermore, the couples' freedom to choose partners was restricted to the interest of their paternal kin group, where marrying outside one's cast group was unimaginable⁴⁶. Even in love marriages, if the matter was informed to the parents, the young couple would step back, allowing their parents to negotiate marriage-related matters, including the marriage ceremony⁴⁷. Even though sexual activities and love life were practised before and after Sri Lankan colonization, early marriages were not purely a romantic decision⁴⁸. Instead, it was a family strategy and matter of inheritance issue in which the family counteracted property fragmentation by allowing cross-cousins to marry⁴⁹.

In the changing social world, Sri Lankan society has changed from a family and community-centred to an individualistic one where individuals choose their marriage partners based on their skills, education, and jobs⁵⁰. Increasingly, a young woman's marriage in Sri Lanka depends more on her own ability and choice than relying on her

⁴⁴ Anuja P. Premawardhena et al., "Marriage Patterns in Sri Lanka and the Prevalence of Parental Consanguinity in Patients with β -Thalassaemia: A Cross-Sectional Descriptive Analysis," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 52, no. 4 (2020): 573–84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021932019000658>.

⁴⁵ Jayanththi, *Changing Notion of Love and Sexuality of Sri Lankan Family: The Challenges from the British Colonial Ethical Hegemony*.

⁴⁶ Bulten et al., *Contested Conjugalities? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka*; Jayanththi, *Changing Notion of Love and Sexuality of Sri Lankan Family: The Challenges from the British Colonial Ethical Hegemony*.

⁴⁷ Asha L. Abeyasekera, "Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka," *Feminist Review* 113, no. 1 (2016): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2016.3>.

⁴⁸ Bulten et al., *Contested Conjugalities? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka*; Caldwell, "Marriage in Sri Lanka, A Century of Change."

⁴⁹ Bulten et al., *Contested Conjugalities? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka*.

⁵⁰ Caldwell, "Marriage in Sri Lanka, A Century of Change."

family⁵¹. A recent study by Udalagama⁵² on the marital conflict in Sri Lanka has explored that due to love affairs, even during school time, women's family, most of the time, is reluctant to accept such affairs, thus causing them to elope and get merry. It is quite evident that the modern changes among the urban middle-class women in Sri Lanka in which young women emphasize the self as the principal navigator of their life course, including determining their life partner, narrating it as their inner desire rather than social expectation⁵³. In this process, some families no longer prevent love marriages, but when couples choose their partners by their own choices, they are not obliged to take any responsibility if anything goes wrong⁵⁴. Furthermore, parents have been more concerned that love marriages would end in cross-cast or cross-religion marriages⁵⁵.

Self-choice of marriage partner, women's economic liberality, and nuclear families are three pathways absent in the marriage history of Sri Lanka and are modern experiences. Since the non-agricultural type of employment is increasing, thus causing males and females to be exposed to the outer world, love marriage become the norm in society⁵⁶. As per the studies, the emerging nuclear rather than extended-family type is another notable reason why autonomous mate selection and romantic love are more prevalent in society⁵⁷. On the other hand, a woman's increasing pressure of the obligations in the nuclear family setup, finding a job before the marriage, and accumulating dowry on her own has

⁵¹ Bruce Caldwell, "The Family and Demographic Change in Sri Lanka," *Health Transition Review* 6, no. Supplement. The Shaping of fertility and mortality declines: the contemporary demographic transition (1996): 45–60; Abeyasekera, "Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka."

⁵² Udalagama (2021)

⁵³ Abeyasekera, "Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka."

⁵⁴ Caldwell, "The Family and Demographic Change in Sri Lanka."

⁵⁵ John Caldwell et al., "Is Marriage Delay a Multiphasic Response to Pressures for Fertility Decline? The Case of Sri Lanka," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 51, no. 2 (1989): 337–51.

⁵⁶ Caldwell et al.

⁵⁷ Gary R Lee and Lorene Hemphill Stone, "Mate-Selection Systems According to Family Criteria :," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 42, no. 2 (1980): 319–26.

received increasing attention, all of which sometimes delay the marriage at her proper age⁵⁸.

From the beginning to date, Sri Lankan marriages seem rigid in terms of marriage choice and agreement, following formalities of marriage, and considering legal impediments to the marriage. According to the reviewed literature, the Sri Lankan community always resorts to formal marriages to start their family life, which the culture values. However, changes in the family structure and earning opportunities outside the country change the traditional marriage practices and need to be spelt out as the community expects, which has received primary focus in this particular research.

Framing Marriages Based on Migration

Migration is the growing passage that prompts migrants to become economically independent, accumulate whatever amount they want for dowry and marriage, and be ready to marry on their choice, even finding a life partner other than one's birth country. In the migrated destinations, binational marriages between people of native origin and migrants entering the labour market with the intention of marrying have been on the rise⁵⁹. Some marriages between native people and migrants happen intending to settle in the migrated destinations. For instance, skilled labour migrants who enter Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan are more interested in staying longer and exploring new lives, despite their economic prosperity, in order to find a spouse to settle permanently in the host country⁶⁰. As cited in Shanghai, such intermarriages are often associated with maximizing wealth and social status⁶¹. Similarly, an empirical study noted that single mothers from the Philippines migrated to France as domestic workers and married native

⁵⁸ Malhotra and Tsui, "Marriage Timing in Sri Lanka: The Role of Modern Norms and Ideas."

⁵⁹ Kofman et al., "Introduction Issues and Debates on Family-Related Migration and the Migrant Family: A European Perspective."

⁶⁰ Wei Jun Jean Yeung and Zheng Mu, "Migration and Marriage in Asian Contexts," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1585005>.

⁶¹ James Farrer, "From 'Passports' to 'Joint Ventures': Intermarriage between Chinese Nationals and Western Expatriates Residing in Shanghai," *Asian Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2008): 7–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820701870742>.

sponsors by expecting a better life for their families and a promising future for their children⁶². Given that women are growing as economic providers in Vietnamese society, they expect better marriage prospects, mainly by choosing potential grooms in Taiwan, even with the help of the family⁶³. Such married migrant women in Taiwan and South Korea act as a bride for their foreign partners and breadwinners to the family they migrated from⁶⁴.

Another set of literature deals with the marriages between second-generation immigrants and someone from their parent's native country⁶⁵, as studies have identified British Pakistani Muslims who were married to a spouse from their parents' or grandparents' native country⁶⁶. British-born Pakistani and Bangladeshi women marry men back home, probably a cousin, with traditional Pakistani or Bangladeshi culture, such as expecting more responsibilities to be done by women at home and restrictions on engaging in labour force participation outside the home⁶⁷. Besides these cultural preferences, it is further evident, as found in Belgium on partner choices among men and women of Turkish, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Panjabi Sikh, as well as Pakistan and Albania, that occurs with their own desires and preferences⁶⁸. Given that the

⁶² Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot, "Beyond Migration Patterns- Understanding Family Reunion Decisions of Filipino Labour and Thai Marriage Migrants in Global Reproductive Systems," *Migration Studies* 6, no. 2 (2018): 205–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnx038>.

⁶³ Danièle Bélanger and Tran Giang Linh, "The Impact of Transnational Migration on Gender and Marriage in Sending Communities of Vietnam," *Current Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2011): 59–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392110385970>.

⁶⁴ Hee Kang Kim, "Marriage Migration between South Korea and Vietnam: A Gender Perspective," *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 3 (2012): 531–63, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2012.0020>; Bélanger and Linh, "The Impact of Transnational Migration on Gender and Marriage in Sending Communities of Vietnam."

⁶⁵ Helga Eggebø and Jan-Paul Brekke, "Family Migration and Integration: The Need for a New Research Agenda," *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 9, no. 4 (2019): 425–44, <https://doi.org/10.2478/njmr-2019-00030>.

⁶⁶ Katharine Charsley, "Vulnerable Brides and Transnational Ghar Damads: Gender, Risk and 'Adjustment' among Pakistani Marriage Migrants to Britain," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 12, no. 3 (2005): 381–406, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150501200210>.

⁶⁷ Angela Dale and Sameera Ahmed, "Marriage and Employment Patterns amongst UK-Raised Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Women," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 6 (2011): 902–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.564058>.

⁶⁸ Marlies Casier et al., "Breaking the In-Group out-Group: Shifting Boundaries in Transnational Partner Choice Processes of Individuals of Moroccan, Tunisian, Algerian,

marriage migrations in these contexts relate to native-born sponsors or with already settled migrants, studies by far analyze the integration and assimilation issues and labour force participation of newly arrived spouses⁶⁹.

The third form of marriage occurs between migrant workers who are from different nationalities in the host country, which is the temporary destination for them. The causes of such marriages have received less attention in the literature. According to certain reports, love relationships between migrants from different nationalities end in marriage. Studies often explore love marriages as a transitional phase in the structure of forming families⁷⁰. Such romantic relationships that ended in marriage have been found among Sri Lankan migrant workers in Jordan⁷¹. In this transitional phase, some women in Jordan decided to live away from their employers, experiencing more freedom, including sexual encounters with male coworkers. Furthermore, domestic workers outside their employers' homes keep romantic ties with male workers and often marry them⁷². Most of the migrants who engage in cross-border marriages are most vulnerable and economically deprived⁷³.

Turkish, Punjabi Sikh, Pakistani and Albanian Descent in Belgium," *Sociological Review* 61, no. 3 (2013): 460–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12029>.

⁶⁹ Saskiya Bonjour and Albert Kraler, "Introduction: Family Migration as an Integration Issue? Policy Perspectives and Academic Insights," *Journal of Family Issues* 36, no. 11 (2015): 1407–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14557490>; Katharine Charsley et al., "Marriage Migration and Integration Report" (Bristol, 2016), <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/ethnicity/projects/mmi/>; Katharine Charsley, Marta Bolognani, and Sarah Spencer, "Marriage Migration and Integration: Interrogating Assumptions in Academic and Policy Debates," *Ethnicities* 17, no. 4 (2017): 469–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796816677329>.

⁷⁰ Kimberly Hart, "Love by Arrangement: The Ambiguity of 'spousal Choice' in a Turkish Village," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007): 345–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00438.x>.

⁷¹ Frantz, "Of Maids and Madams: Sri Lankan Domestic Workers and Their Employers in Jordan"; Monica Smith, "Erasure of Sexuality and Desire: State Morality and Sri Lankan Migrants in Beirut, Lebanon," *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (2010): 378–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2010.511630>.

⁷² Frantz, "Of Maids and Madams: Sri Lankan Domestic Workers and Their Employers in Jordan."

⁷³ Kim, "Marriage Migration between South Korea and Vietnam: A Gender Perspective."

The above literature so far shows all kinds of marriages that take place in the migrated destination itself. Apart from that, migrants take migration as a means to accumulate money and settle in the country again after marriage or sometimes repeat migration. As per the forgone studies, forming families in the migrated destination happens for various purposes, such as permanent settlement and as a temporary economic remedy. The structure of forming a family in these destinations occurs through family support or self-choices, probably love marriages. It was pertinent to inquire whether migration and marriage were related, particularly changes in forming families and challenges they face subsequently, and if so, what factors were involved, which is the frame for the present analysis.

Methodology

Study Approach and Sample

The present qualitative research on Sri Lankan migrant families has applied the case study method. Bahrain is the case history that exemplifies the Marriage pattern of Sri Lankan migrants. Qualitative research is a strategically conducted argument about the shifting context and situation in which the researcher interacts, and the investigation takes place⁷⁴. The approach merely involves studying the social or human problem in a natural setting⁷⁵. Throughout the investigation, the researcher used this approach to understand the multifaceted pattern of the migration of families during their transitional period in Bahrain, examining the structure of forming families among Sri Lankan migrant workers and the range of challenges that migrant workers faced during and after marriages in the destination country.

The informants of the present study were 30 breadwinners of the family who had resided with families in Bahrain for more than six months. The Kingdom of Bahrain is reported as one of the region's wealthiest countries. It competes in oil exports with other oil-exporting countries in the region and employs labour from the South Asian

⁷⁴ Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2002).

⁷⁵ Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005).

region⁷⁶. Sri Lankan migrants have been migrating to Bahrain since the late 1970s. By 2018, the total departure of Sri Lankan migrant workers to Bahrain was 2922⁷⁷. First, migrant families were identified with the help of Darul Iman Bahrain, a welfare organization for Sri Lankans. Then, the sample was collected using the purposive sampling method and snowball technique, which enabled the selection of unique informants who were informative and helped with other cases. Accordingly, Table 1 shows the characteristics of the informants from whom data were collected.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Informants

Interview group	Category	Participants
Marriage migrants	Marriages during migration	20
	Married to other nationalities	08
	Married to Sri Lankans	12
	Reunited families	10
Families	Families with children	27
	Divorcee	05
Breadwinners	Male	17
	Female	13
Ethnicity	Muslims	22
	Sinhalese	05
	Tamils	03
Visa holders	Documented migrants	19
	Undocumented migrants	11
Employees	Skilled and Middle-Skilled workers	16
	Low-skilled workers and Housemaids	15

n=30

Informants included those who formed families after their migration and families reunited in Bahrain. The present study reported that 20 of the migrants' marriages happened during the migration; among them, eight migrants married to nationalities other than Sri Lankans, such as Pakistani or Indian workers. Three families had left

⁷⁶ Graeme Hugo, 'International Migration and Development in Asia', in *8th International Conference of the Asia Pacific Migration Research Network on the Theme of 'Migration, Development and Poverty Reduction'* (Fuzho, China, 2007), pp. 1–18.

⁷⁷ (SLBFE, 2019)

their children behind, and the rest of the families lived with one and two or three children in Bahrain. Interview responses were collected from male and female breadwinners, who were the primary economic providers of their families. According to interview responses, there were 22 Muslims; five were Sinhalese, and three were Tamils. During the interview, 11 families had lost their valid resident passes, and their families were undocumented. Among the participants, most of the low-skilled workers engaged in precarious jobs, such as maids, babysitting, taxi riders, security guards, and daily paid work. Their families had been in Bahrain for more than two years. Among the skilled and middle-skilled workers, interview responses were taken from quantity surveyors, assistant accountants, IT designers, and various categories in administrative divisions. After the interviews with 26 informants, the researcher received repeated information that reflected that data saturation was achieved.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews, which lasted an average of 45 minutes, were conducted from August 2020-August 2021 with migrant families using a semi-structured questionnaire. The present research used an online platform, such as Zoom and WhatsApp, with the informants' consent due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In the online platform, the recording process was convenient and was done with prior approval from participants. Furthermore, as mentioned in research ethics, the participants were informed about the potential risks, benefits, nature of the research, and the right to withdraw from the interview⁷⁸. Furthermore, the confidentiality assurance and participant anonymity protection were clearly explained. Then, each participant's willingness to take part in the interview was taken by giving the consent form to sign. Accordingly, informants' identity and information confidentiality were protected at every research step. While building trust between the researcher and participants, the project was summarised in layperson's terms as much as informants need before meeting in an interview. The researcher was accompanied by his spouse in the discussion, as some Muslim women were restricted from meeting male strangers without husbands or close male guardians (*Mahram* in the Arabic language).

⁷⁸ Howard Lune and Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 9th ed. (Pearson Education Limited, 2017).

These ethical processes helped to build trust between the researcher and the informants.

Data Analysis

A thematic approach, a digital method (ATLAS.ti), was used to present the findings. First, recorded interviews were transcribed and checked concerning what the participants exactly meant. Then, the data were analyzed by organizing categories on the basis of themes. Finally, narratives and detailed interpretations of the cases come under the theme topics to cover some surprising information and exciting concepts.

Findings

A shift of marriage choice and formalities and subsequent consequences were incorporated in the broad framework of migration, which were narrated supporting the evidence collected from Sri Lankan marriage migrants. Accordingly, the following section presents the findings based on three subthemes: the marriage choice, which explains the shift from arranged to love marriages; marriages from different nationalities, which narrates binational marriage in which migrants were involved and its consequences; marriage formalities, which to explain the legal impediments that migrants faced.

Marriage Choice

In this theme, marriage choice among the Sri Lankans was illustrated within the framework of migration, thus explaining how migrants narrated their life stories when selecting future life partners as part of their transitional life. Through the migration, they gained what they had lost in their native country in terms of economy, freedom, and exposure to modernity. Thus, many decisions were made by migrants since they were far from the social support that they had before their migration, such as parental involvement in family matters, thus causing them to go ahead with bringing the self as a principal navigator in their marriage choice. Although 'whether' to marry was decided by migrants, 'to whom they to marry' was still influenced by their parents in an arranged marriage. Raheem, for instance, migrated to Bahrain after finishing his Advance Level (A/L) examination to earn money in a

productive working environment, and he narrated that after four years of working, he accumulated what he wanted and built his own house, after which he initiated consulting his parents about the marriage. According to his narration, his parents suggested a cross-cousin to marry, and eventually, he did so. He said:

When I built my own house, I showed my intention to marriage to my parents. They didn't refuse it, but they said to marry one of my cuisines--my mother's brother's daughter-. I accepted. (Interview with Raheem)

Interviewees' responses revealed that migrants were anxious when they decided to marry as they wanted to satisfy their parents and relatives regarding their choice and to fulfil the responsibility ahead of them. According to Ihsan's story, father and son worked together in Bahrain, and both of their earnings were shared in family expenses. Then, cutting off one's earnings in the family would cause an expenditure burden. Such families had lengthy negotiations on marriage decisions. Ihsan was only 24 years old, worked as an accountant, and married a Sri Lankan bride with his family's support. This discussion and family support were possible since he had developed a prolonged relationship with his family. He said:

Partially, I was spending on my family, such as paying utility bills and food expenses. When I decided to marry since I had a job with satisfactory earnings, I was afraid about how I could contribute to my parents. After the discussion with my parents, my father said to stay with them since my sister had yet to marry. (Interview with Ihsan)

In an arranged marriage, family involvement was inevitable, and parents were more concerned about following traditional marriage practices, such as representation in the marriage decision by giving more suggestions. Thus, migrants made their decisions carefully without disturbing their relationships with their family and kin. In some families, though these women had their own expectations, they accepted their parents' suggestions instead of contrasting with them because of the respect they had for their parents. Sarah's case was evident that her cross-cousin and his family were chasing her. According to her narration,

her father was anxious that he would not be able to give her marriage since she was working abroad. She said:

My father is important to me. He did everything for me and my sisters after his divorce. Then I let to decide my father. Since my husband was his sister's son, he accepted him. I knew he was under pressure since my age passed, and he feared that no one would marry a girl who worked abroad. (Interview with Sarah)

It was evident that female migrants had less power to reveal their marriage decisions to their parents, although they had economic power. One apparent reason they stepped back was that the family depended on their earning. These females acted as primary breadwinners to their families, but their parents were still the decision-makers, which affected otherwise. In some cases, parents were reluctant to leave their daughters to act according to their desires. Sheema, a housemaid, said:

When I told my parents I wanted to marry, they did not happily accept it. Instead, they said to wait another two years. (Interview with Sheema)

Some women were not concerned about the consequences of their marriage choice on family respect and cohesion. Discarding parents' decisions happened most probably in love marriages, which have been increasing among migrants. According to case history, Rubini married a Sri Lankan because of love, thus causing her family to act totally against her marriage. Notable, when she migrated to Bahrain, she was not romantically connected to anyone. The love story began once she had economic power, which her village friend witnessed. She had this to say:

I had enough money in my hand. I said to my mom about my boyfriend, who knows me well. She refused to marry without knowing any of his background. But I married him. (Interview with Rubini)

Even though marriage choices among the male and female workers had some freedom because of their economic power, the way they negotiated their decisions with family differed. This first cohort

most probably preferred marriages in their native country. Thus, negotiating their decision with their parents was inevitable. Those who preferred the arranged marriage had to accept their parents' suggestions, who sometimes allowed only cross-cousin marriage and insisted on practising an extended family setup. Females participating in this study revealed that their say in marriage choice was less, thus causing them to rely on their parents' decisions. Giving female children marriages when they reach marriageable age is a common tradition in Sri Lankan culture. However, according to the informants, some parents delayed their daughters' marriages to sustain the economic benefit that they received from them. Female migrants who wanted to break this barrier contracted love marriages, discarding their parents' decision, as found in Rubini's case. Apart from that, migrants had the choice to marry migrant workers from different nationalities or native sponsors, which was discussed in the following theme.

Marriage from Different Nationalities

A minority of migrants accepted marriages with other nationalities. The marriages that happened between Sri Lankan migrant workers and other nationalities from various countries represented how the marriages were then and now. These marriages mostly happen because of self-choices stem from initiating a romantic relationship. In fact, there was no other basis for their marriages, such as education or economy, but love and affection. Those migrants formed families with Pakistani and Indian migrant workers. Their families and sponsors never knew the relationship they forged in the destination country. Such marriage relationships occurred in various circumstances. According to Sama, she was a housemaid, and her marriage happened due to her affection for an Indian. Her relationship with the Indian migrant worker secretly continued for a certain period via phone calls. She said:

One day, I received a call from a number. He was an Indian worker. Our conversation continued for a certain period, and we started to love each other. No one knows about our marriage that happened here [Bahrain]. After a period, I brought him to Sri Lanka and took a wedding party. (Interview with Sama)

Zameela, she was a housemaid, said:

I married an Indian vegetable seller in the Manama market due to our long relationship. (Interview with Zameela)

In another case, Nisa forged a relationship with an Indian worker who was a driver in the same house. Eventually, she eloped with him to stay outside the sponsor's home just one year after her arrival.

One year, I worked in my first home. Then, I eloped with the person who worked at the same house as a house driver (Indian). (Interview with Nisa)

Migrants' secret bond lasted a certain period, probably less than one year, over the telephone, which was unknown or was not informed to their parents. Migrants knew the consequences would occur as a result of their rash decisions, thus deteriorating their family honour and cohesion. For instance, when *Marry* talked about her decision to marry an Indian, she wept and said: '*My mom was not happy*'. Thus, migrants attempted to keep their marriage forever secret without expecting any support from their parents. However, the regular connection with their parents did not allow them to deceive their parents. Few of them tried to console their parents regarding their choice, which ended unsuccessfully, which worsened their relationship with their parents. Emphatically, they said that '*we missed the blessing of our parents*', that they could not buy from their money. For instance, *Jazeera and Nisa*, Muslim migrants, said: *we married without our parents' Dua* (prayers).

During formal marriages in Sri Lanka, checking the partner's background would occur, in which families formally visit the groom's and bride's families or gather information from the village mates⁷⁹. However, housemaids had a lack of freedom to go outside the sponsors' homes and physically meet their romantic partners several times, thus limiting knowing much of their background that their parents would check in the arranged marriage, which reflected in their narratives. In *Simaya's* case, she said: *I knew him (her Pakistani friend) by his voice*. Similarly, *Jazeera* said: '*My husband did not return from vacation, then*

⁷⁹ Yalman, *Under the Bo Tree: Studies in Caste, Kinship and Marriage in the Interior of Ceylon*.; Abeyasekera, "Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka."

only I contacted his family in India and got to know he was already married and had children'. Both Simaya and Jazeera said their husbands deceived and divorced them. These divorces or separations, which occurred mainly due to the lack of options they had to check them or wrong choices, were not an exception among the migrant women who married other nationalities. According to Nisa's case, her first husband was an alcoholic and left her when she was expecting her second baby. She narrated her story as follows:

Every day, he fought with me. He came to the home with an empty pocket but full of a drinking smell. I did know much about him. When I was pregnant, he left me alone and went to India. (Interview with Nisa)

During this shift from arranged to love marriages, some migrants compromised cross-religious marriages. For instance, Sheema, a Buddhist girl, married a Hindu migrant worker. However, her parents did not formally approve her to continue her marital life. She expressed:

Only a few months later, my parents knew about my marriage here. They refused to accept me and my alliance with a Hindu groom. (Interview with Sheema)

Similarly, Nisa had chosen a Hindu groom while she practices Islam. Her only intention was to scrutinize what she desired in her marriage choice. According to her narration, her husband later converted to Islam, which she followed. She opined: *'I thought of marrying him but did not care about his religion. Later, he changed his religion to Islam.'* As per Muslims, religious endogamy was vital, which the religion insists on following, while non-Muslim migrants' choices to marry religious exogamy were incompatible with their parent's expectations and the culture they followed. For this reason, Sheema's family rejected her marriage.

Evidence collected from migrant workers portrayed those women who migrated as housemaids and had formed families with other nationalities after arriving in Bahrain. None of them migrated from Sri Lanka, intending to marry another migrant worker in Bahrain or a native Bahraini. Moreover, evidence showed that the traditional Sri Lankan

marriage culture and the couple matching did not exist in these marriages. During the interview, the cross-questions were asked about the formalities they followed during the marriage, such as marriage ceremonies, marriage registration, and family and kin presence.

Marriage Formalities

The above themes so far outlined all kinds of heterosexual alliances as marriage without explaining the validity of their marriages. In the present theme, marriages were identified as not following the basic formalities, which eventually brought various consequences to the family. Marriages that took place in the country of origin in the presence of parents followed the marriage formalities according to their culture. For instance, Nazim's marriage was arranged by his parents when he was in Bahrain. Thus, his marriage ceremony was held in the presence of family, relatives, and friends, complying with Islamic marriage law. According to his narration, three ceremonies took place: one was *Nikah*, where the bride did not participate, in which he expressed his approval for the marriage to her father, offered dower money (*mahar*) and signed the marriage registration. Second, he attended the marriage feast given by Brid's family, and then finally, he offered *Waleema*, which is the feast given by the groom. He uttered:

I was busy with three ceremonies during my marriage: Nikah, wedding, and Waleema. Once I approved the marriage, I gave Mahar in the form of money and jewellery, then signed in the registration. (Interview with Nazim)

However, the marriages that happened in the host country followed only some of the formalities. Since some migrants were abroad for a long time, they thought rejuvenating the Sri Lankan culture in their marriage ceremonies was unnecessary. According to them, marriage was an ordinary life event. For instance, Sama brought her husband to Sri Lanka to hold a ceremonial marriage because of family pressure. Before that, her marriage took place in Bahrain with only the marriage registration. She said:

Why do I need to spend a lot of money on marriage? Simply, we did that. For us, a marriage certificate was important. We

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had a wedding party in Sri Lanka because my family insisted on doing that. (Interview with Sama)

Some migrant women contracted marriages with other nationalities without the approval of their parents and did not hold a ceremonial marriage, such as *Nikah*, which is to prove their marriage evidence with the assistance of a marriage certificate. Most of their marriages happened in agreeing with one another. For instance, Jazeera said: *I just agreed to marry him when he asked me*. Registering the marriages and obtaining the marriage certificate were vital in abroad marriages since it is required to prepare the other documents, such as birth certificates for their children and passports. In-depth interviews showed why some omitted to register their marriages was their illegal stay. Marriages without a valid visa were challenging to register with a legitimate marriage certificate. Therefore, these couples remained silent without informing their respective Embassies of their nuptials regarding their marriages, fearing deportation if the embassy informed the police about their illegal stay. For example, Marry stated:

We still need to register our marriage and get the marriage certificate from the embassy of Sri Lanka. We were scared to go there without a valid visa as they would report us to the police. (Interview with Marry)

The issue of documents appeared in a chain, one after another. First, some women who became pregnant while they did not have a visa and marriage certificate avoided hospitalization, forcing them to give birth at home or were hospitalized under fabricated identity cards. As a result, the children born at home or under fabricated documents lost their birth certificates, which made it difficult to prepare travel documents. For example, Jazeera had three children, and two out of three were born at home because of legal fear. She said:

All three kids do not have passports or even proper birth certificates. No one knows about their birth at home. I was scared to go to the hospital because of the visa. (Interview with Jazeera)

In Nisa's case, she was hospitalized to give birth but under a fabricated identity card because she did not have a marriage certificate and visa, which caused her to be in police custody. She said:

It was a critical time. I was suffering to give birth. Then a family hospitalized me under another lady's document. Then the police caught me. I was there for 45 days. (Interview with Nisa)

The open discussion revealed that parents failed to prepare passports and birth certificates for their children because of their inability to prove their marriages. Parents must produce their valid marriage certificates and birth certificates for both parents and children to the immigration to process the travel documents, which should be certified by the embassy of their respective countries. According to Nisa, her two children were born to her first husband without a marriage certificate, thus causing her to skip preparing the travel documents for her children. She stated that:

I could not apply for a passport for my two children because I don't have a marriage certificate to prove my first marriage. (Interview with Nisa)

It was a challenge for the children who lost their parents in the host country before preparing their passports with proof of their citizenship in their parents' native countries. For example, Simaya said:

The embassy requires submitting proper documents to prove our parent's marriage, which is difficult for us to find it now. (Interview with Simaya)

The marriage formalities they were supposed to follow in the migrated destination were rational and were not taken as serious matters by the migrants in the present findings. Particularly, marriage registration that some migrants ignored resulted in identifying them as married couples and legitimating their children.

Discussions

Migrants, when they are of marriageable age, are expected to make the right decision in their marriage by choosing the right partner. In that, migrants use dichotomous practices: arranged and love marriages. The present research found that male children in the family had more say in an arranged marriage, while female children had less power in initiating their marriages. Thus, love marriages were taken to scrutinize their desire or break the barriers of parents' dominance in the decision-making. Love marriages, which female workers preferred, were initiated not only without their parents' consent but also they married without their parents' presence, which is a rare practice in the Sri Lankan marriage system. Even in love marriages, in the changing culture of the Sri Lankan community, parents accept love couples and are involved in marriage-related matters, such as marriage negotiations and participation in the marriage ceremony⁸⁰. Family cohesion and relationships should not be worsened because of these marital choices. Thus, as found in the literature, the parents are responsible for normalizing the situation by agreeing to deal with the love as an arranged marriage, where their descendants take love as a prime part of their marriage decision, thus preserving family respect and cohesion⁸¹. Of course, migrants must weigh the impacts of portraying what they desire, which is against their family's honour. A person's actions are accountable to groups they are assumed to belong to, such as a family, kin and community⁸². Further, the family is a negotiable institution where individual and collective matters are discussed. Thus, each family member must contemplate what they have been doing in contrast to their responsibilities.

The family is responsible for allowing the male children to marry themselves and giving marriages to their female children, which does not mean that parents must show power over women. Al-qurān says 'to

⁸⁰ Bulten et al., *Contested Conjuality? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka*.

⁸¹ Henrike Donner, "One's Own Marriage": Love Marriages in a Calcutta Neighbourhood," *South Asia Research* 22, no. 1 (2002): 79–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272800202200104>.

⁸² Perveez Mody, *The Intimate State: Love Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (Routledge, 2008).

arrange marriages between the single men and women⁸³, and more specifically, it commands eligible men to marry of their choice since he is the caretaker over the woman⁸⁴. Traditionally, the Sri Lankan community is concerned about their female children's marriages. Abeyasekera⁸⁵ found that parents wept when talking about their unmarried daughters, which shows that they overwhelmingly feel the burden of unmarried children as they have failed to fulfil their primary obligation to them. In contrast to Abeyasekera, some women's marriages were delayed because of families' economic dependency on migrant women and the decision-making power of parents over women. When economics becomes more important than tradition, the parents delay marital decisions and approval, as observed in the case of Sheema. The obvious reason is that female family members are pooled to participate in the labour market to maximize the family economy⁸⁶. Thus, until the family's economy reaches the expected point, the family is reluctant to leave female migrants from the family.

The present study found that marriage contracts and couple matching among migrant workers revealed that their ancient traditions had not been spelt out, which leaned more toward love matches apart from the traditional ethnic and cast-based matches and continued without legal marriage agreements. Caldwell and Udalagama⁸⁷ argued that the younger generation gives more priority to their self or inner desire in determining their life courses, including marriage. Thus, the changes in marriage among the migrant workers were expected; however, it was rather surprising to find weddings that the culture does not value. For instance, as reported in the current study, marrying another one by deceiving a family born by him or entertaining a woman in the destination for a particular time and deceiving her in order to join with an already married partner in the origin country are destructive of the family system. This destructing family system must be gotten rid of by employing moral values in society. Furthermore, families in Sri Lanka

⁸³ ar-Nūr 30:21

⁸⁴ an-Nisā 4:3

⁸⁵ Abeyasekera, "Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka."

⁸⁶ Ukwatta, "Sri Lankan Female Domestic Workers Overseas: Mothering Their Children from a Distance."

⁸⁷ Caldwell (1992) and Udalagama (2021)

are not willing to allow inter-religious marriages, which probably occur in love marriages⁸⁸. In the present study, even among the Muslim community, the acceptance of inter-religious marriage was observed, which their parents did not approve. Thus, again, negotiating their decision with the family to get their concern in their marriage becomes important, which would further eliminate the epithet 'Arabic good', which indicates that they are sexually promiscuous women, that was given to migrating women from Sri Lanka over the years⁸⁹.

In the present study, two important distress were found in love marriages, particularly among the migrants who forged relationships with other nationalities: one because of a lack of knowledge about a marital partner, which led to divorce and separation, and another one because of the marriage formality that they followed, which caused them to become undocumented. Firstly, being a housemaid, checking the proper background of their marital partner was limited, which thoroughly happens in arranged marriages in Sri Lanka. As per *Zameela*, *Jazeera*, and *Nisa's* cases, they only got to know about their husbands' true character after the marriage or after they were deceived. Thus, migrants should be aware of the consequences of their personal choices. Whether the marriage objective is achieved depends on how aptly they have chosen their life partner, leading to a successful family life. Furthermore, securing a good marriage is a marker of success for the individuals involved and is vital to maintaining the family's status quo⁹⁰, which is the obligation of both parents and children.

Secondly, the present study discovered that families living with children in the Middle East without legal documents, including visas and passports, found it rather shocking to see migrants without a passport, which had never been made before. The following marriage formalities in the migrated destination are vital and should be taken seriously by the migrants willing to marry in the host country. According to the present study, marriage registration that some migrants ignored was challenging

⁸⁸ Caldwell et al., "Is Marriage Delay a Multiphasic Response to Pressures for Fertility Decline? The Case of Sri Lanka."

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Frantz, "Exporting Subsistence: Sri Lankan Women's Migration for Domestic Work in Jordan" (London School of Economics, 2011).

⁹⁰ Abeyasekera, "Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka."

in identifying them as married couples and legitimating their children by at least preparing a birth certificate. Throughout the investigation, the researcher managed to help them prepare documents, write letters, and identify authorities to solve their legal matters. However, since they are detached from their community and the sample was small, more studies should be done to find similar cases, even based on other destinations, and help accordingly.

Conclusions

This paper sought to examine the structure of forming families among Sri Lankan migrant workers and the range of challenges that they face after marriage in the destination country. Migration has changed migrants' marriage choices, traditions, and formalities. Love and arranged marriage were identified, but love marriages were preferred among female workers. Love marriages were taken to implement personal desire or break the barriers of parents' dominance in the decision-making. Based on the findings, migration was the cause of change in marital choice and traditions since migrants become economically independent and cherish new cultures. However, this research elevated the question of how aptly they had chosen their partner, leading to a successful family life. Marriage is depicted as a means of establishing a key social institution in which children grow up and spouses exchange love and compassion. The current study identified that migrant workers who married other nationalities failed to establish a fruitful family that supported their children and brought happiness to their family lives as their lives ended in divorce due to the lack of cohesive relationships with their married spouses. On the other hand, their marriage decision, discarding their parents, worsened the relationship with their family and kin. The present study further found that migrants who married foreign nationalities kept quiet without renewing their visas or even informing their respective embassies, causing their children to be undocumented even after their parent's death.

The present findings are significant because of the dearth of literature on marriage migration among Middle Eastern migrants and the range of post-marriage challenges that migrants face in that particular destination. As many families were without legal documents,

some feared sharing their stories as it may cause legal issues. However, research ethics on confidentiality of revealing data helped them have an opportunity to share their experiences, in which some described being relaxed by sharing their stories with someone. Given that the present study used only the migrants in one destination and samples are limited, more samples in this particular destination and other Middle Eastern countries would help to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

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