

SUICIDE NARRATIVES AND IN-BETWEEN IDENTITIES AMONG SRI LANKA'S FACTORY WORKERS



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The suicide narratives (talk, jokes, threats, and writings) of Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zone garment factory workers help them survive difficult lives in the city. The narratives mix and match the cultural discourses they straddle as young, unmarried village women who migrate to work in transnational factories. Suicide narratives are a local response to global capital and cultural flows. They let the workers express gains and losses of their in-between lives as temporary residents in an urban, transnational space. The article explores gender norms, class cultures, and what these narratives mean for transformative politics. (Suicide narratives, identity negotiations, ritual healers, Sri Lanka)

Mala's short stories, hand written in her journal, offer a wealth of information on everyday life and subtle social critique. A Free Trade Zone (FTZ) worker who has committed suicide narrates the following story from her coffin, surveying her own funeral.

Both amma [mother] and thatha [father] are crying now. You would not have to cry so much if you had been more understanding of my problems. Look at the way boarding [house] auntie is grieving. I hope at least now she will be more sympathetic towards girls' problems. Ah, here comes Kumar. He is crying now. He should. He is the reason why I am lying here.

It sounds as if the dead woman is taking her revenge by making all those who wronged her regret their actions. The story grows haunting at the end as she screams in fear, pleading with her relatives and friends not to leave her alone in the cold, dark cemetery.

The story may have been hastily written, given its grammatical errors and discontinuities, but it voices a poignant reality about the FTZ where talk, thoughts, dreams, and threats of suicide abound. Mala's two-and-a-half-page story attempts to capture how workers use what I term suicide narratives, including actual threats, frequent talk, gossip, and jokes about suicide, within their boarding houses to survive the harsh realities of city life, independence, difficult working conditions at garment factories, and the conflict between their new-found sense of self and gender norms. Mala's story points to the pleasure of contemplating suicide even as it warns about death's horrors.

This essay depicts how women use suicide narratives in their daily lives, mixing and matching the multiple cultural discourses they straddle as young,

unmarried village women who move to urban areas to work as industrial workers for five to six years. Suicide narratives are expressive and performative practices that take place within the FTZ industrial area. When faced with contradictory expectations and conflicts, female workers within their female-only boarding houses resort to talk of suicide (contemplation, gossip, and jokes), occasional writing, frequent threats, and half-hearted attempts.

Although the local media harp on the high number of suicides among FTZ workers, interviews with police and NGO officials and statistical reports indicate that actual incidents of suicide do not match the hype. The numbers do not even come close to those reported for the rural districts from which most of these women hail (Manuel et al. 2008). The female community that migrant factory workers find on the shop floor and in boarding houses and the resultant use of suicide narratives significantly contribute to this difference. These narratives help to release stress; they also mobilize local support systems, such as peer groups, healers, and ritual specialists. Further, women use their elevated position as urban workers who are more modern than non-migrant village women to discourage each other from actually committing suicide.

Many studies note that Sri Lanka's suicide rates are among the highest in the world (Kearney and Miller 1985; Marecek 2006) and that most suicide attempts (more than 75 percent) in Sri Lanka occur in rural areas (Ratnayake 2002). Coming from rural areas, most FTZ workers seem to have internalized committing suicide as a way to deal with crises. But, as industrial workers living in an urban area that provides its own challenges and opportunities, they must find novel ways of responding. Most of the workers say it is important that their actions speak of their high level of education, urban experience, and the strong personalities that distinguish them from village women who never migrated. The workers' use of suicide narratives is a negotiation of both their rural system of meaning and the modern knowledges they acquire within the industrial urban area and express the in-between character of their identities.

The present FTZ employment structure informally forces women to go back to their villages after a few years of work, thereby making a complete break from their rural backgrounds almost impossible. Instead they develop creative ways to negotiate in-between identities that allow them to enjoy the benefits of independence, wage work, and urban living, yet also allow room to maneuver norms of respectability when they return to village life. As people encounter multiple cultural discourses, they are confronted with contradictory but possible identities from which they can choose. The workers combine aspects of several cultural discourses to construct an identity that is not rural, not quite urban, not quite modern, yet not at all backward—in short, modern women who never forget their rural upbringing (Hewamanne 2008; Lynch 2007). As such they are able to

balance contradictory cultural expectations, sexual desires, and the allure of the consumer culture in the city through stances that are most beneficial.

I have used the term “modern women with traditional brake-pads” to describe their in-between identities (Hewamanne 2008).¹ They exercise choice as modern women but use cultural norms to constrain themselves, especially with regard to romantic relationships. This position highlights the contradictory desires created by their new culture surrounding the FTZ and the ambivalence inherent in their expression. Workers’ actions, especially in finding boyfriends, transgress cultural codes. At the same time, they feel compelled to condemn those who engage in pre-marital sex with their boyfriends. In a similar vein, when things go wrong, they engage in suicide narratives but use the rhetoric of modernity to restrain themselves from actually attempting suicide. They express in-between-ness of their identity by thinking like rural women who have learned attempting suicide as a response to crises, but applying the brakes of modern ideas to crisis management. Lisa Rofel identified diverse practices and responses within Chinese factories as an expression of an alternative modernity (1992:96): people mixed and matched aspects of western modernity with existing cultural patterns to create a flexible space in which they felt safe. The workers’ use of suicide narratives, in which they combine rural patterns of behavior with their knowledge of modern behavior, is an emergent cultural discourse that lets them express the gains and losses of their in-between lives. Suicide narratives, therefore, are a response to global capital and cultural flows. Though not explicitly stated, these narratives express discontent and a critique of existing gender norms, class culture, and a transnational production system that regards them as disposable labor. The narratives initiate discussions surrounding their living and working conditions and possible solutions, thus contributing to class consciousness and building worker solidarity.

WORK, WOMEN MIGRANTS, AND IN-BETWEEN IDENTITIES

When the first of three FTZs in Sri Lanka was established in Katunayake in 1978 under the structural adjustment program, the newly created assembly-line jobs were expected to be filled by rural, unemployed women who had little chance to find wage employment elsewhere. That they would work only a few years before marriage to accumulate money and jewelry for their dowry was also assumed. Moreover, the assumptions that having no other choice women would accept employment under any condition and that they are secondary or supplementary wage earners resulted in rigorous work schedules and minimal wages.

As in other transnational factories in Sri Lanka and around the world (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Lynch 2007; Mills 1997, 1999; Pena 1997; Prieto 1997; Salzinger 2003), those in the Katunayake FTZ demand maximal output for

minimal wages, exploitative working conditions, and practice a late capitalist form of gendered working conditions. According to the Sri Lanka Board of Investment, about 80,000 young women are employed in Katunayake FTZ's 92 factories and a similar number by subcontractors located around the zone. The majority of them are garment factories, and large numbers of young rural women from economically and socially marginalized groups work in these factories as machine operators. Most are unmarried, young, and well educated, often with 8–12 years of schooling (Rosa 1990:36). Their basic salary as of 2007 is Rs. 2,750 (about US\$27) per month, but workers can earn about Rs. 5,000–8,000 by working overtime and not taking their annual leave. Workers suffer from various ailments due to difficult work and living conditions. The vast majority are ethnic Sinhala and Buddhist by religion.

There are few state or factory-run hostel facilities for these women. People living in the area have hastily built rows of rooms with crowded living conditions to rent to them. Coupled with physically and mentally arduous working conditions, the problems associated with the makeshift boarding houses make life in the area difficult (Dabindu 1989,1997; Friedric Ebert Stiftung 1997; Hewamanne 2008).²

The workers' status as young women living alone without male protection receives the most public attention. Popular accounts of widespread pre-marital sex, rape, prostitution, abortion, and infanticide often portray these women as victims of labor, sexual exploitation, and their own loose morals. Workers are identified as "garment girls" and are said to be recognizable by their dress, hair styles, and speech. Having so many young women congregating in one place is so unusual that people call the FTZ Sthri Puraya (city of women), Prema Kalape (love zone), and Vesa Kalape (whore zone). Their neighbors in the area refer to the "free living women" amidst them as a disaster (Hewamanne 2008) and as loose women who can be easily seduced into sexual relations.

Only a few of the workers I studied had parents or family who made heavy financial demands on them, as is the case for Javanese and Thai FTZ workers (Mills 1999; Wolf 1992). But with salaries only slightly above survival wage, they could hardly achieve desired ways of living. Most factory owners expected workers to leave the factory after five years, with an accumulated provident fund and five-year bonus payments that are meant to be used as dowry. Even if the women wanted to keep working, social pressure made doing so difficult. For example, people believe that the only reason women would continue working is that no men wanted to marry them. Though couched in the rhetoric of marriage and motherhood, the institutional push to leave after five years enables factory owners to recruit younger workers and get rid of senior workers who were becoming politically conscious. Thus, Sinhala Buddhist gender norms are employed to further capitalist interests.

Although the difficulties of factory work seem to outweigh gains, a stagnant agricultural economy, lack of alternative employment, and the quest for modernity and urban life styles as portrayed on television, influence moving to do this work and live with other young women. Doing so, workers undergo changes in their social, cultural, emotional, and cognitive dispositions. The socialization process in factories and boarding houses encourages them to dress, behave, think, and desire in new ways. They start to value free movement and increased autonomy. Their journey toward becoming modern women (in their words “mod”) is constrained by the knowledge of their eventual return to villages.

MIGRANT WORKERS AND SUICIDE TALK

In 1995, Sri Lanka recorded the highest rate of suicide in the world at 48 deaths per 100,000 (Levy et al. 2003) and the rate is two and a half times greater in rural areas than in metropolitan centers (De Silva and Jayasinghe 2003). It seems that the rural/urban disparity in agricultural development and economic stagnation correspond with an increase in suicide and attempted suicides. Kearney and Miller (1985:83) further note that more than half of all suicides in Sri Lanka are committed by youth (15–29 years) of both sexes.

Life in Sinhala villages is characterized by the absence of violence. This results from the strong emphasis on restraint and shame/fear. The village ideal is for quiet self-control, thus angry outbursts or aggression are considered a loss of such cultural restraint (Spencer 1992:605–09). People can express aggressive behavior via homicide, sorcery, and suicide.³ Suicide is a means by which the victim morally entraps the person responsible for his or her pain (Spencer 1992:613). According to Marecek (2006), young rural women commit or attempt suicide due to incidents that cause them and their families to “lose face.” Senadheera and Marecek (2008) note that rural young men and women sometimes use suicide attempts to blame another and to achieve a certain end. They record one incident when a young man attempted suicide to shame the young woman who spurned his advances. His family blamed the woman for his ordeal and demanded that she accept him. She then attempted suicide, blaming the man for ruining her life and diverted the blame onto him. These arguments recall Counts’s (1980:346) view that suicide among the Lusi of Papua New Guinea is an alternative for those who are shamed, abused, and powerless to retaliate.

Most FTZ workers are from villages in the North Central Province where some of the highest suicide rates have been reported (Manuel et al. 2008). Women recounted how, as children, they ran to witness horrific scenes of suicide and/or heard sensational stories dealing with suicide. They said that those who drove someone to suicide were shamed and lived with guilt all their lives.

Several women, somewhat gleefully, related how these peoples' lives were severely disrupted following the suicide—families breaking up, businesses failing, disease, and sudden deaths. Young Sri Lankan rural women seem to have internalized suicide and threats of suicide as a form of communication and potential action at an early age. They regard suicide threats and attempts as forms of retaliation and a way of responding to life's difficulties.

However, the low number of suicide attempts or actual deaths in the FTZ speaks of the workers' new social realities as temporary migrants in an urban, stigmatized space. After a few months in the area, rural women develop female social networks, NGO connections, and working and living skills. They also learn to become members of a gendered group of migrant workers who are different from other industrial workers, middle-class women, and rural women who have not migrated (Hewamanne 2008). While many frequently and casually threaten to commit suicide, many also say that they no longer regard suicide as a way to solve problems and that the ones who commit suicide are foolish and backward.

Although FTZ employment is touted as a way for rural women to attain modernity, low wages, the temporary character of employment, and the cultural stigma attached to moving away from their villages inhibit attaining such ideals. Nonetheless, most rarely missed an opportunity to point out that they are more modern than village women. The frequent talk about suicide and its counter-narrative of modernity prevent a high number of suicide attempts, in part because the threat to do so almost always induces other women to nurture the woman in trouble. Also, by holding that they are modern, educated women, only confined to assembly-line work because they were born poor, workers discourage each other from actually committing suicide. They have a new expressive space available to them that does not exist in the villages. It comes with the deep sentimental ties among migrant women who have to share boarding rooms with many other women, whereas village young people do not live and work together in ways that promote such bonding and sharing confidences. According to Jeanne Marecek (personal communication), while older Sri Lankan women may talk about young people committing suicide in a reproving manner, young village women do not talk about suicide in their own intimate circles.

SUICIDE AND SUICIDE NARRATIVES

Unlike suicide in most Western societies, the prototypical suicide in Sri Lanka is the "dialogue suicide." In contrast to the "monologue suicide," where people commit solitary acts to escape from pain, dialogue suicides are "expressive, directed outward, and intended as communication to others" (Marecek 2006:74). Studies show that women's suicides can protest against injustices or

initiate retaliation against wrong-doers by bringing them shame, guilt, and social ostracism (Counts 1980; Silva and Pushpakumara 1996; Lee and Kleinman 2000; Meng 2002; Pearson 1995).

When Sri Lanka adopted free-trade and open-market policies in 1977, urban and rural areas experienced massive social, cultural, and economic changes. Village daughters taking up industrial wage-work in urban areas and living with other young women in boarding houses aroused much anxiety over female morality and led to discourses that stigmatized FTZ workers as frivolous women of easy virtue. These workers were generally regarded as a pool of women men could approach for temporary pleasure. Living away from their families and communities and experiencing harsh working conditions, women willingly got into romantic relationships with men who did not intend to marry them. According to several NGO officials I interviewed, typical reasons for workers to consider suicide are losing virginity to a married lover, unwanted pregnancies, abandonment, and being tricked out of money by a man. They noted that being slandered for “bad behavior,” especially for engaging in premarital sex, made some women think of suicide to restore their reputation.

Suicide ideation, defined as ideas or thoughts about suicide and committing acts of self-harm to seek attention, are hardly new to the Western world (Bhardwaj 2001; Rudd 1989; Shagle and Barber 1993). Most suicidal ideation and attempts in Western countries stem from intense self-loathing (Bhardwaj 2001), but none of the women I talked to associated suicidal thoughts with self-loathing. Instead they wanted to maintain a good name in public and said their suicidal thoughts expressed the anger they felt toward people who had wronged them. Mostly they considered suicide as a way to expose the wrong-doer and refute the false image he projected. Their suicide narratives could be termed dialogue narratives that say the person responsible should be shamed and ostracized. In that sense, the narratives help to ease the anger they feel about being solely blamed for transgressions committed together. The need to “tell an audience” is present in village women’s suicide attempts too (Marecek 2006), but they lack the peers of the boarding houses to initially share their anguish.

From suicide notes and letters left behind by Japanese lesbian couples who committed or attempted suicide, Robertson (1999:31) argues that lesbian double suicides mark a symbolic death of the traditional Japanese woman and the emergence of more complex female actors on the public stage. She notes that these women are “dying to tell” their stories of new female roles (Robertson 1999:24). Unlike the lesbian couples in Japan, the Sri Lankan female workers move from their close-knit rural communities to a transnational space that offers relatively more freedom of expression and access to goods and services, but also to where capitalist ethics and urban mores prevail and create difficulties for them. According to most workers I interviewed, urban life was better than rural

village life, where strict rules of propriety and emotional control result in restrained feelings and sudden eruptions. While workers do not find it necessary to “die to tell their stories,” the problems of migration and living in a stigmatized area necessitate mechanisms for adjustment which bring support and comfort and help them respond to their new difficulties.

The importance of suicide narratives become more apparent when considering other societies with high rates of female suicide. Similar to Counts’s (1980) study of suicide among Kilali women as an expression of protest against social injustice, Aguaruna suicide, especially among women and young men, is an action by those who are unable to organize collective responses (Brown 1986:311). Writing about Kerala, the state with the highest rate of suicide in India, Halliburton (1998) notes the link between high socio-economic development indexes and suicide rates. According to Halliburton, the frustrations engendered by advanced literacy, out-migration, modernity, secularism, and economic stagnation are responsible for the high incidence of suicide there. Sri Lankan workers also have higher education levels and experience migration, modernity, and secularism, and like Kerala youth face a lack of means for responding to social injustice. However, the expressive space of suicide narratives within the boarding house most often prevents workers’ social and psychological pressures from resulting in suicide.

Furthermore, their reluctance to acknowledge that they could take the path of suicide correlates with their mostly celebratory narratives of migration and finding community where they settled. They seem to have found a middle ground where they can voice their concerns by talking about suicide while maintaining that they are strong, modern women who can survive city life. Marecek (2006) holds that in Sri Lanka, people who attempt suicide are considered “impulsive, foolish, deficient in coping skills and bad decision makers” (Marecek 2006:78). She states that Sri Lankans normally use essentialist accounts to describe women’s suicide but contextual accounts to describe men’s (Marecek 1998). FTZ workers are acutely aware of accounts that associate suicide with foolishness, backwardness, and ruralness (*game gode*). That “modern women” should not attempt suicide is influenced by that knowledge. While this is a strong deterrent, other factors also influence the low number of attempts and deaths. As one woman said, “These police officers, newspapers, and everybody are after these [roadside] abortion clinics. They don’t know how many suicides those places have prevented by taking care of women’s little problems. It is not like you can go to hospitals and ask for abortions.” While this statement points to a need to improve women’s reproductive health services, it also indicates their ability to deal with problems through local clandestine services.

A psychoanalytic view of suicide is the desire to kill someone that is turned upon oneself (Straus and Straus 1953). Since the wrong-doers in the urban area

are also migrants, and usually vanish to some other part of the country, women would have difficulty socially killing them by committing suicide. Instead, they turn to ritual specialists and sorcerers to harm the wrong-doer. Many Sri Lankans use sorcerers to cause ill fortune, disease, and death to enemies (Kapferer 1997), and ritual specialists help the women by “symbolically killing” the wrong-doer, and so easing their emotional turmoil. This is noteworthy, as unmarried village women typically do not consult ritual specialists for similar problems.

Marecek (2006) notes that when seeking help of ritual healers in a crisis, a woman need not divulge private matters as the healer will likely look for such explanations as bad planetary influence (2006:82). However, I found that ritual specialists perform an important role in preventing suicides by being therapeutic listeners and providing practical advice. While consulting ritual specialists in times of family trouble, such as illness and financial problems, which is common practice in the village, young unmarried people do not normally employ them for help with romantic crises. The relative lack of anonymity in villages prevents young people from approaching such healers. In the city, ritual specialists specifically target the workers, for whom visiting such places to get their horoscopes read in groups is an accepted Sunday activity. With many ritual healers within walking distance and the ability to blend in with other women going to get their palms or horoscopes read, women find it easy to consult a ritual specialist when they need help with a crisis. Thus FTZ workers have a source of support that is not available to young unmarried village men and women. The significant role these ritual specialists play in managing actual suicide attempts is discussed below.

SUICIDE NARRATIVES FOR SURVIVING

Once, at the boarding house where I stayed for several months in 2000, a wailing woman, Ramya, threatened to kill herself but was restrained and pushed into a bed. When Ramya’s wailing and physical struggles did not stop, another woman pinned her to the wall and very sternly told her to stop behaving like an ignorant fool and act like the educated woman she was. Ramya seemed to consider this and quieted down for a while. A few hours later she started wailing again. Another resident, Malika, talked to her in a soft voice asking her to “be a good child and listen to what others say.” Ramya again quieted down and, amidst the ministrations of several other women, fell asleep with her head on a friend’s lap.

During my ethnographic research in 2000, I stayed alternately in two boarding houses, one with 50–60 workers, and visited five others regularly. Then and during subsequent visits over the years, I witnessed several such highly emotional scenes. During this time, I became an engaged participant in the

weekend story-telling sessions, where workers gathered in one room and swapped stories, joked, and sang songs into the wee hours. While women formed strong bonds with co-workers from their factories, they forged their most powerful emotional ties with other boarding house residents. During these nightly sessions they shared accounts of their lives, work weeks, and romances, including private matters such as sexual encounters and violence.

At many times during these sessions, women casually mentioned committing suicide. It was common for them to point to a stressful situation and say “the only thing left for me to do is to put a rope around my neck and hang myself,” or “pour a bottle of poison in my mouth.” These suicidal expressions usually came at the end of a long story and appeared to provide relief and even a symbolic, albeit momentary, closure to their concerns. Listeners offered comforting words, praising the story teller for having the courage to not commit suicide despite the problems. Often the story teller added a few more sentences on how hard resisting the impulse to commit self-harm was, prompting another round of discussion on how they have become strong women who can negotiate an unfair world with quiet resolve. The common identity as migrant transnational factory workers and the sisterhood the women develop with their housemates seem to help in overcoming difficulties.

Many women talked about how suicide figured in their dreams, saying they dreamt they or their friends had attempted or committed suicide. Most such dreams ended with the woman being saved at the last minute. Early one morning Ruvini started telling us about a dream she had the previous night. “The most beautiful dream that I ever had in my life,” she declared and proceeded to relate how she dreamt of her boyfriend of three years, Ajith, abandoning her and how she ran to the railroad hoping to jump in front of a moving train. Thus capturing our attention, she explained how Ajith ran after her and grabbed her just before she jumped. He pinned her down and, holding her face lovingly, repeatedly asked, “Sudhu [fair one], why?” Full of smiles by this time, Ruvini described how other people were watching him tenderly care for her.

Sri Lankan society places a high value on fair skin, and the women desired having fair skin as part of their quest for upward mobility. Ruvini, however, had very dark skin and was often teased about it. The anxieties she felt about her “undesirable skin color” and her boyfriend’s affections were manifest in a dream in which she used attempted suicide as a vehicle to achieve a desired end. Other workers also related dreams about suicide attempts, last minute rescues, and happy endings to their worries. Such talk about dreams suggests that, as rural women, they have internalized suicide as a way to achieve some power. Occupying the fringes of urban modernity and daily seeing different ways of living, some workers seem to have pushed this culturally patterned response to the depths of their consciousness, and entertain them only in dreams.

Like other colonized societies, the ideal gender norms constructed during Sri Lanka's anti-colonial struggle stipulated stringent norms for women. Women were projected as passive, subordinate, and confined to nurturing roles within households. Stagnant rural economies, trade liberalization, and new opportunities created by transnational production made these ideal roles unattainable. Still, when rural women migrated to Katunayake, they were stigmatized for undermining gender norms. Discourses portray them alternately as ignorant but innocent women, victimized by opportunistic men, or wanton women who invite trouble through their own misdeeds. Since even rumors of such relationships jeopardize their marriage prospects, workers earnestly desired to marry their boyfriends, often calling them the "man I am going to marry." Men, especially military men, having internalized stereotypes of the women as lacking female morality, routinely committed emotional violence with false promises, seducing women into having sex and then abandoning them, sometimes pregnant. Sri Lankan society still values virginity at marriage and women considered such abandonment devastating.

The reason for Ramya's suicide threat described at the beginning of this section was her learning that her boyfriend was married. While wailing about her now-destroyed life, she said she had sex with him and thereby became worthless. There were many sympathetic responses; other workers described worse experiences and blamed the man in strong language. This response contrasted with comments about other workers who may have had sexual relations. If a woman who is rumored to have had premarital sex did so to enjoy a fun life with boyfriends and material wealth, the condemnation was severe. But during a suicide attempt drama a woman can express her darkest secrets and still receive an understanding response. Emotional outbursts are discursive public forms, and whenever a worker threatens suicide, she appeals to a "community of sentiment" composed of those who share the same discursive forms (Appadurai 1990:108). A suicide attempt, therefore, is like an invitation for others to join a community of sentiment whose members feel responsibility for crisis management.

Many acts of self-harm are "carried out in dramatic fashion, often in the presence of others" (Marecek 2006:69). While directing shame and guilt at the person responsible for or accused of causing this act, it also increases the chance for crowd intervention. The few suicide attempts I witnessed at boarding houses and workers' stories of such attempts show that the women desired intervention and comfort. Twice, I saw workers running to the railroad with their roommates in hot pursuit. On both occasions, the friends stopped the women and brought them back to their rooms, and everyone offered comforting words, cash, clothing, and other material support to help them deal with the crises. Even so, there were dramatic flare-ups, and roommates gathered around the woman in crisis and told stories of how other women going through worse troubles dealt

with such challenges without resorting to foolish behavior. The immediate common-sense counseling of residents eased the turmoil.

During such comforting efforts, many workers blamed the unfairness of societal norms, uncaring politicians, and the police for their problems. Vinitha declared, “if police provide us enough protection to go to work, or to a musical show, or something at night, many of us would not even want boyfriends.” While this statement glosses over the emergent awareness of sexual desires, it relates to what many women cited as one of the reasons to have a boyfriend—the ability to enjoy entertainment opportunities with greater ease.

On a day in June 2000, I visited a boarding house to find that women were comforting a resident who was threatening to commit suicide. I had brought a gallon of ice cream to share with them, but got carried away with the drama and forgot about it. None of the boarding houses I visited had refrigerators, so when someone discovered the container on a chair another uproar ensued as workers ran to find small bowls and spoons to partake of the dissolving ice cream. When the crying woman realized that attention to her had been diverted, she wiped her tears and joined the party. This was the only time I saw the dynamics change so quickly. It demonstrates that the other women did not take her threat seriously, and the woman herself was not determined to go through with it.

Some of my friends laughingly recall Thakshila’s threat to jump in front of a train. During the incident, her friends held her back, while the train roared past the boarding house. Just as it did, Thakshila broke free and ran after the train waving her hands as if signaling it to stop. That day, those who ran after Thakshila were actually smiling when they brought her back. Many later admonished her for putting them all to shame. Ramani berated, “if you want to die, tie a bomb [to your waist] and go explode yourself in a LTTE camp.⁴ Why waste your life in vain?”

The FTZ is an ambivalent space that promises women modernity and independence while conferring social stigma. The women’s thoughts on suicide result from conflicts generated by their dual position as urban factory workers and daughters of patriarchal villages, and also reflect an ambivalence that makes understanding their contradictory claims about suicide difficult.

This kind of attempted suicide drama is rare (I witnessed only five), but comments about committing suicide were frequent, as if doing so were as simple as leaving a job or a boyfriend. The smiling way women said they wanted to commit suicide and the similar way others took these threats shows that both parties understood that they were expressed with a different intent than in the village, where (judging by the high number of suicides) threats usually lead to action. If, as rural women, they contemplated suicide when they were in trouble, most also understood that as modern women they should not act on such thoughts. However, as migrant workers, straddling divergent cultures, they also

choose to talk, write, and threaten suicide as a way to garner support for their emotional and physical survival.

None of the workers considered suicide a crisis management tactic, but condemned it as an act committed by uneducated rustics from rural parts of the country. Some noted that suicide can be understood with farmers burdened by severe debt.⁵ However, many reiterated that suicide was not an option for educated women like them, who have achieved some level of social mobility through industrial employment and urban life. Although female boarding house communities help women through periods of intense emotional unrest, they were not above occasional cruelty in reminding the same women how foolishly they had acted by threatening suicide. Even when no unkind comments were made, women who tried to commit suicide often moved to different boarding houses and changed factories, especially when the initial sympathy waned. Sometimes they briefly returned to their village before starting a new FTZ episode. Thus, they minimize any lingering shame about their own act, which is deemed foolish and backward.

Women are also aware of the help available in urban areas. They knew of NGOs and a counseling center in Katunayake as places where women could get help. They also mentioned books from NGO mobile libraries and other sources of knowledge, such as television, factory workshops, NGO health camps, and street dramas, and the harsh conditions that make them strong as reasons why they should not consider suicide. Many women noted the strong bonds they develop with other workers and the comfort they derive from sharing each other's burdens as blessings that village women do not have. Vinitha explained that unlike in their native villages, "we can talk to each other or write in our journals. We can cry together and let go. What can a village woman do? There is no hiding there."

Perhaps the understanding, not just among the women but of other people in the neighborhood, of their tendency to talk about suicide reduces some of its power. During a somewhat rare public suicide threat (outside of boarding houses on a street), issued directly to the man responsible for her crisis, a woman tried to attach some institutional clout to her suicide threat by invoking police powers. In April 2000, Devika, a former girlfriend of the boarding house owner, Saman, yelled at him to return a pair of gold bangles she had loaned him to pawn during a financial emergency. When he did not come out of the house, an enraged Devika threatened to call the police and drink poison when the police arrived. "Then you will get a different kind of bangles," she added, meaning handcuffs. She attracted a crowd and after about 15 minutes, Saman rushed out to her and delivered several hard slaps and kicks and then went back into his house.

The sudden attack took Devika by surprise. She fell to the grassy area between the road and Saman's fence and began wailing and beating her chest.

While the two female friends who accompanied her and several onlookers tried to help her up, she clutched the grass, smearing the soil on her body, all the while wailing and cursing Saman. It was difficult to watch how quickly her bravado had turned to an emotional drama more intense than some that occurred in the boarding house rooms. Discussing the incident later that night, a woman joked that Devika got a beating because she brought the police into her threat. Everyone knew that a police inspector probably would not have come to her rescue or investigate her undocumented loan claim. Some of the women, thereafter, reiterated their usual complaint about how difficult it is to go to a police station even to report losing a national identity card without being addressed in crude terms reserved for lower-class people (*thamuse*, as opposed to *oya*) or even whores.

These examples show that while suicide narratives are very effective in gaining the support of other women, and may even cause a boyfriend or a friend to become more attentive or ashamed (Saman reportedly shed tears after his physical violence to Devika), they do not bring practical solutions. Public displays usually lead to night-time discussions focused on social injustices and a venting against people in power. Such social criticism notwithstanding, these incidents do not get the attention of the police, state institutions, or NGOs. Rather they seem to add to the perception of most FTZ workers as an embarrassment to the nation and its women. However, such discussions strengthen a growing solidarity as oppressed female industrial workers—one step in a development toward transformative politics.

RITUAL SPECIALISTS AND SUICIDE TALK

Many of the women were aware of a well-known Colombo counseling center, a branch of Sumithrayo (good friends), which could help FTZ workers avoid suicide. But when asked if they would seek help from the center when they faced a crisis, almost all of them said they would not, as going to counseling centers is associated with mental illness, and that would stigmatize them. They said fellow workers were the first source of help followed by family (in most cases, not the immediate family), and then the boarding house “aunties” (landladies). Interviews with neighbors, boarding house owners, and NGO officials revealed that when crises occur, women often looked for supernatural help. Area residents termed several places “*garment devale*” (shrine) because of the large number of workers who visited them. In 2000, I observed that women often went to horoscope readers and ritual specialists who claimed to have supernatural powers.

What ritual specialists perform could be identified as symbolic violence, as they grind turmeric on a stone (*kaha ambaranawa*) or smash coconuts while chanting that the targeted wrong-doer should be destroyed in the same way. Then

the client is asked to wait a week or so to see the results. The symbolic violence provides an outlet for extreme anger, and the wait period helps heal the wounds and allows the woman to get more practical help from friends and family. When analyzing the high prevalence of sorcery in rural Sri Lanka, Selvadurai (1976) wrote that people in societies with weak legal structures resort to sorcery to seek justice. Thirty-five years later, workers living in an urban area still find sorcery the most useful means to avenge injustices, such as loss of virginity, abandonment, and unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, the ritual specialists in the area seem to fill a need for psychological counseling. Several neighbors and NGO officials directed me to a ritual specialist (*kapu mahaththaya*) at a nearby shrine because he knew much about workers' problems and kept a book containing their stories and his remedies.

The ritual specialist, Sirisena, enthusiastically agreed to talk to me and brought out a thick book with notes written in black ink. While leafing through the pages to find a particular story, he said, "You know why these women come to me or other ritual specialists like me?" When I answered in the negative, he continued:

They cannot go to the temple and tell the statue of the Buddha what happened and that they need help. You should not ask for favors from Buddha and especially not when you are angry and want to get revenge. And do you think that they can talk to monks about the kind of troubles they have, like "I lost my virginity" or "I am pregnant"? It is against the customs. Like that saying, "all the garbage goes to the Beruvala Bay."⁶ What the temples cannot solve comes to our shrine.

Women often go to temples to perform bodhipuja (bathing the Bodhi tree, *Ficus religiosa*) for their boyfriends in the war zone, when things run smoothly in their lives, or to perform their nurturing role of bestowing religious blessings on their men-folk. However, according to Sirisena and most of the workers, Buddhist temples do not offer much help when things go wrong. "Today if a woman goes crying to the temple, people will stop her and even the monks will turn their backs," Sirisena said.

The prevalent notions about FTZ workers as promiscuous made neighbors and even the police insensitive to their problems. Many police officers in the area seem to believe that if these women behaved as good, moral Sinhala Buddhist women, by not having boyfriends or engaging in premarital sex, they would not get into trouble. The women themselves have internalized dominant sexual norms and seem to think that in crises such as abandonment or pregnancy they are not worthy of institutional or religious support. On the other hand, ritual specialists, who are a marginalized religious outlet, seem to offer the women easy acceptance and ready help. While the ritual specialists and shrines are a part of the commercial sphere developed around factories and its gendered work

force, and exploit the new problems for their gain, they also help prevent suicide attempts.

Sirisena very clearly understood his importance in providing psychological counseling, albeit of a very practical kind. He said that when women come to him, they are emotional wrecks (*bageta pissu vetila*) and only a short step away from committing suicide.

I talk to them and let them tell the whole story. Then I do my *anjanam eli* (looking into the future) and tell them what is going to happen to the people who wronged them. I also do turmeric grinding and ask them to wait a week or so. To tell you the truth, sometimes I get the money but don't even do the grinding. All they need is a little happiness knowing that the bad men are going to suffer more than they did. And when a week goes by, her mind's wound naturally heals. Time solves the problems.

Sirisena refused to let me record the cases in his notebook, saying, "These are what the girls told me in confidence. I don't feel right about giving their secrets to someone else."

I also tell them to go home to the village. Take a break from work and talk to their mothers. I have often told them not to run away from their mothers just because they shout at you or beat you when they hear the bad news. Stick with them, I say. Because they are the ones who will finally help you. When I hear of a suicide attempt, I check my book and see whether it is one of my girls. None of the girls who came to me has committed suicide [said with a proud smile].

Two other local healers, both operating from their houses, did not appear to have as big a clientele as Sirisena's, but like him, neither said anything about women inviting trouble on themselves by transgressing gender and sexual norms. One healer said that even if the government provided counseling services, people would find it hard to use them because they would be branded as crazy. "But they could come to our place and act as if they came to get some good ritual done for one of their loved ones," he explained.

In a focus group discussion, one of the workers, Nimali, said that one reason women go to these shrines and ritual specialists is because their services are cheap and most are within walking distance. "Women don't like to go to NGOs with these troubles because they (the staff) start preaching and behaving like they are born of flowers (very pure/better than us)," Shirani explained. "These ritual specialists are poor people like we are. They make a living from us and do not look down on us or laugh at us. They have seen these human problems over and over again. So they don't laugh at us. They just try to help," Nimali added. The class critique in several comments by both the women and the ritual specialists suggests that, as two marginalized groups, they have an affinity for each other.

Writing about the rise of occult economies and the deployment of magical means for material ends in postcolonial South Africa, the Comaroffs (1999:284)

posit that it is often a means of expressing discontent with modernity and its deformities rather than a retreat into tradition. In the FTZ area, ritual specialists did not differ much from their village counterparts. The only difference was the clientele and their gender and class specific demands. The account of a ritual specialist being an “abortion provider” using magical potions to induce abortion shows how magical services adjust to the new demands of the clientele.

STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN THE VILLAGE

Talking about, threatening, and writing about suicide help women face the challenges of their urban, industrial working lives. The difference between how they and women in the villages dealt with crises stems mostly from the communication possibilities available in the boarding houses, which are not available to village women. Contributing to this difference is the new sense of self the workers develop, which is partly based on modern attitudes acquired since migrating from rural areas, NGO educational efforts, and ritual healers. Therefore, it is important to ask how the former workers respond to emotional crises when they are back in their villages after a few years in the FTZ.

In rural areas, suicides are usually the result of botched love affairs or reputation-damaging rumors (Marecek 2006). Rural people commonly tag the Sinhala word *illowwe* (funeral) to the English “love” to talk sarcastically about the dangers associated with romantic love. Societies that value community and family over individual needs and desires fear that modern notions of romantic love undermine them. Thus, everyday discourses frequently emphasize the tension and conflict caused by those who seek self-satisfying desires. The workers often draw from traditional values to caution each other of the dangers stemming from love and sex. For instance, they pass notes around the assembly lines, under the supervisors’ noses, that carry such sayings as “Love is a *mammoty* (spade) that digs one’s grave,” and “Although the Niyagala flower is beautiful, eating the Niyagala tuber (*Gloriosa Superba*) will kill you” (acknowledging the beauty of love, while warning against premarital sex).

A story that appeared in *Priyadari*, one of the workers’ favorite tabloid magazines, indicates how family honor sometimes supersedes individual choice. The author recounted how she attempted to commit suicide before migrating to work in the FTZ because some relatives had spread false rumors about her sexual behavior. She responded by eating a niyagala tuber, which is highly poisonous, in front of the relatives’ house. In addition, her brother gave her some sugar, which is believed to cause certain death when combined with the niyagala tuber. She was vague about what happened afterwards but she lived to tell the story. Her brother’s action shows that family honor and clearing her reputation via a suicide attempt was very important to the family.

Research provided only one account of an attempted suicide by a former worker. Mangala, a vocal FTZ worker, returned to her village to care for her ailing mother. In 2007, she tried to drink poison in front of many people who came to comfort her when she lost her gold necklace, her most valuable acquisition from her working days. When we talked in 2008, she appeared very embarrassed by the incident and mentioned that it would not have happened in the FTZ. Other former workers spoke derisively about how Mangala had forgotten her modern ideas when she left the city.

It is too soon to comment on how losing the context for suicide narratives affects the number of attempts among former workers. There is a discernable pattern in how former workers use stories of suicide threats and dramas to repair their somewhat stigmatized image. Returning to a place where anonymity is impossible and family and neighbors scrutinize one's conduct and conformity to behavioral norms, former workers tread a fine line in relating suicide narratives or using threats. In their village story-telling sessions they did not talk about wanting to commit suicide as they did during their boarding house story-telling sessions. Mostly isolated in their respective villages, their story-telling is done among younger, non-migrant village women. The stories have much less emotional intensity, and their narratives about the FTZ focus on its positive aspects, such as the consumer culture and entertainment. They emphasized new knowledge sources, such as NGO workshops, and newly acquired modern ideas of self enhancement. They avoided talking about or down-played labor injustices, behavioral transgressions, and sexual violence against them. Most wanted to motivate younger village women to go to Katunayake and live in boarding houses with other women. Now portraying themselves as women who tasted modernity and brought some of it back to the village, they seem to find it prudent not to talk too much about suicide during village story-telling sessions.

While they want to stay clear of a course of action associated with village women who have never migrated and are uneducated and ignorant, they still have to acknowledge the media reports about the FTZ as a place where workers frequently commit suicide. Most workers creatively addressed both concerns by declaring that the workers would commit suicide to safeguard their family honor and clear their reputation. Although women workers take pride in surviving adversity and not attempting suicide, once back in their villages they carefully select what incidents to relate to project an image of workers as moral women who care about family honor.

For example, when I visited her village, Samanthi, a former worker, told a group of local people about a suicide attempt at a boarding house. I witnessed this suicide attempt and found Samanthi proffering a different recollection. I recalled the woman having threatened suicide because she was anguished over losing her virginity to a married man. Samanthi claimed the woman sought to

counter vicious rumors about her sexual behavior. As Samanthi put it, “No wonder she felt like committing suicide. Who could tolerate such nasty rumors?” Emphasizing how the workers would rather commit suicide than live with a tarnished image, she skillfully used the incident to enhance their moral character as well as her own in the eyes of the village people.

SUICIDE NARRATIVES AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

The increasingly globalizing Sri Lankan economy offers opportunities and dangers for rural women who temporarily move to an urban area and enthusiastically create their own cultural practices (Hewamanne 2003). Their actions and utterances about suicide resemble a perplexity which indexes “the contradictory responses of people as they experience both the joys and aches of global everyday, often simultaneously” (Ramamurthy 2003:525). As newcomers in the city, the women straddle varied cultural discourses to form in-between identities. Suicide narratives are an expression of their in-between identity as migrant industrial workers who are not rural and not quite urban, not quite modern but not backward; in short, modern women who have not forgotten rural values. The narratives allow them to navigate conflicting meaning systems regarding stress by combining rural cultural patterns with modern, urban thinking. It is a new cultural discourse that helps them survive the city and the village while struggling over cultural meanings and identities.

The women deftly use available avenues to avert emotional pain from becoming unbearable. Their most potent resource is to hold onto the notion that they are modern, industrial workers who are different from ignorant, impulsive village women who commit suicide at the slightest provocation. Their notions of what a modern woman should do in a crisis seem to follow dominant discourses on modernity. Current and former workers feel superior to village women and look down on their lack of strength. Former workers either avoid or only very carefully engage in talking about suicide narratives at their village story-telling sessions. The reluctance to talk about suicide assists their social survival in villages where women’s behavior is under constant surveillance.

Does the expressive activity benefit the workers as a group? Brown (1986) concluded that while suicide among Aguaruna expresses anger and can punish social antagonists, the acts inadvertently reproduce the very relations of dominance and subordination that make suicide a compelling course of action. The FTZ workers’ use of suicide narratives, too, appears to be a coping mechanism that perpetuates stereotypes. Their emotional talk and public scenes correspond closely to what middle-class people expect from rural women who have lost their sense of shame due to urban life. Yet, it is also important to note that surrounding the main focus on emotional stress is a subtle critique of gender norms, class

inequities, and rural-urban disparities that adds to the emergent understanding of their rights as women, workers, and human beings.

In her ground-breaking work, Abu-Lughod (1986) explained how Bedouin women use oral poetry among themselves to express what is un-utterable within the moral codes. According to Abu-Lughod (1986:251), poetry in many ways represents a discourse of opposition to the system. Among women in a Rio de Janeiro favela, dark humor in the face of tragedy, seemingly a coping mechanism, is also a subtle critique of the existing power relations responsible for their devastating poverty (Goldstein 2003). Similarly, the FTZ workers' suicide narratives are not merely a coping mechanism or an expression of their in-between identities lacking implications for collective action and transformative politics. Their awareness of their working and living conditions and their bonding are fundamental to building class consciousness and solidarity. Thus suicide narratives are how workers express discontent with modernity and global capitalist regimes which regard them as bodies to be used and discarded in the service of neo-liberal economics.

NOTES

1. This understanding of themselves as modern, as opposed to non-modern village women (*gode*), comes from changes in dress, speech, and new ways of thinking that they acquire through NGO workshops and FTZ magazines. New workers acquire these attitudes and knowledge through intense learning in factories and boarding houses (Hewamanne 2008; Lynch 2007).
2. There are many legal and practical barriers to organizing trade unions within the FTZ, but NGOs have helped by providing legal advice and opportunities to get together to share experiences (Fine and Howard 1995; Rosa 1982).
3. Obeyesekere (1975) asserts that the invisibility of violence is an illusion, as aggression is expressed through sorcery rather than direct violence against person or property.
4. The Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam, a militant organization fighting for a Tamil separate state, have carried out suicide bomb attacks on military and civilian targets for years.
5. With international agricultural corporations undermining traditional agricultural practices, South Asia has seen debt-ridden farmers commit suicide in high numbers.
6. A popular Sinhala saying, that dirty jobs, blame, and trash all fall on one person or institution.

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