Restitching Identities in Rural Sri Lanka

Sanya Hewamanne

Gender, Neoliberalism, and the Politics of Contentment

A complete list of books in the series is available from the publisher.

Ken Nairn and Alma Cudlip, Series Editors

Contemporary Ethnography
In my factory I sew bags for SFFibers, which subcontract for ChrisGlobal. These bags with the Olympic logo are for the Rio Olympics. This contract is big, so I have subcontracted to a few other women. I have friends, relatives, and neighbors who do part of the bag in their homes. The bags with the Olympic logo are for the Rio Olympics. In my factory I sew bags for SFFibers, which subcontract for ChrisGlobal.

—Nayana, former FTZ worker

When Hasini said this, she was showing me her workshop, which was thatched with coconut fronds and had been built between her kitchen and the home’s boundary walls. Although it was a temporary hut, it contained...
Hasini's most prized possessions—four industrialsewing machines she had purchased using savings from her Free Trade Zone (FTZ) work. These machines made a tangible difference between her time as a global factory worker and her life as a local entrepreneur, or, as she once put it, "village factory owner."

Merely owning sewing machines is not enough to become a successful entrepreneur; one also needs good market connections in Colombo and within the FTZ to ensure subcontracting orders. Hasini and many former workers also showed that monetary success achieved through subcontracting was just one part of becoming socially successful in their respective villages; overall success required combining monetary capital with astute local cultural knowledge to manipulate extant social and symbolic capital.

This book explores the ways in which former garment factory workers negotiate social and economic lives once back in their villages. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over fifteen years, this book explores how former FTZ workers manipulate varied forms of capital—social, cultural, and monetary—to become local entrepreneurs and community leaders, while simultaneously initiating gradual changes in rural social hierarchies and gender norms. Their entrepreneurial activities more often than not link former workers to the cascading system of subcontracting that characterizes global production networks. By going beyond the global factory, this book shows how these workers performances of social conformity and disavowal of transgressive FTZ knowledge within their (usually ///their in-laws') villages allow them to manipulate limited social, economic, and political spaces and thereby gradually reshape existing gender norms. Indeed, these former workers' creative manipulation of varied forms of capital allows them to acquire new social status markers, which in turn initiate novel forms of disparities among groups of people in villages in ways that highlight the complex effects of globalization and transnational production on third world women and their communities.

While demonstrating how working in FTZs introduces Sri Lankan women to neoliberal ways of fashioning selves and how their village entrepreneurial activities initiate negotiations in kinship and domestic arrangements and community relations, what follows highlights how varied manifestations of neoliberal attitudes within local contexts result in new articulations of what it is to be a successful woman and community member. Here, TooGoodMore questions how rural and community relations inform how former FTZ women and community members participate in local economic and domestic change. By focusing on the village lives of thirty-seven former FTZ workers, I show the particular ways in which these women manipulate FTZ monetary and social capital, together with local social and cultural capital, to initiate a gradual transformation in rural social hierarchies and gender norms. This book explores the ways in which former workers may use their new knowledge and savings to negotiate village economic lives.

The Free Trade Zone and Changing Selves

The first Sri Lankan FTZ was established in Katunayake in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan. The first FTZ in Sri Lanka was established in 1978 after a new government economic plan.

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Chapter 1C: Globalization in the Villages

In the country, the Katunayake, a town 29 kilometers from Colombo, managers identified Sri Lanka as "a highly favorable place to invest" (Mann 1993:24). The Katunayake FTZ houses around ninety multinational industries. As in other transnational factories around the world (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Mills 1999; Pun 2005; Lugo 2008; Chang 2008; Saxena 2010), women work in transnational factories, and they have opportunities to get together to share experiences (Hewamanne 2016; Ruwanpura 2011). In 2019, the Katunayake ETZ reported having 22,300 female workers in its ninety-two factories and close to 40,000 working for subcontracting factories located around the zone (Board of Investment of Sri Lanka, 2019).

Assembly-line workers, most of whom are female, are supervised and managed by men, while the top management positions are usually held by foreign nationals. Unlike in the early days of the FTZ, present-day factories utilize day laborers to perform substantial portions of work. This is most apparent in the Katunayake FTZ, where a group of workers gather every morning at the FTZ gates to be recruited by labor agencies for day labor at various factories (Dabindu Collective 2017; Hewamanne 2018). Thus the number of female workers in the FTZ on a given day is much more than officially mentioned.

2009 was a turning point for the FTZ workers and their families. The government of Sri Lanka, following the civil war's end in May 2009, introduced tax breaks and other incentives to encourage foreign companies to relocate to the FTZ. As a result, workers have been brought from Tamil-majority areas to work in the FTZ. Most workers continue to migrate from the economically stagnant North Central Province and Southern Province. As of June 2019, the basic salary of an FTZ worker was Rs.13,500 (about $73) per month, but women can earn about Rs.20,000 to Rs.30,000 by working overtime and going alloted annual leave. There are few state- or factory-run hostelfacilities for these women. The local residents have therefore built rows of rooms for rent, resulting in extremely poor living conditions. The problems associated with boarding houses exacerbate the stress stemming from arduous working conditions and low salaries to make life in the FTZ difficult.

While people are aware of such hardships, it is the status of women working as young women living alone and without male protection that receives the most public attention. Popular accounts of widespread premarital sex, rape, prostitution, abortion, and infanticide simultaneously portray these women both as victims of labor and sexual exploitation and as victims of their own supposedly loose morals. Workers are identified in everyday discourses as "garment girls" and "Jukipieces" and are said to be recognizable by their dress, hairstyles, and language (Juki is the brand name of a Japanese industrial sewing machine used in FTZ garment factories, and "Jukipieces" is a term used by workers to describe themselves).
Katz combines the machine's brand with the Sinhala word used in the factory to refer to the pieces of clothes women workers assemble. The use of this label to objectify workers has lessened considerably in recent years. Somany young women congregating in one place is such an unusual phenomenon that people call the FTZ “stхира (city of women), предмата пе (love zone), and веока пе (whore zone). Their neighbors in the FTZ are at talk about them as "freeliving women" (meaning without parents and husbands), even blaming them for the destruction of Sinhala culture and customs. Although vilification in the media had lessened, the stigma created in the early days (circa early 1980s) lingers on and the derogatory terms used for the FTZ and its workers persist. The stigma attached to migrating for El? work results from an ideal image of the Sinhala-Buddhist woman constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This ideal image projects women as passive and subordinate beings who need to be protected within the confines of their homes, and it was constructed primarily in response to colonial discourse on women and culture. As a result, women leaving their parental homes to live alone in urban, modernized spaces arouse intense anxieties about cultural degradation and female morality. These fears also emanate from a discursively constructed rural—urban divide that corresponds to binaries such as traditional—westernized and good—bad. Per this understanding, rural women who have been brought up with a deep sense of shame-fear (tajja-baya) become westernized in urban spaces and consequently become bad or immoral women.

According to Gananath Obeyesekere (1984), practices of tajja-baya—to be ashamed to subvert norms of sexual modesty and proper behavior and to fear the social ridicule that results from such subversion—is instilled into Sinhala children through early childhood training (504—5). When rural women from mostly lower-income and lower-status groups migrated to work in the FTZ (and thus occupied public spaces), it was the effects on women's tajja-baya that the mostly urban, middle-class commentators focused on. A discursively constructed notion that claims the village as morally superior and the locus of tradition has put another burden on rural women. The belief in superior morals and undisturbed traditions are thus superimposed on women, creating expectations that village women are naïve, innocent (in the sense of being sexually ignorant), and timid and are the unadulterated bearers of Sinhala-Buddhist culture. Therefore, when these women migrated to the city and started enjoying their time away from patriarchal control, fears about their morality became a major preoccupation.
Chapter 1

Given that village women and NGOs consider poor financial management a major reason for the failures associated with micro-credit programs in Sri Lanka (Madurawala 2018), such training can influence whether women attain entrepreneurial success or face financial doom. Women who join the FTZ are placed on a labor clock that lasts five to six years. The realization that they would have to return to their villages and most likely be confined to living the life of a village wife (like their mothers) encourages them to learn about post-FTZ income-generating activities, while the knowledge acquired and networks created at training workshops help them connect with the so-called gig economy once back in their villages. According to Todoli-Signes (2017:194), the gig economy refers to how self-employed contractors enable ‘just in time, on-demand’ services, which consist of outsourcing work performed by traditional employees via open call. Such open calls facilitate unpredictable yet plentiful opportunities for appropriately skilled independent providers, and former FTZ workers, thanks to the knowledge acquired while working in factories, are well positioned to take advantage of such opportunities. In fact, some workers subcontract for small urban subcontractors while at FTZ factories. Only a few find the time and strength to do so, but their earnings and material acquisitions inspire other workers to try to do so whenever possible.

As noted, while microcredit provided by state and nonstate actors has gotten village women into entrepreneurial activities, the results have been mostly disappointing (Madurawala 2018). However, former FTZ workers’ knowledge, social networks, and savings combined with microcredit allow them to plan, set up, and develop entrepreneurial activities in ways that their nonmigrant peers are not equipped to do. The so-called FTZ dowry is a major catalyst for former workers in this regard. As noted, FTZ workers are expected to leave work after five years, and there is a built-in incentive to do so. When a worker produces a marriage certificate within a reasonable time after leaving, she can obtain her accumulated Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and Employee Trust Fund (ETF) money along with a five-year gratuity payment from the factory. This lump sum is what workers refer to as the FTZ dowry. Unlike the dowry bride’s parents give to the groom’s parents, this money is deposited in a bank account in the worker’s name. Because it is labeled FTZ and is thus directly connected to the worker’s labor, the money is more attractive than the dowry for women who are planning to get married soon. Moreover, as a dowry, it is required to be spent or otherwise used for the couple’s benefit in the event of a divorce. FTZ dowry, on the other hand, is meant to be used for the family’s economic advancement in ways that the workers deem appropriate. Relations of the thirty-seven women I followed seemed to agree that the FTZ dowry is given by the factory so the former worker may start a business and that family should not make demands on it unless absolutely necessary. It is this FTZ monetary capital that women use creatively, together with other forms of capital, to stretch the boundaries and activate social change.

Indeed, when village officers in the thirty-seven villages were asked to put together lists of successful female entrepreneurs, not only did former FTZ workers constitute more than 75 percent of each list, but in twenty-one villages the entire list comprised former FTZ workers. All this necessitates a closer look at how the neoliberal subjectivities created at the FTZ shaped workers’ entrepreneurial efforts and subsequent social changes.

Stitching Identities and Beyond

My first book, Stitching Identities, was written after long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Sri Lanka’s Katunayake FTZ in 2000, during which time I worked at an FTZ garment factory and lived with fifty to sixty workers in a boarding house. The book focused on gendered and classed cultural domination and sites of resistance from which FTZ workers expressed critical alternative perspectives and noted how several structural conditions, especially the limited space for political expression and the temporariness of FTZ employment, hindered worker activities that may have contributed to transformation of existing political, economic, and cultural structures. Yet, I hesitated to dismiss the workers’ oppositional activities—on the shop floor, at boarding houses, and within a stigmatized FTZ culture—as symptomatic of a transitional phase where by young village women were allowed space for transgression until they moved on to marriage and motherhood. Whatever the suffering and hardship they went through and however temporary this liberation from village habitus, the struggle for identity, and the resultant “stitching” of many identities in their lives, provided tremendously empowering moments for women.

Studies on FTZ workers contend that employment at transnational factories does not empower women in the long term (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Pena 1997; Mills 1999; Pun 2005). While I agreed that the economic and social power attained seemed to diminish once women stopped working, I wondered what happened to the oppositional consciousness, new knowledge, and changed sense of self women workers had acquired in the FTZ once they returned to their villages. How do women respond to the constraints of
Chapter 1: Cubaithe Villages

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MovingbeyondthefactoryandtheFTZarea,thisbookexploreshow now-marriedformergarmentfactoryworkersnegotiatenewlivesandiden

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Research Sites and Methods

A number of assumptions, based on stereotypical readings of thirdworld
women's behavior, have underpinned transnational production: thirdworldwomenaredocile
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workonlytilltheygetmarried.Alltheseassumptionsinfluencedthepartic
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tries. In Sri Lanka, the last assumption held particular sway as it was the
basisforthetemporarycharacteroffactoryemploymentthatforcedwomen
outoffactoriesafterfiveorsixyearsofwork.

WhileatthePTZ,workersbecamewhattheycalledmod"(modern)
women, but this sense was constrained by the realization that they were
boundtoreturntovillages. Even when women wanted to keep working,
many felt pressured to take time off. They knew that the factories would
kick them out if they showed any interest in continuing their employment.

A number of assumptions based on stereotypical readings of third world
women's behavior, have underpinned transnational production: thirdworld
women are docile and will not protest bad conditions, women from patriarcal
societies are secondary earners and do not need a full paycheck, and such
women will work only till they get married. All these assumptions influenced
the particular structuring of transnational production across less-developed
countries. In Sri Lanka, the last assumption held particular sway as it was the
basis for the temporary character of PTZ employment that forced women
out of factories after five or six years of work.
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villagesthatpromptedmetostudyhowtheynegotiatenewlivesafterleaving
the FTZ. Consequently, since 2003 I have been investigating how these former
workers reintegrate into their villages as prospective brides, newwives,
and young mothers.

This research was funded by various agencies and was mainly conducted
in the summers of 2003 to 2018 and during December and January in 2003,
in thirty-seven selected workers' village homes, with visits ranging from one
night to two weeks and often including two to six repeat visits. In addition
to village visits, I met groups of former workers at the Katunayake bazaar
military and participated in numerous pleasure trips with them to different
parts of the country. Our meetings in 2003 to 2005 took place mainly so
as social visits without any research agenda. But this changed as I kept
hearing about post-FTZ experiences—frustrations, despair, and triumphs—and
started noticing certain patterns.

Ifirstgottoknow thirty-four of these thirty-seven workers while con-
ducting research for Stitching Identities, and I have kept in touch with
most of them via letters and telephone. I visited their villages after re-
peated invitations to do so. These close friendships eased me into research
with in-village settings and allowed me to see how individuals, families,
and communities renegotiate relationships and social positions at the village
level and how this process is reconfiguring gendered kinship roles and ritu-
alsof social conformity. During my stay I collected their narratives and in-
terviewed their relatives, in-laws, and neighbors to see whether and how
they utilisetheoppositional consciousness developed in the FTZ to interpret
and respond to everyday situations. I participated in village social rituals
and ceremonies and the former workers' gendered social activities and ex-
pressive practices (storytelling, joking, singing), which provided important
material on how these women re-create their migration experience for
younger, nonmigrant women. I paid particular attention to these former
workers' involvement in village social and political activities and partici-
pated in their monthly meetings and some organized functions. The intention
was to learn how they perceive and respond to NGO initiatives and the
influence of these initiatives on negotiating new identities. Former workers
happily shared photographs, taken at meetings and village functions organ-
ized by various committees and associations, and written records of their
activities, such as minutes of meetings and minutes of council meetings of their
union, or stories about their experiences and reflections on their work.

In addition, I interviewed a number of nonmigrant women and their
family members in those same villages to discern whether they responded
differently to power relations. I was seeking answers to the following re-
search questions: What are the long-term effects of global assembly-line
work, and how do they affect changes in family and community power rela-
tionships and gender norms? What impact do these former FTZ workers have
on nonmigrant village women? How do these former workers utilise social
spaces or create subversive new spaces? What can we learn about neoliberal
subjectivities and their local manifestations by investigating former workers' recent
lifetrajectories?

Throughout the research I took extensive notes and, when given permis-
sion (which was almost always), recorded interviews and photographed and
videotaped daily life and special events. Most villagers not only gave per-
mission but participated in these activities with enthusiasm. I videotaped
five special events in five former workers' villages, including a healing ritual
ceremony, a wedding, and an all-night pirith chanting ceremony—spaces
where negotiations of respectability were on display. Juxtaposing my obser-
vational data, interview transcripts, and text analysis with the visual record
allowed me to better interpret moments when conformity and subversion
were tightly intertwined.

My earlier FTZ fieldwork and subsequent visits made clear that conven-
tional research methods are inadequate for commenting on women's lives
that are played out within varied, intersecting forms of oppression and mar-
ginalization. To discern their tactics when claiming space and voice, we
need to pay attention to silences, winks, smiles, gestures, jokes, puns,
prose, diaries, and especially letters. I was privileged, thanks to the
deep and long-term friendships I developed with most of these workers dur-
ing my previous research, to be able to examine letters they exchanged with
their former FTZ friends and NGO officials, and with me. About twelve for-
mer workers wrote to each other frequently, and most of the others joined in
occasionally. Letter writing continued even after mobile phones became
popular, partly because it took a while for many of these women to acquire
mobile phones. The letters they wrote to each other were usually kept in
decorated shoe boxes or empty candy boxes within their armoire (wardrobes).
This item of furniture is the only one used exclusively by the young
women who are the focus of this book.
women, who usually brought it as part of their dowry, and it gave them a place to store mementoes of their colorful and vibrant FTZ lives. Most of the women enthusiastically shared their letters and accompanying photos with me while also adding details about events described in the letters.

Six of the women shared their Journals with me. These contained daily entries; musings on life, loss, and love; and poetry about the trials and travails of daily living. By combining these written expressions with participant observation and interview data, I was able to examine how these former 'Yorkers use their oppositional consciousness and new identities developed in the FTZ once back in their respective villages. I had the unique opportunity of starting ethnographic research among former workers right after they returned from a life-changing experience at the FTZ and then continuing to do so for more than fourteen years as they renegotiated their positions within their villages. This long-term involvement was key to my understanding of how former workers disrupt urban, nationalist, and transnational intentions as well as the expectations of village elites through their highly nuanced play of agency, conformity, and resistance.

Multisite Research: Advantages and Difficulties

Conducting research in many locations was one of the biggest challenges of this study. FTZ workers came from villages throughout the country (except Northern Province, where the civil war continued until 2009), and they dispersed to various villages throughout the country after leaving the FTZ. It was necessary to address the research questions I needed to visit villages across the country. None of the villages I visited had more than four former FTZ workers. Two was usually the average. The thirty-seven villages I ended up doing the research in were not chosen according to any representative sampling technique; on the contrary, they were chosen because of the links I had developed with former workers. The particular research methods I favor, such as participant observation of storytelling or joking sessions, pleasure trips, and examination of letters and poetry, necessitated strong friendships with the former workers. Fortunately, the ones who invited me to spend time with them and their families hailed from or settled in eight of the country's nine provinces and more or less covered some of the well-known regional differences within the country. Generally, Sri Lankans attribute certain traits to people from various provinces. Working-class women from North Central Province are said to be good at laboring shoulder to shoulder with men, especially in the agricultural sector. It does appear that women from North Central Province have absorbed mainstream notions of female comportment and manners to a lesser extent than women in some other provinces. Women from Southern Province are said to be much more attuned to tradition and morality. Central and Sabaragamuwa Provinces are generally thought of as more conservative and backward, especially with regard to women's conduct. On the other hand, Western and North Western Provinces are generally considered more westernized and modern, although there are considerable differences among districts and between urban centers and interior villages. Uva is one of the country's most underdeveloped provinces. To gauge the extent to which villages have embraced mainstream notions of womanly behavior, I interviewed the gramaniladaris and Buddhist clergy (in sixteen cases, the chief monks) of the village temple. I was able to talk to respected elderly schoolteachers in fifteen villages as well. They provided complex and conflict-ridden perspectives on good womanly behavior and contemporary economic necessities that helped me analyze former workers' choices and activities within the village.

During research, the differences between regional cities and interior villages, where most of the former workers resided, became apparent. At the same time, there were similarities across provinces. These had to do with the nationalist discourses on female conduct and villagers' women as the locus of traditions that the national media helped promulgate. Television programs, newspapers, and magazines were produced in the nation's capital and yet were easily available in even the remotest of villages. This exposure to mainstream notions of good womanly behavior initiated similar expectations of behavior for young women. At the same time, the media exposed villages to new consumer goods that engendered desires that could be achieved only through increased integration into capitalist market relations.
Depending on the difficulty of reaching a village and by using villagers' own transportation methods, the women may live in houses, huts, or even on the outskirts of the village. Each village also had a few families identified as elite or aristocratic, which were considered the 'low quality' (pahathpeIanthiye/panthiye) or the 'poorest of the poor' (ant/iaduppath) living there.

These connections generate conflicting responses among workers' communities, which are usually reluctant to openly accept the economic necessity of women's employment and the increasing interconnections between the villages and the city. The struggle between the encroaching market economy and the pressure to hold on to certain values requires women to maneuver respectability, work, and travel in creative ways, necessitating new ethnographic research tools with which to study these spaces.

Strengths or Weaknesses: Varied Biases

The thirty-seven women were not selected according to a recognized sampling method. Indeed, one could argue that the women chose me, through invitation to visit, as opposed to my choosing them. Most of these former workers were described in Stitching Identities as the ones who let me join their lunch groups, parties, and leisure activities. Most of the others were from Saman’s boarding house and shared their rooms, reading groups, and singing sessions with me and took me to the bazaar, temples, and shrines.

I became friends with three former workers because of their involvement with an NGO that I frequently frequented during various research visits. This is definitely a special group of women—a group that took pleasure in teaching me about the FTZ and learning from me about my life in the United States. They are also the most insistent among the numerous FTZ friends that I visited and kept track of my visits back to Sri Lanka via letters, phone calls, and WhatsApp.

It is legitimate to ask whether these women invited me to their homes and homes, and shared meals because they wanted to flaunt their success. This could hardly be the case, considering that they had little to show at the beginning. I acknowledge that studying a particular set of workers produces only partial accounts specific to that group. However, it is important to note the advantages of studying a group of workers who are willing to share their lives with a researcher. These are women who are familiar enough with me to recount details about their sexual experiences, share erotic jokes about Buddha and his disciples, and shoo their husbands away to the verandah so I could share a room with them and giggle over whispered secrets.
in the United States. The women treated me with kindness and affection because I was a student (although working towards a PhD) and looked younger than they. However, they also afforded me special considerations and respect, not only because I was a guest among them but also because of my social class. They also treated me as someone who is less worldly because I have had an easier life than they and more or less took it upon themselves to help, support, and protect me. Intimate connections we developed on these bases were evident throughout Stitching Identities. Interestingly, although workers and I moved through life cycle positioning, starting as unmarried women, moving on to become young married women and then, most of us, to become mothers, I have experienced little difference in the way they treated me. Even after I got married (perhaps because I do not have children), they all continued the kind and affectionate way they treated me. This affection, though, is still tinged with respect born of their own pride in having a friend who is from a different social class.

Many former workers continue to use the class-specific address form "Sandy amiss" when conversing with me, even while their children mostly call me antic (auntie). I have repeatedly asked them to call me Sanida or Sanida akka (elder sister), but my efforts have been in vain because they seem to be more comfortable using the "miss" address form even while reiterating that they consider me as a sister. Even the few workers at Saman's boarding house who addressed me as Sanida akka started calling me Sandy amiss while in the villages, probably because their family members did so.

Most former workers combined Sandy amiss with other affectionate terms, such as sudhu (fair one), darling, patiyo (little one), raththaran (golden), and, in one case, neniku (gem). During my visits to their villages, I became quite used to being addressed affectionately: "Sandy amiss, what do you think of this, darling?" or "Aneraththaran miss, don't go to those houses." My intention here is not to minimize the social class differences between us but to show the complex social relations engendered by this unusually long research collaboration. I do acknowledge that my coming from Colombo in a rented van, bearing gifts for them (and sometimes for their family members), and insisting on paying for room and board made my interaction with them far from equal. Yet, the inevitable struggle to reimburse their families for room and board—which led to me leaving money on tables, running to the van, and locking the doors before someone could run after me to return it—led to tears that we and I shed whenever I left for Colombo, receiving handwritten greeting notes for my husband in the United States, and discovering later that the van's trunk and spaces under the seats are stuffed with coconuts, mangoes, and jackfruits for my family. This makes me continually question the complexities of these relationships. These may not be equal relationships, but they are without a doubt warm, intimate, and affectionate, and I revel in having such wealth.

Nealiberal Subjectivities, Exceptions, and Reconfigurations

Neoliberalism represents a set of political economic practices that hold that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms within an environment of strong free market policies and free trade. Neoliberalism also works as a form of governance by instilling norms of individuals as autonomous, self-directing agents (Rose 1999; Gunel 2009; Pevre 2016). Thus, a neoliberal subject is an individual who relies on cost-benefit analysis and market-based principles and embodies the spirit of entrepreneurship. As Gershon (2018) notes, such individuals are disciplined, risk-taking, and bent on optimizing skills and represent a "company of one." The flexibilization of capital and labor promotes the so-called gige economy, and neoliberal subjects invest in themselves to engage in this economy by becoming self-reliant, risk-taking entrepreneurs. Thus, some define neoliberalism as a mode of governing through freedom that gives individuals choice and the responsibility of navigating and enhancing their own social worlds.

Although some theorists suggest that neoliberalism has become hegemonic in today's Western world (Harvey 2007), Ong holds that neoliberalism, rather than being the predominant mode of thinking and practice, is an exception to politics as usual, especially in Asia. According to Ong, in countries like China, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, there are neoliberal havens, while societies remain largely repressive and run as welfare states (2007:5). Similarly, Sri Lanka's former FTZ workers, having returned from an area where market relations and a neoliberal ethos of autonomous, agentive individuals flourish, find that they now have to navigate a different set of prescriptions. Rather than completely giving up on a neoliberal ethos, they start a delicate process of trade-offs that then reconfigure and rearticulate both a neoliberal ethos and local gender.
Globalization: images, norms, family and kinship arrangements, and social hierarchies. Thus while women of former workers experience the neoliberal expansion of market-based economies and flexible forms of capital, they also navigate the changes in the local social and political spaces, initiating new forms of gender norms.

Mills (2018) asserts that gendered moral narratives stemming from the FTZ economic success stem from the way women negotiate the different economic opportunities available to them. Similarly, Sri Lankan women must maintain a delicate balance between pursuing new economic opportunities and maintaining their cultural and community expectations. Gibson-Graham (2006) advocates for reading economic activities as 'difference' rather than dominance, so as not to take neoliberalism as a dominant, totalizing regime but rather to look for the failures and weaknesses that give credence to alternatives. Although what I describe in this book does not provide evidence of women creating alternative economic paths, it does highlight the weaknesses of neoliberalism as a regulative technology, even as it shows the enduring strengths of existing cultural and community expectations.

Most former workers are tightly connected to market-based economies through their entrepreneurial activities, and they astutely manipulate forms of capital, but they do this only as far as extant cultural norms permit. It is precisely this restraint that allows for the simultaneous loosening of restrictions on women's mobility. How former workers negotiate economic activities and social relationships in villages necessitates reassessing the dominant narratives of how neoliberalism is established in varied contexts.

**Village Social Change**

An overall question framing this book is whether former workers become neoliberal subjects while at the FTZ and are now the catalysts in incorporating villages into capitalist market relations, or whether there is space for an alternative reading of how they utilize forms of capital to engage with the socio-economic worlds of rural Sri Lanka. The NGO workshop agendas get shaped by their international funders' preferences and typically paint a positive picture of microcredit. Although long touted as a way for village women to become entrepreneurs and generate income, microcredit has been shown to intersect with cultural and community expectations, leading to negative outcomes for women. Women in Sri Lanka have found that not being able to generate enough income to pay back microcredit loans causes borrowersto lose social standing and even, in some instances, commit suicide (Hewamanne 2019). Former workers, however, used FTZ savings to offset short-term losses while utilizing microcredit loans for long-term success. FTZ monetary capital thus plays a major role in the difference between the economics success of former workers and that of other women. Yet the FTZ economic success of former workers and that of other women are not at all a binary choice, but rather both are experienced in different contexts and have different experiences. Former workers are linked to market-based economies, while the women at the FTZ are more connected to a different economic regime. Despite the differences in their experiences, the FTZ women are not immune to neoliberal pressures and cultural knowledge in the FTZ with local economic changes. This chapter explores how former workers navigate against the odds to create their own spaces.
local resources, such as social networks and cultural knowledge, to ignite success. Former workers thus have to combine varied forms of capital at a given moment to best suit the context.

Neoliberalism also means redefining what it is to be a worker. In neoliberal times the worker has become human capital, and any activity that generates salary or income, gives satisfaction, increases one's status within family and community, and promotes travel and civic engagements is an investment in human capital (Foucault 2008:226—235). Women are certainly engaging in capital investments that result in enhanced social status. If they have internalized neoliberal attitudes and utilize forms of capital to create profit, does that mean global capitalism is fast encroaching into villages and the former workers are agents of this capitalist encroachment? A closer look at women's economic activities presents the potential for a different reading. The ways in which former workers negotiate economic activities and social relationships necessitates reassessing the dominant narratives of neoliberalism encompassing villages in South Asia.

Former workers are creative and strategic when operating within local contexts to articulate new moralities both individually and locally meaningfully. This involves considerations beyond profit maximization and includes an array of decisions and actions based on non-market-related concerns such as love, care, duty, and their own perceptions concerning satisfying domestic and public lives. This is not to say that profits and market share are not important for these former workers—they are, but to the extent that such market-based relations contribute to their quest for satisfying lives. At this moment of intense capitalistic encroachment in Sri Lanka, these women see the prudence in utilizing available avenues to overcome significant gendered, social, and cultural inequalities to somehow acquire their piece of the pie. As noted, I use the term 'politics of contentment' to refer to the decisions, actions, and strategies for manipulating available resources to attain happy, content village lives. Contentment implies a sense of satisfaction that precludes the desire to overly compete and acquire wealth. Resisting the conventional understanding of contentment as resigned, controlled, and contained, I highlight the political value of pursuing individual, family, and community contentment. In this I am influenced by Zajac's work analyzing Shakespeare's As You Like It, showing how contentment both sustains the individual and peacefully and profitably unites the self and the other to provide a foundation of positive affect that facilitates political achievements (2016).

The former workers were unambiguous about what they wanted through their village economic activities: fulfilling and meaningful lives shared with family and community in a dignified manner, which essentially meant not having to worry about profits and markets each and every day. Rather than preoccupying themselves with capital and markets, many seek to adjust, transform, and manipulate forms of capital to achieve contented lives. They also value self-autonomy, human rights, labor rights, and women's rights, and they consciously and strategically combine rights discourses and cultural expectations to create the lives they are most comfortable with. While journeying toward this goal, former workers change existing gender and behavioral norms and create more meaningful social positions and relationships for themselves and others. Skillfully negotiating opportunities presented by the gig economy while maintaining traditional gender norms requires rearticulating neoliberal attitudes in locally meaningful ways. While such social and economic navigations redefine individual self-understanding, the same process redefines non-migrant and non-entrepreneurial women in corresponding ways.

The open market policies Sri Lanka instituted in 1977 transformed the islands socioeconomically, but Sri Lankan villages continue to grapple with competing social forces, with neoliberal cultural mores clashing against conventional ways of constructing selves. This struggle between neoliberalism and traditional forces is an evolving process that allows identities to be articulated in myriad ways. As David Harvey explicates, commonsense is the set of prescriptions that ensure the reproduction of social meanings given to time and place. The sense of how things should be done at a given moment is not universal but relies on social constructionism, providing a foundation of positive affect that facilitates political achievements (2007, 214—216). Neoliberal ideologies and women's particular strategies are changing the extant commonsense of rural Sri Lanka, and a new commonsense is consequently emerging. Operating within the intersection of these clashing senses, former workers, and other villagers must sift through conflicting expectations and desires to delicately balance expectations associated with both strands. This very same balancing act then contributes to the emerging commonsense and more satisfying social relationships.

The cascading system of global subcontracting produces invisible armies of homeworkers throughout the developing world, the vast majority of them women. This system significantly advances the objective of ensuring low manufacturing costs in global production, because home workers typically make low wages, experience unsafe working conditions, and receive no protection from their employers. The former workers were unambiguous about what they wanted through their village economic activities: fulfilling and meaningful lives shared with family and community in a dignified manner, which essentially meant not having to worry about profits and markets each and every day. Rather than preoccupying themselves with capital and markets, many seek to adjust, transform, and manipulate forms of capital to achieve contented lives. They also value self-autonomy, human rights, labor rights, and women's rights, and they consciously and strategically combine rights discourses and cultural expectations to create the lives they are most comfortable with. While journeying toward this goal, former workers change existing gender and behavioral norms and create more meaningful social positions and relationships for themselves and others. Skillfully negotiating opportunities presented by the gig economy while maintaining traditional gender norms requires rearticulating neoliberal attitudes in locally meaningful ways. While such social and economic navigations redefine individual self-understanding, the same process redefines non-migrant and non-entrepreneurial women in corresponding ways.

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Chapter 1: Global in the Villages

With workshops, women were empowered to participate in the construction of knowledge, to transform their experiences of work and life, and to participate in the process of change. The workshops were organized under the aegis of the National Women's Organization (NOW) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), with the support of local community organizations. The workshops focused on essential skills such as tailoring, weaving, and cooking, and aimed to empower women to gain financial independence and improve their living conditions. These workshops were part of a broader movement to challenge gender roles and promote women's empowerment.

These workshops also served as a platform for women to share their experiences and learn from each other. They provided an opportunity for women to discuss issues such as domestic violence, equal pay, and access to healthcare. The workshops were conducted in various languages, reflecting the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the participants.

Chapter 2: Pure Girls! Don't Open the Door

The following chapter explores the social and cultural contexts in which these workshops were held. It examines the ways in which rural women responded to the challenges of globalization and the impact of the workshops on their lives. The chapter highlights the importance of encouraging women to participate in decision-making processes and to advocate for their rights.

In conclusion, the workshops were a powerful tool for empowering women and promoting gender equality. They provided a space for women to come together and share their experiences, while also gaining new skills and knowledge. The workshops were a testament to the power of education and the importance of supporting women's initiatives.

Neoliberalism Reaches Villages

Acute economic stagnation, poor infrastructure, and limited sociocultural opportunities mean that many young people leave villages in search of work. The following chapter examines the experiences of former workers as they return to their villages and engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Chapter 2, "Pure Girls! Don't Open the Door," sets the background for the ethnographic material by showing how an ideal image of the Sinhala Buddhist woman was constructed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as part of the anticolonial movement. The chapter evaluates contemporary media representations of this ideal image, confounded now with global media flows, to show how they influence current discourses.

The workshops were a significant step towards empowering women and promoting gender equality. They provided a platform for women to share their experiences and learn from each other. The workshops were a testament to the power of education and the importance of supporting women's initiatives.
Chapter 1. "Identifying the Ideal Wife and Daughter-in-Law" and Shaping Identities and Village Cultures

Chapter 2. "Industrious and Obedient Daughters-in-Law," traces the crucial role of former workers in engaging in local social, economic, and political spaces formerly dominated by men.

Chapter 3. "Superwomen and Lazy Ladies," focuses on former workers' narratives and the enactment of new identities and power dynamics in their home communities.

Chapter 4. "Sex in the Village," analyzes the complex negotiations of rural intimate lives in these changing times.

Chapter 5. "The Strange, the Crazy, and the Stubborn," takes an intimate look at three unmarried women who have taken paths that challenge traditional expectations.

Chapter 6. "Domestic Workers in the FTZ," explores the role of FTZ workers as informal operators and the ways in which they utilize FTZ knowledge and connections to carve out new social positions for rural women.

Chapter 7. "I Do Not Want to Be Rich and Lonely," focuses on the politics of contentment and how new social norms are shaping women's lives.

Conclusion: Weaving the theoretical and ethnographic material into a discussion of the impact of neoliberalism on the rural economy of Sri Lanka, the book concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for future research and policy.