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Making marriage livable: Neoliberal intimacy and ethical labor in rural Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This article examines how neoliberal discourses of autonomy, individual choice, self-investment, and companionate marriage are taken up, reworked, and domesticated in the intimate lives of Sri Lankan women who previously worked in Export Processing Zones (EPZs). Drawing on long-term ethnographic research conducted between 2000 and 2023 among former EPZ workers in rural villages, the article traces how ideas encountered through NGO workshops, popular literature, visual media, and workplace training circulate beyond the factory and reshape aspirations around love, intimacy, and marriage. While these discourses valorize personal fulfilment and romantic partnership, women's post-factory lives are structured by kinship hierarchies, moral surveillance, and economic constraint. The article shows that rather than simply embracing or rejecting neoliberal ideals, women engage in sustained ethical and emotional labor to negotiate competing moral and emotional regimes. Through practices such as letter writing, storytelling, song, and the selective sharing of reproductive knowledge, former workers preserve desire, circulate intimate knowledge, and recalibrate romantic expectations in ways that are socially intelligible. By foregrounding ordinary ethics and emotional labor, the article challenges celebratory narratives of empowerment and resistance, revealing instead the quiet, relational politics through which neoliberal imaginaries of intimacy are selectively reworked in everyday rural life.

INTRODUCTION

Neoliberal discourses emphasizing autonomy, self-reliance, capacity building, and individual choice now circulate globally through media, development interventions, and institutional training programs. In Sri Lanka, such discourses reached women employed in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) through NGO workshops, training manuals, popular literature, and visual media, where they encountered particular formulations of neoliberal ethos—especially those valorizing individual choice, personal satisfaction, and companionate marriage. This article examines how these elements of neoliberal subjectivity are rearticulated as former EPZ workers return to rural villages and negotiate intimate, familial, and social lives beyond the factory.

A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that transformations in economic systems are accompanied by shifts in ideas about love, romance, intimacy, and married life, suggesting that political–economic arrangements cultivate distinct emotional styles and moral frameworks. Across disciplines, scholars have traced how capitalism intensifies attention to emotional life and conjugality, reshaping intimate aspirations and relational practices (Illouz, 2023; Rebhun 2002; Kelsky 2003). Particularly influential are studies showing how U.S. capitalism governs workers through new hierarchies of emotional well-being, sustained by industries of self-help, therapy, and emotional management (Illouz, 2007, 2008). The commodification of romance under capitalism proliferates specific vocabularies, images, and rituals of love, authorizing dominant notions of what counts as “truly romantic” and aligning intimacy with leisure, consumption, and media-generated romantic utopias (Adhikari, 2023; Constable, 2009; Illouz, 2023).

Recent work documents the global circulation of ideals of companionate marriage and the diverse ways people negotiate these ideals in everyday life (Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006; Morris and Korobov 2020). Much of this scholarship links contemporary romance and marriage to the emergence of a modern, individualized self—defined not only by particular modes of loving, but also by consumption practices, aesthetic sensibilities, and social networks that extend beyond kinship. At the same time, studies highlight how societies creatively appropriate and rework circulating ideals to suit local moral economies and situational needs (Larkin 1997; Gabaccia et al., 2021; Hewamanne, 2020).

This article examines how former EPZ workers navigate competing moral and emotional expectations, showing that rather than simply adopting or rejecting global imaginaries, women selectively reinterpret them through deeply relational and context-specific practices that render intimate life both socially intelligible and ethically viable. The article argues that although experiences within EPZs have shaped women’s moral reworking of intimacy, these shifts have not produced rapid or overt transformations in the structural conditions that continue to constrain women’s ability to pursue individual desires. It further highlights the importance of spaces such as storytelling sessions, songs, letters, and reproductive guidance, through which women sustain alternative moral worlds and transfer knowledge to younger generations—contributing to a quiet, gradual reshaping of understandings of love, intimacy, and marriage in rural Sri Lanka.

QUIET TRANSFORMATIONS: REWORKING OF INTIMACY IN RURAL SRI LANKA

Neoliberal subjectivities and the restructuring of intimate life

Scholarship on neoliberalism over the last three decades has moved beyond policy and macro-economics to attend to its affective and subjective dimensions. Foundational work in this vein conceptualizes neoliberalism not simply as an economic doctrine but as a mode

of subject-formation that shapes how people understand autonomy, self-management, and relational life (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008; Ong 2007; Waquant 2012). These accounts reveal how neoliberal governance infuses everyday life with imperatives of individual choice and self-optimization, increasingly inflecting emotional and intimate domains. Subsequent research has traced how such idioms circulate through media and institutional settings, producing affective dispositions—confidence, assertiveness, positivity—that often obscure structural inequalities (Orgad and Gill 2022; Zuo 2025).

Parallel scholarship on capitalism and intimacy demonstrates that love, marriage, and emotional attachment are historically and socially constituted rather than universal. For example, Giddens's work foregrounds the reconfiguration of relationships around self-expression and emotional communication in late modernity (Giddens, 2013). Eva Illouz's extensive body of work further shows how capitalist markets and media shape vocabularies, practices, and expectations of love, embedding intimacy within regimes of consumption, self-work, and emotional management (Illouz, 1998; 2012; 2019; 2023). Her concept of "emotional capitalism" illuminates how subjects are encouraged to invest in intimacy in ways that mirror broader economic rationalities. Recent work in emotions studies extends these insights by examining how emotional life itself becomes an object of governmentality under neoliberal regimes. The notion of emotional regimes highlights how social norms legitimize certain feelings while disciplining others, underscoring that emotions are always socially regulated and historically situated (Reddy 2013; Verbalyte and Ulinskaitė 2024). Related studies show how therapeutic cultures and self-regulatory practices align emotional management with ideals of self-governance, responsabilization, and resilience (Chamberlain, 2024; Smoliak et al. 2025; Lempert et al. 2026).

Feminist critiques add crucial nuance by tracing how neoliberal logics are domesticated, contested, and reworked in gendered and culturally specific ways (Salmenniemi & Adamson 2015; Gibson-Graham 2008; 2014; Bear et al., 2015). Research on postfeminism demonstrates how self-help media, beauty labor, and personality work repackage neoliberal imperatives while reinscribing gendered norms and inequalities (Spajić 2020; Martínez-Jiménez 2023; Swan 2023). Complementary work in postcolonial and Global South contexts emphasizes hybridized forms of subject making that generate both constraint and possibility, rather than simple adoption or resistance (Nilsen 2016; Hewamanne, 2020; Shakya 2024).

Anthropological research on companionate marriage provides further grounding for understanding how intimate ideals circulate and are locally negotiated. Hirsch and Wardlow's influential volume (2006) demonstrates how romantic aspirations intersect with diverse moral economies, while subsequent studies link intimacy to consumption, migration, generational change, and the formation of modern selves (Dalessandro, 2021; Hirsch, 2024). Illouz's later work, including *The End of Love* (Illouz, 2019), continues to trace how capitalist culture reshapes the felt experience of intimacy and emotional relations in contemporary societies.

Within South Asia, scholars have examined how neoliberal transformations reshape women's lives through changing labor regimes, family forms, and affective expectations (Uberoi 2006; Hewamanne, 2020; Kalpagam, 2019; Rahman et al. 2023). Some focus specifically on shifts in emotional labor and intimacy (Puri 2002; Yang 2014; Piper and Lee 2016; Walter 2021), while others document women's critique, dissent, and selective reworking of globally circulating ideals of empowerment, consumption, and romance (Pillai 2022; Roy 2023).

Taken together, this scholarship shows that neoliberal incursions into intimate life are neither uniform nor unidirectional. Instead, they intersect with local moral economies, gendered expectations, and emotional regimes, producing hybrid forms of intimacy and relational practice. It is within such a tension-filled terrain that former EPZ workers find ways to pursue desire, manage constraint, and domesticate capitalist regimes of emotion, intimacy, and self-care.

Ethical and emotional labor in negotiating intimacy

Former EPZ workers engage in ethical and emotional labor to make life livable amid village moral constraints, household surveillance, and economic scarcity.¹ Their post-factory lives are characterized by careful negotiations of intimacy, desire, and obligation within conjugal and extended family relations, revealing how ordinary ethics (Das, 2007; Lambek 2022) intersect with embodied habitus and strategic management of social and symbolic capital (Hewamanne, 2017; 2020).

Anthropological work conceptualizes ethics not as abstract moral reasoning but as practical, situated labor embedded in everyday life. This shift has been articulated most clearly through work on ordinary ethics, which treats ethical action as inherent in habitual practices, relational adjustments, and the management of social obligations rather than as explicit moral deliberation (Das, 2007; Lempert 2013; Laidlaw 2023). This approach is particularly generative for understanding women's lives under conditions of surveillance, spatial constraint and scarcity, where ethical action often takes the form of sustaining relationships, minimizing conflict, and recalibrating expectations in ways that make everyday existence livable. Rather than foregrounding overt resistance scholars emphasize the quiet moral work through which women adjust, and care for others while navigating constrained choices (Das, 2015; Daya, 2016; Lambek 2022).

Feminist analyses further demonstrate that ethical labor is deeply entangled with emotional labor, especially within intimate and familial domains. Classic studies show how women are expected to manage both their own emotions and those of others, smoothing tensions and maintaining relational harmony under unequal conditions (Hewamanne, 2020; Hochschild, 2003; Kang, 2010). Under neoliberal and patriarchal regimes, this labor intensifies as women are expected to absorb disappointment, regulate desire, and reframe unmet aspirations in socially acceptable ways (Ahmed, 2010; Hewamanne, 2017; 2020). Such work extends beyond the conjugal unit into extended kin networks, where women's ability to manage discretion, and respectability becomes central to their family's social status (Abu-Lughod, 2016; Freeman, 2014; Grima, 2005; Hewamanne, 2020).

Studies of intimacy and care under economic precarity further illuminate how women recalibrate attachment within constrained conditions. Rather than pursuing idealized romantic fulfilment, women often live with what Berlant (2020) calls compromised attachments, aligning love and commitment with what is materially and morally possible. Intimacy, in this framing, becomes less a site of personal satisfaction than one of ethical endurance, where women work to preserve household stability, protect reputations, and sustain intergenerational relationships. In South Asia, research similarly highlights how women's marital lives involve continuous moral negotiations within extended families, where managing intimacy, silence, and restraint constitutes a form of ethical labor essential to everyday survival (Mines and Lamb 2010; Alam, 2021; De Silva et al., 2025; Hussein, 2017).

Together, this body of scholarship reframes women's efforts to make life livable not as accommodation or failure, but as ethical and emotional labor performed under constraint. By foregrounding labor, my research on former EPZ workers also moves beyond binaries of agency and resistance to illuminate the subtle, relational practices through which women absorb structural pressures and rework intimacy in morally intelligible ways.

In the sections that follow, after outlining research methods, I trace how EPZ workers encounter intertwined ideas of self-investment, individual fulfilment, romantic love, and conjugal happiness. I then examine how these women negotiate such ideas alongside local moral prescriptions in everyday life—conforming to dominant emotional regimes in public and domestic spaces while quietly subverting them through practices such as letter writing, storytelling, and intimate knowledge-sharing. In doing so, the article illuminates the complex politics of emotional life and marriage under conditions of neoliberal transformation.

Tracing intimacy: Methods and fieldwork

This article draws on long-term ethnographic research conducted in Sri Lanka's Katunayake and Biyagama EPZs, as well as in the rural villages to which former EPZ workers return as daughters, prospective brides, and newly married women. The study builds on an intensive year-long ethnography carried out in 2000 in the Katunayake EPZ. During this period, I worked on an assembly line in a transnational garment factory and resided in a boarding house with factory workers. Fieldwork extended beyond the factory floor to include the surrounding neighborhood, commercial spaces, and both local and international NGOs engaged in workers' lives.

Since 2000, I have conducted short-term fieldwork in multiple EPZs almost annually, enabling sustained engagement with workers and ongoing observation of economic and cultural transformations. My subsequent research shifted focus to former EPZ workers, examining how they renegotiate social roles, respectability, and belonging upon returning to their villages and entering marriage.² The empirical material for this article is drawn primarily from extended ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2018 in the homes of 37 former factory workers. During this period, I stayed in their homes, worked alongside them in their home-workshops, joined informal storytelling gatherings, and accompanied them on road trips and other community events. In addition to former workers, I conducted in-depth interviews with their husbands, in-laws, neighbors, and local leaders—including government officials, Buddhist monks, and respected elders—who shape and reflect community perceptions of women's work, respectability, and social value. Complementing this long-term engagement, I carried out follow-up in-depth interviews in 2022 and 2023 with the same group of women (eight women in 2022 and nine in 2023) to examine shifts in their negotiation strategies in the context of expanded smartphone use and WhatsApp-based communication. Although it was not possible to re-interview all 37 women—both research periods coincided with major religious holidays that limited availability—all but one of the women discussed in the sections below were interviewed in either 2022 or 2023. This continuity facilitates a longitudinal analysis of both change and continuity across two decades.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the institutional review boards of three universities over the course of the study. Standard ethical procedures were observed throughout, including informed consent, anonymization of personal information, and secure data storage. Interviews conducted in 2000 followed seven months of participant observation, by which time strong rapport and trust had been established with factory workers. Subsequent village-based research was made possible by relationships cultivated over nearly two decades. My being born and raised in Sri Lanka and fluency in Sinhala—the primary language spoken by participants and their communities—further supported close interaction and the generation of detailed, context-sensitive accounts of how women negotiate intimacy, marriage, and reputation amid shifting political, economic, and cultural conditions.

EMOTIONAL AND ETHICAL LABOR AND SPACES OF SUBVERSIVE COMMUNICATION

Production of intimate imaginaries

Scholars have long shown how popular media and development interventions shape imaginaries of intimacy, gender, and marital life (Puri 2002; Attwood et al., 2017; Fekete, 2022). For EPZ workers, expectations of emotional and sexual intimacy were shaped not only by national media but also by alternative reading materials circulating in and around factory zones.

When I began research among EPZ workers in 2000, and through roughly 2012, *Priyadari* (later renamed *A–Z*) was the most popular magazine among workers. Targeted at EPZ workers and working-class men the magazine featured sexually explicit stories that workers described as useful sources of sexual knowledge and self-expression. These narratives resonated with workers whose sexual lives were shaped by tensions between ideals of virginity, honor, and the new relational possibilities encountered in and around EPZs (Hewamanne, 2006).

In 2002, a competing publisher, Divine Flower, launched several magazines that promoted an opposing vision of romance. These publications portrayed women who resisted sexual urges, cultivated self-control, and saved themselves for “good” and morally upright men. Romance was depicted as a marker of modernity, expressed through temple visits, charity, and carefully curated consumption and leisure practices. Together, both these magazines offered scripts of romance and marriage for modern woman: one centered on sexual experimentation and desire, the other on moral restraint and respectability. Workers consumed both sets of images, while selectively drawing on them to interpret their own lives.

Magazines such as *Sandarajini* and *Bhavana*, published by Divine Flower, framed ideal romance as a compromise between arranged marriage and romantic love. While falling in love was celebrated as authentic and emotionally pure, relationships were sustained through sacrifice, self-discipline, and long-term commitment in the face of family and community opposition. These stories culminated in companionate marriages characterized by shared domestic labor, mutual affection, and responsible citizenship, alongside consumption and leisure practices largely incompatible with working-class realities. Nonetheless, these narratives encouraged workers to desire such practices as integral to “good” marriage (Hewamanne, 2020).

By 2023, several other publications had joined *A–Z* and *Sandarajini* in circulating similar scripts of romance, sex, and relationships. Although foregrounding different moral logics, these magazines offered standardized packages of behavior, and aspiration. Workers understood these texts as commercialized fantasies, yet they continued to inform how women evaluated intimate choices—both within the EPZ and later in their villages.

These imaginaries were further shaped by serialized Indian television dramas such as Yeh Hai Mohabbatein (*This Is Love*) and Korean historical series dubbed into Sinhala such as Sujatha Diyani (*Well-born Daughter*), and Sanda Hiruta Adarei (*Moon Loves the Sun*), which workers avidly followed. These shows depicted exaggerated contrasts between ideal and improper feminine conduct within marriage, reinforcing norms of devotion, sacrifice, and restraint. Bollywood films, combining Western and “traditional” romantic ideals, were similarly influential. Although diverse content were available, the content they consumed through social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook in 2023 too were focused on wedding ceremonies, beauty practices, and consumption patterns associated with “good” relationships, echoing the ideals promoted by Divine Flower publications and popular television dramas.

NGO workshops, however, introduced a different relational vocabulary. Programs on reproductive health, empowerment, and women’s rights encouraged workers to adopt ideals of autonomy, personal choice, and emotional fulfilment in intimate relationships (Hewamanne, 2012; 2020). Framed through donor-driven development agendas, these workshops promoted visions of marriage closely aligned with Western models of companionate marriage, defined by emotional intimacy, expressive love, and conjugal partnership prioritized over extended kin relations (Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006, 4–5).

Together, these diverse influences intersected uneasily with village-based expectations shaped by religious instruction, school curricula, and agrarian and ritual calendars. The following section examines how former EPZ workers selectively appropriate, accommodate, and rework these competing models of intimacy as they attempt to reshape marital life within their communities.

From romance to marriage

Sri Lanka's recent economic transformations parallel the broader structural shifts that facilitated the emergence of companionate marriage ideals in Western contexts. While political-economic change and global media flows exert pressure toward lifestyle transformation, the pace and form of such change vary considerably, often diverging from the expectations of NGOs and development practitioners.

As former EPZ workers enter married life in their husbands' villages, many confront the limits of relationship ideals embraced during factory employment. Their ideals collide with village moral surveillance, reputational anxieties, and gendered discipline. Surrounded by kin and subjected to everyday enforcement of respectability codes, many women describe abandoning expectations of sustained marital intimacy. As Nilmini observed, marriage did not deliver the sexual freedom she had anticipated; paradoxically, she felt she had greater sexual freedom in the EPZ, despite strong condemnation of premarital sex.

For most women—particularly those with young children—maintaining supportive relationships with women across generations becomes more pressing than pursuing romantic fulfillment. As Vasanthi explained, “I think the villagers would tolerate overt physical intimacy may be few months. After that there are frowns, gestures of disgust and direct censure.” Household composition and spatial arrangements further regulate intimacy. Sujatha recounted how her mother-in-law explicitly instructed her and her husband to restrain their behavior in front of younger female relatives, effectively confining intimacy to nighttime and the bedroom. “To make a marriage successful in villages, the most important friend to have is your mother-in-law, and perhaps also your sisters-in-law. So I followed her instructions,” Sujatha added.

In response, couples develop subtle strategies to preserve intimacy. Some seek moments of privacy beyond the household, such as evening walks to distant wells where kin surveillance is suspended. Economic pressures further constrain emotional life. Purna described how financial strain transformed her husband from an affectionate partner into an exhausted, angry man, whose expressions of love were reduced to quick sexual intercourse before sleep. “When I complained, he asked me ‘what do you want me to do? Run around flowering trees singing I love you?’... He falls asleep almost immediately after sex. True, he works 10–12 h a day, but I still cried much in the first couple of years.” Over time, she came to reinterpret love less through intimacy than through his capacity to provide and generosity toward her natal family.

These accounts illustrate how fantasies of companionate marriage do not simply dissolve but are recalibrated in the face of moral regulation and material constraint. New articulations of “good” marriage emerge that prioritize endurance, obligation, and care over expressive intimacy. Marriage thus becomes a site of ethical negotiation, where intimacy is neither abandoned nor fully realized—a site where women do what it takes to make life livable under surveillance and scarcity.

Ethical and emotional labor in everyday life

Former workers engage in careful negotiations of intimacy, desire, and relational obligations within family relations. These practices reveal how ordinary ethics (Das 2007; Lambek 2022), and the strategic management of social and symbolic capital intersect—particularly as many women pursue entrepreneurial activities that require family and community support (Hewamanne, 2019; 2020).

Approaching these efforts to make life livable not as accommodation or failure but as ethical and emotional labor under constraint allows for a more nuanced analysis of how women sustain social worlds, absorb structural pressures, and rework intimacy in morally intelligible ways. Practices such as letter writing, storytelling among women, and the circulation of reproductive knowledge constitute key sites where ethical judgment, emotional management, and intimate aspiration converge, revealing the quiet but consequential politics of everyday life under neoliberal transformation.

Letters as sites of subversive communication

Letters exchanged among former workers functioned as affective and ethical spaces through which women articulated sexual desires, fantasies, frustrations, and moral reflections rendered unspeakable within village life. While publicly performing the roles of “good” daughters-in-law, wives, and mothers, women used letters to sustain connections to the oppositional consciousness developed during their EPZ years (Hewamanne, 2003; 2008; 2016) and to negotiate intimate knowledge across distance. Letter writing enabled therapeutic self-expression, helping women reconcile the vibrant urban selves forged at the EPZ with village moral constraints. Sujatha, who occasionally walked with her husband to a distant well to spend time together—and when possible, have sex in the nearby woods—wrote candidly about sexual matters to close EPZ friends. When Vasanthi’s husband returned from Italy after a long absence, Sujatha wrote:

He must have been so impatient. Who can blame him? It was more than three years. He must have pounced on you the moment you two were alone.... Did he bring a blue film [pornographic DVD] as he promised...? With the help of all this and gods’ blessings I hope you will get pregnant this time.

Among in-laws and neighbors, former workers routinely disavowed participation in the more transgressive dimensions of EPZ life. In letters, however, they freely revisited rebellious experiences, exchanging gossip, jokes, advice, and memories of factory life alongside accounts of marital struggles. Scholarship on women’s letter writing have argued that it emancipates and empowers the writers (Daybell, 2001; Burke & Gyamera, 2023). In Sri Lanka, too, women opened up the suppressed aspects of their selves, within the safe and secretive space of a letter.

Only sixteen of the thirty-seven women corresponded regularly, and they happily shared these letters with me. While letters often centered on family well-being, blessings, and advice, conversations frequently digressed into recollections of EPZ life, particularly transgressive acts. For example, Sujatha wrote to Aksha,

Remember that time we went to Anuradhapura for our annual factory trip? I still feel ticklish thinking of how we stood on the isles so we could bump into boys (men co-workers) when the bus hit the brakes.

In a letter to Vasanthi, Shanika asked,

Do you remember that boarding house near the public bathing well? There were about 15 women and some of them wore sarongs [men’s clothing] and some acted like couples....

Dinithi once wrote to Sujatha,

When we were at the EPZ we could not wait for our annual parties, trips and weddings to drink beer. I thought it was the most fashionable thing. I was so proud about learning to slowly sip beer and loved to take photographs with beer bottles and glasses.

Besides discussing general transgressive acts, women occasionally talked about individual transgressions. Rena wrote to Vasanthi asking,

Have you seen Nishan sir since you left the factory? I used to be so jealous that all these sirs liked you; especially Nishan sir. Remember how he used to come by our Line and take photos of you?

Despite the risks of preserving such correspondence, all letter writers carefully stored letters and photographs in empty shoe boxes or chocolate tins—kept inside their almirahs in the bedroom. The almirah, a standard dowry item provided to daughters at marriage, remained under women's control even within crowded households. While other furniture they brought as dowry were occasionally shared, almirahs were rarely accessed by husbands or in-laws. Alongside letters, women stored EPZ photographs, creating private archives of memory and intimacy. Several women said they reread letters during moments of loneliness or emotional exhaustion, suggesting that the almirah functioned as both material and symbolic infrastructure enabling subversive communication.

Letters also served as sites of advice, moral reasoning, and care. Vinitha wrote to Chamila, who was refusing to get married,

Marriage can be such a good thing. Everything about it, even the physical pleasure, is just wonderful. You need to try it at least once. Dying as a virgin would be such a waste. Even if you don't marry, have sex at least once.

Letters further reveal how women collectively calibrated respectability, desire and survival. Kalyani wrote to Shanika,

I told Ajitha to be grateful that someone married her after all the dancing [transgressions] she did at the EPZ. She is dark skinned and ugly to begin with. I told her to be like a prostitute in bed, make him happy. But let him lead and feel like he is teaching you to be sexual.

Letters also became spaces to debate disappointment and infidelity. After learning of a former supervisor's extramarital affair, Purna wrote:

It makes me angry that he doesn't take me to the movies or say I love you. When he did not bring a gift for my birthday this year, I said to myself, I am going to find someone who treats me better. But then I realized that other village men are like that too. It is only in Sandarajini stories that men and women hold hands and call each other Sudhu [Fair One]! Who has time for those things?

Vasanthi responded with Buddhist moral reasoning, emphasizing karma and urging restraint.

If we give such pain to a man in this life, the men in our next ten lives will give us the exact same pain. We should not give into temporary urges. We need to think about long-term consequences.

Other letters described creative strategies for circumventing village surveillance. Nisha wrote to Vinitha:

I live with my in-laws and the house is crowded. We don't feel good about having sex while his mother chant Buddhist prayers all night. When I go to Colombo [for work relating to her business], Kasun travels separately and we have a good time in a hotel room. We decided to keep it our little secret. The secrecy makes it more special.

At times, correspondence also generated tension. Shanika mocked another woman's celebratory letters about wealth and consumption, concluding:

My husband said if he brings five saris for one birthday, then he must have a small thing (genitals). We may not have a new car, but my man makes me happy in bed.

Although letters enabled candid expression, communication was constrained by the limited vernacular available for discussing sex. Writers relied on euphemisms—"thing" for genitals, "going to bed" or "being happy with a man" for sex. Other terms are either too scholarly or obscene to be used in letters among friends. Letters thus reveal how linguistic limits shape the form and content of intimate disclosure.

In 2022 and 2023, the women explained that they no longer communicate frequently through letters. Mobile phones have become widespread, and they now tend to call or use WhatsApp to stay in touch with friends. However, they agreed that letters remain a more secure form of communication, as mobile phones are often accessible to other members of the household. Six participants were on shared family mobile plans, which made their text messages visible to others. Of the seventeen women interviewed, only eleven owned smartphones, while the rest continued to use basic flip phones. Those with smartphones often shared them with their children, who needed access to internet for schoolwork. Not surprisingly, when something particularly sensitive needed to be discussed, women still turned to letters. For example, in early 2022 there was a flurry of correspondence concerning Rena's decision to leave her family and elope with a man ten years her junior. All seventeen women, now mothers of teenage children, regarded Rena's actions as deeply troubling. As Vasanthi wrote to Sujatha, "This gives a bad name to all women, especially to her friends."

Although less frequently used today, letter-writing continues to function as a form of social and symbolic capital. Carefully stored in almirahs, letters serve as repositories of memory and agency. By controlling access to these private archives, the women maintain a degree of autonomy over knowledge and intimacy, negotiating the ethical demands of family life alongside their own desire for personal expression.

Storytelling sessions

These sessions with younger, nonmigrant women extended former EPZ workers' ethical and emotional labor into the domain of communal knowledge production. Through jokes, parody, and narrative, these women blended mentorship with the covert transmission of sexual and relational knowledge. Stories and verbal play functioned as performative sites of ethical labor,

allowing women to critique normative expectations, cultivate solidarity, and foster relational well-being while maintaining propriety and avoiding censure.

Verbal subversions through jokes, parody songs, stories, and satire have been widely used by marginalized groups to express social criticism and temporarily escape drudgery (Goldstein, 2003; Delap, 2010; Davis, 2014; Makombe 2021). The women I studied too engaged in verbal subversions during informal gatherings in their village homes. Most former workers I studied (twenty-five out of thirty-seven) had younger nonmigrant women dropping by to help with household chores and to engage in storytelling sessions.³ They usually gathered around 2 pm and hung around till about 4:30 or 5:00. Over time, each group developed implicit rules governing what could be said, when, and by whom. My presence altered these dynamics slightly, as former workers emphasized EPZ stories to draw me into the exchanges.

Sexual topics often emerged indirectly—sparked by village gossip or celebrity scandals—eliciting laughter, blushing, and playful embarrassment. Former workers drew on their own experiences, stories heard from others, and narratives from *Priyadari* to advise predominantly unmarried younger women. Conversations moved fluidly between politics, household crises, village gossip, and sexual humor. Within these sessions, former workers took on adviser/teacher roles disseminating new knowledges acquired while at the EPZ.

Jayani once recounted a story from *Priyadari* about a bride having to sit tightly on a white bedsheet to produce “proof” of purity on her wedding night. She shared it both as a warning about social expectations and as a reminder that quick thinking can resolve fraught situations. In a similar vein, Aksha advised that if proving virginity is a problem, small bottle of red food coloring could save the day. In 2015, a storytelling session at Dinithi’s house was animated by news of a newly married woman sent back to her parents for failing to demonstrate her virginity. As the group condemned the groom’s family as backward, Dinithi admitted that—even after a long romance—her own husband had switched on the lights immediately after their first intercourse to check for signs of virginity. Shanika shared friends’ experiences to illustrate how much women are often expected to endure in marriage—being pressured into sex after surgery or during menstruation. These stories functioned as cautionary tales, preparing younger women for marital realities. Nilmini warned them not to believe the romantic relationships portrayed on television:

Marriage is a lot of work. Sometimes, whether you like it or not, you have to attend to men’s needs. And that work [sex] is not always fun.

When Devika, her young sister-in-law, asked bluntly whether “it” was really “like an iron bar,” the room erupted in laughter. Nilmini deflected, saying she would not discuss her husband’s “that thing” in front of his sister. The teasing spiralled into talk of a well-known Sri Lankan figure whose surname boys used as slang for large genitals, prompting questions about size, compatibility, and bodily difference. Lowering her voice, Nilmini offered practical advice about foreplay and both natural and artificial lubrication. These moments illustrate how sexual knowledge circulated in fragments, shaped by linguistic limits and moral vigilance.

As I am married, they directed some questions to me as well, but Nilmini quickly intervened saying, “she doesn’t know these things.” Later I wondered why Nilmini would prevent me from sharing knowledge. Neither she nor other former workers had any qualms about discussing sexual matters with me when we were alone. Perhaps what Nilmini feared was my inability to know the delicate balance between what should and should not be shared in the village. Blabbering unrestrained would damage not just my reputation, but Nilmini’s reputation as well.

Younger women, for their part, voiced questions that hinted at curiosity about new forms of sexual expression. Between 2005 and 2014, pornographic films were a recurring topic in storytelling sessions. Former workers denied having watched such films, yet younger women persistently urged them to recount scenes and storylines. The older women insisted that even

their husbands lacked access to the informal networks through which such material circulated. In any case, DVD players were kept in shared living rooms, making private viewing nearly impossible. By 2018, most women had mobile data on their phones, but few were willing to spend it downloading large video files.

At times, especially during tedious tasks like sifting rice to remove stones and husks, the groups would break into song. They often sang popular tunes about love, separation, and reunion, playfully revising the lyrics for comic effect. Former workers also revived songs from factory trips and boarding-house gatherings. Nilmini once recalled a song they had sung on a factory excursion that I too attended—soon prompting the younger women to join in.

We will bring Anura sir

Will show the *maligawa* (temple of tooth relic/vagina)

Lalai, lilai, la—

We will bring Weere uncle

Will show Anti's [auntie's] *araka* (that thing/vagina)

Lalai, lilai, la—

We will bring (my name)

Will show Saman's *sthupe* (Buddhist pagoda/penis)

During the factory trip, workers used the song to mock those who exercised authority over their lives—factory supervisors, boarding-house owners, and even the researcher. At this storytelling session, younger women adapted the same tune to tease figures of power in their own worlds: parents, teachers, a Buddhist priest, and, in a gesture of solidarity, Nilmini's mother-in-law. When the lyrics linked her mother-in-law to a wandering village man, Nilmini quickly halted the performance. One young woman quipped, "If auntie had a boyfriend, she wouldn't be jealous of you two holding hands." At other times, they sang altered verses that invoked the Buddha, his chief disciples, and local temples in overtly sexualized ways—irreverent performances that blurred devotion, and defiance.

During another storytelling session, after singing a song about a boatman's yearnings, Rena asked the group what the line "the boat has an unfamiliar fragrance" might mean. Then she explained, "It means he had sex in the boat." She went on to interpret another line—"I will smile tomorrow"—as meaning that he will have sex again tomorrow. The younger women were surprised that such a senior, classically trained musician would perform lyrics with double meanings. Rena responded matter-of-factly: "Not only older, respected musicians, even your mothers, aunties, and grandmothers have sexual desires. It's just how humans are wired." I noted how closely her words echoed the language used by NGO officials in their educational programs.

Former workers in fact frequently drew on their EPZ experiences to gently encourage younger women to see sexual desire as natural and inherently human. They criticized the agents and institutions that teach women to feel ashamed of their sexuality. As Rena once

put it, “Our elders use their own cloth to cover the daughters’ eyes from sexual matters, and in the process bare themselves naked. We are all human—we have hormones and desires. Why make it a big, nasty secret?” These sessions seemed, in part, designed to help village women overcome their fear of speaking about sex. Through jokes, storytelling, and shared laughter, sexual activity was reframed as a source of pleasure rather than shame. Shanika, for instance, recounted how her husband had promised they would have sex in every room of their new house once it was completed. At the time, only three rooms were finished—and, blushing, she admitted they had already fulfilled the promise.

The sessions were neither explicitly oppositional nor did they directly challenge village norms. Instead, they exemplify how ethical and emotional labor is performed collectively: by redistributing knowledge and offering younger women resources with which to navigate intimacy. In this sense, storytelling becomes a quiet pedagogical practice—ways of making life livable by expanding what can be imagined and felt under conditions of surveillance and moral constraint.

In 2022 and 2023, women reported that their groups had dwindled, largely because younger women now have smartphones and attend numerous educational courses in urban centers. Many former workers have since become successful entrepreneurs with strong standing in their communities and hold leadership roles in village organizations. They are also deeply involved in their children’s education and extracurricular activities and no longer felt a need for secretive spaces to share sexual stories to find fulfilment. Some noted that they now feel freer to discuss sexual needs with their husbands and, to some extent, shape their conjugal sexual lives in ways that are more satisfying to them. Meanwhile, storytelling sessions appear to have shifted generationally, with younger, unmarried women now gathering in the homes of younger, newly married women.

Reproductive health knowledge and practical ethics

Former workers deployed the knowledges gained from EPZ reproductive health workshops to mediate between ethical responsibility, community care, and the constraints of village moralities. By selectively sharing information on contraceptives, and sexual health, they performed intimate labor that supported life-making for others, extending care beyond their households. This illustrates the entanglement of ethical labor, emotional labor, and symbolic capital, as women navigate tensions between the imperatives of familial honor and the practical needs of their communities.

All former workers had attended at least one EPZ reproductive health seminar and supplemented this with informal learning through boarding house and factory lunch conversations. Initially, most found it difficult to discuss contraception with their husbands, but after childbirth, they began using contraceptives and sharing guidance with close female peers. Six reported extending such guidance to younger village women, often proactively. As Jayani explained:

You and I both witnessed the terrible abortions that took place around the EPZ because women did not use contraceptives. So when village girls tell me about their boyfriends, I just cannot keep silent.... I tell them, ‘not because they happen, but just in case, keep these things in mind,’ and then I explain about the pill and condoms.

Other workers, like Nilu and Nisha, distributed informational brochures from EPZ seminars, intervening tactically in younger women’s lives. “These days schools have people coming and talking to them about contraceptives [Sri Lanka Family Planning Association (SLFPA)]

outreach programs] but they don't pay attention because they do not think that they will have sex before marriage. I tell them of how women suffer when unwanted pregnancies happen," Nisha said. She also reflected on the tension between knowledge and propriety:

My mother-in-law warned against my talking to young women, saying that their parents would say that I am corrupting their daughters. But this is something I have got to do, and even if one girl takes precautions because of my words, I will be happy.

Most interventions, however, reveal a pragmatic moral calculus: workers balanced the potential social cost of breaching the "good daughter-in-law" role with the ethical imperative to prevent harm to younger women. Shanika's approach exemplifies this strategy: by redirecting a request for abortion services to a trusted NGO contact rather than providing information directly, she preserved her social respectability while still facilitating care. Similarly, Dinithi blended modern reproductive guidance from NGO workshops with Buddhist ethics and practical reasoning to counsel women facing marital and reproductive dilemmas, supplementing her advice with expert counselling (by telephoning a professional in the EPZ) when necessary. These practices illuminate how reproductive knowledge circulates relationally and tactically, constrained by social surveillance, gender norms, and the labor of reputation management. Some former workers' reluctance to share information unless solicited underscores the delicate balance between empowerment and propriety, highlighting how intimate labor is performed within a complex moral landscape. Women also recognized structural gaps in reproductive education, advocating for young men's inclusion in programs organized by the SLFPA and training in negotiation and assertiveness skills for young women enabling them more autonomy in their reproductive choices.

By 2022, and 2023, these former workers are mature women between 38–44 years of age. They now have well-established social positions in their villages and were not afraid to talk about reproductive health needs at village organization meetings. Over time, many elders and local elites had learned to listen to—and respect—their views. In sum, former EPZ workers enact everyday ethical practices that integrate intimate, emotional, and social labor to negotiate competing moral economies. Through letters, storytelling, songs, and reproductive guidance, they transform constrained possibilities into actionable, relationally embedded forms of life-making—practices that are simultaneously subversive, pedagogical, and sustaining, and which illuminate the interplay between ordinary ethics, intimate labor, and social and symbolic capital in South Asian rural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the intimate lives of former EPZ workers are shaped not by a simple adoption or rejection of neoliberal ideals, but through quiet, relational acts of ethical and emotional labor that make life livable under conditions of surveillance, scarcity, and moral regulation. As women move from factory floors to village households, ideals of autonomy, romance, and companionate marriage are selectively reworked within kinship hierarchies and gendered expectations, producing forms of intimacy grounded less in expressive fulfillment than in endurance, care, and discretion. Letters, storytelling, songs, and reproductive guidance emerge as subversive yet socially embedded practices through which women preserve desire, circulate knowledge, and sustain alternative moral worlds while publicly inhabiting the role of the "good" daughter-in-law. In other words they engage in a moral reworking of intimacy under conditions of constraint. Attending to their everyday ethics unsettles dominant narratives of

empowerment and resistance, revealing instead the intimate politics through which neoliberal imaginaries are domesticated, muted, and reconfigured in everyday rural life.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Scarcity here refers to the economic demands within households that required both men and women to work long hours, as well as the necessity of residing in one spouse's—typically the husband's—parental home rather than establishing an independent household. These conditions constrained the time, space, and autonomy needed to engage in practices associated with companionate marriage, such as the open expression of affection.

² In Sri Lanka, marriage is legally and culturally structured as a heterosexual institution. Accordingly, all references to marriage in this study pertain exclusively to unions between men and women.

³ The number of former EPZ workers residing in a given village in any particular year varied, but typically ranged from five to ten. While correspondence, phone calls, and in-person meetings occurred primarily among women who had worked in the same factory or lived together in boarding houses, a loose sense of camaraderie extended across different cohorts of former workers who returned to the same cluster of nearby villages.

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