The Politics of White Women’s Underwear in Sri Lanka’s Open Economy

Abstract

In 1992 the Sri Lankan government offered private investors financial incentives to establish two hundred export-oriented garment factories in villages throughout the island. The political opposition’s critical response was to argue that in these garment factories, “our innocent girls are sewing underwear for white women.” This article examines the meaning and impact of this critique by placing it in the context of the intertwining discourses and practices of nationalism and sexuality in Sri Lanka. This case study has wide comparative implications. When nation-states become increasingly involved in the global economy, nationalists often debate the cultural effects of economic shifts. By considering how economic and cultural interests are tightly interwoven and mutually constitutive, I aim to further our understandings of how and why gender is deployed in these debates. Moreover, by considering how these debates actually affected working women, I aim to highlight the ways in which debates such as these can influence social practices.

In 1992 the Sri Lankan government offered private investors tremendous financial incentives to establish two hundred export-oriented garment factories in villages throughout the island—in some areas so remote that roads had to be widened and paved and electricity and water pipes had to be installed before garment production...
could begin. The political opposition’s critical response resulted in profound shifts in how this factory program was configured by the state and understood by investors, managers, workers and their families, and ordinary Sri Lankans not directly involved in the program. Opposition politicians argued that in these garment factories, “our innocent girls are sewing underwear for white women.” In this article I examine the meaning and impact of this critique by placing it in the context of the intertwining discourses and practices of nationalism and sexuality in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is only one of many postcolonial and Third World societies that adopted economic liberalization policies in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Key features of liberalization strategies include removing state controls on imports and attracting foreign investment, particularly through the establishment of free trade zones for industrial production. A rich literature addresses the global feminization of labor by focusing on countries such as Mexico, Malaysia, and the Philippines where factories have employed primarily female workforces. Sri Lanka’s economy was liberalized in 1977 and the following year a predominantly female workforce was hired in the nation’s first free trade zone. In the contemporary nationalist configuration in Sri Lanka, women are considered the mothers of the nation and the locus of tradition and culture. One can thus easily imagine that, from a nationalist perspective, problems might emerge when the nation’s economic future relies on the insertion of women in the global economy.

I will explore how, fifteen years after the economy was liberalized, the Sri Lankan state tried to overcome the contradictions involved in placing women at the forefront of the nation’s economic liberalization policies. I track a national political debate about the sexuality of female factory laborers that began with the 1992 underwear critique to examine why questions of women’s sexuality and behavior were central to Sri Lankan experiences of globalization at this particular historical moment. This article is intended to provide a case study with wide comparative implications. When nation-states become increasingly involved in the global economy, nationalists often debate the cultural effects of economic shifts. By considering how economic and cultural interests are tightly interwoven and mutually constitutive, I aim to further our understandings of how and why gender is deployed in these debates.

Liberal economic development agendas have become globalized since the end of World War II, but that does not mean they are conceptualized and experienced in uniform ways around the globe. Economic development does not occur in a vacuum, but rather within specific cultural contexts. These contexts seem to be especially
complicated in postcolonial new nations where modernizing agendas are understood in reference to the national traditions (often newly created) that were so important for anticolonial nationalist movements. I argue below that in Sri Lanka this tension is best conceptualized as a struggle between attachment to the foreign and to the local. This struggle has certainly been evident in numerous ways: in how the state has discursively constructed economic liberalization, in how the state has implemented liberalization programs, and in how ordinary Sri Lankans have experienced and understood these agendas in their lives. Often the struggle in Sri Lanka has been not simply between the foreign and the local, but between a foreign and a local constructed in terms of gender and sexuality. Why has this been so? This is the principal question that animates this article.

An answer to this question may be offered by Lata Mani’s work on colonial India, which makes an important intervention for theorizing nationalism and gender.1 Mani (1989, 1998) argues that simply because there were newly prominent debates about sati (widow burning) among anticolonial nationalists, this does not indicate an increased concern with women’s status and rights. In these debates, women were neither the subject of the discourse (they had no agency), nor were they the object (the discourse was not about them). Mani (1989, 117) writes, “On the contrary, I would argue that women are neither subjects nor objects, but rather the ground of the discourse of sati. For as we saw, analysis of the arguments of participants very quickly indicates that women themselves are marginal to the debate. Instead, the question of women’s status in Indian society posed by the prevalence of widow burning becomes the occasion for struggle over the divergent priorities of officials and the indigenous male elite.” Mani (1989, 118) further elaborates, “Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of women was being contested.” Rather, women “became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated.”

I find Mani’s argument attractive because it prevents us from misguidedly thinking that efforts are under way to change relations of power simply because discourses on issues such as women’s rights, workers’ rights, or human rights become prevalent. It pushes us to look deeper to see in what ways debates over issues such as those just mentioned may be ways of speaking about and engaging other priorities. In what follows I will attempt to unravel the intertwining discourses and practices of nationalism and sexuality in Sri Lanka that were the context for the underwear critique. With Mani’s work in mind, I will consider to what extent women factory workers in Sri Lanka have been the site for debates about something other than their own status and rights. But I will not stop there, for I will also
consider how, despite perhaps not being about factory women, these debates did actually affect women. In the concluding section I will consider to what extent Mani’s argument about the expression of political tensions in terms of sexuality illuminates the Sri Lankan case.

Globalization, Nationalism, and Sexuality

My analysis begins with a brief overview of the Sri Lankan political and economic landscape. The majority of Sri Lankans (74 percent) are Sinhala, and most of them are Buddhist (with a small minority of Christians). The minority ethnic groups include Tamils (18 percent—mostly Hindu, some Christian), Muslims (7 percent), and very small populations of other groups. After independence from British rule in 1948, the government of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was elected in 1956 on a platform of Sinhala Buddhist ethnic revivalism.2 The Bandaranaike government quickly implemented laws that made Sinhala the national language, to the exclusion of Tamil and English. On the heels of this legislation, the contemporary Sri Lankan state, regardless of the party in power, has increasingly become Sinhala Buddhist. Ethnic minorities have become alienated by state policies on language, government hiring, and university admissions, and by the Buddhist symbolism and linguistic references that pervade electoral politics (Rogers et al. 1998). Since the early 1980s, Sri Lanka has been the site of an increasingly violent civil war. The government has been fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who are waging a war for independence in the north and east of the country, where Tamils form the majority. When I write of nationalism in postcolonial Sri Lanka, I refer to the ethnonationalism of the Sinhala Buddhist state—although this contemporary nationalism shares many features of anticolonial nationalism, which also articulated a Sinhala Buddhist worldview.

The two main political parties since independence have been the United National Party (UNP) and Bandaranaike’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). From 1956 to its peak in the 1970s the Sri Lankan economy was characterized by state accumulation through nationalization and regulation of private enterprise alongside import substitution. The SLFP ruled the country through most of this period, with the UNP ruling intermittently. In 1977, following an economic crisis in the 1970s due to import-substitution policies, the newly elected UNP government initiated its liberal economic reforms. The different economic orientations of the SLFP and the UNP have been interpreted in moral terms since 1977. Although both the UNP and SLFP
have favored Sinhala Buddhist interests since independence, the UNP has mostly been associated with the English-educated bourgeoisie (who were often those Christian Sinhalas who benefited from colonialism). Because of its orientation toward capitalist development, it has been considered by many to be westernized, materialistic, and indifferent to Sinhala Buddhist traditions. The SLFP, by contrast, has been thought of as more loyal to Sinhala traditions and values because its supporters consist of the Sinhala-educated petite bourgeoisie that included “small traders, white-collar workers, writers, journalists and teachers, with the support of the Buddhist monks” (Jayawardenena 1985, 14). This contingent has been considered more interested in equality and the redistribution of wealth, values thought by many to be consistent with Sinhala traditions. These moral evaluations of national politics provide an important context for the moral arguments about women factory workers that were made in the 1992 underwear critique.

In recent years there have been important scholarly debates over how to define “globalization.” There seem to be two central strands in these debates: they address whether culture or economics should be the focus of inquiry and whether there is something distinctive about the transnational movement of people, goods, ideas, technology, and money in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I consider it fruitful to analyze culture and economics in interrelationship, and I agree with scholars who argue that the intensity, speed, and scale of the transnational movement of goods, and so forth, is greater now than it was in previous centuries.

I am particularly concerned with how Sri Lankans have experienced and made sense of such transnational movement in the postcolonial and liberalization era. Anthropologist Steven Kemper (2001) begins his ethnographic study of Sri Lankan advertising and consumers by noting that “between the allure of the foreign and sentiments that derive from more proximate forms of community, postcolonial societies find their way.” As studies of globalization throughout the world have shown, postcolonial societies are not unique in struggling between attachment to the foreign and to the local. However, this struggle does seem to be especially pronounced in postcolonial societies.

One legacy of colonialism in countries such as Sri Lanka and its neighbor India is a complicated perspective on “the foreign” when it comes to economic development and modernization. While the foreign is in some sense admired, it is also despised. The same can sometimes be said for certain aspects of the local, or what is constructed as tradition in contrast to modernity. For instance, such contradic-
tory understandings of the foreign and the local are especially apparent in India’s postcolonial state-led development policies under its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

In Sri Lanka, this struggle between attachment to the local and the foreign has been a central feature of nationalist thought and policies since the late nineteenth century (from the period of anticolonial nationalism, through independence in 1948, to the postcolonial ethnonationalism of today). The moral contrasts made between the UNP and the SLFP can be understood in this context, with the SLFP accusing the UNP of an orientation too far toward the foreign at the expense of national traditions. Notions of the rural and the urban have been key to the nationalist imaginary, and even here there has been no easy resolution to the struggle Kemper describes. Villages are generally associated with discipline, tradition, and morality and cities with the opposite because of foreign influences in urban areas. And yet, although the urban is generally considered corrupt, some nationalists also positively value the urban for its modernity.

Even the social reforms of the most influential Sri Lankan anticolonial ideologue, a reformer named Anagarika Dharmapala, were situated within these contradictions. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dharmapala formulated a new social ethic that was widely adopted in Sri Lanka, especially among the Sinhala-educated petite bourgeoisie. Over the past century, all Sinhala status groups have gradually adopted this new ethic, but to varying degrees; moreover, its views of the foreign and the local are contradictory.

Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere (1970) has termed this new social ethic “Protestant Buddhism” for two reasons: because some of the values were modeled on Protestant codes of morality, and because it was a protest against the degradation of Sinhala Buddhist culture caused by the British (especially the Christian missionaries). Anthropologist Malathi de Alwis (1998, 152, note 43) explains that “Dharmapala’s project was to fashion a new class of Sinhala Buddhists who were neither overly anglicised and Christianised nor too uncouth and peasant-like.” Dharmapala popularized bourgeois notions of respectability in an attempt to erase certain barriers to the country’s economic and moral development that were perceived to be prevalent among the urban and rural poor. And yet, at the same time, Sinhala nationalists have often considered urban poor and rural women “as the sole upholders of the manners, customs and traditions of a glorious Sinhala past” (de Alwis 1998, 193–94).

Two salient points can be noted about these complicated understandings, and they will be discussed throughout this article: (1) women’s behavior has been a key object of scrutiny within these na-
tionalist configurations, and (2) class inequality lurks in the background of these distinctions. As anthropologist Anne Sheeran (1997, 5) has written in her study of nationalism and Sinhala music, “class inequalities are often obfuscated by the focus in nationalist rhetoric on distinctions revolving around race, gender, and sexuality.”

Such associations between women and national tradition are by no means unique to Sri Lanka. There is a vast literature on how gendered distinctions and meanings have been mobilized in nationalist movements in different places and at different times throughout the world. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (1989, 7) have identified five major ways in which “women have tended to participate in ethnic and national practices and in relation to state practices.” In language that I find slightly more useful for my purposes, Anne McClintock (1995, 355) describes these as follows: women have been implicated in nationalism “as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities,” “as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations),” “as active transmitters and producers of the national culture,” “as symbolic signifiers of national difference,” and “as active participants in national struggles.” While there is local specificity to these mobilizations in different places, there are certainly parallels throughout the world. In particular, in postcolonial countries such as Sri Lanka and India, these mobilizations share similarities because of the impact of Western ideas and technologies on anticolonial nationalist movements (Chatterjee 1993).

In the case of India, for example, Partha Chatterjee (1989) examines how the anticolonial nationalist resolution of the “women’s question” shifted the terms of the debate about women’s rights and social reform. It did so by associating women with the spiritual/inner/home domain of culture (associated with national traditions) and men with the material/outer/world domain (associated with Western civilization and its power to colonize the East). In this discursive frame, “It follows that as long as we take care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of our culture, we could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt ourselves to the requirements of a modern material world without losing our true identity” (Chatterjee 1989, 238). Chatterjee (1989, 240) argues that by keeping the women’s domain separate from the nationalist struggle, nationalists were able to “make modernity consistent with the nationalist project.” In terms of what this formulation means for everyday social practices, Chatterjee (1989, 243; Chatterjee’s emphasis) writes, “There would have to be a marked difference in the degree and manner of westernization of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation.”
Returning to Kemper’s terms, in India the struggle between attachment to the foreign and to the local was articulated in gendered terms. In Sri Lanka, gender has been key to how the foreign and the local have been evaluated by nationalists over the past one hundred years. Yet in this article I am particularly concerned not only with how gender has been important to nationalist projects, but with the centrality of women’s sexuality to these projects—how strictures on women’s sexuality have been used to further nationalist aims. George Mosse (1985) argues that in nineteenth-century Europe (particularly Germany), control over sexuality became vital to the concept of respectability and that respectability was what came to mark members of a nation. Mosse’s work has inspired other scholars to examine the intertwining histories and practices of nationalism and sexuality in diverse locales throughout the world (see Parker et al. 1992).

The twinned concerns about nationalism and sexuality were central to Dharmapala, whose writings elaborated specific rules for a new kind of moral behavior for respectable, bourgeois Sinhala Buddhist women (whom he often compared to immoral European women). Under Dharmapala’s new social ethic, regulation of women’s behavior—especially their morality and sexuality—became important for the nation’s future. As de Alwis (1996, 106) has written, “While the ‘western’ woman was portrayed as being sexually free, the Sri Lankan woman epitomised submission, chastity and restraint.” This was in part an attempt at ensuring cultural purity through policing genetic purity. Political scientist Kumari Jayawardena (1994, 113) has argued that gender roles under Dharmapala’s Sinhala Buddhist revivalism were consistent with many Asian countries, where an interest in women’s sexual purity is designed to ensure that women “reproduce the ethnic group and socialize children into their ethnic roles.” Dharmapala’s rules for women’s behavior included prescriptions regarding quotidian practices such as clothing and hairstyles, alcohol use, and other visible markers of cultural authenticity (Jayawardena 1994; de Alwis 1998, 110–12). Even today, women who have short hair, wear skimpy clothing, or use alcohol are assumed to be sexually loose.

The behavior of bourgeois women was of prime nationalist concern during the anticolonial period. Women of other classes have adopted Dharmapala’s new social ethic since that time, even though there was never the same sort of concerted effort to address their behavior as there had been with the behavior of bourgeois Sinhala Buddhist women under Dharmapala and his contemporaries. Since the advent of economic liberalization, however, there has been an important shift in who has been the object of national attention: rather than bourgeois women, working-class women have become
the focus of nationalist discourses about women’s morality. The two leading sources of foreign exchange in the liberalized economy rely on women’s labor: women’s factory employment in Sri Lanka and women’s employment as housemaids or factory laborers abroad (especially in the Middle East). With large numbers of village women migrating to Colombo and abroad for employment since the late 1970s, the morality of female migrant laborers has emerged as a primary target of nationalist discourse about the moral integrity of the nation (de Alwis 1998, 197–98). Female urban garment factory workers (known as “Juki girls”) have been the chief target of concern, and this article examines why this is the case.

Juki Girls and Moral Panic

In 1977 the UNP government introduced its economic liberalization package. Key features of this “Open Economy” were export-led industrialization, the privatization of industry, and the reduction of state regulations and welfare expenditures. Its centerpiece was the establishment in 1978 of the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in an urban area on the outskirts of Colombo. Situated near the international airport, the Katunayake FTZ is by far the largest of eight FTZs today. It employs nearly 60,000 workers, the majority of whom are women working in the garment industry. Shortly after it opened, the workforce became one that consisted primarily of women migrants from villages, most of them unmarried and Sinhala. Soon after its establishment, there emerged considerable moral panic (a term I discuss below) about good village girls going bad in Katunayake. Moral panic about these women has focused on reports of the following issues in association with FTZ and other urban female factory workers: prostitution, premarital sex, rape, sexually transmitted disease, abortion, and sexual harassment. Given the overabundance of women in the area, and given that these women have a reputation for inappropriate sexual behavior, several nicknames have emerged for the town and the FTZ: “Isthiri pura,” literally “women’s city,” but with “the subtle undertone of a city of easy women or easy virtue;” “Vesakalapaya,” the zone of prostitutes, a play on the real name “Nidahas Velinda Kalapaya,” literally the zone of free trade; and Premakalapaya, the “zone of love.”

“Juki girls” (jukiyō or juki kellō) is a common nickname for women who work in garment factories in the Katunayake FTZ or in non-FTZ factories in and around Colombo. Colombo is perceived by many Sri Lankans as a corrupt, morally degrading space, and this perception is symbolized by the position of Juki girls. Of the thousands of factory workers in Colombo, by far the most work in
the garment industry, and they are especially stigmatized as sexually promiscuous women who behave in a manner antithetical to cultural traditions. These women generally live in boarding houses away from their parents and are frequently seen walking in the streets, going shopping and to movie theaters, and socializing with men. In May 1997 a federation of trade unions launched a campaign called “New Dawn” (Arunodhaya) that “aims at uplifting the morale of the working women and promoting respect for these important workers in their communities and the nation as a whole.” The campaign was aimed at women in the FTZs, and one of the central campaign posters read: “Juki—that’s not my name. We have an identity of our own.”

The Juki nickname unequivocally connotes sexual promiscuity, and it is derived from a Japanese industrial sewing machine brand commonly used in Sri Lankan garment factories. The Juki Corporation has been selling sewing machines in Sri Lanka since 1976, and the nickname emerged soon after—at least by 1979, the year after Katunayake opened. The nickname is extremely common. Just one indication of its widespread usage is that the vast majority of articles about FTZ workers in Sinhala and English newspapers today mention this nickname and the stigma associated with it, and these articles are often accompanied by a photograph of a woman sewing at a Juki machine. But it is not just the mass media that uses the nickname; it is the most common epithet for garment factory workers, and women and men of various backgrounds throughout the island use the term.

In terms of the social history of the Juki nickname, there are two interrelated issues to consider: why did this nickname emerge so soon after the economy was opened to foreign investment, and why was it a sexualized designation? The UNP government was elected in 1977 and immediately liberalized the economy. Critics of the UNP—not only the opposition SLFP, but also left-oriented parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—were quick to construct and draw attention to what they saw as certain alarming moral issues surrounding this new economic strategy. The behavior of FTZ women was one such issue, for soon after Katunayake was opened, there were reports of inappropriate behavior between area men and female workers. For instance, according to anthropologist Ajit Sarasundera, there were stories early on of men being brought in by the vanload for industry-sponsored musical shows, where there would be vast numbers of unaccompanied women (personal communication, 18 October 2001). Clearly, identifying women with sewing machines dehumanizes the women—women who already feel like they are treated like machines in the workplace. In some respects, the
Juki nickname seems to have emerged as part of a political strategy to draw attention to the dehumanization inherent in global capitalism. The foreignness of the Juki brand is likely significant because critics would have been keen to highlight the problematic moral nature of a foreign economic and social process.

It is important that this strategy focused on women’s sexuality rather than class inequality. This focus is consistent with the tradition in Sri Lanka of arguing about the nation and culture in terms of women’s behavior and sexuality and, in so doing, pushing class issues to the background. This is part of a more widespread phenomenon, which Sheeran (1997, 5) referred to when she wrote that distinctions of race, gender, and sexuality obfuscate class inequalities in Sri Lanka. Similarly, Jayawardena (1985, 92, 102) has shown how in varied contexts throughout the twentieth century, ethnic chauvinism has replaced radicalism as a central concern for Sinhala Buddhists, and that by the 1960s even the traditional left-wing parties had begun to focus on ethnic consciousness instead of class consciousness.

Other researchers have argued that attitudes, such as jealousy, of the people who live in the town of Katunayake have been largely responsible for perpetuating the negative Juki girl stereotype (Voice of Women 1983; Weerasinghe 1989). While I will concede that there may be a role played by the jealousy (the meaning of which needs to be examined) of unemployed men or parents of local girls who are eclipsed for jobs by out-of-towners, the stereotype is not simply a local problem. I argue that the Juki stereotype has held firm for two interrelated reasons: (1) the women’s public visibility indicates their lack of adherence to what are understood as traditional roles for village women, which involve a seamless transition from daughter to mother and wife (Bandarage 1988); and (2) class mobility being exhibited by poor village women (as manifest in their new clothing fashions, forms of entertainment, and other behaviors) is perceived as a threat by the higher classes (Hettige 2000, 190–91). In short, these women are violating social norms that hold urban poor and rural women “as the sole upholders of the manners, customs and traditions of a glorious Sinhala past” (de Alwis 1998, 193–94). Economic and cultural concerns converge in the figure of the Juki girl.

In other times and places, nationalist discourses also have associated migration to cities for factory employment with immoral behavior and made women a particular target of control and discipline. These discourses often have portrayed women as central to the defense of national or ethnic traditions. Of the many possible examples, here I mention two. In the early nineteenth century, factories were started in the then-rural town of Lowell, Massachusetts, (instead of
specifically with an eye to preventing immorality in the female workers and so cultivating American republican values (Sandel 1996, 150–54). Ong (1987, 179–93) describes how in the late 1970s and early 1980s similar crises of morality surfaced regarding rural-urban migration and specifically the problem of FTZ workers in Malaysia.  

In fact, factory work does not have to be involved for there to be what Hazel Carby, following Stanley Cohen, calls “moral panic” about the fate of women in rural-urban migration. Carby (1997, 152) describes how the movement of black women in the 1920s United States from rural to urban areas (and from southern to northern cities) resulted in the characterization of female migrants “as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous.” Cohen (1972, 9) describes moral panic as follows: “A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.”  

Juki girls pose such a threat in contemporary Sri Lanka: to people in various social positions they are a threat to the status quo. For many people, Juki girls seem to symbolize the problems related to the social transformations of liberalized Sri Lanka and the accompanying Western modernity that many Sri Lankans view with ambivalence.

Moral panic about female factory workers came to the fore of national political debate in 1992 with the political opposition’s underwear critique. In the remainder of this article I examine this debate, the economic policies it addressed, and the ways in which it affected women who were said to be sewing underwear.

Youth Unrest and Women’s Employment

In February 1992, President Ranasinghe Premadasa began his 200 Garment Factories Program (GFP), an ambitious rural industrialization program in which two hundred export-oriented factories were to be established in villages throughout the country. The program continued the state’s economic liberalization agenda, and yet, significantly, moved industry out of urban areas and into villages. In this state-led industrial development program, we can see the Sri Lankan state’s struggle between attachment to the foreign and the local, and how, over time, it was articulated in gendered terms.

The 200 GFP was a program clearly aimed at earning foreign exchange and increasing the country’s gross national product (Shastri 1997). But rather than highlighting such materialist concerns, Premadasa argued in numerous forums—from the moment he introduced the program to investors—that the program would bring discipline to the nation’s rural heartland, which recently had been the source
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of revolutionaries for a violent youth revolt by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People’s Liberation Front). The JVP was an armed group composed primarily of Sinhalas whose ideology combined a critique of foreign economic forces with Sinhala chauvinism. In the story given investors and the public, by bringing jobs to villages, the 200 GFP aimed to address the perception that recent political instability in the country—especially the JVP revolt, but also marginally the LTTE separatist movement—was caused by rural, vernacular-educated, and unemployed (or underemployed) youth who felt that the benefits of economic liberalization policies reached only the urban, English-educated elite. These notions were described in the findings of the Presidential Commission on Youth, which was established at the height of the JVP revolt in October 1989 to determine the causes of and possible solutions to youth unrest (Sessional Paper 1 1990). Premadasa’s 200 GFP was implemented in direct response to the commission’s report. With the establishment of factories outside the usual industrial zones, the 200 GFP was to address this so-called youth frustration by generating rural industrial jobs. The program was to provide both direct employment in factories for one hundred thousand youth and indirect employment (in related jobs in transportation, shops, and food service) for many others. There was to be one factory in each of the 200 Assistant Government Agent (AGA) Divisions in the country. Investors were Sri Lankans and foreigners, with some factories financed jointly.

Comments by Premadasa and his supporters reveal a certain ethno-utilitarianism underlying the program: if rural youth have money, they will have a stake in the stability of the state and there will not be another youth revolt. Here development and welfare are offered as a solution to unrest (or as “insurance” against it, as Premadasa said on several occasions), all the while preserving the discursive importance in Sri Lanka of the nation’s villages as the locus of Sinhala Buddhist tradition. Underlying the program was a notion that if villagers learned capitalist discipline and associated it with what is configured as good, “village,” moral behavior, they would be less inclined toward the JVP in the long run. Premadasa often insisted that the program was pluralistic and nondiscriminatory in terms of who was to be employed, and, indeed, there were even factories established in primarily Tamil or Muslim areas. Yet its focus on the JVP, which consisted primarily of Sinhala Buddhist youth, is one of many aspects of the 200 GFP that situate the program as a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist development program. In particular, as I demonstrate elsewhere (Lynch 2000), in order to make the discursive connection between capitalist discipline and a disciplined citizenry, Premadasa and his supporters mobilized in a complicated and con-
tradictory manner the tradition of discipline associated with Dharma-
mapala’s Protestant Buddhism.

Although it is widely believed that the JVP was composed primarily of men,29 a 90 percent female workforce was intended from the start when Premadasa mandated that each factory must employ 450 women and 50 men.30 Thus the program rested on an apparent con-
tradiction: the state enlisted female workers in a program that was being touted in the media and in the president’s 200 GFP speeches as a means to prevent male unrest. I received one suggestion for how to overcome this contradiction from some state representatives and factory owners and managers—but only when I solicited it. They explained that the factories employ women because women are bet-
ter suited than men to factory labor.31 Nevertheless, they contended, the goal of providing jobs to prevent unrest would be attained be-
cause, in the case of brothers or husbands of female workers, at least they would have access to money even though they would not be earning it themselves. Moreover, many added, jobs for men would be available in support sectors because of the increased need for buses, bakeries, shops, and so forth near factories.

Yet this after-the-fact reasoning does not explain how Premadasa could have spoken forcefully and eloquently at factory opening cere-
monies about preventing youth unrest—which was generally consid-
ered a male problem—while always mandating a primarily female workforce. Employing women makes practical sense. Premadasa must have known that it has become the norm for Sri Lankan gar-
ment factories to employ mostly women; he probably always thought that is who would be employed. At the same time, while women are naturalized as factory workers, Sri Lankan men are naturalized as soldiers. Given the need for men to fight in the army’s campaign against the LTTE, Premadasa would have joined with the many peo-
pie in all strata of Sri Lankan society who told me that “women work in garment factories, men work in the army.” (I also heard of a saying in Sinhala to the same effect, which went something like gēni juki, pirimi thuwakku—“Juki for women, guns for men.”)32

Of course there does not need to be a logic or rationality to any of the ideological claims made about the 200 GFP. In fact, rather than an explanation for this apparent contradiction, I offer an analy-
thesis that begins with this as the framing contradiction of a state develop-
ment program that was conceived of by the state and experienced by the state, its supporters, factory owners, managers, workers, and their families in terms that were fundamentally contradictory, ambivalent, and uncertain. Significantly, however, several months after the 200 GFP began, the fact that it employed mostly women would not have seemed like a contradiction to many people anyway. By then
the 200 GFP had become redefined as a program for protecting women’s morality; youth unrest had dropped out of the picture.

Sewing Underwear for White Women

The catalyst for this shift from youth unrest to women’s morality was the widely publicized underwear critique. Opposition politicians argued that in the 200 GFP garment factories, “our innocent girls are sewing underwear for white women” (in Sinhala, *apē abinsaka kello suddiyanta jangi mahanawa*). Anura Bandaranaike, then a Member of Parliament for the opposition party (the SLFP), first made this critique in a public speech in approximately October 1992. I heard about it from numerous people of various social positions, ranging from garment workers to government officials.

In a country where unemployment is an important political issue, Premadasa’s 200 GFP became a problem for the SLFP: thousands of rural youth were receiving well-paid jobs in a program that was being widely covered in the mass media. The underwear critique was only one of several attempts by the SLFP to discredit Premadasa and the program and prevent an increase in Premadasa’s popularity with rural voters. This criticism, however, proved the most effective. By making reference to innocent girls and white women’s underwear, it tapped already extant nationalist moral panic about the behavior of factory women. Although I am condensing many details in the interest of space, a brief examination of the meanings of underwear, white women, and innocence will help shed light on why this critique was so effective.

Underwear

Sri Lankans generally consider underwear (*jangi*) both sexual and dirty. (Unlike the English “underwear,” *jangi* refers to underpants only, not to brassieres as well.) This dual association is seen in everyday social practices, such as the following: although most Sri Lankans dry their laundry outdoors on rocks, grass, bushes, or clotheslines, it is common to dry underwear in a private location. Furthermore, as a worker named Mala (whom I describe toward the end of this article) explained to me, underwear is not a topic Sri Lankans speak about (she referred to underwear in Sinhala as “unmentionables” in an interview), and they also do not generally purchase ready-made underwear, but rather sew it at home. By referring to “white women’s underwear,” an already sexualized product was made even more sexual.
White Women

The reference to white women (suddi) was a familiar ploy. Other authors have shown how “a nation can consolidate its identity by projecting beyond its own borders the sexual practices or gender behaviors it deems abhorrent” (Parker et al. 1992, 10). I mentioned above that Dharmapala’s Protestant Buddhism involved a comparison of sexually loose Western women and chaste Sri Lankan women. Note that this was not simply a comparison to a general category of foreigners, but rather to a racially designated category of “white” Europeans. This racial othering of white women as sexually immoral continues in contemporary Sri Lanka. To name just a few of the ways in which this assumption is evident today, pornographic films available in Sri Lanka feature white women, and white women who frequent the country’s southern beaches in skimpy bathing suits are the objects of much criticism. Often these are the only sources of contact Sri Lankans have with white women.

Innocence

The underwear critique was about “our innocent (ahinsaka) girls.” We know from context that these innocent girls are villagers, and it would have in some ways been redundant for Bandaranaike to say “our innocent village girls.” The Sinhala word ahinsaka is translated into Sri Lankan English as “innocent” or “harmless,” and it is also the Pali word for nonviolence. Ahinsaka connotes purity, including sexual purity, and it implies being innocent of all foreign and modern corrupting influences. It always suggested to me a positively valued naiveté, so that part of being innocent has to do with lacking knowledge of and being protected from foreignness.

Here I am reminded of Chatterjee’s (1989) discussion of women’s association with the spiritual/inner/home domain of culture, mentioned above. Keeping women innocent of the foreign is consistent with the nationalist imaginary that holds women as the guardians of tradition. Ahinsaka is often used to describe village women, and it is another way of saying they are “good girls,” a term used for women who act properly in terms of moral norms. (Sinhala speakers use the English term interchangeably with the Sinhala, honda lamay.) In the same way that they would describe each other as good girls, women at Shirtex and Serendib—the 200 GFP factories where I did ethnographic research—would often use the term “innocent” (she is very innocent, eyā hari ahinsakay). So, by employing the term “innocent,” the opposition was raising issues of sexuality but also of cultural purity—and it was doing this in gender-inflected foreign/local terms. The implication was that innocent girls, who should just be associated with local traditions, are now not only working in global
capitalist industry; they are also sewing immoral products for foreigners.

It was not only underwear that was being sewn in 200 GFP factories. Sri Lanka is a top producer of lingerie for companies such as Victoria’s Secret and Marks and Spencer, and underwear for these brands is made in some 200 GFP factories. But the many other foreign clothing manufacturers whose garments are produced under contract at the 200 GFP factories include Liz Claiborne, Warner Brothers, Helly-Hansen, and Gap, to name just a few. Despite the fact that only a small number of the 200 GFP women were sewing underwear, the public latched onto Bandaranaike’s reference to underwear. Sexual language for a garment factory program could not be ignored. As I have argued above, since the late 1970s there has been moral panic about the sexuality of urban female garment workers. Here this moral panic was being located in the nation’s presumably pure villages, and on the bodies of village women—those very women whom many nationalists consider to be the prime keepers of national traditions.

The SLFP’s underwear critique employed a two-pronged strategy. It harnessed the moral panic about Juki girls by sexualizing the women workers—presumably in order to make the jobs appear unacceptable and to make the workers (and their families) not want them. Also, by raising the specific issue of dirtiness and sexuality in reference to these village factories, it made the jobs appear to be low-status work for which nobody should be grateful and which was compromising the moral integrity of the nation at its center of purity. Although they did not offer alternatives, opposition politicians suggested that if they were in power, their party would continue their tradition of paying attention to the economy and morality—they would not provide such morally suspect jobs.

The underwear critique, first raised sometime around October 1992, was extremely politically and socially potent, and its impact could be felt as late as mid-1996, when I was completing my research. For instance, 200 GFP women workers would tell me with much sadness that men who know they work in a garment factory tease them by asking if they are going to sew underwear. As I demonstrate below, Premadasa responded to this critique with his own angle on protecting women’s morality, arguing that it is precisely by keeping women in villages that the program protects women’s morality. From this point on, the government touted the program as being centrally concerned with women’s behavior. It became a program for preventing women from leaving their villages to become Juki girls at factories in Colombo and its outskirt. The underwear critique and the government’s response reveal that economic liberalization
raises anxieties for everyone—politicians and factory owners, women workers and men who tease them. Here the anxieties are cast in terms of whiteness, sexuality, and intimacy. This is a gendered version of the struggle between attachment to the local and to the foreign that has characterized the Sri Lankan postcolonial experience.

Shifting to Women’s Morality

The 200 GFP shift from youth unrest to women’s morality can be tracked by examining changes in Premadasa’s rhetoric. The 200 GFP began in February 1992, and in the early months it was consistently cast as a program for preventing youth unrest. My analysis of newspaper and parliamentary Hansard reports on the program shows that criticism of the 200 GFP intensified in October 1992, when the frequency of factory openings peaked and factories were opening almost daily.39 The first published reference to the underwear critique that I found comes from this period. Premadasa was quick to realize that the critique was not about the actual articles that were made, but about the moral status of the female workers. He responded to the critique with explicit comments on the intertwined issues of morality and social class.

In terms of morality, for instance, he argued that their interest in the panties of foreign women revealed that it was the opposition politicians who were morally compromised, not the factory workers. In one factory opening ceremony speech he said:

The garment sector is expanding rapidly, though the opposition is criticizing this. They say rural women are sewing panties for foreign women. This is how they humiliate the rural masses. We also go abroad, but during our visits we gather something useful and fruitful. They go overseas to look at panties of foreign women!40

In a number of speeches starting that October, Premadasa also raised issues of social class. He argued that the opposition’s critiques of the 200 GFP were an attempt to discredit a program that was providing good jobs for the rural poor and claimed that the opposition was critical because their party consisted of the aristocracy, who wanted to maintain a poor class of servants for their homes.41 In some speeches Premadasa accused the opposition of simply wanting to keep down the poor.42 Although I have not found a written reference to this, numerous people told me that on several occasions Premadasa made the morality connection here as well by adding that when poor women became servants “all they come home with is something
in their stomachs from the rich man”—in other words, pregnant. Perhaps this was just a bit too unsavory to report in the newspapers, and perhaps this was what one reporter meant when he wrote that Premadasa “recalled how poor rural children and youths were employed as servants in aristocratic homes and subjected to untold hardships.”

Also alluding to this issue of servants and morality was a 200 GFP television advertisement—which I never saw but heard about from various people—in which a couple in a fancy car arrive at a poor villager’s house and tell the mother that they will hire the daughter as a servant in their home. The mother refuses the offer by responding proudly that the girl works in a garment factory. Later the girl is shown after she receives her first paycheck, bringing home a sari for her mother and a sarong for her father. Numerous people I spoke to said that the fact that the girl brings these gifts for her parents was another reference to Premadasa’s claim that if she were a servant, rather than clothing she would have brought an illegitimate grandchild home to her parents. Likewise, because saris and sarongs are considered traditional Sinhala Buddhist clothing (again, Dharmapala had an influence on this notion), Premadasa was also making a connection here between morality, social class, and tradition.

In my research I found only one instance prior to the underwear critique in which the president linked the 200 GFP and women’s morality—in marked contrast to the frequency of the linkages in the period following the critique. In a June 1992 opening ceremony speech, he referred to the “nefarious activities” into which some FTZ girls had been forced because very little of their salaries remained for their families back home once they paid for room and board. Readers would have understood this to be a clear reference to rumors that Juki girls become involved in prostitution in order to supplement their meager factory incomes. The president pledged that with jobs in villages, these nefarious activities would be avoided.

But even before the moral accusations became common, press coverage of the 200 GFP in the government-controlled newspapers often pointed out the moral benefits of the program. An unabashedly pro-200 GFP newspaper reporter wrote that under the 200 GFP:

the factory workers, many of whom are young women, will continue to live in their homes and contribute to family welfare, thus preventing the breakdown of traditional values and family life which often occurs when workers move to the cities in search of employment.

This quotation is just one of many examples of how reporters emphasized issues of gender, morality, and changing social values to
argue that the program would address many of the nation’s modern problems through a modern solution: global economic development. The fact that the press but not the government made these moral arguments was consistent with the trend up until that point that, despite widespread moral panic about Juki girls, there had been little direct government engagement in the issue. Subsequent to the underwear critique, the argument that the program prevented immorality by preventing women’s migration to Colombo became even more widespread and was voiced by the president himself. In short, the claim was that keeping women in their villages would keep women—and the nation—from going bad.

This argument about morality and class had an enduring social effect, resulting in the long-term transformation of the 200 GFP from a program for youth unrest to a program for women’s morality. Premadasa’s supporters, such as newspaper reporters, politicians, garment factory investors, and villagers, began to emphasize the protection of women’s morality as the program’s most important feature. This is what was remembered during my research period; for most people, it was only when I pressed them that they recalled a vague JVP connection. So, in the end, the opposition and the government concurred on the importance of women’s behavior to national development. The underwear critique and the government’s response are best understood in the context of the widespread concern in Sri Lanka about women’s sexual morality. Because women’s behavior is central to the nationalist imaginary, the opposition, with its underwear critique, was arguing that if its last holdout (“our innocent girls”) was corrupted, the nation was doomed. In effect, the underwear critique was asking, if good village girls are going to start behaving in new ways by working in garment factories, what will happen to the rest of Sinhala Buddhist society that is reproduced through women’s normative behavior? But note that this was not just a question about women’s behavior. It was also a question about what village women’s presence in garment factories—and the presence of garment factories in villages—implied about the feminization of the nation as a whole under global capital. Had the government gone too far toward the foreign at the expense of local traditions? This critique about village girls sewing white women’s underwear came down to important questions about the relationship between women, the nation, and moral purity.

The Lived Effects of the Underwear Critique

There is a long history of spatially imagining and socially constructing Sinhala Buddhist identity in terms of a divide between vil-
lages and the city. Such a divide connotes differential access to wealth, power, and knowledge, as well as varying degrees of tradition and pure Sinhala Buddhist identity in a politically charged landscape in which village Sri Lanka is claimed for Sinhala Buddhists (and, to a certain extent, other Sinhalas) and not minorities (particularly Tamils). The 200 GFP was first presented as a means to prevent youth unrest. By providing rural industrial jobs, the 200 GFP promised the restoration of the nation’s moral and political order when the LTTE was threatening secession and when the country was recovering from the JVP revolt. It may seem contradictory that placing nontraditional, global capitalist industry in villages could be considered a solution for preventing the disintegration of tradition. In fact, the underwear critique addressed this apparent contradiction, but in explicitly sexualized terms (by bringing in the specter of white/foreign women). In response, the government played up the fact that, within the terms of a socially produced rural-urban divide, villages were considered pure and pristine locales. Thus it follows that villages would purify factories, the consumer practices that come with factories, and even the male managers who in an urban setting might be inclined to abuse female workers. Keeping women and factories in villages would protect the nation’s moral order. So, did this in fact occur? Factories such as Shirtex and Serendib were certainly modern industrial workplaces that employed scientific management techniques. But were they—and the women workers—also somehow pure and traditional due to their location in villages? Perhaps not surprisingly, the picture is much more complicated when we look at how the women at Shirtex and Serendib experienced this work and their new lives and attempted to forge ways of living as what I term “newly traditional good girls.”

At Shirtex and Serendib, nationalist and capitalist gender ideals came together in the figure of the “good girl,” a term used for women who acted properly in terms of moral norms, but also for women who were productive industrial workers. A good girl both embodied Sinhala Buddhist traditions and was an efficient and productive factory worker. Shirtex and Serendib women tried to manage the Juki stigma by deploying new kinds of good girl identities, and yet they also participated in some ways in the moral panic through which they are stigmatized. Many women at Shirtex and Serendib frequently drew stark contrasts between urban and rural garment factory workers, and some even used the term “Juki girls” negatively to refer to the urban workers. In so doing they perpetuated certain repressive gender constructions. Their attitudes resemble those of the Malaysian electronics workers observed by Ong (1987, 191) whose
“positive attempts at constructing their own gender identity depended on a cult of purity and self-sacrifice.”

In numerous conversations, women who worked in Shirtex and Serendib indicated to me that they understood job scarcity, productivity, and competition, and that they knew that investors and buyers would make choices between their factories and those in the logistically more accessible FTZs. By forging newly traditional good girl identities, these women justified their employment over that of urban women, who lacked the self-control to be good workers and good girls. And in doing so they also created a space for their own new social practices (inside and outside of work) within the safety of the villages. They clearly felt ambivalent about their experiences as factory workers and tried desperately to evade moral censure and panic by inhabiting a world that had some elements of a new, urban, and modern life but also important elements of their traditional village lives. It is in their attempts at identity construction that we can see the lived effects of the nationalist mobilization of sexuality in the context of the global economy.

This argument was most visible in the words and experiences of Mala, a worker at Shirtex. Whenever I went to Shirtex, if I entered through the front door my first stop would be a visit to Mala and her coworker Mallika, two quality-control inspectors whose worktable was just inside the factory entrance. I spent a lot of time talking to these two women about the Juki girl reputation, a topic I first started to think about within a couple of weeks of arriving at the factories because of Mala’s own words to me. Mala was twenty-four years old when I first arrived at the factories in early 1995. Articulate and smart, she had missed being accepted into a university by only a few marks. She began working at Shirtex when it opened in 1992, directly out of school. Prior to coming to the factory, Mala had read a number of newspaper reports about Colombo garment factory workers. Within a week of arriving to do research, I distributed an informal questionnaire to the workers. In response to my final query on “additional information for me to know about you or the factory,” Mala wrote in Sinhala:

A lot of people in society think garment factories are places without any culture or civilization. Because I also thought that, at first I did not like coming here. But it was only after coming inside the factory that I could see the skills of the valuable women who work here. That cannot be seen by the outside world since it is enclosed within the four walls. But when we come to work amidst society we are subjected to the insults of young people just like us. It would be a great resource if there
arose in the world a movement that would be able to properly
direct the cross-eyed way society looks at the valuable services
of valuable male and female workers. Can a person’s character
be concluded from a job?

Mala was speaking here about the negative effect on character assessment caused by the Juki label as well as the abuse to which village garment workers were subjected in their commute to work. Although I didn’t understand its full implications when I first read it, I remember being very excited about this response. This was a dream for me: there was a worker I had barely met volunteering this insight in a questionnaire at the start of my research!

The day after I read this response I sought Mala out in the factory. A few months later she was the first of many workers I formally interviewed. When I asked Mala to elaborate on her comments, she explained to me that when she and other Shirtex and Serendib workers boarded buses and trains on their journey to and from work, young men would make comments to them such as, “Oh, ‘garment’ got on, here comes ‘garment.’ . . . Also they say the names of unmentionable garments [underwear] and ask us whether we are going to sew them.” In Sri Lanka, garment factories are known as simply “garment,” so people say in Sinhala “I work at the garment” to mean “I work at the garment factory.” Here the young men dehumanized the women by calling them “garment”—thus labeling the workers as the site of production itself (not unlike what happens with the Juki moniker). The reference to underwear was doubtlessly a reference to the opposition’s critique of the 200 GFP, but even without this political context the comment would have had sexual overtones. In Mala’s experience, men were not the only people who disrespected garment workers on their commute: women on the buses and trains would not even direct toward them the normal courteous smiles expected among strangers.

Mala was careful to add, both in the 1995 interview and in another one in January 2000, that the negative stories about Juki girls are not about all urban factory women. She also said that those urban garment workers who do become involved with men in an inappropriate way do so not for the reason commonly assumed (because they are not under the control of their parents, brothers, and so on). Rather they do so because they need love when they leave the miserable workplace. Drawing an important contrast between village garment workers and those in urban areas, Mala argued that village factory women do not have this problem because they go home to their loving families each evening and forget their work problems.
When I knew her at Shirtex, Mala, like many workers, was trying to get another job—what she described as a “good job.” To this end she was learning English at the factory, taking courses in sewing and bridal dressing, and taking teaching exams. In a December 1996 letter to me in Chicago (six months after I left), Mala told me she wanted to quit her job because she couldn’t bear the “mental and physical pain” of the work. Physical pain may have referred to any number of physical problems such as weight loss, back pain, headaches and dizziness, respiratory problems (from inhaling cotton dust), and other ailments she and other workers have experienced. Also, factories are often stifling hot, especially during the warmer seasons, and women often complained to me of feeling faint. Indeed, it was not rare for women to faint (as I did once—and all I was doing was flitting from one workbench to another). Mental pain probably referred to two things: the lack of social respect garment workers receive and the crude manner in which the Shirtex production manager treated workers, which many Shirtex workers complained to me about. For Mala the mental pain of being a garment worker may also have had to do with the effect of her work on her family’s reputation in the village. Although many people in the area wanted to work at these factories, Mala told me that when she first got the job, neighbors insulted her mother by saying, “You say that your daughter got good [A-level] exam results. Couldn’t she find a better job? Why did she have to go to a factory?”

Mala visited me in January 2000, when (accompanied by her father) she came to Chicago as the Sri Lankan delegate to Mayor Richard Daley’s International Millennium Dinner. At the time she was still working as a quality checker at Shirtex; she had not quit because she could not find another job and she needed her Shirtex wage. In Chicago she told me that she had recently taken quality-control courses in Colombo on Sundays with the hopes of getting promoted within Shirtex to a staff quality-control position, but she had not yet told the management about this certification because she was afraid they would be angry with her for being dissatisfied with her current position. At the same time, Mala continued her self-employment studies: she had completed weekend courses on every aspect of wedding preparation—making and decorating cakes, dressing brides, styling hair, designing and making jewelry, sewing bridal saris—so she could be employed as a wedding coordinator.

In Chicago, Mala told me that all the original workers were now physically exhausted and desperate to stop working. For this reason, she said, many were agreeing to marriage matches they normally would have refused so that they could quit and receive the state-mandated financial benefits women are entitled to if they stop work-
Mala speculated that the result would probably be that women would marry men who hit and scolded them. Because Sri Lankans often correlate domestic violence and drinking alcohol, and because a quick indicator of a man one would not want to marry is a man who drinks, Mala may have been saying that her coworkers were agreeing to marry drunks whom they never would have agreed to marry were they not desperate to get out of the factories.

In this connection, Mala brought me a letter from a coworker named Jayanthi, in which she wrote that she was in the midst of marriage negotiations. In commenting on this prospect, Mala seemed to be using Jayanthi as an example of how coworkers hoped marriage would rescue them from the factory. And Jayanthi herself wrote to me that she would miss her friends, but that she was keen to get her health back and, in terms of an income, she would engage in self-employment after she married. Yet in a second letter she sent me a short time later, Jayanthi told me that due to being in the early stages of vitiligo (an untreatable condition in which the skin loses pigmentation), she had decided to refuse the marriage proposal. She wrote that this must be her fate and that she would be alone in her future. In the Sri Lankan context, where women’s lives are very much directed toward marriage and motherhood, this must have been a very difficult decision for Jayanthi.

Mala’s comments about her coworkers’ hopes for marriage raise questions about the relationship between the Juki girl reputation and marriage prospects. Mala once told me about a marriage proposal made to a coworker that had been withdrawn when the man learned that his prospective bride was working at Shirtex. I heard other cases of this as well, and it is commonly noted in studies of Sri Lankan garment workers that Sinhala newspaper marriage proposals sometimes disqualify FTZ workers with the phrase “no garment girls.” The women at Shirtex and Serendib, like those at urban factories, often work in order to support their families and to collect money for a dowry. It is common for these women to enter into arranged marriages, which usually require dowries, although some “love marriages” also require dowries. In the past, parents have collected the money and goods that go into a dowry, but one effect of recent economic changes is that often parents simply cannot collect enough to secure a desired match. (There is a clear correlation made between a large dowry and what is considered a good marriage match.) Garment work pays considerably more money than other jobs that these women may be able to find, such as working in a paddy field or as a salesperson in a shop. Yet despite the relatively high pay, it carries with it very low social recognition, precisely because of the kinds of
moral criticisms of garment workers discussed in this article. Nevertheless, women sometimes choose garment factory jobs over alternatives because they need the money for their dowries. However, as the phrase “no garment girls” suggests, this decision plunges them into a quandary. They end up working in garment factories to accumulate money and goods for a dowry, yet the very fact that they work in a garment factory may undermine their own goal of a good marriage. Such is the uneasy social situation of garment factory workers in Sri Lanka, a situation not fully alleviated by working in village garment factories instead of urban FTZs.

Conclusion: The Politics of Women’s Underwear

Nationalist agendas and economic liberalization agendas often mobilize women in different ways. In its first fifteen years of liberalization, the Sri Lankan government paid little attention to the contradictions involved in placing women at the forefront of economic development, despite the chorus of moral panic about the morality of these women that was coming from many directions. But when the 200 GFP, an intensely popular and widely publicized state-led development program, risked being discredited precisely within the terms of nationalist moral panic about women’s sexuality, the government responded. An economic program first touted as a means to prevent youth unrest quickly became one whose primary claim was that it would prevent the dissolution of the nation through other means: by preventing women’s improper behavior.

It is revealing that, prior to this late moment in its liberalization program, the state made no attempt to overcome the contradictions involved in placing women at the forefront of the nation’s economic liberalization policies, nor did it enter into conversations about factory women’s morality. This point can only be fully comprehended if, concurring with Lata Mani, we realize that the underwear critique was about something other than women or women’s morality. As I mentioned in the introduction to this article, Mani’s essay (1989, 118) on the prominence of debates about sati in colonial India argues that women “became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated.” Similarly, let us consider the centrality of women in the underwear critique and the government’s response. Although these debates were ostensibly about the status of “our innocent girls,” as I have demonstrated, they engaged other priorities (such as the moral status of the nation, not to mention rural votes, economic development, and youth unrest) of the men50 who were their main promulgators.

I would argue, following Mani, that neither the government nor
the opposition suddenly became concerned with the plight of women factory workers. If this were the case, one would expect that the government would have initiated programs for improving the conditions in and around urban factories and, when the opposition came into power two years later, that it would have discontinued the 200 GFP. But the People’s Alliance (an SLFP-led coalition, which is still in power today) did not close the 200 GFP factories. Rather, the government continued to support the program and new factories opened under its leadership. No, there was no sudden concern for women’s status or rights when the 200 GFP began. Instead, these women became the site on which morality and tradition was being debated and reformulated. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that concepts such as morality and tradition are themselves sites for other arguments, which also are not about women—in the Sri Lankan case, arguments about the relative merits of the foreign and the local, as well as about social status and class, privilege and inequality.

With regard to Sri Lanka as a comparative case, Mani’s theoretical argument does seem to be correct. Yet I want to move in a slightly different direction with this argument by emphasizing how women were affected by the discourse. I consider such an analysis to be as important as an analysis of the political content and context of the discourse. To be fair, Mani does discuss women’s experiences to a certain extent, and the available historical record does seem to present a challenge to what she can do. I would argue that it is when we are able to examine both the discourse and the effects of the discourse that we begin to understand fully why political and national discourses are often articulated in gendered and sexualized terms. Following Joan Scott, I would pose this as an issue about the relationship between gender and politics. Scott (1999, 45) argues that “gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated.” But even if attention to gender is not explicit, she points out, it is crucial to the organization of inequality. For instance, discourses about class in nineteenth-century France help us to see how normative definitions of gender came to be “reproduced and embedded in the culture of the French working class” (Scott 1999, 48), and, furthermore, that normative definitions of gender often affected actual gender relationships.

As I have shown above, although national discussions, arguments, and commentary on the sexuality of female factory workers in economically liberalized Sri Lanka were the sites for arguments about other issues besides women, women were profoundly affected by these discourses. I advocate inquiries that examine discursive constructions and also move beyond the discursive to see how the expression of political tensions through sexuality affected actual social
practices. In the Sri Lankan case, these effects can be seen in women’s ambivalence about the benefits and strains of their jobs. This ambivalence was apparent within the factories (e.g., in incidents and arguments over production and discipline) and outside the factories (e.g., in women’s continuous attempts to find better jobs and also in their difficulties in finding good marriage matches). In this article, with the words and experiences of Mala and some of her coworkers, I have only touched on those myriad lived effects of nationalist discourses.

NOTES

The research for this article was conducted from 1994 to 1996 in Sri Lanka. Factory- and village-based ethnographic research (interviews, surveys, participant observation) was complemented with archival work on the garment industry and President Premadasa’s social policies. I also conducted interviews with government and industry officials as well as investors, and visited numerous factories in Colombo, the Katunayake Free Trade Zone, and villages throughout the country. The factory names in this article are pseudonyms.

Although only a portion of the rich material is discussed here, I thank Michele Gamburd, Jennifer Robertson, and Ajit Serasundera for assistance in interpreting the underwear critique in the context of extremely illuminating (and entertaining) conversations about whiteness, underwear, and Juki girls. I am also grateful for critical comments and assistance from Deborah Winslow, Michael Woost, two anonymous Social Politics reviewers, and especially from Sonya Michel. Thanks also to participants at the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS) workshop on “The Economy and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka,” 25–27 August 2000, Durham, New Hampshire, where I first presented a version of this article. Finally, I am grateful to the numerous people in Sri Lanka who helped me with this project, especially the women at Shirtex and Serendib.

1. I thank Sonya Michel and an anonymous Social Politics reviewer for encouraging me to discuss Mani’s work in relation to my own.

2. The term “Sinhala Buddhist” was first used by the anticolonial nationalist Anagarika Dharmapala in the early twentieth century (Gunawardana 1990, 76), and although not all Sinhalas are Buddhist, Dharmapala’s Buddhist revivalism produced a naturalized equation of Sinhalas with Buddhism. Central to this so-called revivalism, Sinhala Buddhists have claimed a right to political domination of the island by arguing that the Buddha designated Sri Lanka to be the dhānmadīpa, the island that exemplifies and preserves the Buddha’s teachings.

3. Anna Tsing’s (2000) recent essay on “The Global Situation” stands out as particularly instructive for thinking about the role of “the global” in anthropology.

4. Though Kemper does not discuss it, particularly interesting comparative cases have been written about for Latin America, and Benjamin Orlove
and Arnold J. Bauer (1997) use the term “allure of the foreign” in their essay in Orlove’s edited volume *The Allure of the Foreign*.

5. In contemporary Sri Lanka, villages are often considered the locus of tradition and impervious to moral degradation—in stark contrast to the capital city Colombo and its surrounding urban areas. (See Kemper [2001, chap. 3] for a helpful recent discussion of Colombo’s place in nationalist imaginings.) This is a familiar narrative that associates the city with the modern and corrupt and the countryside with tradition, culture, and moral order. For instance, Raymond Williams (1973) has famously examined the role of the country and city dichotomy in the English moral imagination. Likewise, Herman Lebovics (1992) has written about the role of the pastoral in the French tradition. Unlike the situations described by Williams and Lebovics, though, it is not only urban Sri Lankans who think about these dichotomies: rural people are equally invested in thinking about their world in rural-urban contrasts—contrasts that nevertheless are continually complicated in everyday social practices.

6. Although, in a discussion of the relevance of Chatterjee’s argument for Sri Lanka, Malathi de Alwis (1996, 104) notes that during the anticolonial nationalist movement questions of women’s rights and reforms did not animate the debate in Sri Lanka as they did in India. For more on the relationship between nationalism, sexuality, and gender in Sri Lanka, see de Alwis (1997 and 1998) and Jayawardena (1994). Jayawardena (1986) discusses these issues for anticolonial nationalist movements throughout the world, and Jayawardena and de Alwis (1996) is an excellent volume on these issues across South Asia.

7. Manisha Gunasekera has written about the importance of such “physical markers of cultural purity” to the late 1980s Jathika Chintanaya (JC, the National Ideology), an indigenist middle-class intellectual movement followed by Sinhala-speaking members of the professional classes who opposed aspects of the economic and social changes related to the Open Economy (Moore 1993, 627). JC ideologue Gunadasa Amarasekera lamented that long hair and the sari (itself introduced to Sri Lanka by Dharmapala) were vanishing, and the group prohibited women from wearing miniskirts on university campuses during this time (Gunasekera 1996, 10). On the JC, see also Chandraprema (1991, chap. 17), Goonewardena (1996), Hettige (2000), and Serasundara (1998).

8. It is particularly illuminating to understand the situation of Sri Lankan Olympic medallist Susanthika Jayasinghe in these terms. In September 2000 Jayasinghe won a bronze medal in the two-hundred-meter sprint at the Olympics in Sydney, Australia, thus becoming Sri Lanka’s second Olympic medallist ever (a Sri Lankan man won a silver medal in the 1948 Olympics). But she got to that point after considerable struggle. Jayasinghe was originally from a village and over the previous several years she had been continually maligned in the Sri Lankan media for not behaving like a proper village girl. Criticism focused on her short hair, skimpy runner’s outfits, and alleged alcohol drinking at a party in Colombo. Criticisms culminated in alleged sexual harassment by members of the sports ministry. (See Lynch [2000] for a longer discussion.)
9. Although foreign migration for employment was not a direct feature of the liberalization policies, changes in emigration laws were implemented around the same time as the economy was liberalized. This meant that demand for foreign employment for working-class Sri Lankans arose at the same time as demand for laborers in the export industrial sector.

10. For an analysis of gender transformations related to Middle East migration see Gamburd (2000). In her discussion of “horror stories” about migrant workers, Gamburd (chap. 9) follows Heng and Devan (1992) in using the term “narratives of crisis” in a manner similar to my use below of the concept of moral panic.

11. I should note, however, that this is not first and foremost an article about factory workers, although toward the end of the article I do consider briefly their experiences in the face of national political debates about their behavior and experiences. (For an extended discussion, see Lynch [1999, 2000].) Readers familiar with women’s factory labor in other times and places will notice parallels and divergences. My study speaks to other scholars of women’s labor who consider culture and economy in interrelationship. I am thinking of, for instance, Aihwa Ong’s study (1987) of how Malaysian factory managers strive to protect factory women’s morality and how the women respond, Carla Freeman’s study (2000) of how Barbadian women in the informatics industry create “pink-collar” identities that distinguish them from factory workers, and Mary Beth Mills’ study (1999) of how migrant urban Thai factory women struggle between being modern and “up-to-date” women but also good daughters.

12. Employment statistics are as of November 2000, as provided on the website of Sri Lanka’s Board of Investment (http://www.boisrilanka.org/about/freetradezones.htm, available as recently as 20 October 2001).


14. The quote about isthiripura is from Voice of Women (1983, 69). The use of the term vēsakalāpaya is noted in Weerasinghe (1989, 319) and “pre-makalāpaya” is a term I frequently heard.

15. Much more could be written about Juki girls than I do in the following paragraphs. Regrettably I must simplify a complicated subject in the interest of space.

16. Although Katunayake is technically not in Colombo proper, the urban landscape extends from Colombo into its immediate “suburbs” and Katunayake is considered Colombo in this moral imaginary.


19. I thank Ajit Serasundera for discussing with me his own recollections of the social history of this term. My conversations with him on this topic are reflected in the next several paragraphs. He remembers hearing the term among classmates as early as 1979.

20. Both Hettige (2000) and Serasundara (1998) make important arguments about the moral criticisms of the Open Economy, and they both mention the important role of the Jathika Chintanaya (see note 7 above) in these debates.

21. Complaints about being treated like machines were common among the women in the factories where I conducted ethnographic research.


23. While I find Cohen’s framework useful because of its attention to the role of moral panic in the maintenance of values and interests, I should note that the situation I am describing is more pervasive than the top-down sense implied by Cohen. It is not simply people in power who desire to maintain certain values—these desires are more hegemonic and self-disciplining.


25. The UNP government under Premadasa faced a strong challenge in the late 1980s with the violent uprising of the JVP (which today is recognized as an official political party and has members in parliament). Deaths and disappearances at the hands of the JVP and as a result of the brutal government crackdown number an estimated forty thousand to fifty thousand. Estimates vary as to how many of these deaths and disappearances were the responsibility of which group, although there seems to be agreement that the government was responsible for the bulk. For instance, Amnesty International (1990) quotes some observers who hold the government responsible for 30,000 and quotes the government holding the JVP responsible for 6,517. Chandraprema (1991) breaks it down as twenty-three thousand killed by the government and seventeen thousand by the JVP.

It is conceivable that Premadasa simply used the JVP argument to sell the program to the nation and that it in fact had little to do with Premadasa’s true motivations. However, the late president’s true motivations (which we cannot know—he was assassinated by the LTTE in 1993) are of less interest to me than his actual actions and rhetoric.

26. The full two hundred factories were never built. In April 1996, when I was completing my research, 161 were in operation, 5 were under construction, and 12 had been closed. As of September 1995, seventy-seven
thousand people were employed. These figures were compiled for me in April 1996 by the Board of Investment (BOI), the government office that administers the program. Investors received tax breaks and other financial incentives from the state, such as duty free vehicles and priority on quotas for exporting to the United States. Sri Lankan investors were Sinhala Buddhists and many were members of minority groups such as Tamils, Muslims, Sindhis, and Gujaratis. Foreign investors included American, German, and Hong Kong firms.

27. “Ethno-utilitarianism” is a term ArjunAppadurai used in a July 1999 conversation with me to describe Premadasa’s ideas. I use the term to convey how members of a society may be making their own utilitarian explanations for what they do or believe. The prefix “ethno” simply flags that this is a local perspective on the Western philosophical concept of “utilitarianism.”


29. There is little written on women in the JVP, but see Gunaratna (1990) and de Mel (1998). Hettige (1992, 65) writes: “only a small minority of female youth have taken part in militant youth politics.”

30. At the time of my research, several years after the program began, this prescription was largely ignored and approximately 95 percent of the 200 GFP workforce was female.

31. In interviews and conversations with me, state representatives and factory owners and managers described a preference for female rather than male garment workers through the familiar depiction of women’s nimble fingers (when I asked one factory owner why he employed women he simply wiggled his fingers and said “you know, these”), women’s proclivity for sewing, and the ease of controlling a female workforce. There is a vast literature on the preference for cheap and docile female labor in capitalist industry throughout the globe, but a basic formulation is found in Elson and Pearson (1981). See also Fuentes and Ehrenreich (1983), Nash and Fernandez-Kelly (1983), Standing (1989), and Ong (1991). See also Sassen (1998, chaps. 5 and 6), on the relationship between globalization and the feminization of labor, and for Sassen’s efforts to bring a gendered perspective to understanding the global economy.

32. Thanks to Malathi de Alwis for first pointing this expression out to me as far back as 1993. The situation has changed slightly since my research period. In 1997 the government began a drive to recruit women for the armed forces, since they were increasingly unable to recruit enough men for the fight against the LTTE. During my research, many workers understood that because garment revenues are a major source of foreign exchange for the state, and because the war is a major expense, garment revenues are used by the state to fight the war. On this reasoning, many garment workers claimed that they were doing a service to the country by working in the 200 GFP factories. Explaining the importance of earning foreign exchange, they proudly paralleled their national service to that of their boyfriends, husbands, and brothers who were in the army. Some even told me that given the chance they would have joined the army. I must note, though, that the Sinhala Buddhists among whom I did research made these claims; how
Tamil women experience this involvement in the state’s plan remains an important question.

33. Without getting into a complicated family and political history, it is important to note that Anura Bandaranaike is the son of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the SLFP prime minister in the 1950s who was elected on a “Sinhala only” language platform. His mother was the former Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who at the time of the underwear critique was the leader of the SLFP. His sister, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, is the current president. (In 1978, Sri Lanka’s constitutional system changed and the president became the head of state. When Sirimavo Bandaranaike and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike were prime ministers, they were head of state.)

34. The term “suddi” could refer to “foreign women,” although it usually refers to white women. In this case the sexual connotations of the critique clearly recommend its translation as “white.”

35. Thanks to Michele Gamburd for her thoughts on the role of white women in Sri Lanka. Gamburd, who has conducted research in the south of the country, reminded me of the fact that the vast majority of tourists are white Europeans, and that the notion of white women as immoral is fed by the presence of female tourists who “smoke, drink, wear bikinis and shorts, and sometimes travel with men who are not their husbands” (personal communication, 20 October 2001).

36. The concept of abhinsaka has been critiqued by the Sri Lankan feminist journal Options. In early 2001, Options commented on “Ahinsa,” a new insurance policy for women. Options noted how the insurance policy plays on expectations for women to be innocent and harmless such that the insurance policy is “for those who possess the essentially female qualities of innocence, harmlessness, and ‘weepiness’” (Options 2001).

37. Thanks to an anonymous Social Politics reviewer for pointing out this important connection.

38. Here they were playing into the long association that has been made between the UNP and westernization. The SLFP seemed to be arguing that under their leadership economic development in a global economy would not forsake local traditions. When the SLFP came into power in 1994, as the head of a political coalition called the People’s Alliance (PA), it portrayed its policies with the slogan “open economy with a human face” and “capitalism with a human face,” in contrast with the UNP’s policies (Stokke 1995, 124; Goonewardena 1996).

39. Thousands of people attended the opening ceremonies, which included speeches by politicians and employees, factory tours, and nighttime music shows. The state-run newspapers and television stations inundated the public with reports on these openings so that eventually the program became the object of much criticism. I examine these circumstances in Lynch (2000).


41. For instance, Premadasa is quoted making this argument in three articles in the Daily News (Colombo) by a reporter named Pramod de Silva:
“Fearing a threat to their supremacy . . . Some aristocrats out to destroy
govt programs—President,” 20 October 1992, n.p.; “Remarkable economic
growth despite on-going war, says President,” 3 November 1992, n.p.; “We
seek support on the strength of our record—President,” 16 March 1993,
n.p.

42. The UNP has traditionally been associated with the high-caste,
English-educated bourgeoisie. However, Premadasa was its first low-caste
leader, and so, although caste and class status do not always map onto each
other, he was often perceived as the champion of the poor. The SLFP has
consistently been associated with the high-caste, Sinhala-educated petite
bourgeoisie (exemplified by the elite Bandaranaike family). Here Premadasa
seemed to be pointing to perceived concerns by the upper-class elites about
shifts in power associated with class mobility among the rural poor.

43. Pramod de Silva, “We seek support on the strength of our record—

44. Suresh Mohamed, “Mrs. B’s regime of shortages and queues: Govt.
will never take people back to that ‘miserable era’—President,” Island (Co-
lombo), 3 June 1992, 3.

45. “200 Garment factory program—a bold bid to end rural poverty,”
Daily News (Colombo) 30 September 1992, n.p. This article has the byline
“By A Special Correspondent.” It is likely that the author is Anthony Fern-
ando, the government official responsible for promoting the program
through the media, who wrote numerous articles with this same moral tone

46. Without using the term “newly traditional,” I argue this in part in
Lynch (1999); the full argument is in Lynch (2000).

47. In response to a follow-up question, she confirmed that “unmention-
able garments” were underwear.

48. The Sri Lankan education system is based on the British system, and
most workers at these factories had completed their O-level (ordinary level)
exams, the rough equivalent of a high school education. Some workers had
less than O-Level education (usually eighth grade), and less than 1 percent
of the workers were illiterate. A large number had done their A-level (ad-
vanced level) exams, the rough equivalent of a college preparatory degree.

49. The vast majority of the workers at both factories were unmarried.
Not all workers who marry stop working—whether or not they do depends
on the wishes of the new husband. Workers accrue state-mandated financial
benefits of two types, both calculated from the worker’s wage rate. EPF is
Employees Provident Fund, a fund consisting of 8 percent of the wage con-
tributed by the worker plus 12 percent of the wage contributed by the em-
ployer. The money is available at retirement age (fifty for women, fifty-five
for men) or immediately for women if they stop work to marry. ETF is
Employees Trust Fund, a fund consisting of 3 percent of the worker’s wage,
contributed entirely by the employer. It is available to workers after the
current job ends (either through resignation or termination). For details on
these benefits, and the problems with implementation, see http://www.
somo.nl/monitoring/reports/sri_lanka.htm (available as recently as 20 Octo-
ber 2001).
50. I do use “men” intentionally here. Note that although Bandaranaike’s mother, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was the leader of the opposition at the time of the underwear critique, she refrained from using the sexual language of the underwear critique. (But she and her daughter, the current president, did mobilize other moral criticisms.)

51. Mani discusses the experiences of the widows in two ways. On the one hand, she discusses how their agency is eroded in the discourses about sati, such that their own arguments about the social and material reasons for sati are occluded in favor of the nationalist and colonialist religious interpretations (Mani 1998, 190). Their expressions of terror and coercion are similarly occluded (Mani 1998, 196). On the other hand, she discusses briefly how the debates about sati affected women (especially upper-class and upper-caste women), but that the ways in which these discourses affected subaltern women are especially difficult to determine from the historical record (Mani 1998, 195).

REFERENCES


of its Conditions of Possibility.” Ph.D. diss., Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.


Lynch


