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Pathivratha Precarity

Sex Work on the Other Side of Marriage in South India

KIMBERLY WALTERS

Many communities in South Asia understand women to be interdependently subordinate to male kin—initially to fathers and brothers and ultimately to husbands. In the abstract, these men are ideally expected to wrap their women in a cocoon of material support and protection while daughters and wives strive for worth through devoted service, motherhood, and deft domestic management. One of the various terms for chaste wives who succeed at remaining cocooned in this way is *pathivratha*, literally meaning one who is devoted to her husband. As I outline in what follows, *pathivratha* women emulate Sita from the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, by remaining inside a metaphorical *Lakshmana rekha*, the circle their male kin draw around them at home for bodily and reputational security. All too often, however, this idealized system of female encompassment miscarries, just as it did for the goddess Sita, whose story I recount below. Fathers and husbands die or, in India's liberalized economy, find themselves unable to support wives and daughters who remain at home in the orbit of global cities where rising costs rapidly outstrip wages. Men may desert their families physically or economically, and wives and even daughters may find themselves forced outside their cocoons in search of a subsistence.

In this context, women and girls encounter a market for feminine labor in the high-tech economies of places like Hyderabad that can offer better earnings through paid sex than through other forms of work traditionally done by women. Even middle-class work typically gendered female that requires formal education (such as teaching) does not pay as well as sex work (Walters 2016a). But beyond the hydraulics of economic necessity, South Indian women may also find themselves propelled into sex work when they lose or cross the *Lakshmana rekha* in other ways—especially in the pursuit of romantic love. For women in South India, opting or being pushed out of marriage often results in opting in to sex work. This chapter situates sex work as both an effect of and—perhaps counterintuitively—a partial antidote to the precarity of marriage.

The Lakshmana Rekha and the Mythos of Female Encompassment

The goddess Sita, pathivratha to Lord Rama, devoted herself so completely to her husband that she insisted on accompanying him into exile in the forest for fourteen years. While there, Rama, Sita, and Rama's brother, Lakshmana, encountered a mysterious golden deer. In an attempt to protect Sita while he and Rama pursued the deer, Lakshmana drew a magical boundary, the Lakshmana rekha (rekha literally meaning line), in a circle around Sita and their shared hut. He told Sita that if she would remain at home inside the circle, she would surely remain safe. Sita promised to obey her brother-in-law's instructions, but when she began to fear for Rama's life, she chose to overstep the magical boundary and run (she thought) to Rama's aid. But Sita's choice to disobey Lakshmana's command to remain encircled immediately subjected her to being kidnapped by Ravana, a foreign king bent on wooing Sita. When Rama and Lakshmana discovered that Ravana had tricked and abducted Sita, they pursued them and eventually defeated Ravana in an epic battle, reclaiming Sita. And yet, after having gone to such lengths to rescue her, Rama insisted that he no longer wanted Sita, whom he suspected had lost her wifely chastity during the abduction. Sita offered to walk through fire to prove her purity, and she emerged from the flames unscathed (in some versions of the tale the flames turn to flowers). With this evidence, Rama agreed to accept Sita back as his queen. But after returning to his kingdom in apparent triumph, the gossipy doubts of Rama's servants began to perturb him, and he again banished Sita in fear of losing the respect of his subjects.

Years later, Rama once more reversed his stance and pleaded with Sita to return to his palace to raise their twin sons and reign as his queen. This time Sita responded, "I have been doubted once, twice, and I do not care to be doubted again" (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, 145). The earth itself, Sita's mother the goddess Bhudevi, cleaved open and Sita returned to her belly, never to return to the earth's surface.

Myths play key roles in organizing intimate relations and their affective circuitry (Nuckolls 1993; Berlant 2008). The epic of Rama and Sita has gained both ritual and social saliency across the majority of South and Southeast Asia. Its characters and stories have become not only objects of religious piety but the everyday fare of children's cartoons and nightly television serials and a powerful engine for Hindu nationalist politics (Pollock 1993; Baber 1996; Rajagopal 2001).¹ While other myths also structure Adivasi (Indigenous), Dalit (oppressed caste), Christian, and Muslim communities,² Rama and Sita continue to model idealized (if increasingly contested) relations between husbands and wives across much of India. Guests at Hindu weddings sometimes affectionately tell a resplendent bride that she reminds them of the goddess Sita or one of Sita's related avatars, the goddess Lakshmi. In Telugu they say, "Sitadevi laga unnaavu, thalli" (You are like the goddess Sita, my dear). This idiomatic utterance acts both as an endearing tribute to the bride's radiance and as reminder of the role she is about to undertake,

oriented toward the example of Sita's loyal purity. Sita's model of wifely devotion that was doubted once she crossed the explicit boundary of her home continues to structure conflict arising in the lives of many women whom I interviewed from 2009 to 2018 in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in South India.

The South Asian idealization of female domesticity, dependence, and devotion to husbands precariously perches women who cannot or who do not wish to fulfill the expectations of the normative Telugu female life course outside the protections that such encompassment is understood to provide.³ The ideal of the encompassed pathivratha wife structures the anticipation of imminent danger (figured by the greedy Ravana) as located outside the circumscription of home and familial direction.

In what follows, I illustrate how women who lose their protective encompassment after being widowed, separated, or financially abandoned, or those who wantonly cross the limits set for them by their families in order to pursue romantic love, find themselves so unmoored both financially and reputationally as to be vulnerable to entrance into sex work, the logical inverse of the protectively encompassed pathivratha woman.⁴ The women whose lives I draw from in this chapter came from largely rural, working-class backgrounds and often (but not always) hailed from oppressed castes. Among the 136 workers whom I interviewed and spent time with from 2009 to 2018, the majority of them conveyed to me that their options at the time of making their initial foray into sex work seemed to them such that no other choice felt sensible.⁵ Marriage, then, too often fails at its promise of permanent sustenance. For many women, the instability of marriage itself becomes the liminal antechamber to the deeper halls of sex work. Women unexpectedly find themselves needing to become self-reliant in order to sustain themselves, their children and parents, and often their husbands. The experience of transforming precarity into self-reliance, in turn, can prompt additional changes in gendered expectations as women begin to push other boundaries.

Exiting Monogamy: Wives without Husbands as Sexual Targets

While a husband's death or abandonment may spark additional financial troubles that often predispose women to turn to sex work, losing a husband's physical presence also creates something of a power vacuum around a woman as her *Lakshmana rekha* is altogether erased. While living in Hyderabad, I heard from other widowed women whom I encountered outside of my fieldwork among sex workers that friends of deceased men often propositioned them. The sex workers I interviewed mentioned similar events in their own lives: no sooner had their husbands died than their husbands' friends began to stop by to "look in" on them. Such eager visitors sometimes offered to take care of them permanently as their *chinna illu* (small house) or what is referred to in Telugu English as a "second setup." Some women, especially if they had already turned to sex work, accepted such offers not just for financial reasons but because they felt that they were safe only

when they lived “under a man” (*bhartha kinda*). The expectation that women are precariously dependent on men for their safety as well as their sustenance and are therefore in danger when alone permeated many women’s sense of themselves.⁶ More practically, as Sarah Lamb also notes in this volume, women who live alone face extreme difficulty in finding homes to rent. Partnering with a man in some capacity can help assuage these problems.

Widowhood as a particular door to sex work or the presumption of sex work has been noted by many South Asian scholars (e.g., Das 1979, 97–98; Harlan 1995, 218; Lamb 2000, 221; Minturn 1993, 235–236). In North India, the Hindi word *randi* (literally widow) has lost its original meaning and has become synonymous with “prostitute,” indexing the easy slippage between these categories. In Telugu, the word for widow, *munda*, has a similarly salacious tinge. It is seldom used other than as an insult. The slur *munda kodukaa* (son of a widow) is something equivalent to “son of a bitch” in English. Widows are rarely explicitly named as such. Instead the phrase *valla ayana lera* (her husband is no more) is used to communicate a widow’s status while avoiding the uncomfortable term itself (see parallels in Davidson, this volume). Writing of rural Bengalis, Sarah Lamb suggests that “a widow, especially if young, was disturbing not only in her possibly uncontained sexuality but in her liminality—someone who has forsaken her husband by remaining on earth, but who yet cannot ever be truly free from him to move on to form new or independent relationships and identities” (2000, 237). It is this quality of indeterminacy and instability that marks widows and divorced and separated women alike—which I have elsewhere termed “wives without husbands”—as ready sexual targets for nearby men (Walters et al. 2012). Expelled from the boundaries mapped through marriage, wives without husbands appear to the men around them to be readily available, like free electrons in need of a nucleus to orbit. As a result, Telugu women who have lost a male partner may find themselves transformed into objects of sexual predation (see also Braun 2014 for a similar discussion regarding women in the Congo).

Lakshmi was one such example.⁷ She was thirty-five when she spoke to me about her entrance into sex work. She came from a Madiga (Dalit or oppressed caste) family in a town in Telangana and had received no formal education. Her parents married her at fifteen, and she gave birth to a daughter at seventeen and later to two sons. Despite being one of the few sex workers I knew who was in the enviable position of owning her own home and possessing a government ration card (which provided her access to monthly food supplies), a voter ID, and a bank account before her husband died, she nevertheless turned to sex work once she found herself widowed. She explained how her predicament began despite her seemingly secure life: “My husband kept bad company with whom he used to drink and gamble. He borrowed ten thousand rupees from his friends, but then he could not repay it.” These associates used to pressure Lakshmi and her family for money. One day, they got angry and in the heat of an altercation they hanged Lakshmi’s husband by the neck. Lakshmi’s mother-in-law and father-in-law fingered Lakshmi as the ultimate cause of their son’s death, saying that she had brought bad luck to

the family upon setting foot inside their house. Without their support, Lakshmi was left with no money to feed her children, and her husband's friends began forcing her to have sex with them.

Word quickly spread of Lakshmi's dire situation, and an *aunty* from another district caught wind. The English loan word "aunty" is used generally in India to respectfully refer to any older unrelated woman. However, among many South Indian sex workers the term has also come to mean a woman who brokers sex with customers while splitting their fee with the sex worker. This aunty came out to Lakshmi's village and offered that she could begin sex work at a house in Hyderabad. Lakshmi told me that she accepted because she needed the money, and almost as an afterthought she added, "I also thought, 'Anyway, my husband's friends will not leave me in peace. Why not do it for myself? If I go to another town, no one in my village would know about my business.'" Having made the decision, Lakshmi accompanied the aunty to Hyderabad and stayed in her house for a week while selling sex. She found the money good, but with her children in the village under the care of her mother, she could not remain alone at the aunty's house. So, she hired her own room in Hyderabad for fifteen hundred rupees a month, moved her children in from the village, and started life in the city as a full-time sex worker.

In Lakshmi's rendering of the story, she mentioned that her husband's associates had been forcing her to have sex with them in passing as if this outcome was not surprising under the circumstances. Also noteworthy was that Lakshmi drew a sort of moral equivalency between being raped by her husbands' friends and engaging in sex work. Being forced to have sex and being paid for sex were both modes of stepping (or being pushed) outside the ring of obligatory faithfulness to her dead husband. In Lakshmi's reckoning, it seemed that *exit* from monogamy mattered while the *mode* of exit was less important.

Another interlocutor, Preethi, echoed this calculus of female worth measured through monogamous circumscription when she explained to me her fear that her family would never take her back again after she ran away from home and was then brutally trafficked into commercial sex:

KW: Why don't people understand? When it is not your fault, why do people blame you?

P: Whether it is our fault or not, generally—If a wife and husband are walking together, and if *pokirivallu* [miscreants] rape the wife against the will of the husband, would the husband accept his wife again?

KW: That is what I am asking.

P: He would not.

KW: But, it is not the fault of his wife, you know? She has done nothing wrong. Really, it is the fault of the *pokirivallu*.

P: But society does not think like that. Very rarely can we find people who think thoughtfully. People would not think that the woman is not to blame.

Preethi's account of contemporary wifely precarity clearly parallels the tragedy of Sita. According to Preethi's example, a woman's worth as a wife is located in her perpetual monogamy, and it is neither her intention nor her action that bears weight in the balance of opinion, but rather the vagaries of public (dis)belief in her bodily monogamy. Once there is cause to doubt her monogamy, the *rekha* has been crossed, and banishment looms on the horizon. For my informants, after crossing the *rekha*, taking up sex work became the passing stuff of "anyway," as women looked back on what seemed, in retrospect, inevitable. As a result, they expected to be rejected by their families and unable to obtain other employment that paid a living wage. As I show elsewhere (Walters 2016a), many women who resort to sex work use it as a means of contending with their forced exit from monogamy to resourcefully make a living for themselves and their dependents.

The Perils of Love: Romantic Agency as Precursor to Sex Work

While many women I interviewed communicated a sense of the economic inevitability of sex work when husbands (dead or alive) failed them, there was another sense of the inevitability of sex work among girls who crossed the *Lakshmana rekha* by choosing to deploy their sexuality for love rather than on behalf of their families. Damaging her family's standing in the community (*paravu povadam*) by dating or eloping often meant that a girl could not return to them for the foreseeable future. By eloping, then, she might be forced to cut ties with her natal family (possibly permanently). Without the support of natal kin, the young woman forgoes access to dowry, wedding expenses, and ongoing gifts that most affinal families expect to gain from a daughter-in-law, and there is little chance of their welcoming her into their home and family without these expected forms of wealth transfer. Choosing against the grain, she opts for the risky prospect of a future tethered solely to the object of her romantic love sans family support.

The idea of young romantic love is prominent in the vast majority of Telugu films, and it functions as a site of intense friction and social change in South India as elsewhere (Cole 2008, 2010; Cole and Thomas 2009; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Hota 2020; Padilla et al. 2007). But among Telugu speakers, romantic love can also become a portal to sex work. By choosing to cross the *Lakshmana rekha*, a girl who wrests control of her own sexuality by dating or eloping is considered morally audacious enough that a further step into the business of sex may seem probable to her community, or ultimately to her. This may be true even if she did not at first consider the possible linkage to sex work when she initially set off to marry her lover.

Priyanka's story illustrates this point. She was fifteen, hailed from a poor rural Dalit family, and was yet unmarried when she eloped with her lover. She was a tall, thin girl with glowingly smooth skin the color of dark chocolate. Despite her exquisite features, Priyanka's deep skin tone preempted her from being considered beautiful by her family and friends. Additionally, Priyanka had never received any

formal education. Her parents were illiterate construction laborers, but on their few attempts to send her to school, she had insisted that she would rather take the cattle for grazing. Priyanka's rural childhood upended when she fell in love.

The man who wooed her was short but fair and thus, Priyanka had thought, very good looking. "We should never marry for looks," she said to me in retrospect, "but only for good qualities." At first, their clandestine intercaste romance was storybookish: Priyanka's boyfriend brought her gifts and told her that he loved her. He promised her that he would take care of her for life. Later he convinced her to secretly accompany him to a Sri Rama temple in their town where he tied a *mangala sutra* (marriage necklace) around her neck with no family or friends there to witness their religious wedding ceremony. Priyanka returned home to her parents' house and the two continued to meet without his or her family knowing. She would occasionally steal things her new husband asked for from her parents' house when they rendezvoused.

After two or three months of their clandestine marriage, Priyanka's husband told her, "Let us go someplace and get work. Your parents will not let us live if we remain here." They boarded a train for Hyderabad and disembarked at Secunderabad station, one of the hotspots for sex work in the city. There in the train station itself, Priyanka's new husband began talking to another man whom he introduced as a friend of his. After the men finished their conversation, Priyanka's husband told her that she was to wait with the man for a moment while he went to drink some tea. "When I said that I too want to drink tea" (meaning that she wanted to go with him), "he hit me and said, 'What do you need a drink for?!' [*Emi thaguthavu?*] and then he left." Priyanka tried to wait for her husband to return, but the man she'd been left with told her that her husband had just sold her to him and that she must come with him now. When Priyanka refused, he caught hold of the long black braid at the back of her neck and hit her again. She struggled with him, broke loose, and made an escape. Among the hundreds of sex workers I have met and interviewed since 2009, stories like Priyanka's are by no means unheard of. However, experiences like Priyanka's of being tricked by a lover, husband, or family member and sold into sex work were a minority. A few girls who ran away from home for reasons other than romance have also recounted to me having been picked up in train stations and physically forced into prostitution.

Later, as the escaped Priyanka sat alone crying in this strange new city, a group of sex workers associated with a nearby sex workers' community-based organization (CBO) found her. She told them that she had no one, and she called them "aunties" and asked them to take her along with them. They ferried her to the CBO office. Priyanka told me, "The Big Madam [meaning the CBO president] is a good person." She continued, "When she saw me, she said, 'Come with me. It will be like this: I will take care of you and you will not face any problem.' Until now there is no problem. She is taking good care of me." What this arrangement meant was that the sex worker CBO, which ostensibly worked in part to end sex trafficking, effectively introduced Priyanka to sex work after she narrowly escaped from being

sold into what many observers would term “modern slavery.” The CBO sex workers told Priyanka that she could better subsist on the earnings in this profession than any other. The CBO president assigned her to a woman whom Priyanka began calling *atthamma* (father’s sister and mother-in-law). Clients phoned her *atthamma*, and she invited them over to purchase sex from Priyanka or herself. Sometimes Priyanka and her *atthamma* went out to work at bus stops together. Priyanka had been working for the CBO *atthamma* for two years when I met and interviewed her. Whenever the police caught them, Priyanka told me, representatives would come from the CBO office to negotiate their release by telling the police that they “belong to them” and that they “work for the doctors,” in reference to their status as an HIV-prevention project with government backing. These connections shielded them from police interference.

When Priyanka found herself dodging a trafficker and stranded in the Secunderabad train station, crying and alone, why had the CBO not transported her back to her parents in her hometown? Why had that not been the moment when her life transformed again—when she returned to something resembling the more valorized Telugu female life course that sex workers often referred to as belonging to “house women” (*intlo unna aadavallu*)? Here, clearly, was a victim of trafficking even by stringent definitions, and yet, crucially, Priyanka had been found in that preliminary moment before ever being forced to perform sex.

The CBO sex workers had also stumbled upon Priyanka before she learned of sex work’s quick and lucrative earnings and well before she had formed what I elsewhere refer to as the *aalawaatu* (habit) of sex work (Walters 2016b). Why not return Priyanka back to what sex workers often refer to as a “family girl” (*family ammayi*, in a mix of Telugu and English), especially given that the CBO claimed to prevent anyone below eighteen from entering the profession? Priyanka seemed to present them a valuable opportunity to score a trafficking rescue.

To me this initially appeared a liminal moment. Yet neither the CBO women nor Priyanka had equivocated. Upon encountering a crying Priyanka in the station, the CBO held no powwow of deliberation to consider a plan for safely delivering Priyanka back to her former life. Instead, Priyanka’s future seemed overdetermined, and they immediately introduced her to commercial sex. In retelling her story to me, Priyanka did not pause at this juncture in the narrative to explain how and why this crucial decision had been made—why it was that the CBO president and she had chosen the path of sex work over an attempt at return. She did not mention even considering a journey back to her family or a moment of looking back over her shoulder before choosing sex work as the better option. The option to return did not seem to have occurred to her. It was not, effectively, an option.

The lack of equivocation reveals a dimension of female precarity and the propulsion toward sex work: a shared set of expectations about the thin line that circumscribes a “virtuous,” marriageable Telugu girl and delineates her from a “spoiled” girl who has lost her virginal exchange value. In her mind, Priyanka’s fate as a sex worker had been sealed when she cast her lot with the man whom she

married and who eventually sold her. It was the very fact that she had made a choice *for herself* rather than allowing her parents to choose her future for her by arranging a marriage on her behalf that was the crucial moment at which Priyanka crossed over from the magical protection of her status within "family life" to the inevitability of sex work. Since she had eloped without their permission, her parents would no longer welcome her back. Priyanka told me: "They said, 'You better not come back to us.' My mother is not a good person. She says that she will kill me. None of my people are good natured. They are saying that they will kill me if I go back. My father, mother and others are not good people. That is why I am staying here [in sex work]." It was the very choice to violate what her community regarded as the right of her parents to direct the use of her sexuality that Priyanka considered her point of no return, marking her as permanently other than respectable. It occurred well before the choice to sell sex. Thus, being sold by her husband to a stranger was not the ultimate reason that Priyanka never looked back to try to recoup her former life. In her mind, it was her earlier choice to spurn her parents' prerogative to deploy her sexuality through a marriage of their choosing that mattered to the further journey into sex work with the CBO women after her husband's treachery.

What my informants understood to be the moral overlap between women who take control of their own sexuality by falling in love, eloping, or running away and sex work is crystalized in Kondamma's story. When Kondamma (a girl from a poor Dalit family in a small town) was in fifth grade, her father, a quarry worker, suffered a heart attack. Her mother tried to support him in his recovery and the rest of the family by working for a gas company. Kondamma soon decided to drop out of school to add her extra earnings to her mother's by working alongside her at the gas company. There Kondamma fell in love with a coworker, and although she was still a teenager and unmarried, she started having sex with her boyfriend (a highly unusual experience among my informants, who had largely remained virgins until marriage):

We used to meet now and then secretly in parks and in deserted places like old vacant buildings. But he never gifted or paid me anything as a lover. At the same time, my family situation remained the same, and I shared my problems with my close friends. One of my friends in the gas company introduced me to an aunty who convinced me to enter into sex work for extra money. I thought that I could support my parents besides getting good food. I also thought that I could wear good clothes to impress my lover. That was the first time I earned a thousand rupees in one day and that was how I started to entertain clients now and then. My lover got suspicious of my behavior and questioned me about it in front of many people. People started talking about me. When my mother learned about me, she hit me like anything but then kept quiet because of our poor financial condition. I entered sex work completely because I was anyway stamped as a *lanja* [whore].

Kondamma's story is instructive because of the extenuating "problems" she shared with her friends, which are perhaps not immediately apparent to readers. She and her mother were both working to support their family and seemed to be getting by in their small town. Yet what mattered more to her trajectory than her economic situation was that her friends discovered that she had begun having sex with her boyfriend. The news of this transgression ("crossing over") was enough to hasten a propositioning aunty to Kondamma's side. And once Kondamma had but dabbled in sex work, the resulting rumors that her boyfriend spread about her were enough to propel her into full-time sex work, and she soon quit her low-paid job in the gas company. Like so many other sex workers I interviewed, Kondamma deployed the term "anyway" in retelling her story. "Anyway" she'd been having sex with her boyfriend; the algebraic inevitability resulted in her consequent entrance to sex work. Kondamma's story illustrates the expected outcome of female waywardness in a widespread Telugu moral imagination.

Sex Work as Self-Reliance and Self-Determination

As I discuss at length elsewhere (Walters 2016a), many women who resort to sex work use it as a means of actively contending with the consequences of opting out or being forced out of monogamy. Such women use it resourcefully to make a living for themselves and their dependents. Sex workers regularly told me that it was not just better earnings but self-determination that appealed to them in sex work. In South India, most sex workers decided for themselves if and when they would work based on many personal factors. If they received clients via an aunty, they usually had the prerogative to decline work when it did not suit their schedule. I was surprised to learn how much sex work in Hyderabad occurs in daylight hours rather than at night. The flexibility of sex work left women able to work around family members' school and work schedules. Some could even hide their work by leaving home to "shop," engaging in a brief paid encounter, and returning home without having been gone long enough to rouse curiosity. Like gig economy workers, they might choose to work only when they needed extra cash in addition to other forms of work. Except in rare circumstances, there was almost always opportunity to earn; work was theirs to refuse. Sex work offered many women a (stigmatized) security in contrast to the precarity of pathivratha encompassment.

Most women's explanations of how they had entered sex work seemed straightforward enough to them: they encountered financial problems (sometimes severe, sometimes not), usually due to a husband's or father's death, inability or unwillingness to support them, and a friend or acquaintance recommended sex work as the best means of getting by or even ahead. These kinds of stories accounted for about three-fourths of the more than 130 sex workers whom I have interviewed. Stories of financial calculus and women who claimed to have entered sex work because other work "does not pay" are so common that they became unremarkable to the sex workers themselves. Witness the remarkable consistency in the

following examples of how these women turned to sex work for the self-reliance it offered.

Saiamma was a thirty-year-old woman with a tenth-grade education from a Reddy (privileged caste) family. Saiamma's parents married her at the age of sixteen to a man who worked for Hyderabad city as a road and drainage cleaner. Her husband and his family lied to her family about his position with the city before they fixed her match with him, claiming he had a loftier job working in an office. They also lied that he was a bachelor. In truth, he was already married, and Saiamma became his second wife when she married him—a situation that became technically illegal for Hindus in India only in 1956 but remains somewhat in practice. He also proved to be a drunkard, and he often hit Saiamma while demanding she bring money from her parents, something that her parents could seldom afford. After two years of marriage, Saiamma gave birth to a girl just as her husband lost his government job due to his involvement with organized crime. When we spoke, Saiamma's husband was in Cherlapalli jail. Saiamma at first began work as a laborer at a blade factory called the Topaz Company. At the factory, men regularly pestered her for sexual favors. The salary that the company paid her was not enough to sustain her household. She felt that she could not continue to support herself and her small daughter on the wages that she earned, and so she started trading sex for money in addition to her wage labor at the factory. She explained, "I started it myself. No one suggested that I enter sex work. I just watched women in sex work at the Topaz Company and learned about it from them."

Durga was twenty-two when I interviewed her in 2013. She had a ninth-grade education and came from a Dalit family in rural Telangana. Her parents had married her a few years before at the age of nineteen to an auto-rickshaw driver, and she gave birth to a daughter a year later. She was happy with her husband, but in 2012 he died in a road accident. At that time, Durga was pregnant with her second child. After her husband's death, she stayed with her mother and brother, where she gave birth to a son. Her brother and sister-in-law began to feel irritated with the extra burden she posed to their household, and Durga's parents-in-law offered her no refuge. She was left with no money and insufficient food to be able to nurse her newborn son. She was offered a job as a sales girl in a textile shop with a salary of two thousand rupees plus a 10 percent commission on the sales, but she turned the job down because she could not sustain herself and her two children on such meager wages.

At that point, Durga met an aunty who was visiting relatives in Durga's town when she became friendly with Durga. As their friendship developed, Durga confided her troubles to the aunty and asked her to locate a job for her in Hyderabad, the nearest big city. The aunty in turn suggested that Durga enter into sex work in her home-based brothel in Hyderabad. At first, the idea scared Durga. But because of her uncomfortably tight situation at home with a brother who was angrily begrudging her support, she decided to try it just once. "So that I could feed my children well," she explained. Leaving her children in the village with her mother,

Durga came to Hyderabad along with the aunty and tried sex work for three days. She was immediately and pleasantly surprised to discover how much money she had made even after sharing her income with the aunty. And so Durga rented a one-bedroom apartment in the Kukatpalli area of Hyderabad for fifteen hundred rupees a month and moved in her children. Durga also brought her mother out of her brother's home—where Telugu ideals suggest she ought to ideally remain. Durga has secretly supported herself, her mother, and her two children ever since with no man in the house through her earnings from sex work.

In Meena's case, sex work offered her a means to thrive after she chose to leave her alcoholic and abusive husband. Along with her three children, she secretly boarded a bus in their hometown in West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, and departed for Hyderabad. Once there, she realized that working one full-time job would not suffice to support the three of them. The year was 2000, and Meena was then a thirty-year-old illiterate woman from one of the many Telugu agricultural castes. At first, she sought out construction work (*taapi pani*). The foreman offered to pay her sixty rupees, at the time worth about seventy-five U.S. cents, for a full day of physical labor. This was then entirely typical pay for unskilled female labor in the booming city, but it was not enough for Meena and her children to subsist. After a few days of *taapi pani*, one of Meena's fellow workers said to her, "How long can we work like this? Let's go to Secunderabad. Let's see if anyone falls." With this elliptical invitation, she took Meena to the bus depot near the city's main train station where men pick up women for paid sex, and she showed her how to find a customer and bargain for a rate.

That day, instead of spending hours carrying bricks on their heads, Meena and her new friend together provided the same customer with sex. He paid each of them two hundred rupees for their services, and Meena went home with almost as much money as she would have made in four full days of *taapi pani*. The next day, skipping the detour to the construction site, she headed directly back to the same spot in the bus depot with her coworker. There, Meena got picked up by a man who asked her if she wanted to go for a movie. They bargained out a rate of two hundred rupees for the date and went off together to a dark theater. Afterward, Meena's customer bought her two kilos of ripe mangoes to take home with her and then asked whether she had eaten her main meal of rice yet that day (*annam tinnaavaa*). When she said no, he took her to Alpha Hotel near the train station and ordered a chicken biryani for the two of them to share. In addition to her two-hundred-rupee fee, Meena went home with India's favorite fruit for her children and with her belly full of Hyderabad's most prized cuisine. Meena, who had left her unsupportive husband in the village to seek sustenance in the city, never returned to construction work.

Many Telugu sex workers use their earnings to amass wealth, buy gold, rent nice apartments, acquire land in their natal villages, send their children to private schools, provide dowries for their sisters and daughters, offer gifts and large loans to their family members, and buy the affections of their once frosty extended

relatives. Sex work enabled some of my interlocutors to transcend circumstances of abandonment, utter rejection, and abject poverty. While the consequences of participation in sex work were highly complex and often challenging, those who navigated the social and physical risks well were able to leverage their careers into lives of relative comfort and even social standing.

Conclusion: Out of Bounds

In my interlocutors' retellings of their lives, once a woman had crossed her Lakshmana rekha, whether by eloping, engaging in romance, or being abandoned or widowed, there was no need to look over her shoulder as there could be no ready return. That line had been crossed, pathivratha respectability was now behind her, and a new need for economic self-reliance lay in front of her. Labor, wages, and the cost of living are a large but only partial window into Telugu women's exit from the normative expectations of marriage. While it is extremely difficult for a working-class Telugu woman to support her family in Hyderabad on the wages available to her through legally recognized forms of labor, any simple calculation of more cash for less work in commercial sex misses the simultaneous and intertangled workings of gender, marital status, and romantic love that many sex workers index when recounting their histories. Economics alone obscures Telugu notions of what it means to be a woman without support (see also Kapadia 1994). Stories of crossing out of bounds that are understood as predisposing a woman to sex work in turn complicate any merely materialist explanation of sex work as a straightforward strategy to cope with poverty. The mythical figure of the goddess Sita, the loyal but tragically suspect wife of Lord Ram in the Ramayana, maintained its saliency for my interlocutors in modeling Telugu female monogamy and the precarity of female reputation. Indeed, reputational precarity figured as prominently in stories of beginning sex work as financial precarity.

The precarity of marriage would seem to suggest that its inverse, sex work, may be quite common among Telugu women, and many of my interlocutors indicated as much. I often asked sex workers with whom I spoke to imagine the neighborhoods where they lived and the women whom they knew there and to estimate the number of women there who sold sexual services at least occasionally. Estimates ranged a great deal, with answers from "very few" to 75 percent, but on average, sex workers suggested to me that more than 25 percent of the women who lived in their urban working-class neighborhoods sold sexual services at least occasionally.

For those women who succeeded at the business and managed to financially secure themselves and their families in the process, the loss of pathivratha reputation and the crossing the Lakshmana rekha meant traversing other forms of encompassment as well. Some left behind gendered expectations about moving about at night, drinking alcohol like a man, speaking like a man, dictating decisions like a man, amassing wealth, and supporting one's parents like a man. For others, success in sex work allowed them to traverse classed expectations as

they hobnobbed with politicians, turned down the romantic advances of men in their own class, made their own romantic choices, or snubbed the patronizing interference of middle-class work colleagues. In this sense, sex work acted as both a seemingly inevitable outcome of pathivratha precarity and an unexpected means to redefining one's own purview and possibilities.

Once a woman crossed outside the protection of domestic honor and marital security, she found herself in largely uncharted territory. While for some this left them vulnerable to being trafficked for sex work, for others it became the very grounds on which to resist many of the normative expectations of gender, class, and caste that otherwise constrained their everyday lives. They harbored, housed, and fed family members. They provided loans to their relatives. They paid rent, private school fees, dowries, and wedding costs. For some, earning, saving, and paying out like men also prompted them to transgress into the timings, spaces, and linguistic registers inhabited by men. For a few, it meant dictating decisions to their male partners like a husband might to a wife or demanding a show of respect from *peddavallu* (people of higher socioeconomic status). The increasing precarity of pathivratha marriage put other ideals at risk by extension. As women pushed or were pushed past the Lakshmana rekha, what had once seemed a deep abyss between genders proved far easier to traverse than the myth of Sita predisposed them to imagine.

Acknowledgments

I have taken sections of this chapter from my 2016 article in *Signs* titled "The Stickiness of Sex Work: Pleasure, Habit, and Intersubstantiality in South India."

NOTES

1. For example, physically locating and memorializing the events of the Ramayana on contemporary Indian soil is one of the driving preoccupations of Hindu fundamentalists, who now dominate India's parliament.
2. See, for example, Illaiah (1994), Nuckolls (1993), and Ramberg (2014), among others, for accounts of myths that organize relations in South Indian *avarna* (oppressed) communities.
3. See Mies (2012) for an account of how remaining cocooned may produce other forms of economic disadvantage.
4. This claim may invite accusations of figuring Telugu women as the invented foil of privileged white feminist women, as elucidated by Mohanty (1988, 2003), among others. But to analyze a shared coherence is not to deny the idiosyncrasies of individual experience, and to analyze the dynamics of female precarity among Telugu speakers is by no means to deny it among women in Europe and North America.
5. About two-thirds of these women hailed from caste backgrounds other than Adivasi or Dalit. These caste proportions among the women I encountered in my research were roughly congruent with the caste proportions of women in sex work among the large survey of cisgender female sex workers in this region reported in Dandona, Dandona, and Kumar (2006).

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6. The sentiment that losing a husband makes a woman free-for-all apparently troubles more than just the poorer, Telugu women who were my informants. Several sociological studies have found that one of the primary consequences of divorce (a legal resolution to separation that is more typical of wealthy Indian women than poor Indian women, who may recouple but seldom seek a writ of divorce) is that divorced women see a stark increase in the amount of sexual harassment they face in both their workplaces and their social lives (e.g., Amato 1994; Mehta 1975; Pothan 1986).
 7. All names have been changed.