This study looks at issues female primary teachers in Sri Lanka face in teaching and learning mathematics. The primary respondents for research conducted using methods of critical ethnography were ten primary teachers enrolled in a year long continuing education course in primary mathematics. Fieldwork was conducted at two primary schools where the respondents taught and at two tutorial centers where course participants met three times a month for discussion and assessment. Fieldwork was also conducted at the institute that prepared the course modules and administered the course.

The data collected included observations of classroom teaching and tutorial learning, interviews with teachers, tutors, and module writers, and analysis of the course modules and teachers’ course work. Written using the methods of narrative analysis, the six teacher narratives—some individual, some joint—form the basis of the study. These narratives describe the process of teaching and learning mathematics from the teachers’ perspectives, using for the most part their voices, translated from the original Sinhala by the researcher. The narratives also describe the research process in rich detail, as was one purpose of using the analytic approach of narrative. They also examine the social, economic, and political issues that underlie those issues raised by the teachers, as was the main purpose of using the research approach of ethnography.

The research identified problems in the relevance of the course to the primary teachers and a dichotomy between what the course proposed to accomplish and what the modules, tutorials, assignments, and assessments emphasized. Assessment of the course also discusses social, economic, political, and technological issues raised by the teachers. Further, different aspects of the course are assessed in light of the teachers’ narratives and issues to consider in designing similar courses are proposed. These issues include the need to: build on teachers’ knowledge
and experience, enable their construction of mathematical understanding, address the context of their teaching, communicate and collaborate in their professional development, integrate the professional development of teacher educators, incorporate research on the professional development of teachers, focus on learning instead of certification, and be action-research oriented.