

CONTEMPORARY ETHNOGRAPHY

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RESTITCHING IDENTITIES
IN RURAL SRI LANKA

Gender, Neoliberalism, and the Politics of Contentment

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PENN

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS
PHILADELPHIA

suspicions. "Although I helped them by subcontracting my work, if there is any rumor, some of the [nonmigrant] village women you talked to would be the first ones to say 'once a bad girl, always a bad girl,' Nalini said. As described in the previous chapter, most former workers articulated their involvement with economic, social, and political activities under the sacrificial mother/wife rubric, effectively minimizing the possibility of detractors denigrating them as women who were corrupted by their FTZ interlude. However, that very possibility always loomed in the psyche of the former workers and the villagers.

The Ideal Daughter-in-Law in Narrative and Practice

As noted earlier, many village men and some women were connected to Colombo or regional cities through work, and 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, via the cascading system of subcontracting, and are hence open to more contentious interpretations than previous links. These connections generate conflicting responses among workers' communities. The combination of FTZ savings, know-how, and networking opportunities with performances of "good woman behavior" seems to be working its magic in villages where people are increasingly fascinated with urban lifestyles, new consumption practices, and global cultural flows. And yet many older women with grown sons, when asked what is most important to them in a daughter-in-law, first said that she had to be a virtuous young woman who was brought up with shame-fear and lived a sheltered life in her parents' house.

CHAPTER 5

Sex in the Village

Subversive Sexualities Abandoned?

Neoliberal discourses emphasizing autonomy, self-reliance, capacity building, and individual choice circulate globally through media. This chapter focuses on how aspects of the neoliberal ethos—individual choice, personal satisfaction, and companionate marriage—that circulated through NGO workshops, readings, and visual media when the women were at the FTZ are rearticulated in village contexts.

Studies show that ideas about love, romance, intimacy, and married life change when economic systems change, suggesting that economic systems facilitate the development of particular emotional lifestyles that are germane to each system. Scholars in many disciplines have long noted the connections between capitalism and an increased focus on emotional life and conjugality (Illouz 1997; Yan 2003; Hoodfar 1997; Rebhun 2002; Kelsky 2006). Fascinating studies explicate how U.S. capitalism controls workers by shaping new hierarchies of emotional well-being via industries of self-help and therapy (Illouz 2007, 2008). Increased commodification of romance in capitalist societies results in the proliferation of specific vocabularies and images of love and authorizes "what is truly romantic." Eva Illouz's work on capitalism and romance demonstrates how dating and marriage rituals are shaped by and, in turn, shape leisure activities and consumption and how people experience their love lives by comparing them with romantic utopias depicted in the media.

The past decade has produced several studies about how ideals of companionate marriage have spread across the world and how people negotiate their everyday lives in relation to such ideals (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Smith 2006). Many such studies focus on how ideals of romance and marriage are presented as part of the modern self. This more individualized self not only loves a certain way but acquires and exchanges certain commodities that reflect a specific style and taste and also has a network of relationships not based on kinship. There are also studies on how societies creatively appropriate and rework stereotypes to best suit the needs at the time (Smith 2006; Larkin 1997). Sri Lanka's former FTZ workers similarly are trying to balance neoliberal economic mores with ideal-woman expectations even as they grapple with the new ideals of romance and companionate marriage their rural communities will tolerate. This struggle between competing prescriptions of behavior is slowly changing perspectives on emotions and practices in the realms of love, romance, and marriage in the island's villages.

After discussing two forms of reading material and movies that produce and circulate global models of love and marriage, including those from non-Western countries such as neighboring India, I move on to discuss former FTZ workers' married lives in villages and how they manifest the intense competition between newly acquired and already established notions of love and married life and the frustrations, anxieties, and exciting subversive moments that stem from this competition.

One evening in summer 2005, Vinitha and I were sitting on the floor and sorting through some old FTZ photos and letters from her FTZ friends, when I asked if she missed reading materials such as *Priyadari*. At first she said she missed reading and discussing the material in the magazine as part of a group but did not care much for reading the magazine by herself. This was hardly surprising as *Priyadari*, the most popular magazine among FTZ workers at the time, was widely considered to be pornographic (*asaboya*). The magazine carried sexually explicit stories and specifically targeted FTZ workers and working-class males, including lower-ranked military personnel. Readers were encouraged to send in their own sexual stories, and many FTZ workers did. They considered this magazine to be useful for acquiring sexual knowledge and expressing their own turbulent sexual lives, which were complicated by the clash between traditional notions of purity, virginity, and honor and new realities encountered in and around the FTZ.

Two days later, Vinitha revealed that she missed reading *Priyadari* and learning about "real Sri Lankan life." She had not been able to obtain copies since leaving the FTZ, and although she apparently had a loving and respectful relationship with her husband, she did not ask him to purchase copies for her. "He knows that we read those sorts of things in the boarding-houses. But that was then. Now I have to maintain respectability," she said. Although Vinitha was one of the FTZ workers lucky enough to remain with her family and build a small house near her parents' home, she still felt as if her in-laws, living nearly one hundred miles away in another province, were watching her. She did not want to be known as the woman who read such magazines, especially when there were many other magazines that taught many good things. Even when they were living in the FTZ, conflicts about respectable choices were generated by various forms of fantasies that were produced for FTZ workers.

In 2002, Divine Flower Publishers launched several publications that catered to FTZ workers, and their stories promoted opposing views to those of *Priyadari*. The women depicted in the new publications resisted male advances and sexual urges, saving themselves for "good, moral" men with whom they go to temples and engage in charity. This new model for "good romance" was presented as part of modernity and encouraged women to adopt certain consumption practices and leisure activities. Interviews indicated that a personal rivalry between the owners of Pleasure Publishers, which published *Priyadari*, and an editor had caused the latter to found Divine Flower Publishers, which then promoted an alternative viewpoint for "ideal romance." Evidently various capitalist interests seek to shape women's desires and resistance to dominant cultural notions of sex and romance, and women workers negotiate these conflicting ideals in various ways. Both magazines offered scripts of sex, romance, and marriage, and workers readily consumed both sets of images—one portraying a bad modern girl and the other a good modern girl. Although these images inform their perceptions of themselves, the workers understood that they were being sold fantasies and hence both sets of images were reinterpreted and reworked and differently affected workers' decision making within the FTZ and, later, within their villages.

The two magazines offered consumable packages of behavior that were produced differently. What could be called "bad modern girl" publications elicit contributions from readers, while "good modern girl" publications use the editors' own serialized novels to try to conscript

working-class women into proper womanhood by adjusting content to suit particular economic realities. Women felt the difference in content represented reality versus fantasy. Any hopes Divine Flower Publishers had to bring the pornography-reading wayward daughters of the FTZ back to the fold did not go as planned, because workers continue to read both magazines. Similarly, the workers used the two types of magazines in villages to manage reputations and to encourage younger women to try the FTZ.

Education on Good Romance and Good Marriage

It was in 2004 that I first heard FTZ workers had a new set of favorite magazines. The women I got to know said they loved the serialized romances in *Sandarajini* and *Bhavana*, both published by Divine Flower, and related their stories with enthusiasm. In contrast to the stories in *Priyadari*, these serialized novels presented what I call “good romance.” For instance, in a 2001 *Priyadari* issue an FTZ worker noted how she took revenge on her unfaithful boyfriend: “After that, I decided to sleep with the first man who invited me to do so. When Ajith asked me to go to a room with him, I happily agreed.” A serialized novel in a 2006 issue of *Bhavana* described a couple’s physical intimacy: “He kissed her forehead, and they hung on to each other for a minute or so. And then he distanced her lovingly and said, ‘Little sister, you should go now. Mother must be waiting for you. It is not good to go home too late. Her heart swelled with much pride and love for him that tears filled her eyes. He too looked at her with tear-filled eyes as she moved toward the bus stand.’” A story in a 2006 *Priyadari* issue recounted how a factory owner’s son had sex with the story’s author and two other garment workers on the same day. In contrast, a 2006 *Sandarajini* story depicted a couple going to the temple and giving a weak old beggar a bath and washing his clothes.

Sandarajini projects ideal romance as a compromise between arranged marriage and romantic love. While falling in love is celebrated as the most pure and authentic emotional experience, the ensuing relationships are shaped through self-control, extreme sacrifices, and long commitment to the partner over family and community objections. Attaining parental blessings through hardship is celebrated as the ultimate joy of romantic

love. Many *Sandarajini* stories depict married protagonists leading blissful domestic lives. The stories educate FTZ workers on ideal relationships leading to ideal marriages in which couples exchange loving endearments, share household duties, and practice good citizenship. This education also encourages workers to desire new patterns of consumption and leisure activities that go along with companionate marriage ideals. In several serialized novels, the female protagonists express their desire to get pregnant and, wearing a “preggie” gown, walk hand-in-hand with their husbands. Walking every evening for exercise and as part of a bonding experience is not part of Sri Lankan married life, especially for working-class couples, whose work and living arrangements do not facilitate such interaction during the day. These stories nevertheless encourage workers to desire such activity as part of good, companionate marriage.

Although women foregrounded their love for Divine Flower magazines, I noticed that *Priyadari* magazines were also lying about in inconspicuous places. Eventually, workers started opening up and said they liked to read both types of magazines. Clearly, they now did not read *Priyadari* as openly as they had earlier. *Sandarajini* and *Bhavana*, which were supposedly promoting a cleaner image, had sparked conflicts and struggles over individual performances of respectability. Notwithstanding their actual preference, when asked by outsiders, the women were compelled to note the “good romance” magazines as their favorite reading material in order to manage their already precarious reputations. When I presented the same questions in 2013, workers again mentioned Divine Flower publications first, then slowly opened up about *Priyadari*. The government proscribed *Priyadari* in 2006, but it soon reappeared as *A to Z*.

In 2006, during a discussion with about fifteen workers, Mala explained her attachment to both types of magazines: “*Priyadari* stories are realistic. That is what happens within most relationships. *Sandarajini* stories are like dreams. They are beautiful and after you read a story you can dream about such good things happening to you. But many of us know that they are just fantasies.” Chandrani said, “I think both magazines are good for us. *Priyadari* shows us how it is, and *Sandarajini* shows us how it should be. We could learn from both.” Nimali noted, “*Sandarajini* stories make us sad as we know those ideals are not for us. But *Priyadari* stories make us feel better because we have not changed as much as the writers of those stories.” However circuitously expressed, the women seemed to take advantage of both

types of magazines to articulate their diverse positions in relation to gendered sexual regimes. They could use *Sandarrjini* to tell outsiders that they were reading “silly yet decent and acceptable” magazines. They could use the *Priyadari* sexual stories to indicate they were not as “morally debased” as the anonymous women who authored them.

NGOs and Production of Images

Iyoti Puri (1999) has discussed how romance novels published by Mills and Boon influence middle-class Indian female readers’ expectations of marital sex and gender roles. Serialized novels by Divine Flower Publications of what similarly affected working-class readers’ expectations of emotional and sexual intimacy. NGO-organized workshops on reproductive rights and sexual health included sessions on personal autonomy and freedom to choose and, in the process, imparted certain images of ideal marital relationships. Since NGO agendas are invariably connected to the values of international donors who fund their activities, the images presented in these workshops were intimately connected to global notions of companionate marriage. According to Hirsch and Wardlow (2006: 4–5), companionate marriage is a marital ideal foregrounding emotional intimacy and outward expressions of love. Here the conjugal partnership trumps other family ties, with the main aim being individual satisfaction rather than social reproduction. This kind of union is supposed to be founded on romantic love.

Images of love and conjugality that flowed via Indian media influenced the women as well. Workers loved the Sinhala-dubbed mega television soaps imported from India, in which exaggerated forms of ideal female conduct in marital relationships and its contrast are depicted. They also found Bollywood movies that present particular combinations of western and traditional ideals of romances and family lives to be desirable. NGO workshops mocked these alternative visions and urged workers to adopt the global visions of intimacy, autonomy, and personal choice within relationships as befits modern women (Hewamanne 2012).

All these new influences jostled against village expectations shaped by religious education and school texts. The following section discusses how former workers appropriate, accommodate, and recreate these varied and

complex influences as they seek to generate desired changes within their own relationships.

From Romance to Marriage

The economic transformation of Sri Lanka is similar to the economic changes that influenced companionate marriage ideals in the Western world. The changing economic context coupled with global and regional media flows force communities to change lifestyles, although the speed with which this happens varies and the changes taking place do not always materialize in ways NGOs, magazines, or movies imagine they would.

Now embroiled in negotiating new identities in their in-laws’ villages, former workers realize that they were right to suspect the *Sandarrjini* notion of ideal married life. Seeking daily to repair their damaged reputations, and surrounded by many enforcers of village moral codes, they have mostly lost hope in finding individual marital bliss. As Nilmini, a former worker who married her boyfriend and now lives in his parents’ home in a southern village, put it, “We could not wait to get married so that we could have sex without fear, but now that we are married and living here, we both feel like we had better chances of having sex in Katunayake.” As married women with little children, most former FTZ workers realize that finding women’s community across generations is more important for survival than pursuing the ideals propagated by Divine Flower Publications. As Vasanthi said, “People tolerate about one year of intimacy between newlywed couples. Once you have children or after about a year, intimacy is frowned upon, and you yourself feel ashamed to show affection in public.”

Where they live and their economic status also affect the levels of intimacy within marital relationships. Sujatha explained that, after two years of marriage, physical, emotional, and even verbal intimacy occurred only at night in the bedroom: “My mother-in-law specifically said that, since his little sister is in the house, we should behave properly.” We had this discussion right after her husband announced that he was going to a friend’s house to help all night with a wedding that was to be held the next day. Sujatha confided that her husband sleeps on the verandah several days a week, claiming the bedroom is too hot, merely to show that they are not too interested in sex. Village demands for same-sex sociability and everyday rules of

shame-fear transform the intimacies during courtship to generate other forms of bonding. For instance, Sujatha confided that once or twice a month she and her husband walked at dusk to a well, located a few miles away and reputed to have the most refreshing water, because this allowed them to enjoy a few hours of intimacy without family members tagging along. Purna claimed that she liked the image of marriage that *Sandarajini* presented and thought she could achieve something similar as they lived away from her in-laws. However, economic burdens have transformed her husband from a loving boyfriend to a short-tempered, sleep-deprived man whose expressions of love are now limited to quick sexual intercourse a couple of nights a week. Once, when she complained that he didn't love her anymore, he curtly asked, "What do you want me to do? Dance around trees singing I love you?" Although she laughed when relating this obvious reference to the romantic love depicted in Bollywood movies, Purna admitted that at the time she cried for hours. She now seems to reimagine married life in a Sri Lankan village: "He is a good guy. Works very hard to provide for us and is generous to my family as well. That is what love is." Referring to the many other former workers who live with their in-laws, Purna claimed, "I have it better than many others. You were also present when Nilmini shared that they have to be careful not to make any sound when making love in the bedroom lest others would hear through the thin walls. I at least don't have to worry about such things." During this particular conversation, Nilmini also said that she and her husband felt reluctant to lock their bedroom door as that suggested something secretive was going on. They therefore usually kept an eye on the door while making love.

As these narratives show, fantasies of companionate marriage that were spawned within the FTZ have confronted rigid cultural norms and harsh economic realities in villages, giving way to newer articulations.

Subversive Sexualities Abandoned?

I was disheartened to hear of social restrictions and seemingly very-low-intensity sexual lives. It appeared that the women had exchanged their vibrant FTZ lives for the security of marriage and motherhood. I wondered when a former worker would open up about her steamy sexual experiences with her husband or risky sexual transgressions with another man. Instead, I kept hearing about frustrated young married men and women who found it difficult to engage in sexual activities, either because of village social etiquette or economic burdens that adversely affected sexual and emotional

energies. The women seemed resigned to sexless lives and mostly unexpressed love and kindness.

I was feeling almost as much despair as these former workers when I started examining their letters to me and to each other in 2005 to see how they now remembered and described their FTZ time. While each letter had themes and purposes other than sharing knowledge of sexual transgressions or frustrations, many contained clues as to what the women were thinking and wanted to continue exploring. This insight led to my reexamining some of the storytelling sessions I attended for more clues. From summer 2005 onward, I paid special attention to discussions of sexual activities, hidden in metaphors and double entendre, during midafternoon storytelling sessions. These discussions were even more powerful because the audience of younger nonmigrant women seemed utterly fascinated by the vivid descriptions of FTZ experiences that included varied transgressions.

The following sections analyze how former workers participated in subversive sexual communication, through letters written to other former workers and storytelling sessions with younger village women, to highlight that, notwithstanding their performances as good daughter-in-law/wife/mother, they have not abandoned oppositional consciousness and continue to express their wishes and desires in the sexual realm.

Letters: Secret Lives of Good Daughters-in-Law

As noted, Sujatha and her husband walked to a well far from their home once or twice a month to spend a few hours together. While she said the intimacy of the walk was her favorite part, Sujatha also mentioned that they had sex several times in an abandoned hut in the wooded area behind the well. "There is something about having sex outdoors. You should try it," she said. While she did not write about this experience in letters to her friends, she liberally gossiped about their other friends' sexual lives. She was especially interested in knowing Vasanthi's particular experiences right after her husband returned from Italy:

He must have been so impatient. Who can blame him? It was more than three years. He must have pounced on you the moment you two were alone. Has he learned new stuff in Italy? Do tell us if that's the case. But I am sure that rather than learning from Italians, Krishan aya had taught them a thing or two as well. Did he bring a blue film [pornographic DVD] as he promised? Were you able to see it? What

is it about? Cannot wait till I see you again to hear about all these things. With the help of all this and gods' blessings I hope you will get pregnant this time.
Your loving friend Sujatha

At the time, none of these women had seen a pornographic movie but they knew such DVDs were widely available (thanks to TV programs condemning the proliferation of pornography). Vasanthi later acknowledged that Krishan brought a DVD but that she was only able to see parts of it at a friend's house. Krishan keeps it under lock and key to prevent his mother or siblings finding it, although she confided that they sometimes talked about the visuals as part of foreplay.

Among in-laws and neighbors these former workers claimed not to have taken part in the more vibrant aspects of FTZ life, yet their letters liberally reminisced about rebellious and transgressive experiences. I wondered about the psychic effects such denials had on the former workers and expected to read about mental breakdowns, sudden flare-ups, and threats of suicide similar to what I witnessed at FTZ boardinghouses (Hewamane 2010). Close to ten years later, I read about only one suicide attempt and there were no reports of mental health issues. Writing letters to each other and expressing what they really thought or desired was one way these women dealt with the suppression of the selves created during their FTZ years. Intentionally or not, letter writing had become a therapeutic exercise for most of them. Scholarship on women's letter writing notes that it emancipates and empowers the writers (Dublin 1981; Daybell 2001; Douglas 2009). These works point to the contradictions in the Western world with increasing social, economic, political opportunities for women and the gendered limitations in self-expression. In Sri Lanka, too, women opened up the suppressed aspects of their selves, within the safe and secretive space of a letter, to others who have experienced the same things and, therefore, intimately understood the need to empathize and reciprocate.

Only sixteen of the thirty-seven workers wrote frequently to each other, and they happily shared these letters with me, largely because of the seemingly innocuous content. The letters were mostly about the well-being of the recipient and her family, advice and blessings during challenging times, and gossip. While discussing such topics, however, most former workers digressed to reminisce about the FTZ—much of it focusing on transgressive acts. For example, Sujatha wrote to Vasanthi,

My mother-in-law said it is good for men to eat ash plantain curry if the couple is having trouble conceiving and suggested you should cook more ash plantains when Krishan comes back [from Italy]. When she said that I had to laugh because I was thinking about how we mostly ate ash plantains in the boarding houses because potatoes were expensive. No wonder girls got pregnant and made those doctors [roadside abortion clinics]! wealthy!

Discussing Madhuri's suicide attempt, Siri complained to Vasanthi:

This was unbelievable. For a lost necklace? True, we saw many suicide attempts at boarding houses; but those girls had good reasons—they lost virginity, got pregnant, got raped—but this was so trivial.

In a letter to Vasanthi, Shanika wondered about a way to help my research:

Sandya miss asked about homosexual activities among the girls when we were there. I need to ask you before I write to her. Do you remember that boarding house near the public bathing well? There were about 15 women and some of them wore sarongs [men's clothing] and some acted like couples. I mean I haven't ever seen them like that. But that's what everybody said. Remember when we went to the police station once, the inspector shouted at us saying we all are like those women who behaved so shamelessly. We didn't even know what he was talking about until someone told us about this boarding house. What do you remember about them? Have you seen them wearing sarongs? Sandya miss must have asked you too. Tell her only if you have actually seen them.

Dinithi once wrote to Sujatha,

When we were at the FTZ we could not wait for our annual parties, trips and weddings to drink beer. I thought it was the most fashionable thing that I ever did. I was so proud about learning to slowly sip beer and I loved to take photographs with beer bottles and glasses. When we sat around an umbrella [awning], with different kinds of bites—cutlets and devilled cashews—and drank beer it felt like finally I was living like the "high class." But Sujatha,

arrack (local alcoholic brew) is horrible. When he drinks I don't want to be around him because the smell is awful. But that's when he wants me the most. It is hard to refuse without getting into a fight and you know how those end [getting beaten up]. I now hate all sorts of alcohol.

Besides discussing general transgressive acts, women occasionally inquired about individual transgressive acts. In response to Vasanthi's news about accidentally bumping into Ando San, the Japanese factory manager, at a fancy grocery store, her good friend Rena asked,

Have you seen Nishan sir since you left the factory? Do you write to him? Those were the days. . . . I used to be so jealous that all these sirs liked you; especially Nishan sir. Remember how he used to come by our Line and take photos of you? It was hard to tell he was married and the father of two the way he behaved. Like a young, fun-loving boy. . . . You were always so lucky, everybody liked you.

All of the letter writers kept the letters and photographs they received from FTZ friends and family members securely in empty shoe boxes or chocolate tins. Considering that they take much care to appear to be innocent young women brought up with shame-fear, it seems risky to keep letters with care-free comments on their FTZ experiences. All of the women, however, kept their letter boxes in the *almirah* (wardrobe) in their bedroom. An *almirah* and a dressing table are essential items of a dowry, and all parents tried to provide their daughters with these two items at marriage, especially since they were mainly for women's personal use. All thirty-five married former workers brought an *almirah* and a dressing table along with money, land, and other household items to their marriage. While the dressing-table mirror was occasionally used by other family members, the *almirah* stayed under the woman's control in the bedroom. Most kept it locked and confided that neither their in-laws nor their husbands sought to go over its contents. Besides the letters, clothes, and jewelry, albums with photos taken while at the FTZ were kept in *almirahs*. It appears that this culturally accepted personal furniture item provided the space for workers to store things of sentimental value and engage in transgressive communication. A few of them said that they sometimes read the letters when they felt sad, lonely, or trapped in boring village lives.

In their letters, these workers also talked about the joys and pains of their current lives. Most of the time, in response to one woman's sad experience, several others recounted similar personal experiences to comfort the writer. Responding to Dinithi's complaint about her drunkard husband and forced sexual activities, Sujatha wrote about her frustrations at not being able to have sex as they would like to and asked Dinithi to be patient and make the best of the situation. She also wrote, "for god's sake try not to get pregnant."

Vinitha wrote to Chamila, who was refusing to get married,

Marriage can be such a good thing. Everything about it, even the physical pleasure, is just wonderful. You need to try it out at least once. Dying as a virgin would be such a waste. If you really do not want to marry, then be happy with a man [have sex] at least once.

Shanika once wrote a hasty letter to Vasanthi asking her to intervene on my behalf:

That stupid woman Kushani had told Sandya miss to be like a prostitute in bed to keep her husband interested. That woman is raving mad. What is good for her is not good for women like Sandya miss. If you are writing to Sandya miss, advise her not to be too forward. We have to let the men teach us things even when we already know, so they won't think that we danced the devil before getting married. If that woman [Kushani] is near me I will beat her with a broom for trying to mislead that innocent Sandya miss.

Some of the writers shared how they resorted to creative means to overcome village surveillance and a culture that frowned on public displays of affection. Nisha wrote to Vinitha about how her home business is helping her in this direction:

I also live with my in-laws and the house is crowded. We don't feel that good about being happy [having sex] while hearing his mother chant prith [Buddhist prayers] or his father coughs through the night. But when I go to Colombo [for business needs], Kasun travels separately for a day and we have a good time in a hotel room. It is like a little honeymoon every two to three months or so. My mother-in-law is very

good to me now and she won't say anything if she knew. But we decided to keep it our little secret. The secrecy makes it more special, I think.

Many happy letters were sent among the women when Vasanthi first broke the news about Pushla's disgraceful departure from Suisin. Pushla was their line supervisor when they worked in the FTZ. All of the writers celebrated the news by reminiscing about the way Pushla had been mean to them, especially noting that while they left the factory honorably, Pushla was forced to resign because of an extramarital affair with a technical officer. The occasion also started a conversation about what one could possibly gain from such affairs and the possibility of getting into the same situation themselves. Purna wrote to Vasanthi,

It makes me very angry sometimes that he does not have time to take me to the movies or to say I love you. When he did not bring a gift for my birthday this year, I said to myself, I am going to find someone who treats me better. But then I realized that other village men are like that too. It is only in *Sandarajini* stories that men and women hold hands and call each other *Sudhu*, *Sudhu* [Fair One]. Who has time for those things? *Priyadari* is not much better either. Those stories made us think that sex is everywhere, and men cannot wait to pounce on a woman and that sex is so wonderful. Remember the women who wrote about how their men asked them whether they are satisfied before they seek to get satisfied. I don't know about you, but my man has never asked me that.

Vasanthi wrote two letters to Purna addressing the situation:

It is good that you realized that these magazine stories are fairy tales. We are Buddhists and we know that good looks and wealth only bring temporary happiness that end in suffering. When Krishan was in Italy I could have gone the wrong way many times. But I was true to him because if we give such pain to a man in this life, the men in our next ten lives will give us the exact same pain. We should not give into temporary urges. We need to think about long-term consequences.

At one point, Dinitih and Shanika both wrote to Vasanthi complaining of Amila's letters, which they described as lists of all the good things in her married life. Shanika wrote,

We all know that she married a gem businessman and that was like winning the lottery for her. But she doesn't have to boast so much. Her last letter was all about how they bought a new car and how they went to Nuwara Eliya (a hill country vacation destination), stayed in a fancy hotel, and how he bought her five saris for her birthday. I showed her letter to Ranjan and he said, only a man who has a small thing [genitals] has to buy his woman five saris for one birthday. I am still laughing at that. Really, what is the point of all that wealth if he cannot satisfy her? We may not have a nice new car, but my man makes me happy in bed.

These letters were evidently therapeutic, because they enabled the former workers to pour their hearts out without having to resort to face-to-face conversations about uncomfortable topics. Yet it was obvious that not having easily usable everyday words for genitals and sexual activities hindered this communication. For example, Shanika used the word *ekak* (thing) to refer to male genitals. Other terms are the highly scholarly *shishnaya* or *lingaya* or the highly obscene *paiya*. None of these words can be used in a letter, and the word *ekak* only barely conveyed the intended meaning. Everyday words for sexual intercourse were even harder to find. Many talked about sexual activity without using words that explicitly referred to sex, instead using phrases such as "going to bed" (*andata yanawa*) or "being happy with a man" (*sathutu wemanna*). The other available words would have been either too scholarly or too obscene to use in a letter between friends. Perhaps much more direct communication about sexual activities would have taken place if vernacular Sinhala contained mundane vocabulary to discuss sex.

Storytelling Sessions

Verbal subversions in the forms of jokes, parody songs, stories, and satire have been widely used by powerless sections of society, including women, to express social criticism and temporarily escape mundane drudgery (Limón 1989; Spier 1998; Schauwecker 2003; Goldstein 2003; Bryant 2006; Delap

2010). Former workers used these verbal arts when relating stories in their village homes, and their accounts contained subversive elements that enumerated desires and discontents. Most former workers (twenty-five out of thirty-seven) I visited had younger nonmigrant women dropping by to help with household chores and to engage in storytelling and joke-telling sessions.² These sessions could start with just two visitors, although I have seen two former workers holding court with as many as eight or nine nonmigrant women. After the usual pleasantries and exchange of village gossip, a visitor would prompt the former worker to talk about her experiences in the FTZ by alluding to an incident that had been shared a while back. This usually got the former worker going until it was time to end the session, normally around 4:30 or 5:00, when women had to prepare the evening meal. Each storytelling group had developed a life of its own by the time I joined in. Unspoken guidelines about what would and would not be discussed had more or less been solidified. My participation affected these rules in many ways as former workers focused more on FTZ stories so I could join in as well. Both the former workers and the nonmigrant women were curious about how American women would respond to particular situations.

Conversations easily moved on to sexual matters when someone brought up a celebrity's sexual transgression or gossip about a village woman. There was much laughter, blushing, and embarrassment when the stories and jokes that especially pertained to sex were shared. Former workers brought up their own experiences, what they had heard from others, and stories they had read in *Priyadari*, and they imparted advice to the mainly nonmigrant, mostly unmarried younger women. Nonmigrant women also contributed jokes and puns they had heard in school and tuition classes. It is important to note that sexual joking did not dominate the discussions. Conversations moved back and forth between social and political issues, individual crises, and village gossip. In all of this, the former workers took on adviser/teacher roles and did their best to disseminate some of the knowledge they had acquired while at the FTZ.

Subversive or Everyday Sexualities?

I was seated under a guava tree behind the kitchen of Jayani's house with six other village women when Jayani related a story she read in *Priyadari*. The story was about a grade 8 female student who made an appointment to see her boyfriend, who was in grade 11. The boy asked the girl to tell her mother that she needed to go to the toilet at 9:00 P.M. The family did not have elec-

tricity at that time and the toilet was some way away from the house. Therefore, the mother took a flashlight and came near the toilet with the girl. The girl went inside the toilet and quickly started kissing the boy who was already inside. The mother realized that something was going on and shouted, "Who is dancing the ghost in toilets?" and the boy ran away. Jayani related this story to admonish a young woman, who showed extreme embarrassment at the earlier sexual joke, to demonstrate that some village girls are not as innocent as people think.

This story, "Something That Happened to Me," was written by the young schoolgirl, now a married woman in her early twenties, for the *Priyadari* Feature Page. According to the story, she got a beating and the boy was sent to a relative's house in Ampara, effectively ending the budding romance. "I loved *Priyadari* for these kinds of stories, because they tell it as it is. No pseudovirtuousness stories [*boru sil kathai*] in that magazine. I don't know why *Priyadari* is not available in villages. Girls like you can learn a lot from those stories," Jayani said. At least two of the girls reminded her that she had promised to bring them a copy or two but kept postponing it. Another young woman asked whether her husband could bring blue films home as they now have a new DVD player. "This is a way to get my poor man killed in those Arab countries. I think one can obtain all kinds of blue films in Colombo. There is a place in Fort, but I hear they only sell such things to men. So this nangi should find a modern man who would buy those things for you," Jayani playfully challenged the girl who asked for a DVD.

In fact, there was much curiosity in these storytelling groups about pornographic films, interchangeably referred to as blue films in English or *asabya chithrapati* in Sinhala. Many younger women seemed to have the idea that the former workers had seen porn movies since they had lived in Colombo. The former workers denied having seen such films, but this did not stop the younger women from sometimes begging them to share stories from such movies. In one such instance, Vinita retorted, "Ah, yes, in one of the *Priyadari* stories, a man visited a friend's house in Dehigama [a village close to Vinita's] and, since the friends were not home, spent the night at the neighbor's house. The woman there was alone and she put a blue film in the DVD player, saying her husband brought it. And we all know what happened next. I am still looking for this woman so I can see one as well!"

A few former workers discussed porn movies with their husbands but felt that their husbands were also not privy to the underground networks

that facilitated such visual material. Even if they found such DVDs, they knew it would be impossible to enjoy them as only a handful of them owned DVD players. Even the few families that owned them kept the machines in the living room so everyone in the household could watch a movie together. None of the former workers or their families owned computers. By 2018 most of them had data plans on their phones. But not many women were interested in wasting their data plans on downloading data-eating movies. The curiosity and rare stories about pornographic movies in the villages hint at the desire for new ways of sexual expression and experimentation, which is kept under wraps. With the village elites still tightly holding on to constructed notions of the village as the locus of authentic, pure culture, it does not seem likely that these needs will be seriously addressed in the near future.

While former workers could not help alleviate their younger friends' curiosity about pornographic movies, they shared their own or friends' experiences so as to educate these mostly unmarried women on what to expect in married life. Nilmini once advised a group of workers not to fall for the kind of love they see on TV or in the movies. "Those work while you are girlfriend-boyfriend. But marriage is lot of work. Sometimes whether you like it or not you have to help with men's needs. And that work [sex, *E wadej*] is not always fun. I can tell you that much," she declared. "Is that true that it [leka, penis] is like an iron bar?" asked Devika. Nilmini's young sister-in-law. This elicited much laughter as Nilmini said that she was not about to discuss her husband's "that thing" [*arakai*] in front of his sister. But this led to a discussion on a popular story about a famous architect in Sri Lanka (using his actual last name). According to the story, he was so well endowed that several women died during intercourse. In fact, this person's last name was used especially by boys to refer to large male genitals. The story was told with much enthusiasm by a younger woman, leading to more questions about relative sizes and the fit between couples who were of drastically different weights. Nilmini, in almost a whisper, told them about natural and artificial lubrication and foreplay. As I am married, they directed some questions to me as well, but Nilmini quickly intervened saying, "Ane, ane, don't corrupt her. She doesn't know these things." Later I wondered why Nilmini would not let me share sexual knowledge with her village friends. Although I was older than them, most workers treated me as a younger and less mature woman while we were at the FTZ, but things had changed since then with both them and me having being married for quite some time. In

fact, most former workers had no qualms about discussing sexual fantasies and frustrations with me when we were alone. Perhaps what Nilmini feared was my inability to know the delicate balance between what should and should not be shared in the village. Blabbering unrestrained about all I know about western sexual practices would damage not just my reputation as a good, educated, urban woman but Nilmini's reputation as well.

Another theme that made way for discussions of a sexual nature was husbands and boyfriends. Most younger women had experiences with what they called love but merely had to do with boys writing letters, following them, and sending candy and other gifts through mutual friends or young children in the village. Some of these activities led to romantic relationships and some quickly fizzled out. Women swapped stories about men being fainthearted and joked about how some did not seem to have any guts. Once, a storytelling session at Dinithi's house was buzzing with the news of a newly married young woman who was sent back to her parental home because she was not able to prove her virginity. After condemning the groom's family for being backward, Dinithi nevertheless shared that although their marriage followed a long romance, her husband had switched on the lights right after their first sexual intercourse to look for signs of her virginity. Dinithi referred to a common Sinhala saying, "Even if loved as much as our own lives, women cannot be trusted," but changed the words to "Even if loved as much as our own lives, men do not trust." Agreeing with Dinithi, a younger woman added that in her school a boy was said to have asked his girlfriend to show him her chest, which had burn scars from a childhood accident. "The girl was ready to give even her life for him and he needed to see how bad the scars were before going any further. How shallow can one get?" she asked.

The discussion moved to lighthearted banter when a younger woman asked Dinithi to tell me whether she got to "stand on her toes" during her honeymoon. "Oh, all the time when he is drunk," answered Dinithi before explaining that the woman was alluding to a *Priyadari* story she shared with them, in which the writer had her first sexual intercourse while standing in a wooded area behind her parents' house, and all she remembered was all of a sudden standing on her toes! Some of the *Priyadari* stories in fact suggested that there are many sexual transgressions in villages that are committed in secrecy (Hewamanne 2006), and several times former workers astutely criticized their communities for turning a blind eye to village transgressions and targeting FTZ workers for generalized condemnation.

Once Shanika shared a story about one of her friends to show how women often have to tolerate a lot. According to the story, her friend realized that her new husband did not brush his teeth or bathe on a regular basis. She was physically repulsed and cringed at the thought of sleeping with him on days he refused to take a bath. However, after a big, showy wedding, she could not go back to her parents citing low hygiene standards and she ended up getting pregnant. She started keeping the child in the room to discourage the husband's advances on days he did not bathe. In several other storytelling sessions at different former workers' villages, I heard them sharing stories in which women reported to being coerced to have sex right after a surgery and on days they were having their period. These were mostly related as cautionary tales to prepare the younger women for the harsh realities of married life.

However, they also shared fun and light aspects of married sexual activities. Once Shanika shared how her husband promised that they would have sex in every room of their own house as soon as it was finished. They had only three rooms of the house done by that time and a blushing Shanika acknowledged that they kept the promise. This led to a very lighthearted moment as women jumped up making noises of fake disgust at the thought of Shanika and her husband having sex against the half-raised walls of the remaining rooms, on which we sat. When one leaned against the nam-nam tree (*Cynometra cauliflora*) by the wall, Shanika nodded—"there, too"—making the younger woman jump up and scream.

Songs

Sometimes the groups broke out singing, especially when engaged in a mindless and tiresome activity such as cleaning green leaves or sifting through rice for stones. Often the women sang popular songs about love, separation, and reunions but changed or added lyrics to make fun of a woman and her love story. Sometimes the singing and memories of the FTZ got entangled and the former workers shared the songs they sang during pleasure trips or at boardinghouse gatherings. During those FTZ activities, too, workers started with popular, mainstream songs, but as the evening progressed—some of the women tipsy from beer by then—they changed the lyrics of popular songs to sexualized language that made fun of rules and those enforcing rules. For example, in 2010 Nilmini recalled a song they sang during an FTZ road trip that I too went on and started to sing it, only to have the younger women pick up the raucous tune. This prompted Nilmini to hush them even as she continued to sing:

We will bring Anura sir
 Will show the *maṅgawa* (temple of tooth relic/vagina)
 Lalai, lilai, la—
 We will bring Weere uncle
 Will show Anti's [auntie's] *araka* (that thing/vagina)
 Lalai, lilai, la—
 We will bring Sandya akka
 Will show Saman's *sihupe* (Buddhist pagoda/penis)
 Lalai, lilai, la—

The singing women rhythmically pointed their hands in my direction while singing the last verse, the same way as they had during the trip to Buddhist temples at Varana and Athanagalle in 2000. On that occasion the names included in the verses changed several times as women dancing in the aisle of the van used the song to make fun of people who held power over their lives—factory bosses, boardinghouse owners, and even the researcher. While Nilmini and I conversed about the way garment workers used Buddhist sacred places as symbols of sexual organs and functions, the younger women picked up the song with their own additions, which likewise included people who held power over their lives—parents, teachers, an elite woman who was putting on airs, the monk who is second in command of the temple (*poḍi sadhu*), and, in a show of solidarity, Nilmini's mother-in-law. The reference to her mother-in-law, who was taking a nap a few yards away inside the house, in relation to a wandering village man who was an exhibitionist made Nilmini put a stop to the revelry, at which point one young woman said, "But Nilmini akka, that would stop nanda [auntie] from being jealous of you two holding hands and stuff."

On another occasion, Mayuri noted how the FTZ workers changed the words of a popular song that referred to a woman asking the man to go to a temple and worship Buddha. She said they replaced all the verbs with a word considered the most vulgar when referring to sexual intercourse. Then she sang a few verses to jolt the others' memories of the song that was popular among the workers. The first time, the singer asked "shall we go darling?" (*yamudha rathitaran*), but the phrase was changed to "shall we go to a dark place darling?"; thereafter "shall we go darling?" was changed to "shall we fuck darling?" Several times Mayuri said, "This Sandya miss was there, too." But, as far as I could remember, it was a group of young men who did that to embarrass the female workers in the bus. I did not try to correct Mayuri

as I was not sure of her intentions in attributing ownership of the lyrics to the workers. It could have just been a lapse in her memory, or her comment could be an indication of how she now sees her FTZ interlude—a place where they had agency to explore new things, to transgress, and to get back at people who imposed overly repressive sexual mores on them. It is also possible that this is how she wanted the younger women to envision the FTZ, as it was abundantly obvious that she wanted them to experience FTZ life as it was, in her own words, “a great place to see the world and learn things.”

It was interesting that at least two young women claimed to have heard this song being similarly modified by boys in school. This prompted another young woman, a schoolgirl, to confide that the boys who sat in the row behind her at the dharma school changed Pali³ verses and poetry (*gatha*) to sexualized verses. The one she shared was a conversation between Buddha and his closest disciple, the monk Ananda, at the bathing well. The boys had used Pali-sounding words to come up with new verses that, when reversed, said Buddha had asked Ananda to wash the soap off of his butt and penis. I have heard many jokes about Buddhist monks but was surprised to hear Buddha himself being referred to in this fashion. When I expressed my surprise, Mayuri and the young village women spoke over each other to tell me that there are many such jokes. In fact, by relating this experience at other such gatherings in different villages I was able to learn that a few such jokes circulated around all of these villages. Men were said to be the ones who created and disseminated such verses, poems, and couplets. As Nisha explained, “Pali verses are hard to memorize and teachers punish if one cannot recite them properly. So frustrated boys come up with these alterations to make the lessons fun.” The boys may indeed be the authors of such jokes, but the girls were obviously privy to them as well.

It is the prevalence of transgressive sexual discourse among village women that makes me question whether such discourses within storytelling sessions represent a new and subversive element or if they are a continuation of everyday sexualized discourses in female-only settings. Obviously, the village women did not need the former workers to transport such jokes from Colombo. They already possessed such knowledge but perhaps felt afraid to share it lest they be branded bad women. Knowing how sexual knowledge and the willingness to share such knowledge could undermine reputations, former workers made conscious efforts to limit who participated in storytelling sessions. Not only were those who were reluctant to share stories ridiculed for fake virtuousness, but the willingness to share risqué experiences ap-

peared to be a precondition for being included in the group. As Nilu once noted, “There are a few who sometimes drop by, when they are around, we only talk about village gossip. I have a great group of little sisters who contribute as many jokes and gossip as they can get from me.”⁴

While sexualized discourses are not exclusive to the FTZ, what is new and subversive is the way the women incorporate *Priyadari* into their discourse. Although, as noted, most stories in *Priyadari* are written by FTZ workers or their jilted lovers, the former workers presented them as if they were mostly written by village women like themselves and insisted that they ought to acknowledge that village women are not as “innocent and pure” as media and schoolteachers portray them to be. None of the former workers confided that they did so intentionally to minimize the stigma they felt about being former FTZ workers, or to deter nonmigrant women from thinking they were better than the former workers. I witnessed a few friendly debates in which some younger nonmigrant women used nationalist discourses to argue that village people are more virtuous than those in westernized cities, only to be shown otherwise by former workers who highlighted many examples of village men and women behaving shamelessly. By the time I joined the sessions, though, most groups had sifted out the women who rigidly held on to those ideas, and younger nonmigrant women were, for the most part, equally eager to share their knowledge. Therefore, it appears that a partial function of these group sessions was to help village women overcome fear of talking about sex. The sessions may even be designed, given that the former workers’ narratives exonerate the majority of FTZ workers from wrongdoing, to provide the nonmigrant younger women ammunition with which to argue with their elders about the positive side of FTZ work. More important, these sessions provided a space to openly share knowledge about subjects that the unmarried women were expected to be unaware of. The infusion of jokes, fun, and laughter reinscribe sexual activity in younger women’s minds as a pleasurable pursuit, in contrast to an act to be ashamed of and secretive about.

Dissemination of Reproductive Health Knowledge

All the former workers I studied had attended at least one reproductive health seminar while at the FTZ. They had also learned much on the topic thanks to discussions within boardinghouses and factory lunch groups. Most of them, unfortunately, found it difficult to talk to their husbands about contraceptives at the beginning of their marriages and ended up

having babies rather soon. However, they confessed to feeling liberated after having the first baby and started using contraceptives themselves and talking about them to their close female friends in the villages. Six former workers said that they had discussed contraceptive methods with younger women, although none of the younger ones had solicited such knowledge. "You and I both witnessed the terrible abortions that took place around the FTZ because women did not use contraceptives. So when girls tell me about their boyfriends, I just cannot keep silent about these things. All of them wiggle in embarrassment and swear up and down that they have not done anything more than holding hands and do not intend to go any further. So I tell them, 'not because they happen, but just in case, keep these things in mind,' and then I explain about the pill and condoms," Jayanti told me.

Nitu and Nisha both claimed that they had brought back free informational brochures from FTZ reproductive health seminars to give away should the need arise. "Sometimes these young girls are so stupid and they live in fairy worlds. These days schools have people coming and talking to them about contraceptives [Sri Lanka Family Planning Association Educational outreach programs] but they don't pay attention because they do not think that they will have sex before marriage. They cannot even imagine that their boyfriends consider them in a sexualized way. But hormones don't think about customs. If the occasion comes up, even the nicest couples fall for these urges. I try to tell them the FTZ stories of buses breaking down, trips ending up in abandoned huts, and the women ending up with [pregnant] bellies, to get them prepared," Nisha said. "My mother-in-law warred against my talking to young women, saying that their parents would say that I am corrupting their daughters. But this is something I have got to do and even if one girl takes precautions because of my words I will be happy," she added.

Shanika befriended the family health worker who visited during her pregnancy and started helping out by familiarizing the health worker with problematic families in the village, keeping records, and accompanying her whenever she could get away from her own household duties. During these activities she befriended many married women who were of childbearing age. One of these women approached Shanika seeking information about where to get an abortion done secretly. This was the woman's sixth pregnancy and Shanika wanted badly to help. But she was afraid that doing so could undermine the good former-worker daughter-in-law image she had so carefully cultivated, so Shanika decided to help circuitously. She told the woman that she had heard there are many abortion clinics in Colombo even

though she did not know of any. But she thought a certain NGO officer might know of these places and provided the name and address of an NGO in Katunayake. Although she was not informed of what happened, two years later the woman still had only five children. Several other former workers noted that they would not talk to the younger women about contraceptives unless specifically asked about it because they did not want to risk their carefully built good, young married woman image.

According to Dinithi, many young women come to her when they need help concerning their relationships. Although Dinithi herself was in an abusive relationship until 2008, she had managed to develop a reputation as someone with knowledge about matters regarding relationships, intimacy, and marriage. While there are many reasons for her acquiring such a reputation, including her eloquence and spirited attitude during adversity, the most important perhaps was the way she won over her in-laws, to the extent that they all took her side whenever her husband mistreated her. She was also considered to be a good woman for being patient with a war hero and not leaving her abusive husband. Interestingly, the group of women who visited her included married women. According to Dinithi, several such women approached her asking advice concerning their marital woes. After exhausting her common-sense wisdom, Dinithi started regularly telephoning an NGO officer who was trained in counseling and then related the officer's advice to the village women. By 2010 she had lost contact with this NGO officer but felt confident enough to use the knowledge she had gathered to advise village women. "Of course, I cannot advise poor women to leave their husbands knowing there is no other place for them to go. As you know, I myself did not leave Kapila when he used to beat me. So I mostly ask them to be strong and take care of their health and use religion and meditation to deal with situations," Dinithi said, adding that this was more or less what the NGO counselor had advised.

Talking openly about knowledge acquired in the FTZ could arouse suspicions, and villagers could question why there were so many educational programs about reproductive technology for unmarried FTZ workers. While each worker approached the dilemma in her own particular way, it was difficult to ignore the potential for dissemination of reproductive knowledge via returning FTZ migrants. If the Sri Lanka Family Planning Association makes an effort to get village elite women, former workers, and the village health officers together for educational efforts, the former workers could become change agents without jeopardizing their reputations. As

Purna once said, "Really, you only need one or two camp days to figure out everything you need to know about contraceptives and STDs. But NGOs keep spending money on all sorts of workshops in the FTZ while the real need is in these villages." At least seventeen former workers and a number of nonmigrant women noted that the real need is to get men involved in reproductive health educational programs. Shanika agreed and also said that the village health officer works only with married women or women who are already pregnant. "Village girls are very savvy these days and they learn about contraceptives in schools and from TV and magazines. What they need is practical knowledge about when and how these unprotected moments occur and how to avoid such traps and to say no if they do not want to have sex. If we [former workers] don't know those things, then no one knows," Shanika said laughing.

Subversive Sexual Discourses and Reputations

Although many women were deeply frustrated with lackluster sexual and emotional intimacy resulting from village sensibilities and economic and living arrangements, they did not clamor for a western-style companionate marriage in which couples lived as isolated units, preferring the conjugal partnership over family and other social ties. On the contrary, most women wanted to live close to one or both sets of parents and amid abundant same-sex sociability. Yet most yearned for increased emotional intimacy and outward displays of affection. Thus what most workers desired was a new set of prescriptions for what is acceptable for younger married couples within the conventional extended family and compound living. Apparently, neoliberal discourses on autonomy, freedom, and rights are being adjusted to represent something practical and more meaningful for women in rural Sri Lanka.

Although neoliberal reforms provide political and economic conditions that spur people to seek alternative family and kin arrangements, many developing societies do not wholly embrace western ideas. Similarly, ideas from the western world concerning love, intimacy, and sexuality that the workers absorbed while in the FTZ get reworked within varied village contexts into newer articulations that all actors with multiple agendas can agree on. The next chapter further illustrates the importance of common agreement by focusing on three women who sought to overtly stretch the normative gendered codes of behavior.

CHAPTER 6

The Strange, the Crazy, and the Stubborn

What happens when women are not ready to compromise or perform conformity? Would they be able to negotiate new positions for themselves within village contexts and become path breakers for younger village women? How would this affect village common sense, that is, the acceptable rules for behavior? Strange, crazy, stubborn: these were the words used most frequently to describe women, former workers included, who overtly violated normative gendered behavioral codes.

In this chapter I take an intimate look at three women who blatantly flout gender norms in their quest to negotiate desired positions. I attempt to answer why Kushani paid an international matchmaker to find her a Swiss or German husband even while hoping a village man would want her; why Madhuri became an unmarried farmer; and why Chamila asked prospective groom to tell her the most feminist act they had ever performed, resulting in her remaining unmarried. More important, the following sections elucidate how such acts stretched the boundaries of hegemonies. They also demonstrate how intense violations of normative femininity carve out new paths for younger generations amidst other intense social and cultural changes that are occurring in the villages.

Kushani

In late 2000 Kushani mailed me a letter:

My Dearest Sandya Miss,