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Sandya Hewamanne

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# PERFORMING 'DIS-RESPECTABILITY'

## *New Tastes, Cultural Practices, and Identity Performances by Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zone Garment-Factory Workers*

SANDYA HEWAMANNE  
University of Colombo, Sri Lanka



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### ABSTRACT

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This article describes and analyzes how female garment-factory workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones collectively express their difference from dominant classes and males and articulate their identities as a gendered group of migrant industrial workers by cultivating different tastes and by engaging in oppositional cultural practices. In the urban, modernized, and globalized areas of the FTZs, women develop unique tastes in the realms of music, dance, film, reading material, styles of dress, speech, and mannerisms. By performing subcultural styles that are subversive critiques of dominant values in public spaces, they pose a conscious challenge to the continued economic, social, and cultural domination they endure. But while workers' participation in a stigmatized culture is explicitly transgressive and critical at some levels, their demonstrated acquiescence to different hegemonic influences marks the inseparability of resistance and accommodation.

*Key Words* ◇ female garment-factory workers ◇ free trade zone ◇ identity ◇ performance ◇ resistance ◇ Sri Lanka

However much we try to be like them they will always brand us as lower class. Once you realize that, you start seeing the stupidity of those hi-fi fashions. Then you start to think, *hmm*, there *is* value in what *we* do and in what *we* like. (Sama, a FTZ worker)

Third class is my class and that is just fine with me. (Niluka, a FTZ worker)

### *Introduction*

The symbolic creativity of young people in investing their immediate life spaces and social practices with meaning and their selective use of sub-cultural styles are crucial to creating and sustaining individual and group identities (Willis, 1993: 206). In this article I analyze how Sri Lanka's female

garment-factory workers collectively express their difference from dominant classes and males and articulate their identities as a gendered group of migrant industrial workers by cultivating different tastes and engaging in oppositional cultural practices. I examine the new tastes and sensibilities in the realms of music, dance, film, reading material, styles of dress, speech, and mannerisms that factory workers developed in the urban, modernized and globalized arena of the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ). In doing so, I draw attention to the ways in which these emergent cultural practices represent a critique of existing socioeconomic inequalities. In this regard, my analysis of the counter-hegemonic trends in workers' practices corresponds to José Limon's assertion that the carnivalesque cultural performances of Mexican-American working class men in South Texas 'represent an oppositional break in the alienating hegemony of the dominant culture and society' (1989: 478).

Significantly, my focus on cultural practices and styles also situates them as gender critiques in that the workers refused to perform the ideals of respectability sanctioned for women by middle class men. In claiming that FTZ workers' performances of their recently developed preferences in the realm of aesthetics was central to creating both working class *and* gendered identities, my argument resonates with Dorinne Kondo's notion that 'the world of aesthetics is a site of struggle, where identities are created, where subjects are interpellated, where hegemonies can be challenged' (1997: 4). Kondo's study is one among several works that demonstrate the role played by music, performance, dance, dress and style in constituting identity (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1992; Tarlo, 1996). In sum, FTZ workers' insistence on unique tastes and their play with established categories of style, language, and demeanor subverted middle class values and tastes, on the one hand, and enabled them to register distinctive identities as migrant working women, on the other.

The article is based on fieldwork carried out in the Katunayake FTZ since 1995, with the major portion of the observations being conducted over the period of a year during 2000. During this time I visited several boarding houses and stayed in one such house with about 50 FTZ workers for seven months. I also conducted research at a FTZ garment factory and developed close friendships with the workers on one particular assembly line.<sup>1</sup> This allowed me to participate in their daily lives and recreational activities. Accompanying them on trips to movies, temples, beaches, weddings, and parties gave me ample opportunity to examine and understand the meanings the women attached to their activities and the way the others perceived and responded to the workers' tastes and favored practices. The journal notes they wrote about me also provided valuable information as to the conscious oppositional character of their new tastes.<sup>2</sup> In several journal entries they critiqued my tastes in fashions, clothing, music, and movies and termed my preferences middle class ('hi-fi' or western). In their

boarding-house conversations they also attempted to construct a difference between their own recreational activities and those of urban working class youth by pointing to the latter's desire to follow middle class customs when they could afford to do so.

Many Sri Lankans use the term 'third class' (in English) when referring to working class tastes and in general try to dissociate themselves from such tastes in public.<sup>3</sup> As a group, FTZ workers celebrated this stigmatized identity by unhesitatingly claiming stigmatized tastes and engaging in counter-hegemonic cultural practices.<sup>4</sup> As the epigraphs demonstrate, women were keenly aware of their subordination along class lines and consequently developed their own tastes and cultural practices to contest such subordination. These new tastes and cultural practices contained many elements of what the middle class people consider disrespectful. By performing such practices in public spaces they further registered the oppositional nature of this emergent, contestatory narrative about class and culture. It is this critique that allows me to assert that their creation of subcultural styles is a conscious challenge to the continued economic, social, and cultural domination they endure.

Some of their subversions in beauty, fashion, and demeanor were also directed towards creating intimacy with working class males. Though they mostly accomplished this by resorting to conscious tactical moves, this led to asymmetrical and even abusive personal relationships with men. These subversions also created a materialistic consumer culture around their lives, which represented an accommodation to different hegemonic forces—the predominant one being capitalist. Thus, while FTZ workers' participation in stigmatized cultural practices was explicitly transgressive and critical at some level, their demonstrated acquiescence to different hegemonic influences marks the inseparability of resistance and accommodation.

After briefly describing the Katunayake FTZ, middle class notions of 'respectability' and ideal conduct for Sinhala Buddhist women, I describe their new tastes and cultural practices in order to delineate the counter-hegemonic character and class critique contained within these tastes and practices. In doing so, I argue that their performances in public spaces conveyed a specific identity for themselves as migrant FTZ garment workers and registered their differences from men, other women, and their counterparts in other working class spheres.

### *FTZs and the 'Respectable Woman'*

Sri Lanka set up its first FTZ in Katunayake (near the capital city, Colombo) in 1978 as a part of the structural adjustment policies adopted in 1977. Establishing FTZs in Katunayake, and later in Biyagama and Koggala, fulfilled a campaign promise made by the United National Party

(UNP), which came to power in 1977 by pledging to initiate free-market and open economic policies. In its attempt to attract foreign investment, Sri Lanka offered numerous incentives, such as dutyfree imports of machinery and raw materials, dutyfree exports, and preferential taxes, and touted the availability of 'well disciplined and obedient women workers who can produce more in a short time' (Dabindu, 1997: 17)

The Katunayake FTZ houses around one hundred multinational industries that practice a distinctively late capitalist form of gendered working relations. Garment factories, which comprise the majority of all the industries within the FTZ, recruit large numbers of young rural women from economically and socially marginalized groups to work as machine operators. In 1986 between 85 and 90 percent of these women were unmarried, young, and well-educated, often with 8–12 years of schooling (Rosa, 1990). In 1995 more than 70 percent of the workers had taken Ordinary Level exam classes (Fine and Howard, 1995). The overwhelming majority of these young women are Sinhala in ethnicity and Buddhist by religion.<sup>5</sup> There are very few facilities to house the women who flock to the FTZ each year, and people living in the area have built crude rows of rooms and rented them to the workers. Poor living conditions, coupled with physically and mentally arduous working conditions, make life difficult in the FTZ (Dabindu, 1989, 1997; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1997; Hewamanne and Brow, 1999; *Voice of Women*, 1982).<sup>6</sup>

It is, however, their status as young women living alone and without male protection that receives the most public attention. Popular accounts of widespread pre-marital sex, rape, prostitution, abortion, and infanticide simultaneously portray these women as victims of labor and sexual exploitation and as victims of their own loose morals. Workers are identified in everyday discourses as 'garment girls', or '*juki* pieces'.<sup>7</sup> The congregation of so many young women in one place is such an unusual phenomenon that many people have come to call the FTZ *Sthri Puraya* (city of women), *Prema Kalape* (love zone), and *Vesa Kalape* (whore zone). Their neighbors in the FTZ area equate the 'free living women' (*ayale yana*) amidst them to a great (cultural) disaster (*maha vinasayak*).

The reasons for such fears derive from an ideal image of the Sinhala Buddhist woman that was constructed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by nationalists who were provoked by British colonial discourses on women and culture. Early Christian missionaries and educational authorities viewed Sinhala Buddhist women as unrestrained and sought to convert native women to Christianity in the hope of making them more civilized, obedient, and serene in manner (De Alwis, 1997). Responding to these characterizations, male nationalists viewed the project of instilling the virtues of Victorian femininity, domesticity, discipline, and restraint in Sinhala Buddhist women as essential to transforming women into symbols of national greatness. Protestant Buddhist traditions and discipline<sup>8</sup> defined

'decent and correct' manners and morals as well as the proper attitude towards sexuality that middle class Sri Lankan woman were meant to embody. The patriarchal ideal projected women as passive and subordinate beings whose best protection lay within the confines of their homes. As a result, women leaving their parental homes to live alone in urban, modernized spaces aroused intense anxieties about cultural degradation and female morality.

Among the nationalists, Anagarika Dharmapala played a significant role in recasting women as religious, moral, educated, and accomplished. He introduced new dress codes, rules of comportment and ideas on general hygiene and good housekeeping for women (De Alwis, 1998; Guruge, 1965). Commingled with anti-imperialist rhetoric, many sections of society enthusiastically embraced these codes of gendered behavior. These expectations persist to the present day including, for example, the idea that Sinhala Buddhist women will be virgins and innocent of all sexual knowledge at the time of marriage. The importance given to virginity also contributes to the anxieties over women living alone in the city and enjoying unsupervised leisure time, because such freedoms provide the opportunity to transgress norms relating to pre-marital sex.

Furthermore, rural women carry an additional burden due to the discourses regarding the moral superiority of the village as the locus of tradition (cf. Brow, 1999; Moore, 1985; Samaraweera, 1978). This carries with it the expectation that village women are naïve, innocent (in the sense of being sexually ignorant), timid, and are the unadulterated bearers of Sinhala Buddhist culture. Therefore, as women migrated to the city and away from patriarchal control, their presumed moral failings disturbed urban, middle class nationalists who, like their counterparts in many other post-colonial societies, considered any threat to women's morality as a threat against the cultural purity and survival of the nation (Chatterjee, 1993; McClintock, 1995).

Though the socioeconomic circumstances of lower class/caste women were not conducive to following hegemonic norms of respectability, in official and popular discourses that circulate in Sri Lankan society, all Sinhala Buddhist women were measured by this unitary notion of respectability.<sup>9</sup> FTZ garment-factory workers, who were rural women now living in the city away from their villages and moving around freely, came under harsh criticism and their conduct became the space where deep anxieties and ambivalences over notions of development, modernity, and sexuality were played out. According to Gananath Obeyesekere, Sinhala children are socialized from a young age into practices of shame-fear (*lajjabaya*)—to be ashamed to subvert norms of sexual modesty and proper behavior and to fear the social ridicule that results from such subversion (1984: 504–5). When women started migrating to the cities for FTZ work it

was the weakening of their adherence to the values of *lajja-baya* that the middle class and males feared the most.

In the FTZ rural women encountered new global cultural flows and acquired new knowledges. As they migrated from rural agricultural communities and became subject to the discipline of capitalist industrial production, young women underwent a change in their cognitive, social, emotional, and moral dispositions. The sense of self they developed in the new environment, however, coexisted with the deeply internalized notions of ideal Sinhala Buddhist womanly behavior. The articulation of these apparently incompatible positions of being urban industrial workers and young unmarried daughters from patriarchal villages enabled viable spaces for creativity, tactics, and strategies. Women workers creatively and transgressively countered middle class and male notions of respectability and ideal behavior by performing difference through their leisure-time activities. The oppositional character of these gendered recreational practices is evident in their celebration of activities and signs deemed *thuppahi* (hybrid) and un-Aryan or impure by the Sinhala middle class.

In the following discussion I analyze the way FTZ workers learned, performed, and registered an exclusive identity as migrant women industrial workers by focusing on the symbolic functions of the body, its adornment and accessories (words, gestures), and workers' aesthetic preferences and cultural practices.

### *Body Adornment and 'Garment Girl Tastes'*

Kathy Peiss (1986: 63) writes that 'dress was a particularly potent way to display and play with notions of respectability, allure, independence, and status and to assert a distinctive identity and presence'. Similarly, the colorful dresses and other accessories FTZ workers habitually chose to wear on special occasions registered for them a distinctive identity as garment-factory workers. They wore bright colored *shalwars* and *gagra cholis* that were embroidered with gold or silver beads, in combination with dark red lipstick, nail polish, and heavy make-up. They also wore high heels (even if they were going on a trip to a beach) and frequently wore multi-colored dots (*pottu*) on their foreheads. Such choices loudly proclaimed a difference from other women and made it easier for people to recognize them even if they were hundreds of miles away from the FTZ.<sup>10</sup> Their dresses could be loosely divided into two types: work clothes and party clothes. Their everyday work clothes were of different styles because they wore their old party dresses to work. This habit also ensured that they were easily recognized no matter where they went. These dresses included a flowing skirt (called a flared skirt), with puffed sleeves and round necklines, and skirts and blouses in several different lengths and patterns.<sup>11</sup> At the

boarding house I often observed workers bringing their newly made work dresses from the nearby seamstresses. One by one they acquired 'Titanic dresses', the current fashion craze.<sup>12</sup>

While in the film the dresses were made of light colors the FTZ workers preferred bright and dark colors. They especially favored yellow, maroon, magenta, dark green, purple, and black.<sup>13</sup> This choice of colors was especially significant when considering that Dharmapala considered white *saree* the optimal dress for respectable ladies, since this signaled their chastity and purity (De Alwis, 1998: 98–9). Incidentally, many FTZ workers liked to match black skirts with bright yellow or bright pink blouses, even though middle-class people associated such color combinations with prostitutes. The workers' choice to sport these stigmatized colors as well as other marked fashions<sup>14</sup> could not be simply attributed to the ignorance of middle class 'dos' and 'don'ts', since they discussed movie-star dresses and pored over the fashion pages of various magazines.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, these colorful dresses were sometimes more expensive than 'simple, accepted fashions', thus ruling out affordability as the only reason. This play with the prostitute image seems a particular mediation of culture and style by women who have found themselves in-between the categories of 'respectable' and 'promiscuous'. If this play pushed them further towards the latter category, workers did not seem particularly concerned about it.<sup>16</sup>

FTZ workers could easily buy or make pastel colored dresses that were fashionable among female students attending Colombo's higher educational institutions. By doing so they could have passed for belonging among those who congregated at 'respectable public spaces', though they showed no interest in this. When I visited some seamstresses near Saman's boarding house I noticed that they mostly made 'Titanic dresses' and another two-piece dress that most urban women tried to stay away from due to its association with the FTZ workers. Once when we were discussing workers' fashion choices, one male visitor interjected that, even if the workers wore dresses like other women in Colombo, their jewelry and multi-colored hairpins (*vaivarana konda katu*) would give them away.

Neighbors as well as factory officials talked about workers' wearing excessive gold jewelry to work. Many women wore up to four rings to work and sported thick gold chains with pendants. Some women wore long gold earrings.<sup>17</sup> Women also favored various hair accessories that were fashionable among the FTZ workers. During my research many women wore a plastic hair band that featured the English alphabet. Their favorite hairstyles necessitated the use of braids, bands, and pins, and the workers experimented by combining different colored or patterned hair accessories. Their favorite hairstyle was called the 'bump', which was created by combing back a portion of their hair in the front into a puff and then using hairpins to keep it in place; they then used a braid to catch their hair in a ponytail or wore it loose. Some women had bangs cut on the sides, whereas

some others permed the front portion of their hair into curls. While there were some women with short hair at the FTZ, they too used many popular hair accessories for ornamentation as well as to hold their hair in place. There were other accessories like cheap handbags, sandals and fake brand-name watches that they bought at the FTZ bazaar that also contributed to their identity.<sup>18</sup>

I attended four parties at three different factories and attended several wedding receptions at workers' homes. On these special occasions women proudly displayed FTZ party clothes and jewelry. They also wore make-up, perfume, bright lipstick, and nail polish. Women showed photographs from past annual parties, and it was easy to see that their fascination with brightly decorated *shalwar* and *gagra choli* as a party dress had continued for at least five years. Those photographs presented an ongoing story whereby women's wear evolved over the years from pink and blue 'flower girl dresses'<sup>19</sup> to colorful *shalwars* or *cholis* and the gradual addition of other accessories, including gold jewelry. This material change coincided with another transformation—from confused, wide-eyed young girls to self-assertive, animated women posing for photographs holding beer cans while seated on men's laps.

FTZ workers used make-up when they went out on trips or attended special functions. Refusing to follow the barrage of middle class advice about beauty they were subjected to in the media, they almost always chose bright red lipstick. None of the workers I knew even considered shaving their legs. They kept using soap on their faces and hair even though billboards around the FTZ were inundated with advertisements for shampoo, conditioner, facial cleanser, and scrub.<sup>20</sup> Their skin took on a deathly pallor (a thin white layer over the dark skin, probably due to the bleaching agents contained in the soap) for a few hours after applying soap to their faces. Mirroring standards of beauty in other post-colonial societies, Sri Lankans consider fair skin to be essential to beauty and fairness is consequently invested with a considerable amount of social prestige. Though they never acknowledged it, the workers also craved fairer skin through ways that made sense to them. While this preoccupation with fairness is rooted in the racist construction derived from British colonial-era ideologies that claimed Sinhala are Aryan (and therefore fairer) and Tamils are Dravidian (and consequently darker in skin), it is elitist to condemn this preoccupation on senseless racist prejudices. Fairness is so deeply internalized as a sign of beauty and social prestige that it made sense to them to try to be fair-skinned in their quest for those other ideals—marriage and motherhood—that always lurked in the background. As Kondo (1997) writes, it is only the dominant and unmarked sections of society that can afford to be unconcerned about appearance. She also warns that it is a mistake to think that being unconcerned about appearance is a politically innocent position since this apparent lack of concern itself indexes a preoccupation with

appearance (1997: 15). Interestingly, FTZ workers who wrote journal entries about me identified my unconcerned attitude towards appearance as the very mechanism through which I registered my difference from them.

New workers who came directly from their villages learned the appropriate attire, fashions, and behavior within the FTZ through an intense socialization process at the factories as well as in their boarding houses. After a few months of FTZ life workers acquired dresses and accessories that conveyed their membership in the community. Many workers confided that they were determined to uphold their ruralness when they first came to the FTZ. But they reported that the strength and happiness derived from following other workers and the gentle prodding from senior workers soon made them change their minds. According to Lynch (2000: 234), village factory workers spoke disparagingly of the way rural workers arrived with 'dirt dripping from their clothes' and celebrated the newcomers' gradual transformation in hygiene levels and style as a mark of modernity.<sup>21</sup> Marking the difference between the two fields, FTZ workers did not talk disparagingly about new workers or the way they slowly acquired the styles and habits of the FTZ. They all came to the FTZ as rural women and had to collectively suffer through the stigma of being 'unhygienic, backward, ignorant, and tasteless rural women'. This instilled an 'us' against 'them' mentality that focused on whether a woman wanted to be identified as an FTZ worker, as opposed to what her appearance or conduct was when she first arrived in the FTZ.

An episode I witnessed in which punishment was meted out to a woman who willfully refused to be identified as a FTZ worker concisely demonstrates the importance of collective identity to FTZ workers and the role clothing and style play in expressing this identity. On this occasion, a trip to the Unawatuna beach, all the women in the group wore easily identifiable FTZ party dresses, with the sole exception being a woman named Amila. Up to that point, in everyday conversations at the factory, Amila had continually refused to be identified as a FTZ worker, insisting that she worked only because she was bored at home. By constantly pointing out that she came to work from her family home which was located close to the FTZ, she had emphasized the fact that she was not a migrant worker from a rural area. For the trip to the beach, Amila wore tight black jeans with a black checked shirt and little jewelry. She used make-up sparingly and applied a soft pink lipstick, in stark contrast to the bright shades of reds the others wore. Perhaps the biggest difference in attire was her simple pair of beach sandals which were popular among Colombo youth. However, with many in the party wearing brightly colored party dresses we attracted much interest from the numerous male vacationers present at the beach. The indirect flirtations between men and the workers climaxed when a group of men surrounded the women and dragged them to the sea in all their finery. When women ran back from the sea, men tossed sand on their wet clothes.<sup>22</sup>

When men started to drag women to the sea, some of us, including Amila, managed to get away. We climbed up a steep hill and watched the spectacle from a deserted temple. When we came down the women had taken showers and were preparing to have lunch. They happily talked about how often each was dragged to the ocean and how a particular young man dragged a particular woman all the time and how some managed to exchange mailing addresses. When Amila sat down with her lunch a conspiratorial air enveloped the excited crowd. Soon two male workers, who also came with us on the trip, grabbed Amila by her arms and dragged her to the sea. With all her clothes soaked with salty water, Amila came out cursing everybody only to be dragged back to the ocean. After dipping her three times the men allowed her to pay Rs. 10 and take a shower. As soon as she finished the shower they again dragged her to the sea. All the workers seemed to enjoy this and encouraged the men. Their comments focused on how they had all gone through the forced bath and that Amila ought to suffer the same experience. But I was puzzled as to their focus on Amila, since there were at least four other women who managed to escape the drenching. When Amila finally came back to eat, she loudly complained that her nice blouse had shrunk in size due to the seawater. Ever ready with a combative rejoinder, Mangala answered, 'Our clothes are nice clothes, too.' Though she motioned Mangala not to aggravate Amila further, Vasanthi whispered, 'Whatever we wear, we are all garment workers (*oya monawa andath api okkoma garment thama*)'.

This incident demonstrated that workers consider adopting FTZ fashion to be a necessary step in community identification and solidarity. The abuse that Amila was subjected to was a rebuke to the latter's refusal to identify herself with the workers in narratives as well as in clothing and fashions. The choice of clothing not only signaled a woman's willingness to be identified as a FTZ worker but also signaled her membership in a stigmatized women's group and paved the way for 'humiliating' incidents at the hands of men. Workers, however, refused to acknowledge the incident as humiliating or as an act of violence against them, opting instead to recognize it as a mutually pleasurable game. In this way they not only refused to be victims but embraced the consequences of being identified as FTZ workers—in other words, as women who transgressed.

### *Disrespectable Language and Demeanor*

On another occasion seven Suishin workers and I took a train to a village to attend a wedding reception. Four women wore *sarees*; two wore *shalwar kameez*; one wore a two-piece dress. The *sarees* were neither brightly colored nor were they the expensive Indian version that middle class women favored. For this special occasion they abandoned the standard

bumps and braids and got their hair done in big buns at a salon in Katunayake.<sup>23</sup> On the return trip that evening, women took off their excessive jewelry and placed them in my backpack for safekeeping. Make-up worn off by sweat, they looked like any other group of 'lower class' women returning from a wedding reception. However, from the interest our group generated at the railway station, it was soon clear we were recognized as FTZ workers. As soon as we entered the station a man asked, 'What garment (factory) are you from?' (*mona garment ekenda?*). Several other young men gravitated toward us and started talking about garment factories among themselves. Perhaps one reason for our being recognized was the absence of any elderly individuals in the group, although the women's demeanor and language definitely played a big part as well.

The women entered the station in two groups, holding hands and talking loudly among themselves. Workers were usually gregarious when in groups, and on this occasion the beer they had consumed at the reception perhaps intensified this behavior. My friends talked to the men without hesitation and responded with glee to their uninvited comments. They played verbal games among themselves and frequently erupted into loud laughter. Starting indirect group communication with some young men, they proceeded to hide one man's traveling bag. The man jokingly threatened to bring the station master over and strip-search them. Sujatha replied that this was the whole point in hiding the bag. This provoked an elderly woman to spit on the tracks and comment, 'there is no worth in these garment girls' (*ganna deyak ne*). When the train arrived, several young men managed to get into the same compartment with us, and the women immensely enjoyed their company till the journey's end. There were several other people in the compartment, and they looked on with, I thought, sad eyes, probably wondering what was in store for the nation when its women behaved so shamelessly (*lajja nethi*).

Generally, behavior and language worked as identity markers for women in the FTZ. Not only were they loud and boisterous, but their speech was also heavily interspersed with 'rough terms' such as *umba* (you), *varen* (come), *palayan* (go).<sup>24</sup> They also used the masculine terms *machan* (used among men to denote brother-in-law as well as best buddies), *ado* (you), and *malli* (younger brother) among themselves and with men. Though some women claimed they used 'rough terms' with friends in grade school, all the workers I talked to said they never used masculine terms in conversations before coming to the FTZ. Appropriating masculine language was a powerful subversion of middle class notions of feminine discipline and respectability. Workers learned the creative use of regional dialects and phrases in the factories and at their boarding houses. They then used this linguistic skill to get back at superiors as well as to get out of difficult situations at the factories. They also used this knowledge during everyday conversations at public places. Many of these sayings bordered on what was

considered obscene, which attracted the interest of young men, but caused older individuals to react with disgust and frustration. Workers also used familiar technical phrases from the production process to talk about everyday occurrences, making it a bit difficult for outsiders to understand what they were referring to. They used the term 'target' for someone's love interest and *in karanawa* to describe when a man or woman first expressed a love interest. They also used the term 'damages' to identify losses suffered from a broken relationship, which ranged from money and jewelry to one's virginity. They incorporated other factory jargon into their everyday language, including the term 'issue girls' for women who provided materially for their boyfriends, 'trimmers' for scheming men who cheated women out of money, and 'QC manager' for women who bossed others around at the boarding houses.

Men and middle class people censured FTZ women's boisterous behavior and their new linguistic practices. Women nevertheless kept using such language and showed off their newly fashioned, rebellious demeanor. After a trip to the beach or a temple women laughingly talked about people's reactions to their particular actions and how they deliberately did things to further anger onlookers. Women workers usually became loud and animated whenever they were in a group, further demonstrating the strong links between their behavior and their identification as FTZ workers.

### *Celebrating 'Third Class' Tastes*

#### *Reading*

FTZ workers registered their difference in other leisure activities and tastes apart from the medium of clothing and fashions. Reading tabloid magazines was one pastime they indulged in after beginning their employment in the FTZ. On weekends, when they usually found time to rest and relax, women lay on beds and read magazines that catered to urban youth and FTZ women workers. Middle class people looked down on these magazines, claiming they only catered to 'stupid women' or women in the free trade zone (*kalape kellanta*). Teachers and parents encouraged young women to read mainstream weeklies, such as *The Young Woman (Tharuni)*, *The New Woman (Nava liya)*, and *Treasure of the House (Sirikatha)*, and possessing tabloid magazines seriously jeopardized one's reputation as a 'good and intelligent woman'.

Some of these magazines are considered vulgar papers (*val paththara*) and FTZ workers claimed they read them for juicy reports (*pani keli*), which typically dealt with sexual adventures. However, many workers claimed their interest in the magazines was educational and that the material provided much-needed sexual knowledge. A spokeswoman for the

Women's Bureau contradicted this saying, 'If they read books and good magazines like *Tharuni* and *Sirikatha* rather than reading papers like *Priyadari*, *Suwanda* and *Birinda* they will be better equipped to deal with the problems they face in the urban environment.' Dabindu<sup>25</sup> members also bitterly complained that the workers read tabloid magazines rather than reading the *Dabindu* newspaper. The shops around the FTZ boarding house cluster areas sported colorful tabloid magazines and workers bought them from male shopkeepers. Workers knew that middle class people looked down on those reading such magazines. However, even while emphasizing the magazines' educational value, they claimed they could not care less about what other people thought. Many workers mentioned how they had never seen or heard of such magazines while in the village. These examples clearly demonstrate that, by providing a space where transgression was the norm, FTZ employment played a crucial role in the development of new practices among women workers.

Workers also developed a penchant for romance novels<sup>26</sup> and the effect of the novels on their everyday discourse was significant. When they talked about their romances, workers tended to use specific words and phrases that constantly appeared in these novels and in the serialized romances that were published in their favorite magazines. Women used phrases such as 'begging for food with him is better than kingly comforts' or 'we will live in a shack and eat rice and salt' to resolve their continual attachment to hopeless or abusive love affairs. Appropriating these phrases from new reading material, the workers creatively re-centered dominant cultural constructions on 'sacrificial mother/wife' roles to argue for a better understanding of their participation in doomed romantic relationships.

### *'Gallery Movies' and Class Stigma*

With regard to Sinhala cinema people acknowledged a clear division between good, artistic movies made by acclaimed directors and Hindi copy-cat (*anukarana*) films or lovers' dream world (*pemwathunge sihina loka*) movies.<sup>27</sup> There was another distinction made with regard to 'middle path' (*madha mawatha*) movies because of their family-oriented character. While the educated, 'socially conscious, disciplined people' were supposed to like artistic and middle path movies, the other category was identified with low-income classes and was appropriately known as 'gallery movies'—a term that describes the cheapest seats in a movie theater. Even if one enjoyed segments from the latter when shown on television, one was not supposed to go to a theater to view such movies. Growing up in a Sri Lankan middle class family I was never taken to or allowed to go to see such movies. The stigma associated with such movies is also gendered, since it is widely considered more disrespectful for women, as opposed to men, to go to such movies. Gallery movies and the theaters used to screen such movies

are considered low class, masculine spaces where youthful lovers also go to engage in transgressive sexual acts. Nevertheless FTZ workers, most of whom confessed that they rarely saw movies when in the village, flocked to the nearby Cameron Cinema to see light-hearted romances and comedies replete with song and dance sequences, and intensely followed trivia about such movies.

I joined several worker groups that went to see 'gallery movies'. One movie I saw twice was titled *Here Comes Alice (Menna Bole Alice)*, a bizarre copy-cat of the Robin Williams movie *Mrs Doubtfire*. On both Saturdays there were long lines of FTZ workers wearing their best clothes, in groups or with their boyfriends, waiting to buy tickets. The movie was filled with songs, dancing, and hilarious comedy; the latter was generated by a well-known comedian playing a character who falls in love with the man disguised as Alice.<sup>28</sup> For days afterwards, workers talked about the movie at the boarding house.

As the premier theater in the area, Cameron Hall was sought after by producers and consequently movies were discarded much sooner than in other theaters. The movies shown in the theater during 1999–2000 were *Miguel at Day and Daniel at Night*, *You Belong to Me*, and *Where are You Darling?*. As the titles indicate, they all belonged to the gallery movie category and ran to packed crowds.<sup>29</sup> These movies generated so much interest that the FTZ workers, dressed in their trademark clothes, flocked early to join the long lines to enter the theater. The theater was located right by the main road and these lines, comprised of groups of women and their men friends, became another marker for FTZ workers' lifestyle and identity. Workers also loved to see subtitled Hindi movies shown on television. Middle class housewives and youth also enjoyed these movies. But doing so at home or the boarding house prevented the class stigma associated with lining up by the main road to see 'gallery movies'.<sup>30</sup>

In India, the audience base for popular movies, such as the ones favored by the FTZ workers, is not limited to a single class alone. This not only precludes the class stigma described above, at times it even leads to a derision for so-called 'art films'.<sup>31</sup> The Sri Lankan FTZ workers, however, displayed a conflict between what they desired and what they thought they were supposed to desire by planning endlessly to go to see celebrated artistic movies. During my time in the FTZ they never went to an artistic movie. Several women sarcastically talked about their fellow workers who continuously expressed a desire to see artistic movies by saying the latter were trying to merely impress me. Yet, in a clear break from their tendency to openly critique middle class values, none of the workers talked irreverently about acclaimed films. They instead engaged in a silent critique by spending their leisure time going to movies deemed 'disrespectable' by the middle classes.

*All that is Thuppahi and 'Un-Aryan':  
Popular Music and the FTZ Workers*<sup>32</sup>

Workers' preferences in music, songs, and vocalists also marked a break from both the 'acceptable' as well as the new youth pop culture. Indian classical music long influenced Sinhala music. Vocalists trained in that tradition and music directors and vocalists who combined Indian classical music with Sinhala folk rhythms dominated the music scene via *sarala gee* (directly translated as 'simple songs' but generally meaning non-classical/soft). These songs were widely broadcast over state radio and television stations. Older and middle class people valued these songs as well as soft rock and classical western music. The younger generation, however, favored western popular music, and a movement that began in the mid-1990s saw new bands recording celebrated old songs to fast western rhythms, mostly as a result of newly established private radio and television channels. These remixed songs were fast enough for dancing and when played at popular musical shows attracted youthful crowds by the thousands.

This was preceded by an Afro-Portuguese music genre called *baila* that was popular among Sri Lankan urban, lower-income communities and youth.<sup>33</sup> Middle class people considered *baila* music as hybrid and low taste, though they also played it at parties and on pleasure trips. Because this music and the attendant dancing were linked to alcohol consumption, it was considered as another evil associated with modernity.<sup>34</sup> FTZ workers enjoyed this music and certainly jettisoned their inhibitions when they joined dancing crowds at outdoor musical shows and parties. When asked, the overwhelming majority said they liked soft music as well as *baila* music. They also said they preferred *baila* music to slow classics at parties and trips.

Their everyday listening preferences differed from the middle classes and other youth mostly in lyrics rather than in the choice of music. They liked soft music with lyrics that related to their lives. The difference between these soft songs and the ones favored by the middle classes was the presence of previously unknown singers and the parodying of soft tunes with hastily written, garbled lyrics. The songs also parodied popular Hindi movie songs using whatever lyrics suited the tune. New singers and lyricists, who were launching their careers, created such songs, and cheaply made cassettes were sold to workers at the Sunday fair. Indeed, on Sundays it was common to see the vocalists themselves promoting their new cassettes by blasting their songs from vehicles. These songs expressed sympathy for the workers' lives as well as the country's military personnel.<sup>35</sup> The latter were close to workers' hearts, and the formulaic, celebratory terms and phrases reminded them of their brothers and boyfriends at the war front and brought tears to their eyes. Though every singer had at least one patriotic song, these new

singers' songs, which I had never heard broadcast or promoted over radio or television, directly addressed the close relations the garment-factory workers had with soldiers. Their focus on mothers, sisters and girlfriends, who were waiting for soldiers to return, in fact marked a break from popular patriotic songs, which focused on masculine duties to the nation and womanly sacrifices.

Their special interest in these audiocassettes did not preclude a preference for popular *baila* singers or songs that spoke to their particular life experiences by well-known singers. According to Seneviratne and Wickramaratne (1980: 740), paralleling the national independence movement was a movement to de-Sanskritize the Sinhala language. This simple lyrical Sinhala style came to influence the songs of soft classics singers such as Sunil Shantha, Amaradeva, Victor Ratnayake, and others. These songs, however, were still composed using metaphors and creative language and their subject matter adhered to dominant cultural expectations. In the late 1990s, acclaimed female vocalist Nanda Malini recorded several songs that steered away from this standard style. One such song that the workers frequently sang in their rooms and on trips said, 'why didn't you join our pilgrimage (trip to a temple), oh, child (*lamayo*), I am very lonely'. This was written in decidedly colloquial, rural Sinhala, using workers' favorite terms such as *lamayo*. Nanda Malini recorded many romantic songs, but they did not evoke the same interest among FTZ workers because her songs contained scholarly Sinhala, Sanskrit, and obscure metaphors.<sup>36</sup> Another song by Nanda Malini, however, caught FTZ workers' attention. Written to a popular Hindi tune the lyrics noted, 'My darling take me wherever you go. Let's build a hut by a mountain and eat only rice and salt. Let's tear *sarees* to use as window curtains.'<sup>37</sup> This song was also regularly sung at parties and on trips. In the latter case the few males present would change the words to read 'Darling take me to a dark place (*kaluwarakata*).' Once when we were returning from a trip to a temple intoxicated men in the bus started replacing the last verb of all the lines with an obscene word for having sex.

Nanda Malini was criticized for singing a song written to a Hindi tune, espousing hedonistic ideas. Ironically, Nanda Malini and the composer, a professor of Sinhala at a leading university, created the song as a criticism of young people blinded to social problems due to their pleasure-seeking ways. The two also hoped to ridicule the current fascination with Hindi tunes and movies among young people.<sup>38</sup> Their efforts back-fired when youth groups appropriated the song as an affirmation of their lifestyles. When males appropriated the tune to embarrass women, FTZ workers refused to be silenced or to turn away from the song by such masculine parodies.<sup>39</sup> They kept singing the song with its original lyrics that critiqued self-indulgent philosophy, even as they desired similar care-free pleasures from their real-life romances. Nationalists have 'always looked down on

*baila* as alien, debased, vulgar—in short *thuppahi* (Siriwardena, 1990) and Sheeran (1997: 235) observes that it is more shameful and un-Aryan for women to sing and enjoy popular music than it is for men. In this context, the FTZ workers' determination to sing a popular song, which contained the potential of vulgar parodying, signaled a celebration of what is deemed vulgar, debased, *thuppahi* and un-Aryan, that is, embracing all that which was not middle class.

### *Mirror of an 'Evil Time': Dance Mania and Modernity*

Dancing—be it *bailas* or ballroom dancing—was perceived to be a particularly reprehensible form of behavior for 'respectable' women. (De Alwis, 1998: 126)

Dancing expresses relations of power, protest, resistance, and complicity (Reed, 1998: 505). Sinhala Buddhist young women have been learning Kandyan and low-country dance styles and Indian classical dance—*bharatha natyam*—in schools and private classes for decades. Dance is an important means of producing and reproducing gender ideologies, and these dance forms reflected the stereotypical gender images through their conservative movements as well as their subject matter.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, they were easily incorporated as an admirable aspect of the middle class image of the ideal, accomplished woman. *Baila* dancing is neither conservative in its movements nor does it address specific subject matter. The resultant space of ambiguity offers women an opportunity to test cultural categories and control. It is this non-choreographed, and, therefore, undomesticated (Savigliano, 1995: 122) character along with its hybrid origin that invested the dance and its female performers with class stigma.

The way women participated in their factory parties reflected both embodiment and resistance to dominant cultural values. Suishin managers talked derisively about women dancing to *baila* tunes and noted that they were becoming women without shame and fear (*lajja, baya nethi*). By implication the ones who did not dance signaled their allegiance to the hegemonic culture by avoiding certain bodily movements. FTZ workers, at different levels of intensity, used *baila* dancing to express happiness, protest repression, and invert authority. During different dancing parties performers and spectators negotiated the discourses on shame and fear in ways that were meaningful to them.

At Suishin and in boarding houses workers described their attraction to dancing as 'dance mania' (in English) or as *baila pissuwa*. Many women looked forward to their annual factory parties and trips for the opportunity to dance and watch others dance. In fact, knowing how to dance or losing enough self-consciousness to dance was considered a sign of being 'mod'. This is not to suggest that these women learned to dance *baila* at

the FTZ. Several women confided they had danced while on school trips or at home with their siblings. But dancing in public meant jettisoning the shame (*lajjava arrenna ona*) they felt about 'jumping up and down' before others. In fact, many workers drank beer to get over the initial fears of dancing. Learning to drink beer and dance at parties, as a sign of modernity or fully embracing the FTZ identity, was a common discourse in factories and boarding houses. I attended four factory parties (in different factories) in which many attempts were made to get new workers to drink and dance.<sup>41</sup> Groups surrounded reluctant young women and ridiculed or forced them to drink and dance. When a woman took her first sip of beer or tried her steps on the dance floor there was applause and joking.

The link between modernity, westernization, and insanity was a regular theme surrounding FTZ dancing parties. On a nationally televised youth talent program called *Thurunu Shakthi* (*Young Strength*), which was held at the Katunayake stadium, the FTZ worker groups were frequently featured either dancing or watching others dance. On one occasion the cameras lingered on a young woman who was engaged in a solitary dance that did not conform to *baila* or western dance routines. She convulsively flayed her arms and legs while her face alternately held expressions of anguish or ecstasy. The middle class people with whom I watched the program speculated that she either had gone temporarily mad or was in a trance (*yakek vehila*) and the demon that had overtaken her was doing the thrashing. The next day at the University of Colombo and a few days later at the Suishin executive meal hall middle class people, especially men, expressed similar ideas about this woman's dancing.<sup>42</sup> At Saman's boarding house women talked about her in embarrassed tones. According to several workers, the military personnel at checkpoints had ridiculed them asking whether they too performed the '*aspa* dance' (horse dance). Indeed, for months any 'excessive' physical movement was referred to as *aspaya gone* or '*aspa* dance' at FTZ dances.<sup>43</sup>

Focusing on the subculture surrounding American dance halls at the turn of the 20th century, Kathy Peiss asserts that dance forms 'dramatize the ways in which working class youth culturally managed sexuality, intimacy and respectability' (1986: 90). Since *baila* dancing did not require physical intimacy as did ballroom dancing that New York working women engaged in, FTZ workers had a more difficult time managing respectability. Men and women could be totally segregated when engaged in *baila* dancing. Usually it was easy to see distinctive male and female dancing groups at factory party grounds. As night progressed and the lights were dimmed one could see more male-female couples dancing face to face or groups dancing together. There was much touching, trampling of feet, and holding hands among these dancers. The physical contact in these cases was usually designed to look inadvertent.

However, much more direct physical contact took place during these dancing sessions. The Suishin New Year party was held indoors in the meal hall, and the only lights were swiveling party lights. This allowed more freedom than did an outdoor party or a trip to experiment with physical closeness. The few male workers and supervisors were in heavy demand that night as women encouraged them to join the dancing. In fact, many women workers found the dark atmosphere a good opportunity to tease and harass junior factory officers, thereby getting back at them for the indignities suffered on the shop floor. I saw one executive officer storming out of the hall and later found out that while forcibly applying a shiny dust all over his body several women had touched/squeezed his crotch.<sup>44</sup>

The RAC factory party was attended by almost all of the factory's 3000 workers. Unfortunately it was a rainy day and the revelers had to run for cover twice. Women huddled together under any awning they could find by the side of the hotel. There was much physical intimacy between men and women. The couples, their wet clothes pasted seductively to their bodies, stole kisses under the rain, which no doubt reminded them of the song and dance sequences in their favorite movies. Just before dinner was served the band played feverishly and the dancers reacted as expected. Couples danced close to each other and frequently touched hands and faces. Walking around the spacious plaza with Nalini, a RAC worker who volunteered to show me around, she and I came across a man and woman dancing by an overgrown hedge even as they squeezed each other to the rhythm of the music. An embarrassed Nalini informed me that the woman had been drinking all day and that she was also a little strange (*amuthu*). 'Once before she went crazy in the factory because she lost everything she owned when her boarding house flooded', commented Nalini.<sup>45</sup> This allusion to temporary insanity (brought about by drinking or other social economic problems) and spirit attacks provided a culturally meaningful space for onlookers to make sense of what happened during dances.<sup>46</sup> However, it did not help much in managing individual reputations within the factory. What helped was that a vast majority of women were 'guilty' of transgressing some rule or another during the party. The surprisingly little finger-pointing that I noticed among Suishin workers after a party or a trip appeared to be a consequence of collectively engaging in these new cultural practices. There were some women who sat shyly in corners and avoided dancing. This helped women workers to claim that they were among those shy ones and thereby counter the FTZ-related stigma in their villages.

It is clear from these vignettes that their *baila* dancing was much more sexually expressive than would have been accepted in middle class households or in public arenas. Not only was *baila* dancing considered reprehensible behavior for respectable women, but one early 20th-century newspaper article described ballroom dancing as 'drunken men, in hotels,

who ride women as jockeys would ride horses . . . in the presence of large audiences' (*Sarasavi Sandaresa*, 2 October 1925, quoted in De Alwis, 1998: 126). It was perhaps significant that the people termed the televised solitary dance by a FTZ worker as the horse dance. Rather than being a horse, the woman in this case seemed to ride an invisible horse, her own desires, in an unconscious effort to tame them.

According to De Alwis, early 20th-century newspaper discourses on women identified practices introduced by Europeans such as dancing, drinking, smoking, and frequenting hotels and beaches as signs of an 'evil time' (1998: 127). Suishin's annual 'excursion' (*vinoda yathra*) combined all these 'evil practices' for their women workers. The excursion was held annually at a famous tourist hotel on the southern coast. Workers were taken there in buses and then provided with a day of fun. This included lunch, snacks, drinks, and games culminating in a contest to choose Miss and Mr Suishin. Both men and women wore their best party clothes for the excursion but some changed into special outfits (Sinhala national dress) for the contest. However, the highlight of the competition was the dance contest and, according to Vasanthi who was the 1999 Miss Suishin (and often referred to as such), the finalists had to dance for some time and only then were two winners chosen. The factory reserved several rooms in an upper floor so workers could change clothes and rest. But women used the rooms to spy on white tourists lounging on the beach, smoking, drinking, and kissing. There were photographs with FTZ workers in their bright colored finery battling each other to take a look from tall windows down at the beach. These photographs represented a particularly poignant collapse of women's entrance to modernity with the nationalistic fear of women's attraction to *para weda* (foreign activities) and *para sirith* (foreign customs). An 'evil time' indeed!

### Conclusion

It is clear that the FTZ women's fashions, tastes, language, and demeanor resisted the norms of sexual conduct and restrained behavior expected from respectable Sinhala Buddhist women. Rural women who claimed that they followed or at least made a show of following dominant cultural values while they were in villages, learnt new fashions, tastes, and demeanor through socialization at the FTZ. They expressed considerable pride in being able to follow fashions and tastes that were their own and were happy in the knowledge that their actions irked middle class people. Their performance of FTZ garment worker identities at public places, through new tastes deemed disrespectful and shameful, represented a critique of middle class and male enforced cultural hegemony.

While it is clear that performance of subcultural styles and tastes within

the stigmatized arena of the Katunayake FTZ represented a class and gender critique, a question worth exploring is whether these new tastes and activities are different from the practices of other working class youth. One difference is the deeper anxieties that the FTZ workers' actions aroused, given that they were rural women temporarily living in an urban area and as such were expected to uphold village traditions and customs while living in the city. While activities of urban working class youth were considered their 'normal' behavior, similar activities by FTZ workers were considered transgressive and therefore warranted contempt and punishment. In fact, women were well-versed in ideal norms of behavior and used their rural demeanors and charms whenever it was beneficial to them—especially in order to escape difficult situations in the factories. Workers talked derisively about urban working class youth and said that those men and women would do anything to be considered middle class. Though in practice individuals belonging to both these groups had varied motivations for their behavior, FTZ workers as a group were aware of their difference and the explicitly oppositional character of their public performances which challenged middle class notions of respectability.<sup>47</sup> In their performances, both embodied and narrative, they constructed their specific tastes as unique, something that was not quite urban or rural, not quite modern or traditional and definitely not male. Therefore, when FTZ workers established their identity as a particular taste community, they did so by excluding not only the urban middle classes but their rural communities and urban lower-income communities as well.

As noted earlier, even while resisting some aspects of Sinhala Buddhist, male, and middle class cultural hegemony, FTZ workers compromised on other aspects, such as in their desire to enter into romantic relationships and to get married. Finding boyfriends and enjoying physical intimacy transgressed norms of sexual conduct. But their uncritical acceptance of patriarchal domination within their romantic relationships marked accommodation to a different set of hegemonic cultural expectations.<sup>48</sup> More importantly, their performance of alternative identities required that they participate in the consumer culture surrounding the FTZ and ensured their acquiescence to capitalist hegemony even as they sought to subvert dominant cultural values. The very acts of expressed resistance contained strains of accommodation while explicitly accommodating acts encompassed elements of resistance.

Though workers' contestatory practices contained levels of opposition and complicity, they still subverted Sinhala Buddhist male cultural hegemony. These subversions formed an important part of their daily cultural struggles that had the potential to reconfigure the terms of dominant discourses. In this sense, their oppositional activities represented subversions that mattered (Kondo, 1997: 26).

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## NOTES

1. The boarding house I stayed at will be referred to as 'Saman's boarding house', while the factory I worked in will be referred to as 'Suishin'. Both are pseudonyms as are the few names of workers that I cite.
2. After some time with them I asked eight workers at Suishin and 20 residents in Saman's boarding house to keep a journal recording their thoughts about me and my activities among them. We sometimes shared notes and at the end of my stay 12 women gave me photocopies of their notes, and I in turn promised to give them translated copies of my dissertation.
3. The discussions I had with the few urban, low-income shantytown dwellers during a previous research project showed how they tried to identify themselves with dominant middle class values and tastes. Sheeran (1997) also reports similar tendencies among Colombo's shantytown dwellers. The few Suishin workers who were from low-income communities in Katunayake or Colombo tried to create a difference between FTZ workers and themselves through narratives of being 'mod' (more modernized) and by more firmly associating themselves with middle class tastes.
4. On an individual level, workers differently received, negotiated, and reworked dominant cultural values. Though they enthusiastically participated in the FTZ culture, they also manipulated dominant discourses whenever that was beneficial to them.
5. The majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhala (74%). While 5% of the Sinhala are Christians (principally Catholic), most Sinhala are Buddhist by religion (69%). The Tamil minority (18%) is mostly Hindu (15%), with some Christians (3%), Muslims (7%), and small communities of other ethnic groups such as Burghers and Chinese also live in the country (Mann, 1993: 59). I have only met a few FTZ workers belonging to minority communities. When asked why this was so, a BOI official speculated that Hindu and Muslim parents are reluctant to send their female children away to live alone in the city. However, the protracted civil war between the Sinhala-dominated government and the Tamil militants and the resultant tensions between the two ethnic communities seem a major reason for this imbalance. According to another BOI official, the garment factories opened in the Eastern province are also having trouble recruiting local women.
6. According to the BOI document 'Industrial Factor Costs', skilled Sri Lankan workers are paid Rs. 2500–3250, while non-skilled workers are paid Rs. 2000–2500. A FTZ worker's basic salary is Rs. 2250 (about US\$25) per

- month but women could earn about Rs. 3000–4000 by working overtime and not taking their annual leave. Workers suffer from various ailments due to poor work and living conditions and are sexually harassed on their way to and from work (Dabindu, 1997; Smith, 1993). There are many legal and practical barriers to organizing trade unions within the FTZ, but NGOs have managed to provide legal advice on workers' rights and some facilities to get together and share experiences (Fine and Howard, 1995; Rosa, 1982).
7. Juki is the brand name of a Japanese industrial sewing machine heavily favored by FTZ garment factories. The words 'juki pieces' (*juki kelh*) refer to the pieces of clothes women workers assembled using Juki machines. The label strongly conveys the way the garment workers were objectified based on their work.
  8. Obeyesekere (1970: 46) uses the term 'protestant Buddhism' to refer to new traditions of Sinhala Buddhism that were configured by incorporating 'Victorian-Protestant ethical ideas'. Obeyesekere notes that sexual morality, monogamous marriage ideals, and divorce rules are several such ideas adopted from Protestantism.
  9. Middle class cultural hegemony achieves popular consent through continuous cultural work done by mainstream media, the national education curriculum, and local religious and political leaders. However, women belonging to all classes negotiated rules of ideal conduct in varied ways to claim different roles within economic, social, and cultural spaces surrounding their lives (Bartholemeusz, 1994; De Alwis, 1998; Gamburd, 2000; Hewamanne, 2000; Risseeuw, 1988).
  10. Once I joined a group of workers from Suishin on a trip to a famous beach in Unawatuna, about 100 miles away from Katunayake. Many workers who took the trip wore bright colored party dresses and make-up. Even the ones who chose to wear simple dresses or jeans and T-shirts registered their identity by sporting a dot on the forehead, three to four rings along with other gold colored jewelry, high-heeled sandals, bright nail polish, and lipstick. The moment we got to the beach groups of men started poking fun at us about garment work, FTZ living, and juki machines. Middle class women at the beach acknowledged our presence by smirking at us disapprovingly.
  11. Most of their work clothes suggested popular urban fashions were being modified by incorporating elements from favored rural fashions. Their party dresses, however, were a combination of several past middle class fashions and their own color preferences. Haney (1999: 437) writes that the creation of a hybrid style called fantasia by female performers in Mexican American tent shows, by combining costumes in Mexican 'folkloric' dances with elements derived from vaudeville, asserted Mexican American identity while marking the performer's entry into 'newly public female roles'. The hybrid style among the FTZ workers similarly marked their new identity as urban factory workers different from the middle class and other urban factory workers.
  12. The movie *Titanic* was showing in Sri Lankan theaters at the time, and the dress mimicked the period dresses worn by western high-society women of the early 20th century, like the character portrayed by the star of the film, Kate Winslet. Workers' dresses displayed low, round necklines, high waist, tiny sleeves, and criss-crossed ribbons in the back. The length was modified by shortening the dresses to flow just below the knee.

13. Workers constantly commented on my clothes and playfully admonished me to get some colorful clothes. In one journal note the author used the word 'mud colored shirts' and continued that those 'made it hard to decide whether they were just dirty or highly fashionable'. This was an appropriate way to describe my own ambivalent position in Sri Lanka: an unmarried woman, who had migrated temporarily, though to a prestigious destination, the United States.
14. Another remarkable preference was to use black nail polish on their toes. Unless going to a party, FTZ women usually did not paint their finger nails but they habitually painted their toe nails. Prior to this I had never seen Sri Lankan women painting their toe nails black.
15. Though these marginalized magazines had a distinctively different outlook on youth and values, their fashion pages typically depicted middle class fashions as displayed by prominent Sri Lankan and Indian models. In addition, there were articles published in mainstream magazines in which movie stars and models answered beauty queries. Television women's programs and cosmetic promotional programs also featured fashion experts who gave beauty advice.
16. Towards the end of my research, two of my closest friends from the boarding house, Sujani and Janaki, visited my parents' home in a Colombo suburb. While Janaki wore a maroon tunic over a long maroon skirt, Sujani was attired in a bright yellow and orange shaded blouse and a black skirt. Hearing that we planned to visit two temples after lunch, my mother asked me to loan them some of my clothes that were 'appropriate for the temple'. Since Janaki and Sujani had no qualms about their dresses, I refused to offer them different clothing. We had talked about taking some photographs at the temples and it was clear that they wanted to wear their prized clothes.
17. The factories I visited had no safety rules prohibiting these ornaments.
18. There was a vibrant consumer culture built around the women workers' lives at the Katunayake FTZ. Women enthusiastically participated in this consumer culture and at times seemed to have become slaves to the newest fad in the area. However, they also actively structured this commercial space through their specific demands and tastes. While women's participation in the FTZ consumer culture marked a challenge to patriarchal and middle class values, it also guaranteed their immersion in capitalist markets that mostly benefited the rich merchants and ensured the flow of foreign goods to the country. Acquiring colorful commodities gave women a false sense of empowerment even while preventing them from taking steps to initiate long-term empowerment, such as acquiring land or building houses in their home villages.
19. These are knee-length dresses made of pastel colored satin or charmeuse material. Rural young women typically wear bigger versions of dresses worn by flower girls at Sri Lankan weddings until they start to wear *sarees*. Shiny material, puffed sleeves, frills, beads, and embroidered flowers characterize such dresses. I heard such dresses referred to as 'flower girl dresses' only once but thought it was a fitting characterization, especially considering the poetic use of the term 'flower' to denote virgins and what the progressive change from flower girl dresses to FTZ dresses signified for their crafting of new subjectivities for themselves.
20. *Niveka*, a monthly magazine published by NGO, carried an article in its August 2001 issue that was written by a member of a major advertising company who

toured FTZ factories promoting beauty products. The workers' refusal to be swayed by these influences marked a local response to modernity and globalized practices that were sweeping the middle class off their feet. In fact, one critique they often noted in their journal entries was about my 'blind mimicry of western fashions'. One woman wrote, 'she will be thousand times more beautiful if she has long hair' and then later discussing this journal entry sarcastically said, 'oh, no you have to cut your hair short because all the *ladies* (*nonala*) in America do so'.

21. Caitrin Lynch (2000) conducted research among women who worked in village garment factories. These village garment workers responded differently and made different choices when negotiating their new roles. The way FTZ workers challenged the dominant cultural expectations emphasized how migration and living together in a space marked by stigma encouraged resistance.
22. There is a Sinhala saying that no matter where a male child goes or whatever he does he could take a bath and return clean. Growing up, we were told that girl children did not have that privilege (meaning that a woman's reputation, once tarnished, could not be salvaged). Looking at the way men singled out garment workers for harassment, I could not help but wonder whether this symbolized a communal punishment for women who transgressed. It was only a few weeks before that the residents at Saman's boarding house were crudely awoken from our beds and sprinkled with holy water as the final step in a ritual ceremony aimed to cleanse the impurities (*kili*) at the place. The humiliation and pain we collectively endured at that time was fresh in my mind, I wondered how closely this supposedly playful activity resembled that cleansing ritual.
23. Farah Deeba fashion, one woman proudly declared. Farah Deeba was the fourth wife of the deposed Shah of Iran. My mother tells me that, in the 1970s, Farah Deeba's hairstyle was fashionable among Sri Lankan middle class women. Late arrivals into modernity, FTZ workers sometimes seemed to take up fashions that had been discarded long ago by middle class women. They could have easily adopted early 1990s fashions; yet their insistence on reaching so far back was perhaps a way of expressing exclusive identification by ensuring a considerable time lag existed between their preferences and middle class fashions.
24. *Umba*, *varen*, *palayan* are words people (mostly men) used when angry or addressing people of lower ranks. These are called rough (*ralu*), as opposed to the soft (*mrudu*), words that the women are typically advised to use.
25. A non-governmental organization that worked among the FTZ workers. They published a monthly newspaper named *Dabindu*, which carried news and feature stories about FTZ work and workers' lives.
26. They themselves laughed at their choices saying that after a hard day's work they did not want to read difficult novels about social and political problems. This signaled another form of worker alienation in that the workers tried to temporarily escape their drudgery by reading romance novels rather than reflecting upon exploitative working conditions during their leisure time.
27. Jayamanne (1992: 57) broadly identified these two strains as generic cinema and that which blurred the simple binary oppositions, which structure the mythical narratives of the generic cinema.
28. The dream love scenes, in which Alice changed into numerous colorful dresses,

reminded me of the film *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. But my efforts to generate a discussion about homosexuality via transvestism were not successful. While women talked about cross-dressing and 'weird' personalities in their villages, they refused to talk about homosexuality.

29. The theater had two halls, which were roughly divided for screening good movies and not so good ones. *Kinihiriya mal*, a movie about the FTZ, was shown in the hall reserved for artistic movies, and my friends wrote to say that workers flocked to see this movie that was advertised as 'a story of a seamstress of our times'. But this movie reproduced many of the stereotypes about FTZ workers as a victimized group of women.
30. Though they challenged middle class norms by publicly claiming stigmatized movies as their favorite, these preferences also marked an uncritical attitude towards the patriarchal ideologies espoused in these films.
31. My thanks to Kamala Visweswaran for pointing this out (personal communication).
32. *Thuppahi* is a derogatory term referring to being mixed/hybrid and is mostly used to denote being racially or culturally hybrid. According to Sheeran (1997: 235), the preference for Sinhala soft classic music over *baila* music is related to the notion of Aryan and un-Aryan preferences, respectively.
33. The Portuguese occupied Sri Lanka between 1505 and 1658 and the music is said to originate from the association between the Portuguese and the African slaves they brought with them. For more information on the history and its place in colonial and post-colonial Sri Lanka, see Sheeran (1997).
34. Diehl (1998: 317–18) reports that Tibetan refugees of all ages were torn by their enthusiastic consumption of Indian pop music and that even Buddhist monks secretly craved popular music. Similarly, Sri Lankans belonging to all classes demonstrate intense conflictual feelings about enjoying *baila*. Once reviled because it threatened cultural purity, today many have incorporated it into leisure-time activities as 'party time music'. That is, *baila* is a harmless source of enjoyment as long as one does not forget the 'true culture'.
35. Workers demonstrated their desire that cultural forms reflect their real-life experiences by changing the words of popular, mainstream songs to include information about their lives and by singing these parodies at their Saturday gatherings at the boarding houses. I have read several such parodies published in the tabloid magazines, *Priyadari* and *Suwanda* (the latter has a feature section devoted to parodies) that were sent by FTZ workers.
36. For example, one of her songs translates as follows:

Leader among the shepherds (Govindu/Krishna), in this beautiful bed I am like a she bear who has lost her cubs. Even the river Yamuna is shaken thinking about our former beautiful sexual games . . . Moon rays enter from fissures among the tree cover like arrows that burn the heart. Wounded by the king of physical desire the youthful body does not allow any rest. This is a night other lovers become tired, but Radha is shaken by the separation.

The whole song is written in scholarly and metaphoric Sinhala and Sanskrit, perhaps a prudent ploy considering that the song would have been banned if written in everyday Sinhala. Though this song conveyed a message very close to the workers' hearts, none of the women was able to decipher the erotic content and the song failed to catch on. It was also important to notice that this

song was used for Sinhalaized *bharatha natyam* (Indian classical dance), which was popular among middle class young women. When these dancers expressed sexual frustrations through sanitized dance movements and lyrics on national television and in prestigious theaters it was applauded as high culture. However, FTZ workers are reviled for expressing the same emotions through *baila* at their factory parties.

37. Dharmapala prescribed the saree as the ideal costume for low-country Sri Lankan women and reasoned that it befitted their role as the symbol of the nation's virtuous, spiritual qualities (De Alwis, 1998; Obeyesekere, 1979). The song is heavy with symbolic meaning in that the *saree*, introduced and maintained as a mark of respectability, is torn by the protagonists and used as curtains to cover the sexual activities following their elopement. One wonders if the woman is ridiculing the middle class categories of respectability and promiscuity by pointing out the ways in which this respectable costume has been used to cover up lapses in ideal behavior.
38. From conversations with the vocalist. I am grateful to Nirmala Herath for providing me several opportunities to talk to the vocalist.
39. This is important since middle class women were apprehensive precisely about males appropriating and parodying the song. I thank Rohinie Kularathne and Shamila Asiri for reporting two such incidents related to a university pleasure trip and an office trip.
40. All three of these dance forms followed themes that depicted typical female activities and, in the case of *bharatha natyam*, stories that focused on stereotypical women's roles. Low country dancing usually included dance sequences featuring paddy work, transporting water, etc.
41. Though dance moves and other behavior associated with dancing transgressed ideal behavior and norms of shame-fear, I did not hear any worker reflecting on the way their factories structure their leisure time by organizing these parties and trips. When asked, they did not recognize factory parties as a capitalist strategy or that the activities might hinder their efforts to resist exploitation.
42. Obeyesekere (1978: 468) asserts that most trance dances are highly erotic in content. Thus people's recognition of this dance as a trance is also a veiled reference to its erotic expression. It was also significant that they claim the dance is one performed under the spell of a demon. Obeyesekere wrote that under the traditional belief system it is inconceivable that any god would reside within an impure body (1978: 465). Sri Lanka has seen social and economic changes on a massive scale since Obeyesekere's article and women now readily occupy spaces that are considered modern and dangerous. So it is not surprising that people perceived that the FTZ woman worker, who was not just 'physically impure' but also 'socially and culturally impure', effectively prevented any god from even considering the idea of possessing her!
43. *Aspaya gone* is a childish term describing children riding stationary horses. This allusion to horse-riding somehow seemed strangely fitting for the televised dance. Morris (1995: 584) holds that when possessed by spirits women are permitted to take attire, gestures, and many other privileges denied to them in everyday life. She further contends that within the trance women can appropriate and play with the sexual and social privileges of masculinity.
44. It should be noted that these activities took place in a cultural context that is

defined by many conventional rules and regulation about how men and women should interact, such as when it is permissible to touch one another, who will be permitted to make such physical contact, what parts of bodies can be touched, etc. Male and female physical contact at these dancing parties transgressed many conventional rules pertaining to the ideal of 'decent, well mannered, and restrained' Sinhala Buddhist woman and were instrumental in FTZ workers being labeled as women without shame-fear.

45. Though I have no proof for this I instantly thought Nalini lied about knowing this woman and her prior behavior. Nalini was a new worker among 3000 others and it seemed unlikely she would know this particular woman. It should be noted that this was the first and the last time I visited the RAC workers. Nalini could well have been attempting to save the reputation of RAC and its workers.
46. Obeyesekere asserts that the increasing popularity of the fast paced erotic-ecstatic *kavadi* dancing (religious dancing in honor of the god *Skanda*) results from the sexual frustrations in modern Sri Lanka. According to him, the prevalent sexual repression and the internalization of aggression have led to a widespread hysterical disposition among Sri Lankans (1978: 473). Though Obeyesekere states that *kavadi* dancing was enormously popular among people of all classes (1978: 475), in 2000, with the advent of western and *baila* musical shows, *kavadi* dancing was only used when showing devotion to the god.
47. Mills writes that Thai migrant female factory workers intensely pursue standards of modern womanhood and attempt to achieve an 'up-to-date' identity through new consumption practices. But constrained by low-status and low-wage employment they are marginalized within the urban consumer culture and the 'up-to-date' identity remains unattainable. Nevertheless workers keep trying and even the Buddhist merit-making trips they take mimic the religious practices of the powerful and the wealthy (1997: 43–54). Sri Lankan FTZ workers, on the contrary, not only insisted that they did not want to follow the middle classes but also developed new religious practices and spaces to which they attached a set of meanings different from dominant values (I examine these new religious practices and alternative religious spaces elsewhere: Hewamanne, 2002: 330–8).
48. Some women, however, offered critical perspectives on the circumstances that necessitated their need for getting married and their acceptance of asymmetrical relationships.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

SANDYA HEWAMANNE is a senior lecturer attached to the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. She has published several works dealing with Sri Lanka's female migrant workers in *Asian Women*, *Anthropology of Work Review*, and *SAGAR*. She received her doctorate in 2002 from the University of Texas at Austin's Department of Anthropology, where she completed her dissertation, 'Stitching Identities: Work, Play, and Politics among Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zone Garment Factory Workers'. *Address*: Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka. [email: sandyahd@sltnet.lk or kumudul933@yahoo.com]