

Violence, Agency and Freedom of Movement: Issues Emerging out of the Lata Sisters' Disappearance

Susanna Trnka

Abstract

This paper analyses the Indo-Fijian public's responses to the suspected kidnapping and possible murders of three Indo-Fijian sisters from the Rakiraki area. It considers some of the cultural dynamics that shape young Indo-Fijian women's domestic lives. Focusing on the disappearances of Aashika, Renuka, and Radhika Lata in June 2005. The paper examines how middle-class Indo-Fijians imaginatively re-constructed the events surrounding the fate of the three girls. My interest is in both what the events surrounding their disappearance as well as the public's speculations over them tell us about familial and community concerns over young women's freedom of movement. I also consider related issues of women's agency and measures for empowering young women against violence.

This paper focuses on the tragic disappearances of four young Indo-Fijian women from Rakiraki, Fiji as part of a broader discussion of gender dynamics in Indo-Fijian families and communities. Through an analysis of media accounts and the public's responses to the 2005 disappearance of three sisters, Aashika, Renuka, and Radhika Lata, and the earlier 2002 disappearance of their friend Vandhana Jeet, I consider some of the cultural dynamics that shape young Indo-Fijian women's domestic lives, particularly familial and community concerns over women's freedom of movement and related issues of young women's agency and the safeguarding of young women from violence.

News of the Rakiraki case dominated the Fijian media from the first reports of the Lata sisters' disappearance on 28 June 2005 up to the day when the police called off the search for their bodies on 13 July 2005;

since then there have been continuing media updates on the resulting court cases. Over the course of those two and a half weeks, the events of the girls' disappearances captivated many members of the Fijian public. During this period, I was conducting interviews about the proposed '*Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill 2005*' in Sigatoka, Suva, Nausori and Rakiraki. While I did not set out to talk about the Rakiraki case, I found that my discussions with NGO workers, civil servants, and members of the public were often punctuated with lengthy speculations about the Lata sisters' disappearance.¹ I recorded opinions about the case from over thirty people, predominantly middle-class Indo-Fijians. My analysis here is concerned with cultural dynamics associated with gender as they were reflected in both the events surrounding the Lata sisters' disappearance and in how middle-class Indo-Fijians in the Suva-Nausori area imaginatively reconstructed those events.

Initial Reports of the Case

The events surrounding the Rakiraki disappearances, as they were widely portrayed in the media in the first few days following the Lata sisters' ill-fated departure, are as follows: On the morning of 26 June 2005, Aashika Sherin Lata (age nineteen), Renuka Roshni Lata (age eighteen), and Radhika Roshni Lata (age seventeen), left their parents' home in the small settlement of Naria outside of Rakiraki ostensibly to go on a picnic. Accompanied to nearby Malake Island by their neighbour and family friend, Dip Chand (age forty-two), the girls were expected home in the afternoon. They didn't return. Their mother Maureen Lata later said that by early evening she was concerned over their continuing absence. According to Mrs Lata, the morning after the excursion the girls' father Vijendra Kumar reported his daughters as missing to the police and then went out looking for them. 'After checking the area for some time, my husband saw Mr Chand alone in the boat in deep water about midday on Monday', she stated. 'When my husband asked him about our daughters, he said that some Fijian men in a boat assaulted him and took my daughters with them' (Gopal, 2005a).

A police investigation ensued and soon it was revealed that another

¹ While I travelled up to Rakiraki and visited neighbouring areas during the time of the search, I did not speak to anyone directly connected to the Lata or Chand families or involved in the murder investigation. My focus was on public speculation about the girls' disappearances and what it reveals about notions of gender and agency, rather than the tragic events themselves.

girl from the same area, Vandhana Pritika Jeet, who had been a friend of Aashika (the eldest of the Lata sisters), had likewise disappeared from Rakiraki a little more than two years prior. The last sighting of Vandhana had been by Aashika, who had reported seeing Vandhana getting into an unknown man's car.

Dip Chand spent the next few days accompanying the police on their search for the sisters' captors, pointing out the location where he and the girls had allegedly been overpowered. Their assailants were alternatively described in *The Fiji Times* (28 June 2005, 29 June 2005, and 30 June 2005) as 'some people', 'some Fijian men', 'several Fijian men', and 'three Fijian men in a boat'. We cannot know what else Chand told the police or Kumar, but news reports did not reveal any other identifying features of the alleged kidnappers.

Over the next few days, more details about Chand and his relationship to young women in the area were revealed. I will come back to these later in this paper. First, however, I wish to consider how members of the Indo-Fijian public reacted to these preliminary news reports, beginning with their responses to Chand's allegations of having been attacked by 'some Fijian men'.

A Failed Narrative

Chand's vague descriptions of his assailants were not accidental. Whether he was fully conscious of it or not, by invoking generalized descriptions of 'some Fijian men', Chand was tapping into the highly volatile, racially based images that had circulated through Indo-Fijian communities during the 2000 coup. During the months of intense political instability that followed 19 May 2000, violence spread throughout Fiji. The Indo-Fijian community in particular was subject to a range of assaults including physical attacks, sexual assaults, muggings and harassment, as well as having their homes, schools, places of worship and businesses looted and destroyed (for a detailed discussion of Indo-Fijian responses to these events, see Trnka, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). Simultaneously, stories of how 'Fijian men' were attacking Indo-Fijian women swept through Indo-Fijian communities. Such attacks did indeed happen but given the instability at the time it was hard, if not impossible, to systematically collect women's testimonies of attacks or to gather evidence of them. Questions remain as to how many attacks happened, against whom they took place, and who the assailants were. Without a systematic collection of testimonies, be they police records, reports from NGO's, or medical files, the extent of the violence cannot be ascertained.

In one of the few analyses of the extent of coup-related violence, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC)² organized a study in August 2001 to examine the impact of the 2000 coup on women. Starting in June 2000, FWCC staff undertook fact-finding missions to the areas most affected by the violence of the coup. They noted that 'race motivated' sexual violence against Indian women had occurred in Muaniweni and Baulevu (in Tailevu) and Dreketi and Batiri (on Vanua Levu), but did not specify the numbers of women affected other than to state that 'there were several cases of such rapes' (FWCC, 2001: 11). The study also surveyed 414 women around Fiji about their experiences during and immediately following the coup and found that of this group, one woman reported being raped and another five reported experiencing other forms of sexual assault and attempted rape.

During the 2000 coup, I was conducting anthropological fieldwork on religious practices and community relations among Indo-Fijian residents in the Suva-Nausori area. Due to the violence, I also collected accounts of physical attacks. Among those I interviewed about coup-related violence were long-term residents of Nausori who had relatives in the interior where intensive violence was occurring, as well as women and men who had just fled the interior to resettle in Nausori. I recorded over a dozen stories of violent muggings, physical assaults, rapes, and attempted rapes that they had either personally been involved in, or knew of happening to relatives, friends, and neighbours. Only one of these was reported in the news media. I also noted that as these stories circulated orally through the community, passed along from one narrator to another, details were added or amended to the point where it was difficult to know if people were recounting the same incident or describing different events (Trnka, 2002a, in press a).

At the same time, domestic violence against Indo-Fijian women and girls was also escalating. According to the FWCC study (2001) as well as a Save the Children report on the impact of the coup upon children and families (Carling and Peacock-Taylor, 2001: 9), the prevalence and severity of domestic violence have both increased since 19 May 2000.³ Stories

² The FWCC is a NGO that provides counselling and other support services, including legal and medical assistance, to women and children who are victims of violence. The FWCC is also active in community education and public advocacy around issues of gender-based violence.

³ The most recent of these studies was conducted in 2001. More research needs to be undertaken on whether or not this trend has continued. For more on domestic violence in Fiji, see Lateef (1990, 1992).

of domestic violence were not, however, similarly circulated through Indo-Fijian communities. In part, this was because domestic violence is less openly spoken about. More importantly, in a time of intense political crises, inter-ethnic attacks were part of a political campaign to force Indo-Fijians out of their homes, off their land, and out of Fiji and thus commanded community attention. Furthermore, narrative re-telling of inter-ethnic attacks became a commonly employed discursive technique of 'making sense' of the inter-ethnic tensions that were widely debated as being a possible contributing factor to the coup (Trnka, 2002a, in press a).

One characteristic that was shared by almost all of these narratives of inter-ethnic attacks was the same vague description of the assailants who were always 'Fijian men'. As I have argued elsewhere (Trnka 2002a, in press a), during a time of intense social and political turmoil, the widespread circulation of these narratives established the figure of almost *any* young 'Fijian man' as physically dangerous to Indo-Fijian women. In a process similar to that described by Mary Weismantel (2001) for the Peruvian Andes, narratives of the 'ethnic other' expand upon the experiences of real-life, inter-ethnic violence to the point where an entire category of persons, white men in the Andes and 'the Fijians' in Fiji, become an almost mythic figure of violence and immorality. In Fiji, the circulation of such stories receded when the violence died down (Trnka, 2002a), but the memories of what 'some Fijian men' might be capable of are harder to erase. It is these memories and the narratives that popularized them that Chand's story attempted to revive. By revealing nothing except the race and gender of his assailants, Chand tried to evoke the image of 'Fijian men' as a means of deflecting attention away from himself and onto the Fijian men living in and visiting the area.

As I interviewed Indo-Fijians from around Suva and Nausori, many of them spoke with great interest about the Lata sisters' disappearance. Everyone I spoke to was, however, highly sceptical of Chand's story. 'I think that fellow Chand's got something to do with it', an older man told me. 'He probably sold them to the yachties, to some Americans', he speculated. Others shared his misgivings. The primary reason why they questioned Chand's initial explanation was, they told me, that the purpose of his excursion with the Lata sisters was preposterous. A man like him should not be going on a picnic with three girls in the first place.

The news media initially described Chand as 'a relative' of the girls, later amending this to 'a distant relative... whom they called *aaja* (grandfather)' (Gopal, 2005a, 2005b; 'Three...', 2005). Soon, however, it was established that Chand knew the family well, not because he was related to them, but because he lived next door and was a family friend. It was

also revealed that he was only forty-two years old, making him an unlikely candidate for the name of 'grandfather', as many of my interlocutors told me.⁴ 'He's not a relative', an older woman stated, 'so what is he doing with these girls?' 'Did you notice they didn't mention his relationship to them, just that he was a relative in the first news story?' one young man pointed out to me, 'I think the public rang up [the newspaper] and wanted to know what their relationship is, so the next day they said the girls called him *aaja* but he's forty-two', he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

The dubious nature of Chand's relationship with the girls heightened suspicions against him. What was missing from Chand's story was a socially legitimate male figure, in other words a close male blood relative, who was there to ensure the girls' safety. As only a friend of the family, Chand could not occupy the position of a legitimate guardian.

The girls' father also refused to back Chand's allegations of an inter-ethnic attack. In an interview with Kumar published five days after Chand was first questioned, Kumar offered a different explanation for his daughters' disappearances. 'The area in which they were allegedly taken is frequented by yachts', Kumar stated. 'I cannot rule out the possibility of them getting caught in a wrong deal' (Gopal, 2005c). (The yachts in question belong primarily to American and Australian tourists with whom the islands near Rakiraki are a popular spot.) Elsewhere in the article, we are informed that Kumar thought that his daughters might have been kidnapped, murdered or sold to someone, suggesting the possibility of them being caught up in a foreign ring trafficking young women. Kumar later explicitly suggested that he thought it was Chand who had sold his daughters ('Police...', 2005).

To many in the Indo-Fijian public, Kumar's story of foreigners in yachts absconding with his daughters carried more credibility than Chand's explanation. In the days that followed, local callers to Hindi-language talkback radio discussed a helicopter having been sighted in the area on the day of the girls' disappearance. Callers pointed out that since no one in Fiji, including the military and the police, owns a helicopter, this would indicate a premeditated, foreign plot to kidnap the girls. Other residents, however, disputed the helicopter sighting, leading to increasing speculation over who else might have been involved.

At the same time, however, the police began to question Kumar about his own possible involvement. Two weeks into the investigation, the police picked up Kumar and interrogated him. Their suspicions reso-

⁴ *Aaja* refers specifically to one's paternal grandfather.

nated with what my Indo-Fijian interlocutors had to say. Repeatedly I was told that if it was strange for Chand to take the girls picnicking, it was stranger still for Kumar to let him. 'Any father would know better', an older man explained to me, 'so why did he let them go?' The police appeared to be following up on similar lines of inquiry. In explaining their decision to question Kumar, Divisional Police Commander Western Senior Superintendent Permal Naidu was quoted as stating '... [W]e need to know why he sent his daughters with a man who was not related to them' ('Police...', 2005).

Among the Indo-Fijians I spoke with, a prevalent explanation was that Kumar had sold the girls using Chand as a go-between. As a labourer at the local sugar mill and the father of four daughters and no sons, Kumar was not a wealthy man. Many of my interlocutors speculated that his poverty had driven him to do it. 'Some people will do anything for money', an older woman told me.

Public commentary thus implicitly shifted from focusing solely on the danger of 'strangers' (for instance, non blood kin) to include concerns over the misuse of *parental* power and authority. The suggestions that Kumar had sold his daughters implied that not only do 'strangers' pose a danger to young girls, but also that their fathers might be an even greater threat to their safety and security. Public speculation centred on what could have possibly driven the man who should be ultimately responsible for protecting his daughters to betray them in this way.

In contrast, Chand's motivations towards the girls were not debated by those whom I interviewed. Chand was consistently described as a sexual predator, even when people thought it was likely he had sold the girls. One middle-aged woman was very explicit about this when she related to me what she thought had happened to the Lata sisters. 'The parents are involved,' she said. 'Do you think Chand sold them?' I asked, alluding to the rumours. 'Chand took them to the island,' she leaned forward and whispered to me, so that my two young daughters who were playing nearby could not overhear, 'and *raped* them, and *then* sold them.'

In a highly conservative religious community where divorce is frowned upon, the fact that Chand had lived with three women (some newspaper reports claimed four), added weight to the public depictions of his assumed immoral character and sexual depravity. These details of Chand's personal life also fuelled the questions that the Indo-Fijian public asked about Kumar. 'What kind of a father lets his daughters go about with a man who has had three wives?' the middle aged woman bluntly asked me.

Through their imaginative speculations, the narratives put together

by many Indo-Fijians I interviewed converged upon a similar story line, namely that the girls had been taken by Chand with their father's permission, that they had most likely been violated by Chand, and then that they were sold for profit. Kumar had been motivated by money, Chand was drawn into it through his sexual lust as well as his greed, and foreign agents were behind the whole thing.

What was missing from my interlocutors' musings over the sisters was any acknowledgement of the girls' agency. In a later news report, Chand was said to have used bribes such as a good catch of fish or an exciting picnic trip to 'lure' the young women away from their families ('Police...', 2005). Even so, there was little thought given, in either the news media or the public imagination, as to why the young women were motivated to accept his offers. Indeed, during the two weeks that the story was in the headlines, the fact that Chand might have bribed them was the only suggestion I saw in the media or heard from Indo-Fijians about the girls' as *actors* in this situation. This still gives us little insight into answering how the girls might have perceived these encounters, what kinds of factors may have made Chand's offers appealing, and most importantly, what can be done to strengthen girls' rights and control over their bodies to ensure that fewer young women will be similarly victimized.⁵

Throughout my discussions and interviews with Indo-Fijians in Suva and Nausori about the Lata sisters' case, I was unaware of any debate in Indo-Fijian communities there (or, through the national media, elsewhere in Fiji) over these questions. Instead, my interlocutors expressed a widely held cultural assumption that Indian girls' whereabouts are, and should be, managed by their parents, and ultimately by their fathers. This is in accordance with Indo-Fijian cultural values that hold the husband and father of the family primarily responsible for other family members' protection (Carswell, 2003). But in the Lata sisters' case, Kumar failed in this responsibility when he granted Chand access to the girls. No one I spoke with, however, suggested that Kumar had been simply foolish or misguided in trusting Chand.⁶ In general, granting respon-

⁵ For more on women's agency and in particular its relationship to women's activism in Fiji see Leckie (2002).

⁶ This was, however, implied by a statement put out by the influential Hindu religious organization the Shree Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha. Referring to the Lata sisters' disappearance, the Sabha issued a warning to families not to entrust their children to non-kin. 'We see that parents and guardians easily place a lot of trust in people who do not have blood relations to them', the Sabha president, Surendra Kumar told reporters (Gopal, 2005d).

sibility for the protection and care of three teenage daughters to an unrelated man was considered too egregious to be considered a mistake.

The opinions expressed by my interlocutors, as well as others interviewed in the media or calling into talk back radio shows, often hinged on the motivations of two men who should have been in conflict with one another – Chand whose intentions towards the unrelated girls, they said, could not have possibly been honourable, and Kumar who never should have agreed to allowing his daughters to leave the house with a man who was not a close blood relative. The only way to reconcile the contradictions between their positions was to assume that the two men were in collusion with one another.

The Domestic Lives of Young Indo-Fijian Women

Viewed in the broader context of Indo-Fijian familial life, the public's responses to Chand's story involved cultural perceptions of males as inherently predatory and of young women as vulnerable and in need of appropriate male protection. Such protection, moreover, was viewed as necessarily coming from legitimate family members who, due to their kin ties, are considered not to be sexual threats against women and are therefore seen to make more appropriate guardians than non-kin. Concerns over sexual violence, as well as over consensual sexual activity, result in much attention being paid to the movements of young women, especially those who are unmarried or newly married (Lateef, 1990; for more on familial restrictions of Indo-Fijian women's movement, see also Adinkrah, 1999: 1300-1301; Carswell in Leckie, 2002: 171; Gill, 1988: 98; Trnka, 2002a: 149).

Conflict between young women and their families over their restricted movement is in fact a source of familial discord. When I first conducted research in Suva in 1999, as a foreign woman in my late twenties I found no trouble befriending Indian women of a similar age who asked me to accompany them shopping or to the cinema. Many of them commented upon the intense scrutiny their movements outside of the home garner from their families. I quickly learned that my presence and willingness to accommodate their requests allowed them to instigate trips outside of the home on the excuse that they were helping out a visiting academic. For example, one new acquaintance of mine, a 22-year old university student, once asked me to take her to the movies. She picked the film, the time, and even, with what seemed to me like great deliberation, chose our seats. Following the movie, we walked past a young man who smiled and greeted us both before exiting the theatre. My new ac-

quaintance later revealed that the man was her boyfriend and that they had staged the meeting at the cinema in order to see one another, as he had been sitting in the row directly in front of us.

Obviously this young woman put a lot of care into planning her meeting, but there are other, more casual means for young women to meet with men. Work and education are both arenas where young men and women continually interact, as are religious events and shopping trips to town. It would also seem that abilities to control young women's movements are decreasing as women stay at school longer and more young women are employed outside of the home.⁷

Young women's movements are, however, not only constricted prior to marriage. Women who had recently undergone either arranged or love marriages remarked of their in-laws' attempts to control not only where they went out on their own, but also where and how often their husbands took them out. In one case, a new bride's mother-in-law and sister-in-law complained to me that after she came home from work, she and her husband would often want to go out instead of sitting at home with them. The conflict between them subsided when the bride had her first child and subsequently had little opportunity for going out. While negotiations over young women's roles in the household are nothing new, factors such as jobs, education, and the dissolution of the extended family, so that fewer new wives can expect to live with their husband's parents, increase the time women spend away from their husband's families and add to their parents-in-law's concerns.

One of the few researchers to focus specifically on young Indo-Fijian women's domestic lives, Shireen Lateef, has argued that the regulation of young Indo-Fijian women's mobility is based on the ideology of *purdah* which requires 'segregation of the sexes, the protection of women's sexuality, and the maintenance of family honour' (1990: 44). According to Lateef, in order to keep the family honour, parents and older siblings consider it essential that they ensure that unmarried daughters do not have sex prior to marriage (1990: 45). This leads them to restrict young women's access to unrelated men; a restriction that Lateef states is often enforced through domestic violence or threats of it (1990: 44).⁸

⁷ As noted by Leckie, in recent years 'education for girls has greater urgency, while young women may be encouraged to leave families for employment or to marry abroad' (2000: 199). Leckie also writes that 'education levels for all women in Fiji have increased during the past decade' (2000: 184).

⁸ Lateef's work is the only research that I am aware of that focuses directly on these questions. For historical analyses of the impact of *girit* and colonialism on

While Lateef's insights into why young women's freedom of movement is such a controversial issue for Indo-Fijian families go a long way in helping us understand Indo-Fijian family dynamics, her descriptions of the power of the patriarchal ideologies that underpin Indo-Fijian families are simplistic. While patriarchal values are hegemonic in Indo-Fijian culture, this does not suggest that their deployment cannot be impinged by other factors. Lateef (1990) does not, for example, allow for the negotiations of power that occur in most families or the connections of love and care that also govern relations between kin. Often drawing directly from the literature on North Indian family dynamics to describe Indo-Fijian domestic relations, Lateef (1990) outlines a very constrained, and analytically constraining, representation of relations between Indo-Fijian men and women. 'The essential characteristics', she writes, 'of the North Indian family are: male dominance and female subordination, males as the economic providers with females as the economic dependents, spatial and social confinement of women, male inheritance of family property and the treatment of females as reproducers of the male lineage and repositories of family honour' (Lateef, 1990: 44). Later in her paper, Lateef (1990) acknowledges that women resist their subordination. She, however, does not use women's perspectives of their power struggles to inform her model of the Indo-Fijian family.

Despite this shortcoming, Lateef (1990) provides some highly pertinent insights into the domestic lives of young women, particularly in her analysis of emerging trends that shaped 'less traditional' gender arrangements in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many of these trends, such as women's increasing participation in higher education and increasing employment rates, continue to influence gender relations in Fiji today. But we must add to these, another, increasingly significant phenomenon - the expansion of overseas marriages and chain migrations which have begun to impact upon 'traditional' gender norms.

Migration by marriage is hardly a new arrangement, particularly among young middle class and professional Indo-Fijian women (Lateef,

Indo-Fijian women's family relations and home lives, see Lal (1985), Shameem (1998), and Kelly (1997, 1993, 1991). Other accounts that deal, albeit less centrally, with Indo-Fijian women's domestic lives include my own work on Indo-Fijian women's domestic labour and religious practices (Trnka, 2004, 2002a, in press c, nd), as well as women's, and men's, responses to political violence (Trnka, 2002b, 2002c, 1999, in press a, in press b); Carswell (2003) on sugar cane farming families; and Leckie on women's labour, activism and Indo-Fijian responses to illness (for example Leckie, 2000, 2002, 2004).

1990, and on marriages to European men, Lateef, 1987) but it is one that has further intensified following the 2000 coup. While the evidence I collected in 2005 is limited to anecdotal accounts, there are widespread suggestions that young women have been increasingly encouraged to marry overseas as a means of migrating. In the panic following the 2000 coup, some of these marriages were hastily arranged without a great deal of attention to their possible negative consequences. While the political instability is no longer as intense as it was in 2000, according to local NGO workers this trend for overseas marriages has continued. It is furthermore a phenomenon whose frequency is commented upon by middle-class Indo-Fijians. For example, a young woman I interviewed in 2005 told me that now when a girl becomes engaged, the first question asked by her relatives and friends is whether the boy is from the USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand, in descending order of desirability.

Some of the young Indo-Fijian women I interviewed had also personally experienced pressure to consider overseas partners. They were, however, also concerned that an overseas marriage would increase the likelihood that they would be separated from support systems, such as nearby relations, if things should go wrong in their marriage. Many of my interlocutors stated that they knew one or more young women who had been married overseas without sufficient research into the prospective groom's background. A commonly told story among Indo-Fijians is of the overseas bride who found herself in a situation where the groom had a de facto spouse, she was expected to do all of the domestic work and, as one woman put it, was 'treated like a slave'. Not all overseas marriages, however, fit this picture and further research needs to be done on both the statistical rates of overseas marriages, the class-backgrounds of those involved, and the experiences of the women who take part in them.⁹

For the purpose of analyzing public interpretations of the Lata sisters' case, what is important here is that as the numbers of women migrating through marriage increase, so too do concomitant anxieties over the power of foreigners and foreign money, and over the dangers girls' parents face in losing their influence over their married daughters' living conditions. The Lata sisters' disappearances provided a focus for many of these concerns: in the public imagination, fears over women's movements and over who is ultimately responsible for safeguarding them were given

⁹ My initial research on this topic indicates that there are also a number of possible positive impacts that the desirability of overseas marriages may have on Indo-Fijian women's domestic relations, both in and outside of Fiji. This topic is, however, too broad to be discussed in detail here.

voice in speculations over the Lata sisters' disappearance. Growing public concern over fathers too eagerly giving their daughters away to overseas husbands who might treat them 'like slaves' may have been part of what fuelled public speculation over whether Kumar sold his daughters to foreign yacht owners and thus into a life of sexual slavery.

Widely held concerns over the possible dangers of overseas marriage should not, however, overshadow the very real concerns that some Indo-Fijian families, particularly those who live in poverty, face over the actual sale of young women and girls into sexual slavery. According to Fiji's Minister for Women and Social Welfare, Adi Asenaca Caucau, there is growing evidence of local trafficking of young girls in Fiji. In September 2005 at the Pacific Consultation on Addressing Violence Against Children, she stated that in addition to problems of child pornography, there is now the problem of fathers in Fiji selling their daughters to human traffickers ('Fiji...', 2005). Concerns over the actual sale of women to human traffickers in addition to the widely entertained prospects and fears of arranging migrations through overseas marriage were both part of what made the Lata sisters' disappearance salient for a range of Indo-Fijians who closely followed coverage of the case in the daily newspapers and on television.

Further Developments in the Case

A major revelation in the Rakiraki case occurred when three other girls in the Rakiraki area made statements to the police that Chand had repeatedly sexually assaulted them over the last two years. In total, they accused him of ten counts of rape, some of which had taken place in his home or in the girls' homes, and others during fishing and picnicking excursions to Malake Island. They also reported that Chand had threatened to kill the girls if they spoke out.

Confronted with the girls' statements, Chand, who up to this point had maintained his innocence and had been assisting the police in their search for the Lata sisters, confessed not only to the rapes but also to murdering the Lata sisters and disposing their bodies into the sea. A few days later newspaper reports cited that he had also confessed to the murder of a fourth girl, thought to be Vandhana Pritika Jeet. The media dubbed Chand the 'Rakiraki Ripper' and noted that he was the second known serial killer in Fiji (Gurudayal, 2005). In his later court appearances Chand would, however, retract his confessions.

Subsequent police investigations unearthed the remains of a body on Malake Island. Forensic tests were conducted to confirm whether the re-

mains are human, and if so, of those of Vandhana Jeet. Results indicated they were animal bones. Despite over two weeks of searching the police were unable to locate the Lata sisters' bodies or the anchor that Chand said he attached to them to carry their bodies down to the ocean floor. The result is that we still do not know the fates of the Lata sisters or of Vandhana Jeet.

Speaking out about Sex and Violence

The Lata sisters' disappearance dramatically reaffirms the importance of two strategies for empowering communities to combat violence, both of which are well-known to Fiji's women's rights groups, such as FWCC and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement.¹⁰ These strategies are empowering young women to talk openly about violence and empowering other community members to take responsibility for reporting violence against women.

On the same day the newspapers broke the story that Chand was accused of serial rape, *The Fiji Times* published a request by the police that 'children and other people who may be victims of sexual assault' step forward and inform the police and 'have confidence in the force's ability to help them' ('Victims...', 2005). A police spokeswoman, Superintendent Unaisi Vuniwaqa, was quoted stating that 'community members have to be open minded in reporting such cases if the perpetrators are to be brought to justice and the victims to be counselled and helped to overcome the trauma' ('Victims...', 2005). She then added that the police had no facilities for such counselling, but would try to arrange support through FWCC and the Social Welfare Department.

The fact that the police do not have adequate resources to help victims of trauma is an important issue, but it is not the only one that needs to be addressed. As noted by women's rights activists in Fiji, we also need to acknowledge the very significant social consequences of speaking out about rape. The three young girls who stepped forward faced community judgments over their behaviour. They risked potential shame through having had sex outside of marriage, even though it was due to rape. There was also the possible loss of familial respect if they, or their family members, were blamed for allowing Chand to get too close to them. As young, unmarried women, they furthermore risked the possibility of lowering their chances of securing a good marriage. Despite all of this, they did

¹⁰ The Fiji Women's Rights Movement is a feminist NGO that has been outspoken on a number of human rights issues including violence against women.

come forward in order to put a stop to Chand's violence. The question is, how could they, and others, have been encouraged to do so earlier?

In interviews and participant observation I carried out among Indo-Fijian women, I noted that older, married Indo-Fijian women talk amongst themselves about sexuality, adultery, and violence, and moreover, circulate stories of so-called 'bad men' who violate community moral codes. I also observed, however, that many older women take care that their discussions of these topics are not overheard by younger women. In general, I found a social reluctance to discuss issues of sexuality in front of unmarried women and, in some cases, this extended to close family members.¹¹

The silencing on these topics can be quite explicit. Early on in my research in Fiji, I asked a middle-aged, Indo-Fijian woman, from a North Indian family, if her marriage to her husband, an Indo-Fijian from a South Indian family, had been an arranged marriage. I made the mistake of posing the question in front of her sixteen-year-old daughter. 'It was an arranged marriage', the mother assured me. I then said that I was unaware that many arranged marriages took place between North and South Indian families. 'Some do', she replied and changed the subject. A few days later, she was alone on the street when she stopped me to tell me that her marriage had in fact been a love marriage, but that her daughter was too young to be informed of this.

Not all forms of silencing are, however, so dramatic. Some topics are never brought up in front of young women, or, as when the middle aged woman took care to whisper her thoughts about Chand in front of my two daughters, they are communicated so that young women will not overhear.

Young Indo-Fijian women are, of course, already informed - and, perhaps more importantly, misinformed - about relationships, sexuality, and sexual violence through the influence of film, television, romantic novels, and the Internet, as well as their own experiences with boys and men. What is missing are a sufficient number of avenues for them to openly discuss sexual violence. While important spaces have been created by local NGOs, the current resources for holding such discussions and promoting their importance are not sufficient. As can be seen from the Lata sisters' disappearances, further encouraging communication amongst

¹¹ Morse (1981,1989), for example, noted in her study of women's responses to childbirth pain that as first time mothers, many Indo-Fijian women lacked general knowledge about birth, the body and sexuality. It is unclear, however, how representative her study was of Indo-Fijian women throughout Fiji.

girls and young women, as well as between them and adults will serve two purposes. They can be more fully informed about particular men and situations that might be dangerous to them. They can also potentially inform adults about dangerous individuals, be they kin or non-kin, as did Chand's three young victims.

In addition to empowering young girls to talk about violence, another tactic is to encourage those who know of such incidents to take responsibility for informing other community members or the police. At the moment, we cannot assume that this will be the case. The Rakiraki case is a striking example of this. It has been reported that at least one other person, Aca Boyasawa, a Fijian resident of Malake Island, saw Chand raping a girl on Malake Island. Boyasawa informed *The Fiji Times* that when he confronted Chand, Chand pleaded with him saying that his life would be in danger if Boyasawa told the police or the girl's family because the girl's father would kill him. In return for Chand's promise that he not re-offend, Boyasawa agreed to keep quiet (Rarabici, 2005). In hindsight, it is clear that Boyasawa's silence only added to the tragedy.

Encouraging girls and other community members to speak more openly about violence will strengthen already existing relations of trust and care within Indo-Fijian families, Indo-Fijian communities, and inter-ethnic neighbourhoods. Greater reliance on girls and on other community members will furthermore extend the network of protection beyond fathers and other members of girls' immediate families, thus making girls less reliant on their goodwill alone. It may be one way in which we can reduce the dangers posed by people like Chand and whoever else who might have been involved in the tragic disappearances of the four young women from Rakiraki.

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Susanna Trnka is a Lecturer at the University of Auckland and can be reached c/o Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, P.B. 92019, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand. Email: s.trnka@auckland.ac.nz