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AISHATH NOORA MOHAMED: CULTURAL ALIENATION AND  
RESISTANCE: SRI LANKAN WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE  
MALDIVES. THESIS ADVISOR: MICHAEL HAYES, PH.D., THESIS CO-  
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My study focuses on analyzing how the foreign domestic workers in the Maldives resist the cultural alienation that they experience within their workplace and the society at large. The relatively large migrant worker population in the Maldives lives in an environment with heavy restrictions on their rights, limited mobility and limited physical space and privacy. Their vulnerability is emphasized by the limited legal protection, inadequate institutional support and limited voice of migrant workers in the media. The domestic workers work in households, and are often isolated and hidden from the view, making the group potentially an even more vulnerable group within the migrant workers. However, several studies on migrant workers had described their agency in finding ways to resist and respond to socially, culturally and politically restrictive situations. Through participatory fieldwork with Sri Lankan Sinhalese domestic workers, I explore how they resist their cultural alienation by redefining their identities and through the use of social networks and by negotiating place and space.

Findings support the foreign domestic workers in the Maldives are alienated through policies and practices that negates the control over their work situation. The community and household practices and views differentiate and subordinate the Sri Lankan domestic workers in relation to the Maldivians. The research shows the foreign domestic workers resist and contest the dominant views of their limited and subordinate social space through different means, such as placing social boundaries that excludes other nationalities to create a sense of community for Sri Lankans, negotiating power within the household by acquiring and employing skills and knowledge and building social and emotional ties with members of the household. The social network within migrant workers also provides alternative means of gaining control of their lives in the Maldives. The research also highlights the multiple meanings of space for the Sri Lankan domestic worker, and how the utilization of public spaces and places becomes a key strategy for building alternative identities and resistance for migrant workers.

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