

Laundry and Leisure

Iromi Perera

“Luckily we are on this side of the building so we get the morning sun. My sister in the other building gets no proper sun, so her clothes take hours to dry.” This was said to me one gloomy morning by Samanmalee,¹ a forty-year-old domestic worker in Colombo, as she examined some damp clothes drying outside her eighth-floor apartment. It was meant to be a conversation about her housing documents, or lack thereof, following her relocation to a high-rise complex in a different part of the city in 2016.

¹ Names have been changed.

Over the years, I found that conversations with women in these high-rise complexes always came back to chatting about all the household chores and care work they perform as a way of explaining how relocation had changed their lives. This was not what was promised in the brochures of the Government of Sri Lanka’s postwar flagship city beautification programme. In 2012, the Urban Regeneration Programme (URP) ambitiously set out to create a “world recognized city” by eliminating “[shanties, slums and other dilapidated housing from the city of Colombo by relocating dwellers into modern houses](#),” while also recognizing various social and economic benefits of relocation (CPA 2014: 8). Since then, the URP has moved almost twenty thousand families to high-

rise complexes across the city, with another forty thousand to go (Perera 2020a). The majority of those who have been, or who are going to be relocated, did not and do not actually live in slums. Their settlements are referred to as *watte* (වත්ත, in Sinhalese), which literally translates to ‘gardens.’ They have permanent, fully upgraded houses with formal grid access to water, electricity and sanitation, and some form of housing documentation that ties the residents to their house. Residents in these settlements



Clothes drying in a watte while residents are out at work.

Photo: Iromi Perera, 2021.



A woman plays with her grandchild while clothes dry outside their top-floor apartment.

Photo: Iromi Perera, 2019.

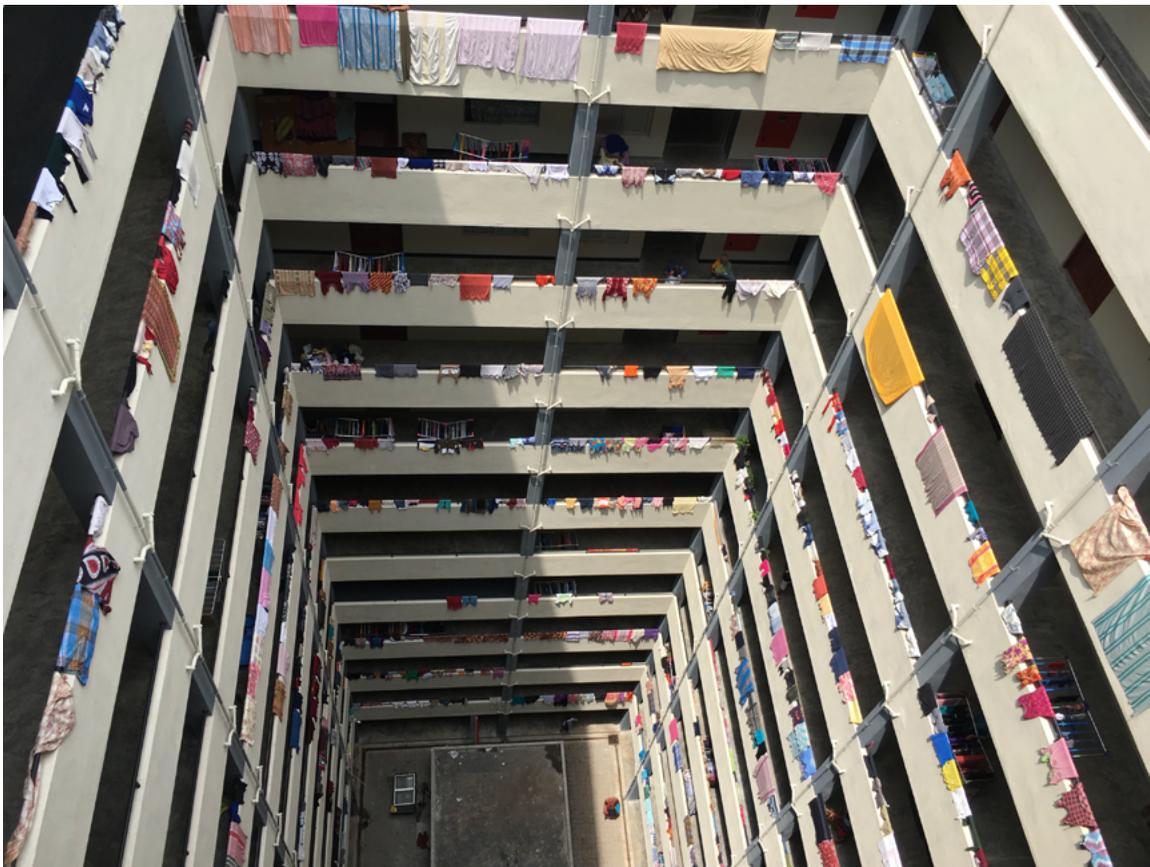
have lived in the city for generations and consider Colombo to be their ‘village’, i.e. the place where their roots are (Abeyasekera et al. 2019). However, they all occupied or occupy prime property that has been earmarked for mixed development projects and luxury condominiums (Perera 2020b).

One of the more telling entry points for understanding the impact of relocation is to look at the human–infrastructure conflict taking place in these high-rises. Apartment dwelling is a very different way of living for anyone who has spent their life in a house. The design and form of this built environment does not take into consideration how people have previously used space. The URP assumes that a “modern” apartment of 400–500 square feet alone is enough to increase quality of life, despite the fact that some citizens had bigger homes previously.

The complexes house various communities from all over the city and the Urban Development Authority deliberately breaks up *wattes* in the involuntary relocation process. Many residents do not have a close relationship or community network with their new neighbours, even after living there for years. Families and former neighbours are now scattered across different blocks. Over time, there have been more complaints by residents about the increase in drug use and petty crime in the buildings, as no one is able to identify whether someone is an outsider or a resident. For the most part, other residents are also strangers anyway.

A regular weekday in a high-rise block where a community had just been relocated.

Photo: Iromi Perera, 2019.





The same block in May 2022 during the Vesak festival. Over the years the women have added some green to the building, personalizing the front of their homes.
Photo: Iromi Perera, 2022.

A typical day for many women in the high-rises means waking up around three or four in the morning, then cooking breakfast and lunch for the whole family before getting the children ready for school. For those who have a home-based livelihood or go out to work, all this care work, as well as household tasks like laundry, must be done first. What makes this work much harder and longer now is that the built environment has neither been planned with these daily activities in mind, nor does it facilitate the communal nature of routine tasks. The women who do not work spend days inside their apartments without interacting much with others in the building.

One of the most common complaints is seemingly minor but it has profound implications that shape and are shaped by gender relations: the drying of clothes. Apartments in the older high-rise buildings each have one small individual balcony that is also used as storage space. Hanging wet clothes on this balcony is the only way of drying them other than hanging them in the public corridors, and in the older complexes these corridors are long and dark, with little to no sunlight or ventilation. Newer apartments do not have a balcony, which means residents are left with the corridor, and laundry can only be done in small batches because everyone is competing for corridor space. Depending on where you are situated in the building, some apartments have minimal sunlight or breeze, and clothes take much longer to dry. In buildings where there is a lot of petty crime, it is not unusual to see women sitting outside their door – literally watching clothes dry and sometimes keeping an eye on their neighbours' laundry as well.

Leisure, or free time, is yet another area that reveals the gendered dynamics of resettlement. The men in the buildings go out to work, and when they come home they rarely help with the household work that has fallen on the women. As many men engage in labour-intensive work during the day, coming home and resting is the norm. Even in

households where women also go out to work, the expectations of running a smooth household has not changed, nor have the ideas of what is considered women’s work in the household. In my research over the last eight years I have regularly heard women remark that even if they did have time for themselves, they would still be cooped up or ‘caged’ (කුඩුව) inside the flat. The complexes were not built with the idea of leisure in mind. Their apartments and the corridor areas have become the only spaces where women can spend time, which has made their world physically smaller. The buildings all have twelve to fourteen floors, and over time the lifts have broken down, receiving no maintenance or repair for months on end. This means that older people, as well as those with disabilities, feel trapped in their small spaces, too.



Car parks and balconiless concrete buildings.
 Photo: Iromi Perera, 2021.

This new life in the high-rises is all the harder because residents have another, prior life to compare it to. While dwelling in the *watte* was not always easy and had its own conflicts and tensions, space and time were things that women had more control over there. “Even if we were sometimes annoyed with our neighbours, we would never let their clothes get wet in the rain, and there was always someone to keep an eye on my child or give him some food if I came home late from work,” explained Kanchana, who worked as a cashier in a supermarket. She had been allocated an apartment in

a different block from the rest of her *watte* and hardly knew anyone on her floor. In the *watte*, activities could spill over to the passageways and streets, and spaces for leisure or privacy were not limited to the home. The *wattes* are not designed in a grid-like way, leaving open spaces and small public garden areas that afford privacy. Most importantly, communities and care networks had evolved over time. Even when relocation has kept a community together in a block, the layout and design can never replicate the forms and functions of a *watte*. It is too sterile, too disciplined (Amasuriya and Spencer 2015), and does not allow for life to spill over from one place to another in an organic fashion.

Neither does it allow people to adapt to change, whether this is driven by circumstances, aspirations or socioeconomic conditions. If a family expands in a *watte*, they build another floor or an annex to accommodate everyone. So when working-class poor communities in Colombo, just recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown (Perera 2020c), were hit hard by [Sri Lanka's crippling economic crisis in 2022](#), the *watte* communities found it easier to adapt in comparison to those in the high-rises. [They shifted from using gas cylinders to cooking on wood-fired stoves](#), growing whatever edibles they could in their gardens and cooking communally in the public areas. None of these were options for those in the high-rises.

The aesthetics of controlled order promote disorder of a different kind, and this plays out in a gendered way. Life is harder for the men as well. Relocation has increased household expenses, leaving men with less disposable income. But in comparison to the women's experiences, their stress is caused less by the built environment. For the women in the high-rises this is, as one of them described, a 'slow death' (අපි හිමින් හිමින් මැරෙන්නේ). Not only does the stress of the everyday creep up on them, but there is great difficulty in adjusting to these 'modern' houses. In advocating for changes in housing policy or even simple upgrades to their building – for instance better garbage collection – women do not usually prioritize their own wellbeing in terms of space. They are more likely to campaign for a children's playground or shop space where they can sell groceries and earn an income, but not a park or green area for people of all ages, nor even a better place for drying clothes. Had planners and policy-makers considered the gendered dimensions of housing infrastructures, consulting the people who were going to occupy the high-rises, the likes of Samanmalee and Kanchana would perhaps be living a very different life today.

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