

## **Spas in the Socio-Cultural Geography of Sri Lanka: Interrogating the Social Space of Spas through Lefebvre's Spatial Triad**

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### **Abstract**

*The focus of this paper, the organisational entity termed the spa, signifies a local place with a significant presence in the (semi)urban areas of Sri Lanka. Spas play diverse roles within the local specificity, as legally endorsed wellness service providers and, on the contrary, as places of commercial sex work. In this context, we explore the social construction of the spa within the broader socio-cultural geography of Sri Lanka, utilising a socio-spatial perspective. For this purpose, we draw upon Henry Lefebvre's conceptual spatial triad to examine the ongoing spatial practices, representational space, and representations of the space of the spa. In doing so, this paper provides insights into the way in which the interplay of class and gender relations in the local geography of Sri Lanka forms this organisational entity as a distinctive social space. Informed by a qualitative methodology, the paper draws on data generated from in-depth interviews conducted with the social actors who occupy the urban spas of Sri Lanka, specifically the female spa workers who form the labour force of these spas. Focusing on an organisational context that has become a space of tension in Sri Lankan society, the study provides original*

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*insights into the complex socio-political dimensions producing this unique social space in the urban geographies of Sri Lanka.*

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## **Introduction**

The spa industry is considered a significant part of the wellness economy, experiencing substantial growth since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This growth can be seen in the increasing number of spa locations, revenue generated, and employment opportunities created in many countries around the world (Global Wellness Institute, 2017). In parallel to this, the emergence of the spa industry in Sri Lanka since the 2000s can be attributed to various interlinked global forces, including a growing global health consciousness and the rise of tourism trends that have made countries in the global south attractive tourist destinations (Hall, 2011; Sivanandamoorthy, 2021). The growth of the spa sector parallel to the tourism industry in Sri Lanka is undeniably linked to several political and economic conditions in the locale, comprising the increasing adoption of neoliberal economic policies and the end of the separatist civil war in 2009 (Fernando, 2016). The local policymakers have recently identified the spa industry as having a significant capacity to contribute to the growth of the country's economy as a vital part of the wellness tourism industry (Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade, 2018).

Initially established in Sri Lanka as a means of attracting tourists during the 2000s, spas hold an important place in the health and wellness tourism industry (Azman & Chan, 2010; Lehto et al., 2006). Prior to the Easter Sunday terrorist attack in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic, spas catering to tourists were prevalent in coastal regions (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021). These tourist-oriented establishments were most often attached to tourist hotels and promoted as providing treatments such as foot massages, water baths, and ayurvedic massages. However, despite their wellness origins, spas are increasingly associated with commercial sex work (Suttikun et al., 2017; Wiryawan & Bunga, 2018) and have become an integral part of the sex industry in the global south. This phenomenon is very evident in Sri Lanka, where spas are proliferating in the urban milieus, and are widely recognised as places providing

sexual services to local clientele (Chaturanga, 2017; Daily News, 2018; Sivanandamoorthy, 2021; Warnasuriya, 2018). As a workplace, spas attract socio-economically vulnerable young women, particularly those who have moved from rural areas to urban cities in search of employment (Ilangasingha, 2023; Live at 8, 2022). Importantly, despite the complexities around the gender and class implications of these entities, not least for vulnerable female workers, the social dynamics of producing spas and the intricacies associated with work at spas remain unexplored.

The scant literature which pays attention to spas as an organisation, primarily limits their attention to the economic role of spas as part of the wellness tourism sector (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021; Thalagala, 2022). In this paper, we adopt a socio-spatial perspective to explore the distinctive social formation of the organisational space of the spa within the socio-cultural geography of Sri Lanka. Informed by Lefebvre's understanding of space as a social product which is produced through the embedded social relationships in it, we illustrate how this organisational space is socially produced through the relational practices of spa workers and users and the other social actors who interact with spas in their everyday lives. In this endeavour, Lefebvre's spatial triad has been used as a conceptual tool (Middleton, 2013) to examine the spatial practices (space as perceived and understood by humans), representational space (space as lived in everyday life), and representations of space (conceived space by actors in power) of the spa within the socio-cultural geography of Sri Lanka. In doing so, the paper provides deep insights into the complex class and gender relations that shape the social constitution of this organisational space in Sri Lankan society, which can be distinguished by its own character (Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 1993). The paper contributes to the organisation studies literature by explicitly uncovering the local character of spas—which entails Sri Lankan forms of production and unique social interactions—within the neo-liberal economic context (Lefebvre, 1991).

The paper commences by summarising developments in the spa sector since its emergence in the Sri Lankan socio-cultural geography and then reviews the scant literature examining spas in this context. Next, the paper introduces the theoretical framework of the study, namely Lefebvre's spatial triad and the methods employed to conduct the research. The ensuing section presents the findings of the study under several themes which expound on the socio-political

dimension of producing the social space of the spa when viewed through Lefebvre's spatial triad. The concluding section grounds how the findings implicate the class and gender-based power relations in the broader socio-cultural geography of Sri Lanka that influence the construction of the organisation called spa as a distinctive social space.

## Literature Review

### *Spa industry in Sri Lanka*

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) defines a spa as “an entity devoted to enhancing and relaxing overall wellbeing, through a variety of professional services and treatments that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit” (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, n.d., p. 1). Based on the classification of spas by the International Spa Association (2019), Sri Lanka has four types of spas: destination spas, resort/hotel spas, medical, and day spas. Destination spas offer overnight stay facilities with a range of health treatments and those are rarely available in Sri Lanka. Resorts and hotels maintain spas and wellness centres in their amenities targeting an international tourist and highly affluent local clientele. Instead of mineral and thermal springs spas, ayurvedic medical treatment spas are relatively popular in Sri Lanka due to the country's popularity in ancient ayurvedic medicine (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021). This paper focuses on the spas objectively recognised as ‘day spas’ and which claim to offer a wide range of spa services such as massage, facials, manicures, and pedicures. These spas can be found in urban locations across the country and explicitly target local customers as their primary client base.

There is a dearth of official statistics regarding spa numbers and discrepancies in reported data (Thalagala, 2022) and obtaining an accurate count of spas in Sri Lanka is difficult due to limited research and public information. The *Sri Lanka Spa and Massage Centres* blog estimates that around 263 day spas were operational in Colombo and its suburbs in 2021 (Sri Lanka Spa & Massage Centre, 2021) and that this number increased to 320 in 2022 (Sri Lanka Spa & Massage Centre, 2022). In the same period, the Department of the Registrar of Companies, Sri Lanka (DROCS) reported an increase from 560 to 660 registered entities (across Sri Lanka) that included the term ‘spa’ in their business name. These figures likely do not include spas affiliated with tourist

hotels, as they usually operate under the hotel's registered name. Although it is hard to discern the exact number of spas in the official records, available data could be assumed as only a shallow representation of the actual number of spas in Sri Lanka. However, according to media reports local customer-oriented day spas have rapidly grown in number in recent years, surpassing tourist-oriented spas in number, particularly in urban areas (Live at 8, 2022).

Alongside the growth in day spas, a widespread discourse in Sri Lankan society connecting spas with commercial sex work is visible in social texts such as television, newspapers and social media (Economynext, 2018; Newsfirst Sri Lanka, 2021; Pradeep, 2017; Warnasuriya, 2018). As reflected in the dialogue on such platforms the conflated nature of spas as places of sex work and places of massage treatment and, in particular women's involvement in these spas as workers appear to disturb ideological regimes that govern women's behaviour and attribute supreme value to moral purity and chastity of women (Lynch, 2004) in this specific cultural setting. Government authorities also claim that the hotel and spa industries have a bad reputation as places of employment (presumably due to the affiliation of such places with commercial sex work) among the public (Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade, 2018). Moreover, it has been officially voiced that the cultural values of the country make any sort of involvement in such industries "shameful for women" (Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade, 2018, p. 20). Correspondingly, news reportage often alleges that spas are being used as legal fronts for sex work (Live at 8, 2022). Sex work is legally prohibited in Sri Lanka under the Vagrants Ordinance of 1841 (Sri Lanka, 1841), first introduced in the British colonial era. The cultural values and ideological beliefs deeply ingrained in Sri Lanka's society both overtly and covertly prevent the decriminalisation of sex work. In this context, women working in spas are exposed to police raids and related harassment. Such police raids are given considerable publicity in the media, mainly targeting stigmatising women spa workers rather than other actors involved in the day-to-day activities of the spa establishments, including clients (Daily News, 2018; MENAFN-Colombo Gazette, 2020; Newsfirst, 2014; Prime Vision, 2020).

### ***Researching spas in Sri Lanka***

Despite being legally registered as business organisations under DROCS and being visibly present in urban areas, scholarship on the social constitution of these organisations remains limited. Among the scant literature, Sivanandamoorthy (2021) studied the impact of COVID-19 on the spa and wellness tourism industry in Sri Lanka. His study, focused on wellness tourism-oriented spas licensed under SLTDA or Sri Lanka Department of Ayurveda (SLDA), explicitly claims that spas not licensed under these authorities occupy a significant part of the spa industry in Sri Lanka and are involved in “unethical business” practices (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021, p. 168). Based on his findings, tourists demand sexual services from the Thai spas and massage centres operating in the close suburbs of Colombo and “[t]hese places have become the haven for customers seeking erotica at the optimum level” (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021, p. 168). He claims these spas are causing reputational damage to the Sri Lankan wellness industry and create an “unwanted fear about cultural stigma among the host community” (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021, p. 169). Further, he points out the difficulty in recruiting skilled and trained therapists and that the industry employees are highly concerned about “cultural phobia and cultural stigma” (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021, p. 169) associated with the spa industry.

Thalagala (2022) examined the issues faced by the Ayurvedic spas and wellness centres in the southern province of Sri Lanka, highlighting the unfavourable community perception of the spa industry, difficulties experienced in recruiting workers and negative expectations of local customers. Both Sivanandamoorthy (2021) and Thalagala (2022) identify the proliferation of spas in the country operating under a business registration but without a license from the SLTDA or SLDA as a threat to the wellness tourism sector. However, although these studies implicitly suggest that there is a tendency for sexual transactions to occur in the spas popular in the urban milieus, the limited literature on sex work and sex workers (see, e.g. Karunanayake et al., 2020; Ratnapāla, 1999; Vithanage, 2015) does not acknowledge spas as a place involved in sexual commerce. The complexity and ambiguity surrounding their presence in the local socio-cultural context are likely to have contributed to the low levels of prior research on spas in Sri Lanka.

### *Understanding spas through a socio-spatial perspective*

With the growing focus on relating space with organisational dynamics, many scholars claim that a 'spatial turn' has occurred in organisational studies (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012; Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Weinfurter & Seidl, 2019). Many of the theorisations of space are informed by the socially produced view of space introduced by Henry Lefebvre. Lefebvre conceptualises space as a social product and emphasises that each society creates its own distinctive space. Hence, "each mode of production, along with its specific relations of production" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 31) produces a distinctive space. This distinctiveness makes it challenging to analyse space as an 'object' that can provide a universal theoretical explanation. Therefore, he suggests that instead of analysing the objects in space by treating space as a passive receptacle, it is necessary to consider "space as space in itself" and reveal "the social relationships embedded in it" (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 89-90). Based on this argument, it can be considered essential to pay attention to the social relationships concealed in space (Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 1993), such as class relations and gender relations. As we argue in this paper, space in Sri Lankan society needs to be distinguished by its own character, and it entails Sri Lankan forms of production and unique social interactions (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 31) innate to that cultural specificity.

The conceptualisation of space by Lefebvre distinguishes society's space as perceived, conceived, and lived. These three spaces are linked to three aspects of producing space, which Lefebvre terms the "conceptual triad" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) formed through spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. Thus, society's space is produced through the continuous interaction of these three aspects, which form the spatial triad, and those necessarily become the basis of the day-to-day living of human beings in the world. A society's space is continuously produced through spatial practice, and it "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). This refers primarily to the material performances of the members of society, for example, where people and other material things are located and how those are used (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Perceived space constitutes daily routines and the history of a society which is developed progressively (Dale & Burrell, 2007). How people perceive space influences their everyday usage of space; hence,

“spatial practices structure daily life and a broader urban reality” (Merrifield, 1993, p. 524).

The second aspect, representations of space are understood to be the dominant space of society, conceived by designers, engineers, planners, and other technocrats (Lefebvre, 1991). They denote the interactions within a society that lead to the production of space and the “order” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) enacted by such interactions. The order imposed by such interactions becomes our knowledge of space, denoted through objectified expressions such as verbal indications, spatial codes, jargon, and symbols (Merrifield, 1993). The third aspect of the triad, representational space, is “directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, emphasis in original). It is the space which is lived by its ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ as well as those such as artists, writers, and philosophers who wish to describe space. This aspect of space “overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (p. 39). Representational space connects with the covert side of the life of people in a society. This aspect of space “forms, informs and facilitates the deviations, diversity, and individuality that are fundamental aspects of any social encounter” (Watkins, 2005, p. 213). Any spatial event in the social world emerges from the continuous and mutual interaction of these three vital constituents of the spatial triad (Lefebvre, 1991).

Organisational studies scholars have found Lefebvre's spatial triad to be a useful analytical tool for examining various spatial events occurring in the social world. Watkins (2005) asserts that the spatial triad is a powerful resource for analysing the processes of organisations. Thus, it offers a radical methodology through which to analyse organisations by integrating three diverse views of space—social, physical, and mental—together (Goonewardena, 2019). As such, the spatial triad helps to identify critical problems in the social world and aids in addressing such problems (Watkins, 2005). In this sense, the spatial triad directs to understanding human interactions within spas, the physical constitution of spas, and inhabitants' sense of lived experiences in spas. According to Weinfurter and Seidl (2019), Lefebvre's spatial triad provides a comprehensive understanding of society and the ways and means by which a society is constructed. Thus, the spatial triad is claimed to be an unbiased, integrative framework (Gottdiener, 1993) which sheds light on the interactions existing among the different constituents that form a space, such as the “discursive

formations, structural conditions and economic and various other social characteristics” (Weinfurtner & Seidl, 2019, p. 3) of space, as well as the influence of such interactions on day-to-day life routines. Therefore, the spatial triad utilised in this paper can be productively applied to understand the complex socio-political dimensions of producing spas in Sri Lanka.

## **Methodology**

Subscribing to social constructivism, this paper adopts the epistemological stance that “realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on the individual person or groups holding the constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Therefore, the research study adopted a qualitative research approach, and data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021) conducted with thirty-one participants who are the social actors interacting with the spas explored in this study. These participants included twenty-five female spa workers (masseuses) who work in spas registered under the DROCS and six additional social actors who interact with spas and spa workers, such as officials attached to the SLDA, Non-Government Organisational (NGO) actors, and spa owners/managers; no spa clients were interviewed. Further, non-intrusive web-based research methods (Warrell & Jacobsen, 2014) were used to access supplementary secondary data such as news items, promotional advertisements, job vacancy advertisements and YouTube videos. Due to the paucity of research on the spa industry, this secondary data was used to develop a contextual understanding of the research setting and enrich the insights generated from primary data. Due to the impact of COVID-19 travel restrictions, the researchers could not physically visit the field and conduct face-to-face interviews; all the interviews were conducted via telephone, the most convenient technology-enabled communication method for the spa workers and other actors. Although it was anticipated that the telephone interviews could be ineffective in eliciting in-depth responses, the interview experience revealed it was a productive tool when interviewing participants hailing from underprivileged socio-economic conditions (Holt, 2010) and researching sensitive subject matters (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021; Sipes et

al., 2019). This method supported the participation of interview participants who were reluctant to expose their identity due to the cultural sensitivity of the subject matter.

The masseuses were the primary data source of this study because their lived experiences, views, understandings, interpretations, stories, narratives, and interactions (Mason, 2018) provide access to embodied knowledge regarding the social construction of the spaces of spas. The ages of the masseuses interviewed ranged from 18 to 50 years. Twenty-one participants were originally from rural areas while only four came from closer suburbs of Colombo. Four masseuses interviewed had sat the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level examination, fifteen had sat the GCE Ordinary Level examination, and six had dropped out of school before year 11. The masseuses' experiences of working in spas ranged from one to eight years, and four started working in spas as first employment in their early twenties or late teenage years. The previous work experience of other participants included work in the garment sector, grocery shops, supermarkets, salons, foreign domestic work, and preschool teaching. Thirteen masseuses were recruited via an initial point of contact at a spa and then using a snowball sampling strategy, which is pragmatic with a hard-to-reach, socially excluded and marginalised group (Miller & Brewer, 2003). The remaining twelve participants were recruited through an NGO focussed on preventing HIV/STD and empowering marginalised women in Sri Lanka. Adhering to the ethics approval obtained to conduct the study, all the ethical concerns and risks were verbally explained via telephone and verbal consent was obtained and recorded. All interviews ranged from forty minutes to one and a half hours in length, based on the willingness of the participants to share their experiences.

The interviews were conducted in the local language (Sinhala), and the confidentiality ensured through telephone interviews (Bryman, 2012; Holt, 2010) facilitated the development of good rapport and open responses. Consistent with the interview guide prepared, questions inquired about participants' everyday experiences/interactions in producing the social space of the spa but were not constrained by a predetermined set of questions. Instead, the researchers were attentive to "what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behaviour" (Bryman, 2012, p. 468) and departures from the questions were taken to allow

them to narrate their everyday experiences which provided deep insights into the social constitution of the spas in the locale (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021).

All interviews were digitally recorded, and during the initial transcribing process, all identifiable data was replaced by pseudonyms, including respondent names, as a measure of safeguarding the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. To achieve the aims of this paper, data in the form of interview transcripts were thematically analysed (Mason, 2018). In this process, multiple codes and categories were initially identified, which led to deriving a few broad themes presented in the following discussion.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Under the Façade of Ayurvedic*

Spas in the urban geographies of Sri Lanka primarily serve a local clientele and are registered as business organisations under the business regulation laws in Sri Lanka. The frontal representations (Lefebvre, 1991) of these spas attempt to represent their legitimate existence as places of providing massage therapy and health treatments, particularly Ayurvedic massage therapy. However, the multiplicities and continuous changes that are involved in the representations of the identity of a spa were revealed by spa worker Achini describing the place where she works as follows:

*Firstly, the place was named Ayurvedic [spa], and the steam bath was done. However, exact Panchakarma [Indigenous health treatment] Ayurvedic treatments were not done. As having it under the pretext of Ayurveda may cause problems, Ayurvedic [name board] was later removed, and the name spa was used on the [name] board.*

Analysis of the frontal representation of several spas demonstrated that many spas use different signs and symbols to identify as Ayurvedic treatment centres or registered business organisations. Spa worker Sanuli explained that using signs related to ayurvedic medicine, like a few oil bottles, is a popular maneuverer used to emphasise the legitimacy of a spa to the police and other authorities such as SLDA. According to the masseuses' interviewed, such misleading representation influences rural young women's choice to work in a

space with most entered into spas under the tag 'ayurveda', unaware of the complexity behind the sign (Lefebvre, 1991).

### ***Clandestine Space of Spas***

The masseuses' lived experiences in spas demonstrate the complexities and multiplicities of the social interactions that occur in spas and reflect how spas are "directly lived through" by the "inhabitants and users" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Nishini's detailed description of her work experience elaborates on the ongoing spatial practices and the clandestine aspect of spas.

*At our place, there was no manager. I even worked as the cashier. I take care of the customer and handle all issues from the moment I open the door to a customer. And then, afterwards, the lamai [masseuses] are put on selection. Let's say the customer took me. All I do is take the man in and ask him to change in the washroom when he arrives. Some people like to have oil treatment. Some people like to be treated with lotion. Some do not want to use either [oil or lotion]. We must first ask them what treatment they like. Then the massage should be given from the legs to the head. A good massage should be given to the back and front of the body. It takes half an hour to finish the massage anyway. So, it's good for us to go for a half-hour massage. Otherwise, if completed in one or two minutes, each person will have about forty minutes left for the feeling [sensual massage]. That is disadvantageous to us. After the massage, it is easy for us to handle the man. This is because a massage facilitates good blood circulation. It relaxes his body. Then it is easy for us to feel him as he is mentally very settled. While giving the massage and speaking a few words of love, we ask him if he wants a feeling or not. If he says yes, we provide the feeling...[we] never give lip kisses or suck. I tell [the client] directly how I provide the treatment. When told directly, there are no complaints. After doing the feeling, we do a handshake [manual masturbation], send him to the washroom, clean the room and come out.*

Nishini's narration brings together all three aspects of producing the place called the spa through social interactions in Sri Lankan society's space (Lefebvre, 1991). Initially, she connects the bodily interactions in spas with the conceptual model of spas that guides the everyday direct practice of those

places. In the latter part, she draws forth the embodying complexity of the bodily interactions among the masseuses and clients—the inhabitants and users of spas (Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 1993). Here Wiryawan and Bunga (2018)'s definition of massage therapy helps to illuminate the abstract archetypal of a spa, as it identifies massage as a health treatment carried out to cure different ailments “such as headaches, back pain,...stress, osteoarthritis, mental disorders, (anomalies in) infant growth, digestive disorders, muscle and joint pains” (p. 54). However, when it comes to the spas in the locale, while those places are symbolised as places which provide massage therapy, the narrations of the masseuses reveal that their service provisions extend beyond the symbolic meaning (Lefebvre, 1991) of massage. Their work typically involves sex-related services ranging from providing the clients with a sensual massage—which culminates with manual masturbation provided by the masseuse—to sexual intercourse.

The “directly lived” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) space of spas narrated by Nishini was endorsed by an additional twelve of the women who participated in the study who claimed they also provide sensual massages and sex-related services to their clientele. In their interactions with the clients, some form of agency is involved as they enforce their own rules to set boundaries for their services. They believe it is crucial to explicitly state their service provision rules, like the extent of bodily interactions, to avoid undue influences made by clients. Another twelve of the twenty-five research participants self-identified as sex workers and claimed they engage in transactional sex in or outside spas. While some spas provide space for all sorts of services within the service continuum stated earlier, some spas restrict direct sexual interactions inside spas. Therefore, women tend to develop contacts within the spas and later meet up with them outside the spas to provide transactional sex services, which brings them extra income. This reveals how the interactions inside transcend the physical boundaries of spas and extend to the broader social sphere in the locale.

In this manner, masseuses' claims about lived space of spas or how their bodies interact with the clients' bodies (Gottdiener, 1993; Lefebvre, 1991) within spas show that representational spaces of spas differ from how those places are represented in the outer world. As Lefebvre's (1991) theorisation of space explicates, different representations of buildings contain the power relations that occur in space. The “frontal expressions” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) of buildings

do not depict the complex power interplay or the underground operations of the power relations. The power relations inside spas are challenging to understand through the frontal code, spa, which is only plausible compliance with the law. The performances of multiple social actors—masseuses, clients, and spa owners—are influenced by power relations, and in such relations, clients and owners hold more power. According to the experience of all the masseuses in the participant group, the client base of spas primarily constituted by local males while the majority employed comprised females. Masseuses' performance within the spa depends on the nature of demand conditions derived from the client and the spatial acts demanded by the owners who own the physical space masseuses occupy.

Chamani elaborated in detail on her performances within spas, revealing the multiplicity of the spatial practices within spas. Her narrative depicts how the lived reality of spas contrasts with the frontal representations, as the spa space is produced through its inhabitants' interactions.

*After working in this field, I get to associate with other people in the field. So, as far as I know, though spas are promoted as ayurvedic places, hardly any spas provide such authentic massages. Even though ours is called an Ayurvedic spa, [after a few seconds of silence] I hope you understand what I mean, miss. The people who come to us do not expect the same thing [not the authentic massage]. We have to give what they expect. In the place where I worked before, though it was called an Ayurvedic spa, it was not ayurvedic treatment using [ayurvedic] medicines that were provided. The payment is made at the entrance [by the customer], and the treatment is provided as packages. There are packages called the full body, and then the suck. So, the service is dependent on the package... Honestly, a man does not come to a spa just to get a massage. They come to get something done that the wife does not provide at home. The man will never return if only touch and a massage are done. Obviously, they come for sex treatment.*

Chamani's narrative suggests local [male] clients who visit spas in Sri Lanka perceive spas as a place for fulfilling sexual needs and visit spas to fulfil such needs. While the frontal codes ensure conformity with the 'typical identity' of a spa, multiple cultural subtexts such as private and hidden parking, feminine presence with a skimpy dress, and 24-hour service provide users of this place

some sense of what is happening inside. Consequently, clients know to expect service beyond an authentic massage or Ayurvedic treatment. In this way, when its inhabitants and users live through spas, it “overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). This reality is well depicted in Sanuli’s comment: *keep two or three Ayurvedic oil bottles to show that it is an Ayurvedic spa.*

Based on the lived reality depicted through masseuses’ views, spas can also be understood as a place where intense commodification occurs in relation to sex. As many women who involve in sex work repeatedly uttered, the spas in the locale are unable to ensure their business survival in the current market without providing sex-related services. Spa worker Hirushi suggested that the provision of sex services has become the leading *subject* in spas:

*In fact, many spas do that, and without doing that subject [sex], spas cannot survive. We can’t build up the customer base without that. Nowadays, it happens in many places [of spas].*

In the previously stated sexual service continuum, masseuses who only provide a basic level of sexual services such as *feeling massage* and *handshake* acknowledge sexual services of some kind are an expectation within the spatiality of a spa. Spa worker Shashi goes so far as to claim:

*Some people say that they don’t even want the massage. That means they take a feeling massage, then a handshake and go. Many people come to get a feeling massage. To a greater extent, about 75 percent to 80 percent come to have a feeling massage.*

According to masseuses’ claims, the feeling massage stated above is the sensual massage that leads to providing the client sexual pleasure. As none of the participants claimed to be a massage practitioner who provides authentic massage services without sex content, it can be concluded that sexual (massage) services are the prominent spatial practice in the rapidly emerging spas in the locale.

### ***Objective Representation of Women***

The analysis of the spatial practices of spas indicates how women are positioned in the spas as objects or commodities. The *selection*: the term Nishini uses in her narration, is a code which refers to an embedded material practice of spas. In this practice, women are showcased as 'objects' or 'commodities' in a similar manner to those products or commodities sold in shops or showrooms and indicated by a price determined by the ownership/management of the spa. The woman subject to such commodification has no agency in deciding the price that they sell their labour power (Marx, 1847). The customers of the spas can decide which object they will consume to fulfil their desires or needs. Nishadi explained how women enact themselves as attractive commodities and produce the space of *selection*.

*Now, if there are five of us, the customer can select one from the five to give him the treatment. We have uniforms, and we wear a red dress on Mondays. So, we looked similar as all of us were beautiful girls. All the girls are very young and look alike. A red light comes on at the place of selection. Under that, the girls look lovely. Then we wear a blue dress on Tuesdays. All of us look the same. Then we have to wear a skirt and blouse on other days. We need to wear a short skirt and a blouse. We also need to tie our hair or keep it short. Also, we need to put on makeup.*

Nishadi's sense of lived experiences in spas demonstrates the material practices of spacing spas (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012) by its principal inhabitants, the masseuses and the users, the clients. Beauty is a critical factor which marks girls' presence at the spatial practice—*selection*. Spatial elements like the red lighting and bodily inscriptions such as makeup, hairstyle, and dress code become the objective expressions that materialise women's attractiveness. The similitude of the young women, highlighted by Nishadi, shows the tendency of this space to make them similar but beautiful commodities ready for consumption.

Newspaper advertisements promoting spas are an important source of depicting how the social space of spas is produced in the locale. Most of such promotional texts highlight the feminine presence—the attractiveness of the masseuses—rather than the type(s) of service provided. *Beautiful, cute, young female*

*therapists* is a famous line used in spa promotional advertisements in newspapers. In this context, women have become the ‘icons’ representing the excellence of service quality reflected in their beauty, desirability, and youthful freshness. The images, colours (red), and verbal symbols used in these advertisements emphasise sexuality, femininity, and novelty, symbolising the services provided inside the respective spas. An advertisement for Samanmal Ayurvedic Spa in *The Sunday Times* Hit Ad (2018, p. 123) exemplifies the ongoing objectification of women. Its Sinhalese text can be translated as “look for the beautiful [women] butterflies spreading a jasmine-scented breeze by the fluttering of their wings and be drawn to the smell of flowers”. Here the poetic imagery depicting the appealing feminine presence is strategically linked through a sexy picture of a young woman to the erotic experience that could be obtained inside. As these aspects indicate, sex and sexuality are used as marketing tools (Brents & Hausbeck, 2007), and women have been explicitly reproduced as commodities readily available for sexual consumption. Hence, in this specific locale, the spa has become an “institutional site of sexual consumption” (Brents & Hausbeck, 2007, p. 436). Apart from sex being articulated as a commodity, women are being defined, marketed, and consumed as commodities in such a context.

### ***Women’s ‘Agency’ Inside the Spa***

While such objectification of women is ongoing in spas, the ownership of these organisations has suppressed the right of their female workers to demand a salary commensurate with the job they perform. Many are not entitled to a wage for utilising their labour power as masseuses or sex workers. Unlike other capital-labour relations, the ‘price of labour’ (Marx, 1847) is not received by these women, and that price is replaced by the physical space and amenities provided to perform the labour role. Despite this, one of the main approaches to draw women to spas is highlighting the income potential of being a masseuse. This suggests that the spa owners may play on women’s economic vulnerability and strategically take advantage of the weakest point in the lives of rural, less educated, or single-parent women who struggle to locate themselves in a reasonable livelihood. The job vacancy column of the *Lankadeepa* newspaper, published on 26 November 2017, had 95 advertisements seeking female massage therapists, and around 60 of those indicate a monthly

salary/commission entitlement that ranges between Rs. 60,000 – 200,000. This is equivalent to a middle management-level employee's monthly salary in Sri Lanka's corporate sector (Salaryexplorer, 2023). However, the masseuses do not receive a fixed salary. Instead, they earn an income through tips (gratuities) given by contented clients. Achini described how spa workers earn their income.

*We are not paid a salary. Our income is the tip received from the customer. The place I worked in is a place that attracts a lot of customers. That means there are places where there is sex in spas in Sri Lanka. Also, there are places without sex. The place where I worked was a place where there was no sexual intercourse. In the places that have sex work, the lamai [masseuses] earn around four to five lakhs [Rs. 400,000-500,000] per month. However, the treatment was not the only thing available in the place where I worked. When we do the handshake, we receive a tip of Rs. 1500, 2000 or even 2500 from each customer. There are days when we have around 7, 8 or 10 customers to work with.*

Their services are offered as packages, and a price is charged to the customer at the entrance at the reception, however, only three masseuses claimed spa owners paid them a commission. Others stated they only receive a tip. As most of these women are not entitled to a salary, the ability to generate value for their labour (Marx, 1847) depends on their embodied spatial performances (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012) within the spa. In spacing the spa, masseuses capitalise their body in the first thirty minutes to compensate the price charged from the customer (profit earned by the physical space provider—owner) at the reception. Then their “embodied practices of spacing” (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012, p. 47) are targeted at earning (tip) for their own living. Masseuses have a ‘constrained choice’ in the spatiality of spas, and as such, engagement in sex-related services, rather than being an individual choice, is a compelled choice instigated by their socio-economic vulnerability. Yet, the findings reveal that some form of agency is involved in choosing the extent of sexual interactions with the clients. Acknowledging all these spatial relations, masseuses strongly affirm spas as a worthy economic space which allows them to overcome the burden of their financial vulnerability caused by their rurality, gender and

disadvantaged socio-economic class. So, the production of this social space is an outcome of the socio-economic conditions of the locale. The masseuses interviewed strongly believe that considering sex work as a criminal offence exposes them to further vulnerability and subjugation in the locale. The regular police raids have a high level of media publicity which is targeted at humiliating them rather than taking legal actions against the spas and spa owners. This is well evidenced through the media reporting of raids which solely focus on the women (spa workers) who were arrested rather than any of the other actors involved in the operations of the spa establishments, including the clients (see for e.g., Prime Vision, 2020).

### ***Class and Gender-Based Acceptance and Refusal***

The constitution of spas seems primarily influenced by the distinct class relations embedded in the local space, and particular social classes appear welcomed while others are refused access to spas. Spa customers are segmented into two categories, and masseuses identify those categories as ordinary customers and VIP customers. Ordinary customers are men who work in companies/offices and belong to the educated middle class, while VIP customers are wealthy men such as politicians, businesspeople, actors, and professionals from the high socioeconomic class. One of the distinguishing characteristics of these customer segments is the VIP customers' willingness to pay a high price, while ordinary customers pay a fixed price for the service received. Chamani explained the difference between the two customer segments:

*At most, the ordinary customers give us two thousand or two thousand five hundred rupees. But the customers we have categorised as VIPs pay us a large amount personally, in addition to the amount given to the cashier. They sometimes pay more than five thousand [rupees]. If an ordinary working man comes, he cannot spend much on us. So, we try to attract more VIPs.*

While the most desired customer segment is the men who can pay 'extraordinary' amounts beyond the standard, ordinary customers are also welcomed to local spas, and masseuses characterise them as 'decent' and 'manageable'. However, while accepting upper-middle-class or high-class men,

they condemn the visits of three-wheel drivers (taxi drivers), bike riders, or bus conductors to spas as clients. This shows that people from the lower classes in the social hierarchy are actively excluded from this “power-geometry” (Massey, 2009, p. 21). Spa worker Hirushi revealed the significance of class relations in producing the social space of the spa by referring to a ‘genuine customer’ in her narration.

*You know that there are rasthiyadukarayo [riffraff] who go by bikes and three-wheelers. When we walk on the street, they joke about us and make various comments. They call us baduwak [commodity]. We have heard such things an infinite number of times. But there is that genuine group. They don't talk to us like that. They know we're not doing anything wrong. They tell us that we provide an excellent service. They tell us, “Don't think you are doing anything wrong; you are doing us a great service.” That's why we prefer genuine people. They come and go in vehicles. They don't talk to us even when they see us on the street. They mind their own business. We can walk on the roads without problems. We will not be able to walk freely on the streets if we serve all types of customers. They will point us out to everyone. When they are in the midst of friends, they will say, “She is that kind and this kind.” In fact, this is one of the main reasons we choose genuine customers. They are not going to spread gossip about us. Actually, they are also visiting these places secretly.*

Hirushi expresses her strong disdain towards *riffraff* in society who insult masseuses by calling out to them, outside the spas, as commodities. By excluding *riffraff* from spa spaces, masseuses show their resistance to being treated with humiliation outside the boundary of the spas. Her narration provides a deep sense of the class-based discursive formation of identities in multiple spaces of Sri Lankan society. It is challenging to interpret what the term ‘genuine’ signifies in Hirushi’s comment. The people in the ‘genuine’ category appear to admire masseuses for providing a service they could not receive via other forms of social spaces produced in society, such as family (Lefebvre, 1991). The genuine category appreciates masseuses’ services within spas and lets them be imputed with a worthy sense of work identity. The interactions within the spas with them do not influence masseuses’ spatial

experience outside the spas. As the genuine customer's association with spas is covert, the secrecy of masseuses' involvement is also protected beyond the spas.

Customers considered to be genuine are not the people that masseuses like Hirushi meet in everyday life at public places, as there is a social distance between the class represented by Hirushi and the 'genuine' client. On the contrary, in many ways, the 'riffraff' and Hirushi (and other masseuses) belong to the same social class and commonly occupy public spaces accessible to their social class. In light of the understanding reflected through the notion of 'genuineness', which Hirushi emphasised, I put forth that masseuses' spatial experiences in and out of spas influence class-based acceptance and prohibition, which actively produce the social space of the spa. Apparently, the network of social relations (Massey, 1994b; Truong, 1990) under the signification of spas facilitates serving the sexual interests of males of the urban high class and the upper/lower-middle classes. However, Hirushi notes that these affluent classes, those who are valued and legitimated in society, are highly concerned about respectability and therefore exhibit covert spatial behaviour when visiting the spas:

*They are coming like hiding. They don't even park their vehicle in our park. They seem very scared when coming. Because they worry whether the people at their home will get to know or it [their visit] will affect their status. Sometimes, they talk with us and tell us that their wife will kill them if they are found out. Even if they get a call while in the spa, they say they are elsewhere.*

Due to spas being a tabooed organisation in Sri Lankan society, spa visits of the affluent social class are invisible in the public sphere. According to Hirushi, their clients "enter the spa slowly but struggle to go out faster than they came". Within the mutually beneficial interactions between masseuses and affluent men, masseuses also protect customers' privacy and facilitate hidden spa visits as it affects the ongoing existence of the spa.

The disparaged spatial identity associated with spas and the need for clients to engage in covert spa visits act as deciding factors in the planning and physical designing of spas and in the use of signs expressing spas to the outer world. Spa worker Sanuli explained how such happens in spas' positioning in the (sub)urban locations.

*Many people see whether these are located on inner streets. Because [they] cannot go to spas near [their] houses. Then problems will be created in the homes. If anyone is coming, it looks straight ahead on the main road. Almost everyone is coming [visiting] like doctors, engineers, police people. They check whether there is parking in inner streets which nobody can see and whether the neighbourhood will make issues. Also, whether it is safe from police [raids], we can retain the customers if [we] can locate a spa in such a place.*

As Sanuli points out here, many professionals visit spas, and their safety from police raids and societal affronts influences the physical making of spas. Even the spa advertisements published in newspapers explicitly promote how the spas facilitate the secret social life of the affluent and middle-class male customer base of spas, from the terms such as “AC separate rooms” and “private and hidden parking” (The Sunday Times Hit Ad, 2018, p. 123).

Gender also plays a significant role in the ongoing production of the spas as this social space appears as a taboo social space for women as consumers. Out of the twenty-five masseuses interviewed, only Nishini said that she had served a woman in her one and half years of career in spas. All others claimed that women never visit the spas that they work at. Unlike in Western countries, it is rare to see a woman visit a spa in Sri Lankan society to get an authentic spa treatment. During his interview, Rohan, a consultant to SLDA, remarked on gender-based social prohibition, which means excluding women, particularly middle-class women, from this place.

*Rather than when a man says he is getting a massage, when a woman says she is getting a massage can perhaps create a big issue. In general, in Colombo, it is quite a normal thing. And also, in high-class society. But the social perception relatively changes when it comes to the middle class, whether it is a man or a woman. It is perceived as going for a bad thing. This problem is faced by people who do massage as well as the people who get a massage.*

A few dichotomous relations that affect the social space of the spa, are explicitly and implicitly indicated above: men/women, urban/rural and high-class/middle class. When men and women are comparatively considered, consuming the massage service is deemed deplorable to a woman. This reflects the social

control of women's spa experience in Sri Lankan society, and the *big issue* that Rohan points out here comes from the gender norms, religious constraints, and marital obligations, as the first author's feminine experience in the locale would confirm. This condition is also prevalent in Israeli society (Poria, 2008). The consumption of massage services is socially controlled in patriarchal societies, and women are reluctant to receive massages due to obligations to social norms. According to Poria (2008), massage is a cultural experience that denotes power asymmetries among females and males in a particular society. However, as Rohan suggests, the interactions with this social space are somewhat acceptable to the high-class society and urban geography but considered unacceptable for the middle-class (men and women). As it appears, not only class-based but also gender-based exclusionary practices are active in the spatiality of spas and hence let us recognise it as a power-geometry where class, affluence, geographic location, and gender act (Massey, 2009) as significant determinants which restrict access to spas.

Some spa establishments in urban areas cater exclusively to women, often marketed as nail or foot spas. These kinds of spas are generally only accessible to affluent women. Gaya is a woman who owned such a spa combined with a salon a few years before our conversation, and she shared her experience as a female spa owner. Most of her clients were 'high-class' women, and she explained why she restricted her spa only to women.

*I had a ladies-only spa. One of the main reasons for making it ladies-only was the recognition of spas in Sri Lanka. If the gents came there, it's not good for me. If I let them in, a situation could have been there where even I can't even go down the roads [pare bahala yanna bari thathwayak athi wenawa]. So, even though a couple came, I did not allow the boy to enter the spa and kept him outside. Everything that happened inside was visible out over the glasses.*

As suggested through Gaya's interpretation of a ladies-only spa, the dominant ideologies in the locale which define women's behaviour in society refuse 'decent' women's involvement with spas which cater to men. The design of the physical space of a spa that caters for females is often influenced by societal expectations of women's respectability (Skeggs, 2012). Gaya believes that prohibiting the place for men and having an open spatial design helped her represent her spa's non-sexual authenticity. This suggests that, on the side of

consumption, the local spas that mark a significant presence nowadays are being produced as a gendered social space that excludes women's occupancy as consumers. Nevertheless, women essentially constitute the labour force of spas to cater to demand conditions in the locale.

## **Synthesis and Conclusion**

This paper has discussed how spas are produced and reproduced with distinctive local characteristics as a peculiar form of space (Lefebvre, 1991) in the specificity of Sri Lanka through the interactions of multiple social actors, primarily masseuses and spa clients. Drawing from Lefebvre's conceptual triad, we demonstrated how the frontal aspect acts as a veneer which conceals many power relations within spas. Though spas are often represented as legally endorsed entities for providing spa-related services, such places' formation is most often linked to a wide range of sex-related services in the local geography. In fact, when the spatial practices of spas are expounded, there is a paradoxical association between these representations of spas and what masseuses experience as their daily reality within the spas (Lefebvre, 1991).

The material engagement of masseuses in a wide range of sex-related services results from high demand for such services by the local male clientele. Largely, the male clientele of spas expects services beyond an authentic massage or Ayurvedic treatment, and this has caused the typical positioning of spas in the mindset of the 'local' client. Thus, when the spa is lived through by its inhabitants and users, it "overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). In a society where sex is becoming a commodity in very high demand, spas are relationally produced as places where intense commodification goes on in relation to sex (Brents & Hausbeck, 2007). In this context, the very survival of masseuses as the labour constituents of the spas is obviously reliant on the provision of sex-related services, and their bodies are placed within spas as commodities marked by a price. Within the power-geometry of the spa, masseuses are placed in submissive status, and their performances within spas depend on the desires of clients and owners. Masseuses' livelihoods rely on tips from clients and the physical space provided by owners. As a result, both clients and owners hold power over the bodies of

masseuses, leading to their intense commodification in the construction of this social space.

The findings of this study demonstrate the interplay between class and gender in the acceptance and refusal of interactions with spas. Thus, in the ongoing constitution of this social space, men belonging to the upper and upper-middle classes, professionals, and politicians are welcomed in spas more than labouring-class men. Acceptance or refusal of sexual relations is triggered by the wealth possessed by these men belonging to the affluent classes. The reliance of masseuses on the tip, which is a gratuity exchanged for the fulfilment of men's carnal desires, could be discerned as a significant factor which causes these power relations to interact dynamically in producing the place called the spa.

Another aspect of multiplicity in the production of this social space is the manner in which gender is formed in the specific cultural context (Massey, 1994a) and how “geographical variation in gender relations” (p. 2) matters in such a process. The labour force of spas comprises young, rural women and single mothers who are socially vulnerable and economically destitute (Ilangasingha, 2023). Nevertheless, contrary to this lived reality of the workers, visiting a spa for beauty therapy or massage treatment by a local woman is socially disavowed in the sense that spas are supposed to be ‘scary places’ for ‘respectable women’ who are bound by the local disciplinary notion of *lajjabaya* (shame-fear). Such ideology-driven cultural restrictions influence ‘middle-class women’ more than women who belong to the elite social classes. A few luxurious spas located in urban areas often cater solely to affluent and urban women. This gendered and class-based spacing of spas highlights the local particularity of the place and the influence of the cultural formation of society on producing those spaces.

Informed by the understanding that space “is always in the process of being made” (Massey, 2005, p. 9), we acknowledge that this paper cannot provide a complete picture of the construction of the social space of spa in Sri Lankan society's space. At the same time, there are many avenues for further research, specifically the scholars in the organisational studies field could exploit. For example, as this study has focused on local client-oriented spas in Sri Lanka, the

spatial elements and lived experiences of workers in tourist-oriented spas—a burgeoning dimension of the Sri Lankan spa industry—remain a significant opportunity for further research to develop comparative/contested geographies in a given locale. These include studying what role racial, ethnic, and religious elements play in the spatial formation of local and tourist spas and the way in which such elements influence the bodily interactions of the occupants of those spas. A further critical area for inquiry exists in relation to how tourist spas differ from (and create relationalities with) local spas due to the expectations of international visitors and the potential exoticisation of local masseuses.

Examining the spas through a socio-spatial perspective foregrounded the distinctive formation of the social space of spa and the interplay of gender and class-based power relations in the locale which play a significant role in the ongoing social constitution of the spas. Within the context where spas mark a remarkable presence in the urban geographies of Sri Lanka and, as a workplace, attract socio-economically vulnerable young women, this study provides original insights into the complex socio-political dimension of masseuses work within spas and their broader pejorative characterisation as morally deviant characters. The findings of the study reveal that masseuses are often sexually and economically exploited within these rapidly growing organisations. It emphasises the importance of paying attention to the lived experiences of these women within and beyond spas and to the broader structural conditions which contribute to positioning them as 'sexual objects' in spas. Beyond focusing solely on the economic contribution of the spa industry, this study suggests that policy interventions are necessary for establishing professionalism and legitimacy over masseuses' work at spas as a measure of safeguarding their rights as a category of labour.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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