

CONTEMPORARY ETHNOGRAPHY

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**RESTITCHING IDENTITIES
IN RURAL SRI LANKA**

Gender, Neoliberalism, and the Politics of Contentment

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PENN

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CHAPTER 1

Global in the Villages

Politics of Contentment

In my factory I sew bags for SF Fibers, which subcontracts for Chris Global. . . . These bags with the Olympic logo are for the Rio Olympics. . . . This contract is big, so I have subcontracted to a few village women who do parts of the bag in their homes.

—Nayana, former FTZ worker

Although my factory is made of tar sheets and coconut fronds, and I only have four machines, I am a subcontractor for both Sly Garments and Coles Asia! When I was working at Sushin did you ever think I will run my own factory?

—Aruni, former FTZ worker

When I went to the Free Trade Zone I only had the clothes on my back. When I left I had money, jewelry, friends, fearlessness. . . . Now I have my own “factory” and I subcontract for the same factory I used to work for. Venura sir even calls me his “best small factory owner.”

—Hasini, 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 industrial sewing 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 within 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 an entrepreneur as well as a good woman. Thus I focus on how former workers may be decentering neoliberal market relations while using their entrepreneurial and civic activities to reimagine

social life in ways more satisfying to them and their loved ones—a phenomenon I term the “politics of contentment.” Their entanglement with capitalist market relations does not diminish these robust subversions. These women, while engaging with global and urban markets and obsessing over profit margins, also engage in a complex array of behaviors that are motivated by love, compassion, duty, altruism, and care, which are defined and expressed in the vocabulary of happiness, satisfaction, and other worldly rewards. Feminist political economists have long challenged dominant tropes of capitalism by focusing on lived experiences of economic activity and their potential to reinscribe social worlds in more meaningful ways (Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008, 2014; Bear et al. 2015; Tsing 2015; Fisher 2018). Although not their intention, some writings of feminist political economists resulted in a devaluation of activities and movements within and against capital that certain marginalized groups engaged in. By centering politics of contentment to explain former workers' use and manipulation of varied forms of capital, I follow Harris (2009), who cautions against blinding ourselves to new political possibilities in situations where both reproduction of neoliberal economic relations and alternatives to them coexist.

Most scholarship on female global assembly-line workers does not follow them back to their villages after they leave the factories. Thus an understanding of how former workers may use their new knowledge and savings to negotiate village economic lives is a lacuna in the literature on neoliberalism's effects on people and communities. 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 local gender norms and village hierarchies. In doing so, I demonstrate the long-term impact women's temporary employment in transnational factories has on individuals, families, and communities, and I comment on the fragmented and uneven manner in which neoliberal ways of thinking and living take root in rural South Asia.

The Free Trade Zone and Changing Selves

The first Sri Lankan FTZ was established in Katunayake in 1978, after a new government began pursuing structural adjustment programs. Although thirteen other export processing zones were later established throughout

the country, the FTZ in Katunayake, a town 29 kilometers from Colombo and home to the island's only international airport, remains the largest and most prominent one. Located northeast of Colombo, the Katunayake FTZ spans more than 190 hectares of flat land. The Board of Investment of Sri Lanka (BOI) oversees this FTZ, along with others. Although the official term is Economic Processing Zone (EPZ), Katunayake is known as an FTZ, and the workers, neighbors, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and state officials all refer to it as such, which is why I use the term in this book.

In its attempt to attract foreign investment, Sri Lanka offered numerous incentives—such as duty-free imports of machinery and raw materials, duty-free exports, preferential tax, double taxation relief, unrestricted repatriation of dividends, and up to 100 percent foreign ownership. One major attraction the BOI cited when advertising the FTZ's prospects was the “availability of a low cost, easily trainable work force,” while foreign factory managers in turn identified Sri Lanka as “a highly favorable place to invest” (Mann 1993: 24).

The Katunayake FTZ houses around ninety multinational industries that practice a distinctively late capitalist form of gendered working relations. Garment factories, which make up the majority of industries within the FTZ, recruit large numbers of young rural women from economically and socially marginalized groups to work as machine operators. According to some accounts, the availability of “well-disciplined and obedient women workers who can produce more in a short time” was used as bait to attract investors to Sri Lanka's FTZs (Dabindu Collective 1997: 17). Most of the female workers are unmarried, young, and relatively well educated. In 2015, just over 80 percent had passed the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) exam, roughly equivalent to earning a high school diploma (Hewamanne 2016).

As in other transnational factories around the world (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Mills 1999; Pun 2005; Lugo 2008; Chang 2008; Saxena 2014), Katunayake factories demand maximal output for minimal wages in exploitative working conditions. Workers suffer from various ailments due to difficult work and living conditions and are sexually harassed on their way to and from work (Samaraweera 2012; Hewamanne 2016; 2019). There are many legal and practical barriers to organizing trade unions within the FTZ, but NGOs have helped somewhat by providing legal advice and opportunities for workers to get together to share experiences (Hewamanne 2016; Ruwanpura 2011).

In 2019 the Katunayake FTZ 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 mostly present in the Katunayake FTZ, where a group of workers gathers 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 within the FTZ on a given day is much more than officially mentioned.

The vast majority of these young women are ethnically Sinhala and are Buddhist.¹ The locations of the FTZs in Sinhala-majority areas discourage Tamil women from seeking employment. I met only a handful of FTZ workers who belonged to minority communities when I lived in the Katunayake FTZ area in 2000.² However, and as explained briefly in Chapter 7, labor contractors have been bringing groups of Tamil women to work in the Katunayake FTZ since the island's civil war ended in May 2009.

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 \$75) per month, but women can earn about Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 30,000 by working overtime and forgoing allotted annual leave. There are few state- or factory-run hostel facilities for these women. The locals have therefore built rows of rooms for rent, resulting in extremely poor living conditions. The problems associated with boardinghouses exacerbate the stress stemming from arduous working conditions and low salaries to make life in the FTZ difficult (TIE Asia 2003; Dabindu Collective 2017; Hewamanne 2018).

While people are aware of such hardships, it is the status of workers 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 “Juki pieces” 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 “Juki pieces” [Juki

kajji combines the machine's brand with the Sinhala word used in the factories to refer to the pieces of clothes women workers assemble. The use of this label to objectify workers has lessened considerably in recent years.

So many young women congregating in one place is such an unusual phenomenon that people call the FTZ *shri puraya* (city of women), *pemma kalape* (love zone), and *vesa kalape* (whore zone). Their neighbors in the FTZ area talk about them as "free living 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 FTZ 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 (*lajja-baya*) become westernized in urban spaces and consequently become bad or immoral women.

According to Gananath Obeyesekere (1984), practices of *lajja-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 *lajja-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 naive, innocent (in the sense of being sexually ignorant), and timid and are the undaunted bearers of Sinhala Buddhist culture.³ 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

for urban, middle-class nationalists. Like nationalists in many other postcolonial societies, they too considered any threat to women's morality a threat against the cultural purity of the nation (Chatterjee 1993; Yuvai-Davis 1997; Kandoyi 2000). Consequently, migrating to the city and living away from their families in a stigmatized space affects their reputations and lowers these workers' value when it comes time to contract marriages (Hewamanne 2016, 2018, 2019).

Although the difficulties associated with FTZ work seem to outweigh gains, a stagnant agricultural economy, lack of alternative employment, and quest for urban lifestyles appear to motivate women to migrate. And by working in the FTZ and living with other young women in an urban area, rural women experience social, cultural, emotional, and cognitive changes. They start to enjoy relative freedom of movement and increased decision-making powers. They acquire global knowledge flows on reproductive, labor, and human rights, and the intense socialization process in factories and boarding-houses encourages them to dress, behave, think, and desire in new ways. Furthermore, they develop forms of political and feminist consciousness and absorb particular forms of neoliberal narratives that circulate within the FTZ area.

While negotiating difficult lives in transnational factories, they also develop friendships and mentoring relationships with people in the area, NGO staff members, and even local and foreign aid workers and researchers (Hewamanne 2008, 2016). Most workers eagerly attend classes in dance, spoken English, beauty culture, and computers offered by NGOs. Several NGOs in the area also run educational workshops for workers that address how to develop income-generating activities once they return to their villages. Through these classes, and through their mentors (boardinghouse owners, NGO officials, factory officials), women meet small subcontractors in the area and learn about generating income in the global economy. At one such NGO workshop I attended, a husband-and-wife duo discussed how workers could set up "factories" in villages to subcontract for urban subcontractors and volunteered to visit villages to help women streamline production. They later told me that a consortium of several big FTZ factories financed their work as part of their corporate social responsibility activities.

Mas Holdings, a major company with several factories at Katunayake and elsewhere, has initiated a program, Women Go Beyond, to provide their workers with multilateral skills like bag and shoe making or bridal dress and cake making. They also train workers in personal finance management

(Mas Holdings n.d.). Given that village women and NGOs consider poor financial management a major reason for the failures associated with micro-credit loans 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 knowledges acquired and networks created at training workshops help them connect with the so-called gig economy once back in the villages. According to Todoli-Signes (2017: 194), the gig economy refers to how self-employed contractors enable “just in time, on demand” services, which consists 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 extra income and material acquisitions inspire other workers to try to do likewise 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 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 a 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 women’s labor, their spouses and affines, for the most part, allow them to use the money for the family’s economic advancement in ways the workers deem appropriate. Relatives 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.⁴ It is this FTZ monetary capital that women use creatively, together with other forms of capital, to stretch normative 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 stayed with fifty or sixty workers in a boardinghouse. 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 constrained 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 boardinghouses, and within a stigmatized FTZ culture—as symptomatic of a transitional phase whereby 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.⁵

Studies on FTZ work 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 seem to diminish once women stop 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

village life with their newfound sense of self? What aspects of their acquired knowledge do they share with other village women? Do they go to work in village factories or use their FTZ savings to start home-based income-generating activities? Do they yearn for the colorful, transgressive years they experienced at the FTZ and, if so, how do they manage to keep such memories alive? Are they able to inspire any changes in village social norms or power relations? These are the questions that drove me to extend my research to workers' post-FTZ lives in villages throughout the country.

Stitching Identities mainly focused on how migrant garment factory workers understood and responded to the new cultural discourse they encountered at the FTZ and how they developed a new sense of themselves within and against dominant cultural discourses. The articulation of their new sense of self as industrial workers living in the city juxtaposed with their being young, unmarried daughters from patriarchal villages enabled viable spaces for creativity, tactics, and strategies. These spaces, where the clash of contradictory discourses played a central part in shaping their responses to specific situations, showed how FTZ factory workers combined elements from varied discourses to construct and narrate new identities. In short, they not only refused to uncritically accept identities crafted for them within various dominant discourses, but they also situationally negotiated alternative identities within shifting relations of power.

Moving beyond the factory and the FTZ area, this book explores how now-married former garment factory workers negotiate new lives and identities in their husbands' villages. These are workers who spent many years living in an urban transnational space where evil men and the hedonistic consumer culture are thought to corrupt innocent village women. Although vilified to a certain extent as transgressive, most manage to earn respect and decision-making powers within their families because of their financial contributions. However, after leaving the FTZ and getting married, often through parental arrangements, they find themselves in their in-laws' villages, where the surveillance mechanisms are even more strict for women who have married into the community. Constrained by rigid social norms and surveillance, these women, who developed an intense oppositional consciousness during their time in the FTZ, engage in disciplining their bodies, speech, and mannerisms.

On the surface, the women may appear to have reverted back to their pre-FTZ selves, but a closer look shows that their apparent conformity is part of a complex strategy for rebuilding respectability. This book thus

investigates how a deliberate display of conformity enables these women to use networks developed in the FTZs along with their savings and village social, cultural, and symbolic capital to generate income and facilitate entry into the village sociopolitical scene. The following sections discuss the sites and methods of research and provide a theoretical framework and flight plan for the chapters to follow.

Research Sites and Methods

A number of assumptions, based on stereotypical readings of third world societies, underline transnational production: third world women are docile and will not protest bad conditions, women from patriarchal 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 FTZ employment that forced women out of factories after five or six years of work.

While at the FTZ, workers became what they called "mod" (modern) women, but this sense was constrained by the realization that they were bound to return to villages. Even when women wanted to keep working, social pressure and the monetary incentive (FTZ dowry) made it difficult to do so. For example, people widely assume that the only reason women continue working is that no man wants to marry them—a powerful psychic pressure that induces women to leave their employment at the expected time. Throughout my field research, I talked to young workers who contemplated their eventual departure from Katunayake with trepidation. Despite being physically tired, feeling disillusioned about FTZ work, and envisioning more restful lives in their native villages, they dreaded exchanging the relative economic freedom, social independence, and consumer culture that the FTZ afforded for villages where surveillance regimes were more strictly enforced.

Nearly all these women wished they could settle in Katunayake with their new spouses and continue to work. However, circumstances—such as factory discrimination against married women and mothers, lack of job opportunities for men, men's economic and familial responsibilities in their native villages, and concerns about the stigma of FTZ work—made it difficult

for many women to achieve this dream. It was this reluctance to return to villages that prompted me to study how they negotiate new lives after leaving the FTZ. Consequently, since 2003 I have been investigating how these former workers reintegrate into their villages as prospective brides, new wives, and young mothers.⁶

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, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2015. During these times, I stayed 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 bus terminal and participated in numerous pleasure trips with them to different parts of the country. Our meetings in 2003 to 2005 took place mainly 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.

I first got to know thirty-four of these thirty-seven workers while conducting research for *Stitching Identities*, and I have kept in touch with most of them via letters and telephone. I visited their villages after repeated invitations to do so. These close friendships eased me into research within 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 rituals of social conformity. During my stay I collected their narratives and interviewed their relatives, in-laws, and neighbors to see whether and how they use the oppositional 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 expressive practices (storytelling, joking, singing) which provided important material on how these women recreate their migration experience for younger, nonmigrant women. I paid particular attention to these former workers' involvement in village social and political activities and participated 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 organized by various committees and associations, and written records of their activities, such as minutes of meetings and newspaper features of village

functions. Collecting women's narratives about their pursuits and studying the visual and written records allowed me to see whether these former workers engage in political activities on their own terms.

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 research questions: What are the long-term effects of global assembly-line work, and how do they affect changes in family and community power relations and gender norms? What impact do these former FTZ workers have on nonmigrant village women? How do these former workers utilize social spaces or create subversive new spaces? What can we learn about neoliberal subjectivities and their local manifestations by investigating former workers' recent life trajectories?

Throughout the research I took extensive notes and, when given permission (which was almost always), recorded interviews and photographed and videotaped daily life and special events. Most villagers not only gave permission 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 observational 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 conventional research methods are inadequate for commenting on women's lives that are played out within varied, intersecting forms of oppression and marginalization. To discern their tactics when claiming space and voice, we need to pay attention to silences, winks, smiles, gestures, jokes, puns, poetry, journal entries, and especially letters. I was privileged, thanks to the deep and long-term friendships I developed with most of these workers during my previous research, to be able to examine letters they exchanged with their former FTZ friends and NGO officials, and with me. About twelve former 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 *almairanis* (wardrobes). This item of furniture is the only one used exclusively by the young

women, who usually brought it as part of their dowry, and it gives 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 tribulations of daily living. By combining these written expressions with participant observation and interview data, I was able to examine how these former workers utilize the 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 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.

Multisited 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. Thus 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 joke-telling 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 in villages 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.

Of these thirty-seven former workers, nine were from Southern Province, eight from North Central Province, five each from Central and North Western Provinces, four from Western Province, two each from Uva and

Sabaragamuwa Provinces, and two from Eastern Province. I identify villages by the names that villagers use, and these usually coincide with the name of the *grama niladari* division (village government agent).⁷ As no official statistics exist on how many workers the respective provinces send to the FTZ, determining regional representativeness is next to impossible.

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 have women in some other provinces. Women from Southern Province are said to be much more attuned to nationalist discourses and mainstream notions of "good woman" ideals, causing them to pay more attention to traditions and morals. 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 most underdeveloped provinces in the country. To gauge the extent to which villages have embraced mainstream notions of womanly behavior, I interviewed the grama niladaris and Buddhist clergy (in sixteen cases, the chief monks) of the village temple. I was able to talk to respected elderly school teachers in thirteen 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 with village 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' sense of their village status, I categorized twenty-one villages to be remote. In such villages, some houses could be reached only by walking on foot paths. Many residents claimed that a trip to a regional city was a hassle. I categorized all but six villages as largely dependent on agriculture. However, all thirty-seven villages showed varying levels of integration with Colombo and regional cities, and many men and women were working in cities. Seven villages, five in Western Province and one each in North Western and Central Provinces, had more visible connections to Colombo and Kandy. Categorizing any village according to a socioeconomic index was difficult, as different social groups have different living standards. All the villages displayed social hierarchies based on intertwined factors of land ownership, houses, material wealth, and family name. Village categorizations are based on my observations and discussions with village leaders and former workers. In at least thirty villages, people relegated bad behaviors to a section where the "low quality" (*pahath pelanthiyel/panthiyel*) or the "poorest of the poor" (*antha duppath*) live.

Each village also had a few families who were identified as elite or aristocratic (*walaw*) and a number of families considered respectable and well-to-do. Daughters from those families rarely traveled to the FTZ for work. They either stayed home after schooling until a marriage was arranged or found jobs as teachers, nurses, or clerks in reputable establishments. When these women needed to be boarded in cities, they usually stayed with relatives or in respectable private homes with elderly women. A broader section of the villages was identified as middle or lower middle class but upwardly mobile. Whereas eighteen former workers reported that they came from poor families, only three said they had married into poor families. All the others felt that they married up into the middle strata of the villages where they now resided. Their husbands had government jobs, worked overseas or in middle-level business positions, or came from families with land and good reputations. This positioning directly influenced how their FTZ time, return, and public behavior were perceived and interpreted.

As noted, many men in these villages were connected to Colombo and other regional centers through their work, and a number of women had been to the Middle East to work as housemaids. These links to cities have increased continually since independence. The translocal connections that former FTZ workers manipulate, however, represent a particular manifestation of late capitalist economic relations and are open to more contentious

interpretations. 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 onto 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

These thirty-seven women were not selected according to a recognized sampling method. Indeed, one could argue that the women chose me, through invitations 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 group, parties, and leisure activities. Most of the others were from Saman's boardinghouse 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 too 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, lately, WhatsApp.

It is legitimate to ask whether these women invited me to their homes 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 show their husbands away to sleep on the verandah so I could share a room with them and giggle over whispered secrets.

Although I am a Sri Lankan woman of their own ethnicity and the same religion of most, and I speak the same language, I was brought up in a Colombo suburb and belong to a middle-class family. When I first started my research in the Katunayake FTZ, the most obvious differences between the workers and myself were my university education and the few years I spent

in the United States. The women treated me with kindness and affection because I was a student (although working toward 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 the workers and I moved through life cycle positioning, starting as unmarried women, moving on to becoming young married women and then, most of us, to becoming 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 borne 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 “Sandya miss” when conversing with me, even while their children mostly called me *antie* (auntie). I have repeatedly asked them to call me Sandya or Sandya *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 a sister. Even the few workers at Saman’s boardinghouse who addressed me as Sandya *akka* started calling me Sandya miss while in the villages, probably because their family members did so.

Most former workers combined Sandya miss with other affectionate terms, such as *sudhu* (fair one), darling, *patiyu* (little one), *raththaran* (golden), and, in one case, *menika* (gem). During my visits to their villages I became quite used to being addressed affectionately: “Sandya miss, what do you think of this, darling?” or “*Ane raththaran* 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 interactions with them far from equal. Yet, the inevitable struggle to reimburse their families for room and board—which led to my leaving money on tables, running to the van, and locking the doors before someone could run after me to return it—the tears that they 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 all make 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 reveal in having such wealth.

Neoliberal Subjectivities, Exceptions, and Reconfigurations

Neoliberalism represents a set of political economic practices that hold “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms” (Harvey 2007: 2) within an environment of strong free market policies and free trade. Neoliberalism also works as a form of governmentality by instilling norms of individual selves as autonomous, self-directing agents (Rose 1999; Gunel 2009; Fevre 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 in short represent a “company of one.” The flexibilization of capital and labor promotes the so-called gig 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 designated zones or dedicated areas that 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 individual flourish, find that they now have to navigate a different set of prescriptions. Rather than completely giving up on neoliberal ethos, they start a delicate process of trade-offs that then reconfigure and rearticulate both a neoliberal ethos and local gender

norms, family and kinship arrangements, and social hierarchies. Thus while neoliberalism manifest in Sri Lanka in the first instance as an exception, its attendant narratives and discourses escape those confines and travel to various corners of the country via former global factory workers. The villages the former workers return to are more or less differently positioned in their experiences of national and colonial history, cultural practices, and socioeconomic standing. Thus former workers have to combine neoliberal entrepreneurial sensibilities, skills, and resources acquired in the FTZ with local resources, such as affinal social networks and cultural knowledge, to ignite economic success. In short, they have to manipulate varied forms of capital at a given moment to best suit the context. This includes performing rituals of social conformity to repair their damaged reputations, which then leads to the support of affinal kin and the community. The latter is a must for a woman, no matter how skilled and thoroughly embodying neoliberal sensibilities, to succeed economically. As I show later, the entrepreneurial success allows women to participate in village social, cultural, and political spaces, initiating changes in gender norms.

Mills (2018) asserts that the gendered moral narratives stemming from new patterns of global production in Asia reveal how local ideological support sustains neoliberal models of development and governance. Invoking both Lynch (2007) and Hewamanne (2008), Mills further elaborates how narratives and images of female immorality connected with global production in Sri Lanka to initiate varied moral and material demands that marginalized and gendered groups must carefully navigate daily. Freeman (2014) discusses how upwardly mobile Caribbean middle-class entrepreneurs must walk the tight rope of respectability while engaging with a flexible economy. Women who may get recognized for hard work and creativity can suffer loss of respectability, and Freeman focused on symbolic trade-offs people navigate when availing themselves of flexible economic opportunities. Similarly, Sri Lankan women must maintain a delicate balance of pursuing income-generating activities formerly reserved for men while performing culturally expected “good women” roles. This balancing act reshapes the neoliberal ethos at the same time it initiates changes in the very norms that necessitate the balancing. Thus, how former workers negotiate social economic life in their villages may, in the long run, help erode the gendered moral narratives that support the exploitative global production arrangements in Sri Lanka.

Gibson-Graham (2006) advocates for reading economic activities for “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 give evidence to 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 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 establishing itself in varied contexts.

Village Social Change

An overall question framing this book is whether former workers became neoliberal subjects while at the FTZ and are now the catalyst incorporating villages in capitalist market relations, or whether there is space for an alternative reading of how they utilize forms of capital to engage with the socioeconomic worlds of rural Sri Lanka. The NGO workshops that women attend while in the FTZ instill in them the notion that connecting to the gig economy is the best way to achieve post-FTZ economic success. The NGO workshop agendas get shaped by their international funders’ preferences and typically paint a positive view of microcredit. Although long touted as a way for village women to become entrepreneurs, alternative readings have shown how microcredit leads to new forms of hierarchies and cultures of shame (Karim 2011). Village women in Sri Lanka too have found that not being able to generate enough income to pay back microcredit loans causes borrowers to 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 economic success of former workers and that of other women. Yet, the villages they return to are more or less integrated into the dominant cultural narratives and expect certain behaviors and social conformity from younger women. These expectations mandate that the neoliberal entrepreneurial sensibilities, skills, and resources acquired in the FTZ must get paired with

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 village spaces 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 necessitate 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 mores both individually and in locally meaningful ways. 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 peaceably and profitably unites the self and the other to provide a foundation of positive affect that facilitates political achievements (2016).⁸

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 nonmigrant and nonentrepreneurial women in corresponding ways.

The open market policies Sri Lanka instituted in 1977 transformed the island 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, common sense is the set of prescriptions that ensure the reproduction of social meanings given to time and place, the sense as to what should be done at what time and by whom (2007, 214–216). Neoliberal ideologies and women's particular strategies are changing the extant common sense of rural Sri Lanka, and a new common sense is consequently emerging. Operating within the intersection of these clashing senses, former workers, and other village women, 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 common sense and more satisfying social relationships.

The cascading system of global subcontracting produces invisible armies of home workers 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

health and medical benefits or even recognition as wage workers (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009; Mezzadri 2014). Moreover, such workshops, by picking up the overflow the regular workforce cannot handle, fuel an economy that promotes so-called just-in-time production (Barrientos 2013). Obviously, the nature of subcontracting makes work precarious and keeps workers vulnerable to economic and other forms of exploitation. Additionally, the availability of home workers threatens the regular workforces of larger manufacturing plants by providing managers additional avenues for discouraging protests among those seeking better working conditions. However, similarly to Mezzadri and Fan (2018), I hold that informal home work in villages allows women to gain some degree of control over their wage and reproductive labor. Ultimately, the women, by operating home workshops, are exploited by global production networks; yet by being subcontractors, who own means of production and employ part-time workers, they simultaneously collaborate with these same global production networks.

Only five of the thirty-seven former workers explicitly recognized that their work may be detrimental to the current regular workforce at FTZs. Others seemed bewildered by how processes of dispossession are interconnected through global production networks. This was interesting, given that at least twenty of these thirty-seven former workers were considered politically conscious and rebellious when at the FTZ. At different times, these women demonstrated great solidarity with the regular FTZ workforce and understood that differently positioned workers were being oppressed by forces beyond their control. Their conflicting feelings are reminiscent of what Priti Ramamurthy theorizes as perplexity. Noting that “perplexity is a conceptual platform to think about the experiential contradictions of globalization as a series of processes that often overwhelm subjects,” Ramamurthy says it indexes how people simultaneously experience both joys and aches of global processes in their everyday lives (2008: 525).

Most of these women felt that the NGOs and the factories did well to connect them to some of the larger subcontracting operations. This was not surprising considering that some of the training and networking was done within programs that were organized under company corporate social responsibility (CSR) agendas. Workshops were also sponsored by local NGOs with connections to prestigious organizations such as UNICEF, UNIFEM, and the International Labor Organization. Just as in other global capitalist contexts, this field where multiple power sources with varied histories diverge perplexed the former workers (Ramamurthy 2008, 2014).

These contradictions notwithstanding, the social changes the women initiate through their economic activities keep transforming the rural socioeconomic and cultural landscapes. Former workers are acutely aware of the new spaces, positions, and relationships they are conjuring as they engage in economic activities. They expressed their achievements mostly in the vocabulary of their gendered responsibility for social reproduction. Emphasizing triumphs over uncomfortable realities associated with eroding worker rights not only highlighted the perplexities of globalization but also indexed the politics of contentment.

Succeeding in entrepreneurial activities is one way to find meaning and fulfillment, but women were willing to forego such success for things they valued more. Thus politics of contentment also entails taking up work that is not profitable, as well as saying no to lucrative contracts in order to attend family and village festivals, help sick relatives, and attend funerals. It is noteworthy that there were five women who firmly refused to do global subcontracting work because the target production was too stressful. Particularities of how these women negotiate social and economic life in rural Sri Lanka, while in the process rearranging domestic, intimate, and community relationships, forces us to rethink Harvey's postulation that “neoliberalism has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” and that it has become part and parcel of the way many of us interpret and understand the world (2007: 3).

Neoliberalism Reaches Villages

Acute economic stagnation, poor infrastructure, and limited sociocultural opportunities make many a young person leave villages in search of work. The following chapters traverse former workers' lives as they return to villages and embark on renegotiating their positions, repairing damaged reputations, and bettering their economic, social, and political positioning within villages.

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 nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as part of the anticolonial movement. The chapter evaluates contemporary media representations of this ideal image, conflated now with global media flows, to show how they influence current discourses

on the ideal wife and daughter-in-law and shape the ways women negotiate identities and village cultures.

Chapter 3, "Industrious and Obedient Daughters-in-Law," traces the former workers' linguistic and performative strategies to dispel stereotypes of them as corrupt, street-savvy, transgressive FTZ women. The chapter focuses on how these women consciously discipline their bodies, speech, and mannerisms, showing how such displays of conformity are crucial to engaging in local social, economic, and political spaces formerly dominated by men.

Chapter 4, "Superwomen and Lazy Lales," focuses on former workers' social, political, and economic activities and the way they network with the subcontracting gig market, NGOs, and individuals they knew in the FTZ. Showing how they engage with local and translocal NGOs and redefine the good young married woman, the chapter also discusses how former workers and their entrepreneurial activities affect nonmigrant women and influence certain new stereotypes and power struggles.

Chapter 5, "Sex in the Village," analyzes former workers' narratives on sexualities. While in the FTZ, workers felt subversive for having boyfriends and enjoying intimacy or premarital sex. Now they feel subversive for dreaming of a certain kind of intimacy in their married lives. This chapter addresses how former workers use available means of communication, such as letters and village storytelling sessions, to engage in subversive sexual discourses, even as they encourage younger village women to try out the FTZ. The chapter shows the particular ways in which former workers try to influence the rearranging of rural intimate lives.

Chapter 6, "The Strange, the Crazy, and the Stubborn," takes an intimate look at three unmarried women who have taken paths that blatantly stretched the boundaries of normative femininity with varying results. It seeks to understand the extent to which their FTZ experiences influenced them to imagine and try nonnormative lives and what their actions tell us about how social norms change. More importantly, it highlights the atypical ways some former workers 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 politics of contentment and how a new common sense that incorporates both conventional and fresh ways of being is emerging. A short section in this chapter looks at the new dynamics surrounding FTZ work, such as labor contractors, manpower workers, and the arrival of Tamil women workers from

war-torn areas, to briefly comment on what these transformations may mean for global workers and their subsequent village negotiations.

The Conclusion weaves the theoretical and ethnographic material into a discussion of the effects of neoliberalism on Sri Lanka's villages while summarizing the book's major findings.

Driving from the Back of the Bus

My 2008 book, *Stitching Identities*, focused on how FTZ workers constructed an identity as modern women with traditional brake pads—women who bought into modern ideas concerning work, independence, and lifestyles but used the awareness of existing social norms to restrain themselves from getting into trouble. The current book focuses on women who willingly take on traditional roles once back in their villages but who through several strategic moves become networking and mobile women—in short, women in traditional roles who use the wings of modern ways to soar high. Stuart Hall noted that identity is like a bus, "not because it takes you to a fixed destination, but because you can only get somewhere—anywhere—by climbing aboard. The whole of you can never be represented by the ticket you carry, but you still have to buy a ticket" (1989, quoted in Pred and Watts 1992). When former workers take on and perform expected behavior as young daughters-in-law or wives, they are not expressing a wholesale acceptance of the identity position imposed on them at that point. Rather, as Hall states, they are using a ticket to get somewhere that they like. What Hall does not note are the quiet maneuverings that allow women to control the steering wheel without appearing to do so. This book is a tribute to a group of creative and skillful former FTZ workers who daily struggle to create meaningful lives by manipulating what they have available even as they change existing social norms. Thus the book calls into question the reach and power of neoliberal discourses and the tendency to assume that this blanket term can be used to account for and explain everything (Brown 2005; Kipnis 2007; Klein 2008). While making the case that neoliberalism's hegemonic status cannot be assumed but must be questioned, the book makes a compelling argument for the need to take politics of location seriously when exploring neoliberalism's effects.