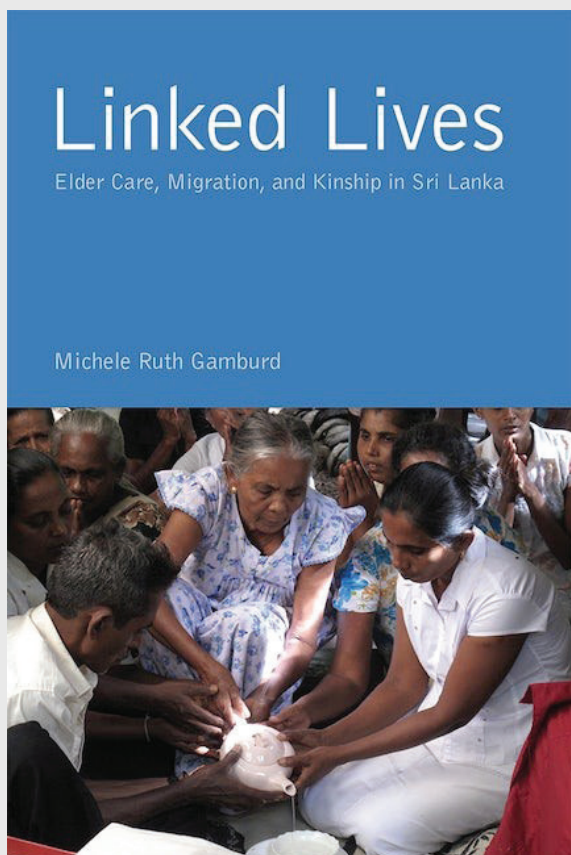


# Linked Lives: Elder Care, Migration, and Kinship in Sri Lanka. Michele Ruth Gamburd. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020

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Michele Gamburd's ethnographic monograph *Linked Lives* looks in depth at practices of care in a Southern Sinhala village, documenting the nexus between kinship relations, globalisation, and migration and its impacts on eldercare. At the heart of the book is the question “how to care for the elderly in times of (economic) crisis when migration is one of the main means of household survival?”

Gamburd begins by asking “what does ‘care’ mean, and what does it mean ‘to care?’” The ethnography highlights six key themes that characterise the nature of care, the first three being that (i) care is culturally specific but adapts to socio-economic and political contingencies; (ii) care depends on a rich network of relations; and (iii) care is gendered and is disproportionately undertaken by women. The book also illuminates how care shapes gender roles and relations due to it being: (iv) time-consuming and physically demanding; (v) experienced as a moral obligation and ethical imperative; and (vi) deeply emotional. For the families in *Linked Lives* care is the moral core of kinship, with the duty of care forming the foundation of kinship relations: the daily rituals of caring for and being cared for by others are embodied acts generating emotional ties that link generations. In highlighting these characteristics of care, *Linked Lives*

raises questions about the extent to which care work can be monetised and dispensed through the marketplace. For Gamburd's interlocutors care homes for the elderly exemplify the dissolution of kinship's moral order. While migration has meant that they must rely on extended kinship networks and even paid services for eldercare, removing elderly parents from a home remains unthinkable.

In chapter two Gamburd introduces her conceptual framework, namely the theory of generalised reciprocity through which social reproduction in rural Sri Lanka is enacted. According to Gamburd, among Sri Lankan Buddhists the ethical imperative to care is underscored by Buddhist teachings that emphasise reciprocal obligations between parents and children: the debt one incurs as a child for being nurtured is paid back by taking care of parents in their old age. To care for one's elderly parents and kin is to earn merit. A family meets their intergenerational care obligations with the support of a rich network of kinship relations expanded through marriage alliances and fictive kin. As a person ages, having access to such a network is a sign of the merit they have earned by caring for others.

Gamburd uses Sherry Ortner's (1996) theory of "serious games" to describe kinship dynamics in the context of care. Ortner's model makes explicit the dialectical relationship between agency and structure by emphasising how individual projects and intentions are constructed and play within a field of sociocultural constraints, limitations, and opportunities. Drawing on Ortner, Gamburd reminds us that throughout the world kinship is a collective endeavour that imposes intergenerational rights and obligations by demanding coordination between individual projects and intentions. Gamburd's use of Ortner's "serious game" analogy as a framework for understanding *why* people enact kinship, however, is reductive. In fact, the ethnographic vignettes illuminate how people struggle to articulate a rational moral framework for why they enact care. Even when Gamburd's interlocutors explicitly explain reciprocity in transactional terms, they also share how their first-hand experiences of reciprocity – both in the human and spiritual domains – are neither orderly nor fathomable. In fact, the family portraits in *Linked Lives* elucidate that the ethic of care is not rational but is deeply embedded in Sinhala Buddhist notions of the good even when one's care for others is imperfect or neglected. In trying to understand the motivation for care using the analogy of a serious game, there is a danger of explaining care in economic terms such as winners and losers, gains and losses, and risks and rewards.

Chapter three examines the long-term project of social reproduction within the context of a capitalist economy and economic precarity. Through several family vignettes, Gamburd demonstrates how families weigh meeting financial needs through working outside the home against their care obligations. The chapter explains how migration changes family structures, intergenerational dynamics, and gender roles, especially when women migrate leaving young children in the care of the elderly. For those with financial means, some care work can be 'purchased' through the market, but as many of the family vignettes show, care is not a set of tasks, but an intergenerational relationship of duty, obligation, and deep emotional attachment.

In chapter four Gamburd describes how the older generation strategically uses their economic assets, especially property and the family home, to leverage attention and care in their old age. Unmarried women without property, Gamburd demonstrates, are the most vulnerable in securing care. Chapter five is an in-depth examination of the Sinhala practice of bequeathing a family's ancestral home to the youngest son. Gamburd explains why this practice allows parents to be the principal occupants for a maximum period of time, while also ensuring that the youngest son takes care of them in their old age. Gamburd also analyses how emigration is complicating Sinhala practices of inheritance and dismantling the idea of the ancestral home and a family's village of origin – a critical aspect of people's sense of belonging in Sri Lanka.

In chapters six, seven, and eight Gamburd pauses her central discussion on the crisis of elder care to focus on cultural meanings of the cycle of life and death and the Buddhist moral framework that underpins the ethic of care among the Sinhalese. Although descriptively rich and important for a deeper engagement with the cultural context of the ethnography, these chapters read like a detour from the book's central argument.

Chapter six explores the cultural meanings of health, illness, and aging, while chapter eight explains how Buddhist philosophy forms the framework for people's understanding of the circle of life: birth, death, and rebirth. The quality of care is evaluated, Gamburd shows, through the presence of kin, the bringing of food, and how the aging and sickly body is cared for by one's kin. After death, care is expressed through funerals and almsgivings. Chapter seven explains people's complex relationship with eldercare homes. To place a parent in a home is considered an ultimate betrayal of one's intergenerational obligations, while at the same time people help eldercare homes as a way of earning merit.

Gamburd's ethnography is timely. Although it predates Sri Lanka's unprecedented economic crisis of 2021-22, it offers several key insights for understanding not only the impact but also the outcomes of protracted economic crises on kinship, family, and community, which form the heart of the social and cultural fabric of Sri Lanka. Gamburd's long-term engagement with a single village enables her to illustrate how the "crisis of care" in contemporary Sri Lanka is but one of many key moments of what Fraser (2016: 99) identifies as "a major crisis, not simply of care, but of social reproduction" in the Global South. Just as Fraser concretises the abstract by naming its components, i.e., "birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally" (ibid.), so does Gamburd through her detailed portraits of individual families. *Linked Lives* describes the ways in which migration – both temporary labour migration for economic survival and long-term emigration for economic stability – disrupts eldercare and the intergenerational reciprocal obligations that characterise Sinhala social organisation. The migration of younger generations for economic survival exposes the tensions between the processes of life-making and profit-making that characterise the globalised financialised capitalism of today (i.e., neoliberalism), as well as the devastating consequences of prioritising the logic of capital accumulation over the ethic of care (Bhattacharya 2020).

Gamburd, however, does not directly engage with the feminist scholarship on social reproduction. Although it is inferred, the book does not explicitly critique how the crisis of care in Sri Lanka has been engendered by the globalisation of the world economy and the international division of labour that has transferred

both capital and labour from the South to the Global North on an unprecedented scale (Federici 2020). The monograph only gestures at global care chains, i.e. the interconnections between the "crisis of care" in the Global North and the "crisis of care" in countries like Sri Lanka, where an emphasis on women's "productive" labour in the North has meant an influx of women into the professional workforce, creating an urgent need for social reproduction – i.e. childcare, eldercare, and household care – which is resolved through the export of "cheap" (and gendered) labour from the Global South (ibid).

Nevertheless, *Linked Lives* exemplifies the havoc economic migration inflicts on life-sustaining processes of social reproduction and care networks in the Global South. Gamburd's monograph is a testament to the benefits of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. Having known the village since she was a child and conducted fieldwork there for over 25 years, *Linked Lives* provides rich vignettes of people's family histories as they navigate the precarious terrain of a globalised economy.

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