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Feminine Domesticity and Emotions of Gender. Work and Women in 20th and Early 21st Century India*

On a blistering afternoon in September 2019, I was sitting with Sunita in the small outer room of her tenement in Wazirpur, an industrial locality in northwest Delhi. Sunita is 36 years old, a mother to a teenage girl and in search of employment. The daughter of migrant workers, she was married soon after she completed her 8th grade education and moved to Wazirpur in 1999, where she lives with her husband's extended family. Her husband Kamlesh owns a small shop selling SIM cards and phone top-ups. Like many other women in the area, which is dominated by steel production and processing, Sunita is quick to specify the kind of work she is looking for. With her low education and (more crucially) without any documentation of her educational qualifications, many of the options she is keen on – working in an 'office', or in government employment as a grassroots social worker such as in an *anganwadi* or as an *ASHA* worker – are closed to her.¹ Factory work, arguably the most easily available employment in the area, is explicitly rejected as a possibility. Working in a factory in Wazirpur is not only inscribed with physical danger to the body in the form of accidents and casualties but also with connotations of social status and respectability. While nearly all women in Wazirpur work, a fine grained gendered hierarchy emerges within a landscape dominated almost entirely by informal work relations. 'Respectable' jobs such as teaching, 'office work' or government jobs are the most coveted, followed by work as shop assistants, sales persons and beauty technicians of varying kinds. Considered lowest are factory work and domestic service.

The room where Sunita and I were sitting was furnished, like many other such homes, with a high bed that occupied nearly all the space in the room. Displayed across the walls were studio photographs of the family. Two years earlier, an opportunity had presented itself. Sunita was offered a low-skilled job as a helper at a medical clinic nearby. Her work would have involved attending to patients, preparing them for medical screening, administering medicines and so on. The salary and hours seemed

* Many thanks to Devika Dua for her research and editorial support.

¹ *Anganwadis* are mother and child care centres run by the Indian government, staffed mainly by women workers. *ASHA* workers are government employed community health workers.

attractive to her – Indian rupees (Rs.) 2000 a month for six hours of daily work² – as did the fact that this could be considered an ‘office’ job. But on her first day of training for this job, she decided that she was not cut out for it. “There was this elderly man. I had to apply medicine on his shoulder. I had this weird uneasy ‘feeling’, a dirty ‘feeling’. Look, a woman who has never touched another man except her husband, if she touches a strange man, would she not have this uneasy feeling? That’s exactly what happened to me. I felt this disgust. He was an elderly man, but still I felt this disgust inside me. I somehow applied the medicine and quickly palmed it off to the *didī*³ who was training me. I didn’t go back there after that. It’s just not for me. You know it feels strange to touch any man except your husband, but this can also become a habit. For a day or two, you feel uneasy touching someone and then you get used to it. I didn’t want that. I can’t do this type of work.”⁴

What Sunita narrated to me in connection to her employment options and choices is not particularly unusual in the contemporary Indian context. The stress on feminine modesty and chastity has historically been seen as part of the framework of social respectability. The operations of social respectability and the power relations embedded within have also been crucial in determining the structures and experiences of women’s employment. The initial disgust that she felt at the first bodily contact – though felt towards an elderly man who did not pose a threat of sexual transgression – is something that needed to be preserved for her to maintain her sense of gendered respectability. To Sunita this disgust does not appear to be unproblematically ‘natural’. This is a disgust borne out of years of conjugality, an uneasiness that could also just as easily be ironed out. The possibility of *not* feeling disgust carries the potential of disturbing gender norms and relations. It is this ambivalence and fluidity that Sunita stabilises, in choosing not to work through or manage her disgust. If anything, it seems like she wants to affix disgust as part of her emotional repertoire for encountering unfamiliar male bodies, to establish gendered boundaries and to fashion a gendered hierarchy of work relations. Sunita’s account, therefore, lays out the three coordinates that frame this article – gender, emotions and fluidity.

In what follows, I will trace the role that emotions play in upholding or upending gender norms, roles and subjectivities. I do this through an exploration of the dynamics of feminine domesticity and social respectability amongst the urban working classes in 20th and early 21st century India. Ideals of domesticity, seclusion and connected (gendered) notions of social respectability are neither fixed nor stable; they are his-

² Roughly 25 euros.

³ Literally elder sister. Form of respectful address for an older woman.

⁴ Interview, Delhi, September 2019. This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the working-class neighbourhood of Wazirpur, Delhi between 2016 and 2019. I carried out in-depth interviews with ten families. This included a cross section of factory workers, home based workers, domestic labour, housewives, shop keepers and students. These intergenerational interviews were supplemented by participant observation and wide ranging conversations with local residents.

torically contingent and inherently relational. Social respectability, in India as elsewhere, is both gendered and embodied, marked out by a matrix of emotions, language, dress and comportment, among other things. Respectability, as other literature has observed, remains always in conversation, a dialogue between the individual and others.⁵ Thus, fluidity is often embedded in the ways of feeling respectable.

Domesticity references an alignment of gender with certain roles and spaces. In the way that the ideology operates, feminine domesticity is necessarily viewed in relation to the notion of the male provider.⁶ Domesticity, as Antoinette Burton argues, is a “fundamentally networked phenomena”, a “messy assemblage” that effectively operates as a form of distributed power.⁷ Crucially, it encompasses the “performance of relationships of sentiment with the curating of space”.⁸ Through a focus on the emotional repertoires of domesticity, it is possible to delineate the interface between hegemonic codes of gender and individual behaviour. It allows us to map the adherence to and ruptures with the emotional scripts of gender, and attend to the ways in which specific emotional styles of gender are fashioned. That is, I explore the interactions between socio-cultural norms/rules of feeling and display (that may be relatively stable and carry a shared meaning) and emotional styles, which encompass shared scripts and the autonomous potential of individual behaviour and action.⁹ Linked to that, my aim is to address a set of interconnected questions: What work do emotions do in the formation and disruption of gendered structures of social power? How do diverging emotional styles of gender play out against social and cultural ideologies? How does fluidity affect the relationship between gender, power and emotions?

To address these questions, I draw on trade union publications, government and civil society reports and interviews from three urban industrial centres in India – Bombay, Ahmedabad and Delhi. Bombay and Ahmedabad in western India were major sites of the cotton textile industry from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1980s and influential in the framing of a national level labour policy in postcolonial India. The national capital of Delhi, formerly a key site of artisanal production, emerged as a centre for small and medium-scale industrial activity – as exemplified by the steel producing

⁵ See David Goodhew, *Working-Class Respectability: The Example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930–55*, in: *The Journal of African History*, 41, 2 (2000), 241–266; Ellen Ross, “Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep”: Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighborhoods, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 27 (1985), 39–59.

⁶ For a succinct overview of the various shifts in the domesticity/breadwinner debate, see Chitra Joshi, *Notes on the Breadwinner Debate: Gender and Household Strategies in Working-Class Families*, in: *Studies in History*, 18, 2 (2002), 261–274.

⁷ Antoinette Burton, *Toward Unsettling Histories of Domesticity*, in: *The American Historical Review*, 124, 4 (2019), 1332–1336.

⁸ Julie Hardwick, *Fractured Domesticity in the Old Regime: Families and Global Goods in Eighteenth Century France*, in: *The American Historical Review*, 124, 4 (2019), 1267–1277.

⁹ See Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History—Lost and Found*, Budapest 2011; Benno Gammerl, *Emotional styles – Concepts and Challenges*, in: *Rethinking History*, 16, 2 (2012), 161–175.

neighbourhood Wazirpur – from the 1920s onwards.¹⁰ In a sense, the three sites addressed also draw attention to the varying forms of employment relations in industrial production, with Bombay and Ahmedabad emblematic of ‘formal sector’ work arrangements with strong trade union movements, state regulation and some degree of social protection, and Wazirpur an exemplar of informal, casual employment relations.

The article proceeds in four steps. The first outlines the changing landscape of feminine domesticity, highlighting its classed dynamics. The second examines the ways in which emotions were imbricated in the ideologies of domesticity, and how they were employed to uphold and stabilise dominant gender roles. The third section discusses the social space of the home, suggesting that fluid emotional practices allow for multivalent spatial meanings. The final part of the paper considers women workers’ emotional relationship to the workplace and argues that fluid feelings towards gender roles and positions enable a reconfiguration of domestic ideals, which affirm social norms rather than posing an overt challenge. Throughout this article, I examine how emotions are instrumentalised, articulated and experienced in the process of forging and challenging domesticity.

1. Domesticity and class in India

Middle-class nationalist discourse through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constructed the figure of the woman (in the idealised form of a wife/mother) as the repository of traditional values and the embodiment of moral order. The home and the domestic sphere were assigned as a sanctuary and refuge from colonial domination,¹¹ while the family was seen as the microcosm of the nation.¹² As women and the domestic arena emerged as sites upon which conflicts and tensions between the nationalist middle classes and the colonial state played out, a dichotomy was produced and deepened between the home and the world, the private and the public.¹³ Emotions became increasingly central to notions of modernity, to ideas of domesticity, con-

¹⁰ See Government of Delhi, *A Report on the Census of Industrial Units in Delhi*, Delhi 1969.

¹¹ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question*, in: Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid eds., *Recasting Women. Essays in Colonial History*, Delhi 1989, 233–253.

¹² See Samita Sen, *Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal*, in: *Gender & History*, 5, 2 (1993), 231–243.

¹³ A rich body of literature has analysed aspects of domesticity in modern India, focusing on its relationship with colonial power, as a vector of female agency, and as a site of reform, among others. However, to a great extent this scholarship has remained focused on the elite and middle classes. Baring a few studies cited in this article, there has been little exploration of domesticity within the working classes. A selection of these works include: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Difference-Deferral of (a) Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal*, in: *History Workshop Journal*, 36, 1 (1993), 1–34; Francesca Orsini, *Domesticity and Beyond: Hindi Women’s Journals in the Early Twentieth Century*, in: *South Asia Research*, 19, 2 (1999); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation. Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, New Delhi 2003.

jugality and femininity, and in the making of a new bourgeois subjectivity.¹⁴ Domesticity emerged as a new cultural logic, and the domestic ideal – emphasising seclusion, chastity, modesty, prudence, homeliness and companionship in marriage, among other virtues – came to be regarded as a marker of social status and a vehicle for class and caste mobility.¹⁵ Caste, class and gender overlapped in variable ways with “quasi-functional relations” to each other.¹⁶ Lower caste as well as working-class women, visible in the public sphere, were represented as the ‘other’ of upper caste and upper-class women who embodied these domestic ideals. Patriarchal control over women’s mobility, sexuality and labour, therefore, was manifested in terms of caste and class.¹⁷ While caste structures on the one hand could hinder social and economic advancement at times, class and caste mobility on the other might be accompanied by an increasing adherence to upper caste gender norms, such as women’s seclusion, withdrawal from paid work and early arranged marriages.¹⁸ The complex interaction between caste and class while profoundly shaping social mobility in India, forms ways of signalling status distinctions, in terms of patterns of behaviour and feeling.

The ideology of feminine domesticity, in particular, has been crucial in shaping women’s experience and access to work. The working-class body was cast as the site of ‘dangerous’, ‘deviant’ and ‘perverse’ sexuality, around which moral panic coalesced.¹⁹ By the 1930s, considerable attention was devoted to working women’s sexual and reproductive roles, as they increasingly became targets for reformist and legislative interventions, leading to a devaluation of their work roles.²⁰ The supposed links between working women and sexual immorality were fortified in the public imagination, both drawing from and leading to the desire of working-class families to withdraw women from industrial employment when male wages improved.²¹ The strengthening (and masculinisation) of the trade union movement in India during the first half of the

¹⁴ See Margrit Pernau, *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India. From Balance to Fervor*, Delhi 2019; Mytheli Sreenivas, *Emotion, Identity, and the Female Subject: Tamil Women’s Magazines in Colonial India, 1890–1940*, in: *Journal of Women’s History*, 14, 4 (2003), 59–82.

¹⁵ See Swapna M. Banerjee, *Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India*, in: *History Compass*, 8, 6 (2010), 455–473.

¹⁶ Samita Sen, *Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890–1990*, in: *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 1 (2008), 75–116.

¹⁷ See Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste. Representing Dalits in Print*, Seattle 2016; Sen, *Gender*, see note 16.

¹⁸ See Jonathan Parry, *Sex, Bricks and Mortar: Constructing Class in a Central Indian Steel Town*, in: *Modern Asian Studies*, 48, 5 (2014), 1242–1275; See Sen, *Gender*, see note 16.

¹⁹ See Janaki Nair and Mary E. John eds., *A Question of Silence. The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, New Delhi 2000.

²⁰ Of particular importance were the heated debates and responses to the maternity benefits bills. For recent scholarship on this, see Priyanka Srivastava, *The Well-Being of the Labor Force in Colonial Bombay. Discourses and Practices*, Cham 2017; see also Sen, *Motherhood*, see note 12.

²¹ See Sen, *Gender*, see note 16.

twentieth century was accompanied by women's marginalisation.²² Women workers formed up to 20 percent of the workforce in textile mills and nearly half in plantations and mines in the 1920s, before being gradually dismissed from the workforce. However, it was not as if women excluded from the workplace retreated into a space of domesticity and seclusion.²³ They found employment at the bottom rungs of the labour market, in even more poorly paid, precarious jobs. This gendered precariousness, which was tied to underlying gender inequities within the household and labour market, was further exacerbated by India's economic liberalisation of the 1990s. While women's labour participation rate is declining in India and data on women's work remains notoriously patchy, recent statistical surveys indicate that around 13 percent are engaged in manufacturing and 95 percent of total women workers are employed in the informal sector.²⁴

2. Emotions, domesticity and the working-class family

To begin discussing how emotions were operationalised in working-class gender politics, I first turn to the textile industry in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad and the ways in which ideas of domesticity were crafted by the city's powerful, Gandhian trade union, the Textile Labour Association (henceforth TLA) from the 1920s onwards.²⁵ Women workers constituted a significant proportion of the workforce in the early twentieth century, though mainly confined to certain low paying departments in the textile mills. Notions of self-respect, dignity and respectability lay at the core of the union's Gandhian ideology. "What does the average Indian worker aspire for?" asked one of the union's publications. "He wants a steady job, a habitable house and a happy family life."²⁶ The worker that the union envisioned was clearly a male one, whose aspirations were framed through the model of the male breadwinner and feminine domesticity. One way in which the union promoted this was by affirming the gendered divisions of productive and (social) reproductive labour and by actively pruning the

²² This is not to say that women were not a part of labour mobilisations and protests; indeed as historical research has shown women's militancy was systematically undermined by pervasive and derogatory representations of their sexual behaviour. See Sen, *Gender*, see note 16.

²³ See Joshi, *Notes*, see note 6.

²⁴ See IWWAGE – An Initiative of LEAD at Krea University, *Women in the Indian Informal Economy*, Delhi 2021; Sher Singh Verick, *The Puzzles and Contradictions of the Indian Labour Market*, in: IZA Discussion Paper Series, New Delhi/Bonn 2018.

²⁵ The Textile Labour Association was established in 1920 and remained prodigiously powerful until the collapse of the textile industry in the mid 1980s.

²⁶ Textile Labour Association Ahmedabad, *Six Decades of Textile Labour Association (1917–1977)*, Ahmedabad 1977, 35.

female workforce.²⁷ To do this, an emotional style was advanced by the trade union, emphasising care of the family, appropriate mothering practices, notions of gendered seclusion and cultivating other 'feminine' attributes. This modality of feeling as gendered subjects was not directed exclusively at women workers but included a vision of masculinity that posited the male worker as the 'head of the family' and defender of familial reputation. For instance, in one of the union's early appeals against the violent excesses of shop floor supervisors, 'emasculatation' was explicitly highlighted as a consequence of the prevalent forms of informal labour regulation.²⁸

The category of the 'natural family' – broadly, the wife and unmarried children of an individual – as outlined in the official records, made the notion of a family wage explicit and enshrined the male bread winner model.²⁹ As early as 1924, union representatives passed a resolution to pare down women's employment.³⁰ In recommending that married women be retrenched over men, the union explained, "if in a family a man and wife are both working and the man is retrenched, then how bad will it look [?]"³¹ Social norms were clearly important for the TLA in framing their labour policies. Women's retrenchment in this case was favoured over that of men, in order to avoid the social embarrassment of the female breadwinner. A sharp emphasis on the ideology of domesticity and respectability was in place when the union similarly stressed that women's work in the mills bore serious consequences for the healthy upbringing of children, a happy home life, sexual propriety as well as diminishing male wages.³² As part of the union's well-publicised civilising mission, a women's wing was started in the mill neighbourhoods, which spread "the message of creating happy homes for workers".³³ Such 'happy homes' were clean and sanitary, with competent, prudent and thrifty wives and mothers, who had all the necessary skills of housekeeping and homemaking. As examples of what not to do, the union published little vignettes in their official newspaper depicting everyday life in the workers' neighbourhoods. In these portrayals, children ran about unattended, covered in filth, the mothers were careless and casually violent, the surroundings fetid.³⁴ The crisis of feminine domesticity as perceived by the largely bourgeois, male trade union leadership, appeared in the form of emotional and material neglect of the home – as a lack of care and attention towards children and an indifferent attitude towards hygienic living. The union appealed to women workers as

²⁷ Between 1921 and 1971, the proportion of women workers in the industry fell from 20 % to 3 %. See Renana Jhabvala, *Closing Doors. A Study on the Decline of Women Workers in the Textile Mills of Ahmedabad*, Ahmedabad 1985.

²⁸ See *Majoor Sandesh*, June 7, 1924.

²⁹ See Radha Kumar, *Family and Factory: Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1939*, in: *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 20, 1 (1983), 81–96.

³⁰ See *Majoor Sandesh*, February 2, 1924.

³¹ Jhabvala, *Closing*, see note 27, 47.

³² See *Majoor Sandesh*, February 2, 1924.

³³ Textile Labour Association (TLA), *Annual Report*, Ahmedabad 1953, 4.

³⁴ See *Majoor Sandesh*, January 6, 1951.

wives and mothers, invoking guilt when women digressed from their assigned roles and practices. Women were urged to leave the mills and instead, devote their energies to tending to their children and serving their husbands who returned tired from work.³⁵

While in Ahmedabad much of the labour force was settled in the city and generally followed a pattern of family migration, other industrial centres such as Calcutta and Bombay had a large proportion of single women workers. In elite and official discourses, the urban working-class neighbourhood came to symbolise the breakdown of morality and gender hierarchies. Anxieties around the presence of single women in non-conventional living arrangements – as Sen highlights in the case of the jute industry in Bengal or the TLA's concerns about overcrowded workers' settlements impacting sexual morality – coalesced in a broader effort to restore and stabilize the working-class family.³⁶ Emphasising women's roles as wives and mothers also enabled the convergence of employers' strategies of rationalising the workforce with the concerns of male workers and trade unionists alike.³⁷ The cracks that appeared in the gender order through women's work in the mills were sought to be corrected through an ideology of domesticity that called for women to emotionally sustain the home. Women workers were expected to cultivate emotions of homeliness (as opposed to the sexual abandon that was perceived as prevalent in the mills) and be committed to performing the emotional and physical labour of making 'happy homes'. The 'happy home', on which the wellbeing of the worker family rested, thus functioned as a trope for a moral rhetoric of social hygiene and domestic respectability. It was a narrow and rigid conception of happiness, which could only be achieved through the emotional burdens (care and selflessness in making ends meet, practicing prudence and thrift to maintain familial self-respect, guilt over the neglect of the home) of feminine domesticity. Domesticity, in reframing activities of daily existence as acts of care, then, turned "labor into love".³⁸

To fulfil the primary roles of good housewives and mothers, the education of women was crucial. Motherhood emerged as pivotal for raising healthy, morally upright citizens suited for the collective task of nation-building. Working-class mothers were considered to be the progenitors of a new generation of workers and therefore responsible for its social reproduction. The "ignorant", "neglectful" and "careless" mother was set up as the one responsible for the abysmal health conditions among the working classes. This focus, on the one hand, stressed the dangers presented by industrial work on maternal

³⁵ See Jhabvala, *Closing*, see note 27, 48.

³⁶ See Sen, *Gender*, see note 16; see also TLA, *A Plea for Municipal Housing for the Working Classes in the City of Ahmedabad*, Ahmedabad 1929, 22–23.

³⁷ See Kumar, *Family*, see note 29.

³⁸ Katharine Silbaugh, *Turning Labor into Love: Housework and the Law*, in: *Northwestern Law Review*, 91 (1996), 1–86; Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work. Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, New York 1990, 149.

and infant health and, on the other, advocated a dissemination of knowledge of “mothercraft”, a scientific approach to home and childcare.³⁹

In the discussions at the All India Maternity and Child Welfare Conference in 1927, the Chief Medical Officer for Delhi remarked on working-class mothers: “We know that there is nothing that can replace the love of a mother, for her infant. But the greatest love, however, is not sufficient in itself. It should be accompanied by a practical knowledge of the requirements of the child.”⁴⁰ While the social space of the workers’ neighbourhood was in itself regarded as detrimental to the physical and emotional growth of the child, poor mothers were seen as likely to shirk their duties.⁴¹ The working-class mother was to be educated to remedy her “dull, unfeeling ignorance”, which caused “great suffering to the unfortunate child”.⁴² It was recognised that “mothercraft was an art that must be taught”, and with knowledge of mothercraft, the Indian girl “will possess that for which all *good* women long, the power to heal, to redeem, to guide and to guard”.⁴³ In other words, she was to be trained to feel correctly in order to be a good mother. What these administrators and experts were, in effect, suggesting was the promotion of a new kind of emotional practice of mothering – one that tied together the gendered body, maternal feelings, scientific knowledge and the material conditions of working-class life.

In the years following India’s independence in 1947, vigorous initiatives of economic planning were launched, with a key focus on industrialisation. Labour, at this point, had emerged as a crucial political category and a slew of welfare legislations were introduced which paid particular attention to the social protection of the industrial working classes. Within this dynamic of modernisation (by way of industrial development) and social welfare (in the measures undertaken for better standards of living), there was increasing scrutiny of the role of women in the Indian economy.⁴⁴ Concerns surfaced over the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation in uprooting the ‘Indian peasant woman’ from her ‘natural’ habitat to the urban proletarian context, as well as ambivalence around women’s roles as workers and homemakers.⁴⁵ The Chief Industrial Health officer of the Tata Company⁴⁶ held that the shift to a life of waged labour and “the lure of material benefits” could be morally and emotionally damaging for women, and “more often than not, she realises that she is failing the purpose of her life which is to rear a happy family”.⁴⁷ This reveals an anxiety over women feeling differently and

³⁹ Sen, Motherhood, see note 12.

⁴⁰ Report of Maternity and Child Welfare Conference, Delhi 1927, 38.

⁴¹ See Report, see note 40, 174.

⁴² Report, see note 40, 187.

⁴³ Report, see note 40, 188.

⁴⁴ See National Planning Commission, Women’s Role in the Planned Economy, Delhi 1947.

⁴⁵ See Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) archives, Papers of the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC), 4th instalment, File no. 394, 1958.

⁴⁶ An Indian industrial conglomerate established in 1868, with a prominent labour welfarist image.

⁴⁷ NMML, Papers AIWC, see note 45.

deviating from their expected desire to raise happy families, necessitating the public reiteration of working-class familial happiness being rooted in the return of women to an engaged and enlightened care of the home.

A landmark report of 1988 on workers in the informal sector suggested that the ideology of feminine domesticity permeated popular culture representations. “Serving the family” was depicted as a woman’s “only source of happiness”.⁴⁸ A happiness script was produced, which, as Sara Ahmed has argued, was an often gendered script involving the proper alignment of the individual with a normative object choice. This was a subtle process “of affirmation, encouragement and support through which subjects are turned towards certain objects.” Such objects (happy families, for instance) become social goods that “circulate and accumulate value, thus acquiring the capacity to turn subjects”.⁴⁹ The making of happy homes and families, in turn, was predicated on a woman’s duty towards maintaining happiness, of approximating the signs of being happy, and erasing the labours of homemaking under the signs of happiness. The report concluded that women workers shouldered “physical [and] emotional drudgery in the home”, squeezing the most out of the meagre resources to feed the family, providing emotional and physical care to children, the old and the sick. Along with the “implicit demand that women workers be superhuman beings and not show it”, women workers bore a “constant feeling of guilt, generated by having to share herself between home and work demands”. If children fell ill or there was a shortage of food, money or resources, “it [was] somehow the woman’s responsibility, her blame and her guilt”.⁵⁰ While the happiness script was affixed on the model of domesticity, more ambivalent and contrary feelings are visible in the emotional burdens that were involved in the practice of homemaking.

3. Emotional space of the home

Emotions and social space have a mutually constitutive relationship – emotions have a spatial logic, and social space as a product of social relations is implicitly embedded with emotions.⁵¹ The spaces of work (the textile mills in Ahmedabad and Bombay and steel workshops in contemporary Delhi) and the homes of workers are often architecturally

⁴⁸ National Commission on Self Employed Women (NCSEW), *Shramshakti: Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector*, New Delhi 1988, 180.

⁴⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, NC 2010, 239–240.

⁵⁰ NCSEW, *Shramshakti*, see note 48, 159–160.

⁵¹ See for instance Razak Khan, *The Social Production of Space and Emotions in South Asia*, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 58, 5 (2015), 611–633; Liz Bondi, Joyce Davidson and Mick Smith eds., *Emotional Geographies*, New York 2016; Deborah Thien, *After or Beyond Feeling? A Consideration of Affect and Emotion in Geography*, in: *Area*, 37, 4 (2005), 450–454.

part of the same neighbourhood landscape. In neighbourhoods of the working poor across India, the boundaries between the private and the public, the home and the outside have been fluid and shifting. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to question what exactly the domestic means in spatial and emotional terms.

In the mill neighbourhoods of Ahmedabad, part of the TLA's concern with domesticity, respectability and propriety of the working classes was manifested in the remaking of workers' housing. In this view, housing was more than just the built form. It required care and emotional investment on part of women. Through the late 1940s to the early 1970s, the union made a concerted effort in "creating physical conditions where [workers] would live healthily and happily".⁵² In Ahmedabad as elsewhere, trade unions and labour authorities aimed at orienting everyday recreational cultures towards social betterment. Training was imparted in arts and crafts and home-industry, which could enable women to earn a supplementary income.⁵³ Such recreational programmes in industrial centres were formulated with the intention of combating the problems of industrialisation and urbanisation. Women, in particular, were seen as psychologically unprepared to move to the city, feeling "lost and confused", like "fish out of water", "having lost all sense of individual significance, and find[ing] themselves reduced to the position of a cog". The dark, dingy and squalid conditions in urban workers' neighbourhoods and the lack of fresh air and sunshine were thought to generate "apathy" in women.⁵⁴ With these concerns in mind, programmes such as the Modern Housewives Courses were initiated to train women from low-income households to develop a "modern, scientific outlook towards life and become conscious and responsible citizens".⁵⁵ What women were thought to be feeling (a lack of concern towards the home in the case of Ahmedabad's women workers or a sense of belonging in the city) was to be remedied by a (re)attachment to the home. Broader social processes of migration and labour regulation were thus negotiated by stabilising the fluidity and ambivalence of women's feelings towards domestic life.

Along with training women in the emotional dimensions of home-making (such as care in preparing food, responsibility for the mental and emotional wellbeing of children, practicing thrift to adhere to dominant notions of feeling respectable, and an awareness of herself as the 'centre of the home'), such initiatives also equipped women to take on home-based work. Thus, while women's work outside the home was perceived as 'unfeminine',⁵⁶ a model of domesticity was proposed which accommodated women's waged work as long as it was seen as supplementary to men's work and was

⁵² TLA, *Five Decades at a Glance*, Ahmedabad 1971, 25.

⁵³ See TLA, *Annual Report 1955*, 34–35; See also Ela Bhatt, 'A Glimpse of the Young Generation of Women of the Labor Class of Ahmedabad', Ahmedabad 1970; Ela Bhatt, *Neck-Deep in Debt. How Jobless Millworkers Manage to Live*, Ahmedabad 1969.

⁵⁴ NMML, *Papers AIWC*, see note 45.

⁵⁵ *Janata*, January 11, 1970.

⁵⁶ See NCSEW, *Shramshakti*, see note 48, 190.

undertaken in their spare time and physically confined to the home.⁵⁷ This was presented as a way of restoring feminine 'self-respect' that could potentially be lost in work outside the home.⁵⁸ Middle class notions of the domestic as an interior, private, essentially feminine realm and the woman as the 'angel of the hearth' were thus unsettled and reconfigured, as working-class homes were partially used as workplaces. Women's feelings *in* and *towards* the home too, varied in accordance to the patterns of their waged labour.

While scholarship has clearly demonstrated that wage work has consistently been carried out from inside the home, the relationship between the workplace and home has changed after the increasing informalisation of labour relations since the mid-1980s. That is, following wide-spread factory closures, the disintegration of formal, secure employment relations, and the intensification of casual work arrangements, the home increasingly became a site of production. What does this mean for the practices of domesticity? Home-based waged work involves a micro-maneuvering of specific bodily, material and emotional practices. Such work is often represented in Ahmedabad as well as in contemporary Delhi as work that is being done to pass time. "We are sitting idle, might as well do something with our time," 22 year old Muskaan in Wazirpur told me, as she was snipping off the uneven edges of plastic bike parts.⁵⁹ For every 1000 pairs that she and her sister go through, they earn Rs.180. The large bags of raw materials lie in one corner of a room that, at different times of the day, functions as a kitchen, a place to sleep and a workspace. Quotidian annoyances surface over the ways in which living space is used. In the narrow confines of their home, someone or the other is always irritated over the bags occupying space. Responsibility for domestic chores are volleyed between Muskaan and her sisters as they strive to complete their daily orders, resulting in accusations of negligence, indifference and selfishness. Tensions and fights with the contractor over orders placed and payment received are routine affairs that structure their everyday lives. Muskaan and her sisters, who distance themselves from factory work, are nevertheless part of the local production processes. The emotional orders of domesticity were similarly deeply intertwined with the sphere of production.

Small scale retail activities are also often part of the domestic landscape. Many homes in Wazirpur set up small outlets at the threshold of the home, attracting a steady flow of customers who pass through these spaces throughout the day. Not only does this blur the boundaries between spheres of commerce and the home, these activities also call for the cultivation of specific emotional styles. A key problem of such businesses arises over the extension of credit. Customers are nearly all neighbours, and share a relationship of proximate intimacy with the shop owners. For the women who run these stalls, deferred payments for goods bought poses a niggling source of annoyance. As a consequence,

⁵⁷ See Bhatt, Neck-Deep, see note 53.

⁵⁸ See Majoor Sandesh, February 24, 1964.

⁵⁹ Interview, Delhi, September 2019.

many of them have to navigate the delicate and awkward terrain of refusing credit, expressing anger when repeatedly pressed and pursuing debtors, despite “how bad it may feel”.⁶⁰ This, of course, foils the idealised way of feeling towards the home that was expected of women, centered on duty, care, sacrifice and selflessness in serving the family, best manifested in the ability to make do with meagre resources. A closer look at emotional practices within the home (marked by irritation and tiredness, daily struggles to meet the demands of production and disputes over care work) suggest that emotions ideologically tied to this model of domesticity remain unstable, contingent and enmeshed with the rhythms of spatial practice.

The emotional patterns of daily life in Wazipur are crucially shaped by the porosity between the physical structure of the home and the street. Benches in the street are as much a part of everyday intimacies as the interior. So are the water connections and taps outside, where much of the daily domestic and personal labour is performed. The fluid relationship between the home and the outside is gendered and dependent on the everyday rhythms of work in the area. This fluidity is also contingent on age, as older women display greater latitude with regard to bodily and emotional practices. On most afternoons, they sit outside on benches and door stoops, chatting, preparing food, washing clothes, dishes and occasionally, themselves. Because of the architectural layout of the neighbourhood, there is a steady traffic of people and goods through these streets. On Wednesdays (the weekly day off in the industrial area) the gendered rhythms of the street change somewhat. More men hang around, settling down to chat or playing cards for longer periods, less mobile than on other days. At night, men often sleep on the cots that are placed out on the inner streets; occasionally, these lanes become sites for social festivities or personal celebrations, such as birthday parties. A common concern expressed by parents is the locality’s ‘bad atmosphere’, which presents a rationale for the gendered regulation of spatial practices. The most quotidian of familial and intergenerational tensions arise over younger (especially unmarried) women’s mobility and bodily comportment. The way they might inhabit the street, laugh or conduct themselves (with seriousness or frivolity) has a bearing on how their sexual and social respectability is perceived. Thus, loitering, chatting or taking selfies on the fluid boundaries between the home and the street appear as potentially contentious activities, while carrying out domestic chores in the same physical space do not. The street may become an extension of the domestic space, depending on the time of the day, the kind of people gathered there and the activities being performed there. Social space in Wazirpur, as in other workers’ neighbourhoods, does not have a singular and uniform use, but instead can be mapped in malleable ways in conjunction with specific bodily and emotional practices.

⁶⁰ Interview, Delhi, October 2018.

4. Gender and emotions in the workplace

One of the most common tropes that appears both in archival records as well as in ethnographic research is the stress on feelings of *majburi* (helplessness, hardship) as an explanation for women's wage work outside the home, the implication being that they would not work in these jobs unless it was economically unavoidable for them to do so. But what meaning does such work hold for women? How do working women negotiate different spaces and navigate hegemonic ideologies of domesticity?

For Muskaan's mother Zulekha, factory work is a function of her *majburi*, of hardship, financial constraints and economic compulsions. It is not a future that she would want for her daughters. Domesticity and its emotional practices are often invoked when speaking of women's work outside the home. Zulekha entered the steel processing industry after her husband ran into major debts and left home. Muskaan and her sister, Feriha, recalled: "Before Papa left, Mummy was a housewife. She used to just do housework, take care of us and she was so beautiful then, you can't even imagine."⁶¹ After their father left, Zulekha and the elder children took over the responsibility of running the house. Their eldest sister dropped out of school to work as domestic help in the adjacent middle class localities, their elder brother got a dangerous and much disliked job in steel cutting. And Zulekha "gathered courage and got a job in the factory".⁶² They faced a loss of respectability, shame and humiliation over the debts that the family had accumulated and the public and constant negotiations and pleadings with debt collectors. "We would leave the house as little as possible. We didn't like it that people would keep asking. Even when we went to school, we went without bathing with soap. Our clothes would be washed without any detergent. We didn't have money. We'd go all dirty. It was a very bad time for us. I used to feel very bad that people were saying things about us, that we had to go work in other people's homes."⁶³ The stress on their mother's beauty and care work for the family is significant in signalling out a time when the fantasy of domesticity and the associated happy family is rendered real in their memory. The fractures in this fantasy were felt through the material markers of dirty clothes, unwashed faces and menial work.

The (gendered) spatial and material dynamics of the workplace mattered in shaping the emotions that women workers felt there. Wage work, as we have seen previously, was located both inside and outside the home. While home-based work could be somewhat reconciled with dominant models of domesticity, women's work outside the home and the emotions implicated in it posed a sharper and more visible challenge. One dimension of emotions at work centred around orienting emotions towards the needs of production. Officials and administrators in the late 1950s had this in mind when they

⁶¹ Interviews, Delhi, October 2018.

⁶² Interviews, Delhi, October 2018.

⁶³ Interviews, Delhi, October 2018.

urged employers to provide for the 'special attributes' of women, "treating [a] woman as she should be, as a woman", "for the woman worker can give her best to industry only if she is accepted as God made her".⁶⁴ Women workers were not to be treated as a "smaller type of man".⁶⁵ This position was reflected in the largely inadequate (and often failed) attempts to establish crèches and rest spaces, as well as in creating spaces where women could "satisfy their psychologic [sic] needs", (which for instance, included an allegedly innate absorption with their physical appearance). As seen elsewhere, women were presumed to be more emotionally equipped to perform certain roles, such as receptionists or secretaries.⁶⁶ It was also assumed that women "liked routine work" over that which required quick decision making.⁶⁷ Stereotypes around gender differences (not only in terms of bodily capacities but also through emotions) were thus mobilised to reinforce the structures of industrial capitalism.

Other aspects of workplace feelings relate to subjective experiences of factory work. For women workers in the textile factories of Ahmedabad and Bombay or those in the steel industry of contemporary Delhi, bodily discomfort, pain and exhaustion emerge as crucial ways of relating to the work process, work tools and the spatial environment. Women workers in the Bombay textile industry in the early 1980s stood at their machines for an average of three to four hours without breaks.⁶⁸ Pregnant workers in the Ahmedabad mills would use their bellies to balance their work tools.⁶⁹ The status of the employment relationship – as precarious contract workers or as permanent workers – had much to do in the shaping of these experiences. For instance, in the Bombay textile mills temporary workers were tied to their machines for longer hours, their break times more stringently monitored.⁷⁰ In the steel processing units of Wazirpur in Delhi, similar tensions arise at the intersection of gender and the materiality of the workplace. For Zulekha in Wazirpur, factory work is made up of daily trials and frustrations. "I'm there from nine in the morning till eight in the evening. There are these bastards in the factory. They don't even let us use the bathroom. I have to hold myself till I get home."⁷¹ So, Zulekha's day involves a regular circulation between her factory and her home every three or four hours. As a consequence, over the course of the day she has the possibility of displaying varying emotional repertoires – the appropriate emotions of maternal annoyance if she finds her daughters loitering and the emotional style of a woman at work.

⁶⁴ NMML, Papers AIWC, see note 45.

⁶⁵ NMML, Papers AIWC, see note 45.

⁶⁶ See Claire Langhamer, Feelings, Women and Work in the Long 1950s, in: *Women's History Review*, 26, 1 (2017), 77–92.

⁶⁷ NMML, Papers AIWC, see note 45.

⁶⁸ See Mira Savara, Factory and Home – the Contrary Pulls: Lives of Women Workers in the Textile Industry, in: *Manushi*, 12 (1982), 14–20.

⁶⁹ See Jhavbala, Closing, see note 27, 31.

⁷⁰ See Savara, Factory, see note 68.

⁷¹ Interview, Delhi, October 2018.

The implications of sexual impropriety and the persistent threats of being labeled unchaste were underlying concerns that governed women's work in the factory. Daily spatial manoeuvring is expected in the workplace to avoid a reputation of being 'loose'. Women in the Bombay textile mills ate their lunch on the shop floor, while the machines were being cleaned, trying to protect their food from the flying dust, only so that they could avoid the much cleaner canteen, where they "would get no respect" and their presence would be seen as an invitation for harassment.⁷² As a former factory worker in Wazirpur argued, "there are those women who wear lipstick and speak flirtatiously with the supervisor. Those are the ones who manage to keep their jobs. I can't do that, so I quit."⁷³ While this statement is made to describe gender dynamics in the Wazirpur industries, it is revealing of the rhetoric of domesticity that casts the factory as a site of sexual licentiousness.

Thus, while frustration, discontent, hardship and anxiety over disrepute emerge as crucial ways in which women workers relate to their workspaces, there are other emotions and affects that often problematise the normative constructions of feminine behaviour. For many women, their work outside of the home is framed in terms of skill, mastery and pride. The ambivalent feelings of women towards the home and towards waged work outside the home lay bare the contradictions at the heart of the ideologies and practices of domesticity. The shift from regular mill employment to informal work in Ahmedabad is perceived by former workers to be as incompatible with the ideals of domesticity as possible. Retrenched in the 1960s, Babuben now works as a paper picker: "When I was in the mill, we used to look down upon paper pickers. We would say, we are mill workers, we earn a good salary. These paper pickers they wander around everywhere without any shame. Today, I am degraded. When I first had to start picking paper, I would try to make my *ghungat* (veil) long so no one could see my face. I was so ashamed."⁷⁴ Shame surfaces in relation to the loss of her former role as a mill worker, as a function of her diminished social status but also as an organising principle of the hierarchies of work. The emotions evoked by the retreat from factory employment in this case are contrary to the normative structures of feeling that suggest that women's work outside the home is primarily a function of hardship or helplessness.

Emotions at the workplace (especially on the shop floor) also emerge in the interactions of the body with the machine. For those working in the steel production units in contemporary Wazirpur, work is undeniably dangerous. Pinky works a cutting machine, which flattens steel circles into bowls and plates. This kind of work is imprinted on the body, as Pinky shows me the scars on her forearms and feet: "This is very risky work, but ladies do it. The kind of work that ladies do, many men can't even do. We run cutter machines, press machine, but it's back breaking. My arms and legs are sore after

⁷² Savara, Factory, see note 68.

⁷³ Interview, Delhi, October 2018.

⁷⁴ Jhabvala, Closing, see note 27, 20.

standing at my machine the whole day. I am covered in dirt and dust. And I can't lose my focus for a second. I have to keep up with the machine. If my body stumbles, there will be splinters of steel flying all over. Wearing a *sari* is also a problem, sometimes it gets caught in the machine, but what to do? All my neighbours are my relatives. Would I go out in a *salwar* in front of my uncles in law?"⁷⁵

Pinky's work life has to be delicately mediated through a display of appropriately gendered bodily practices. As she walks to her factory, past the benches, the overturned hand carts, stationary auto-rickshaws and tea stalls where men gather to chat, she keeps her head covered. Once at her machine, she hammers out 100 kilos of steel utensils per hour. As she and other women who work in steel cutting point out, high focus and extreme attention is required, as is a certain toughness and aggression to negotiate with the supervisor. "I will only run the [steel cutting] machine. If my material is not ready, I will just sit there. I will say no, I won't do other work. I will start fighting with them," Lalita tells me as she demonstrates the pose that she would take, folding her arms across her chest and shaking her head vigorously. Lalita is continuously asked by her husband, who works in a steel rolling mill, to leave her job: "He is always beside himself with anger. Stay at home, stay at home, he keeps saying, quit your job, look after the kids, so my *pati-dev*⁷⁶ says. He's been saying this since the beginning. But what do men know about how the house runs? What tensions do men have? This is our [women's] headache."⁷⁷ Pinky's husband has a similar refrain: "Don't go to work," he keeps saying, "Who will look after the kids?" "It is because of the kids that I am going. It's not enough to cook for and feed the kids to raise them. One has to think about the future too, about their marriage and all. All of this worry also falls on us."⁷⁸

For both Lalita and Pinky, maternal emotions are invoked by their husbands to urge them to commit to the normative model of domesticity. But these same emotions appear to the women as a way of challenging the normative constructions of domesticity. It is because of maternal responsibilities, care and worries that they continue to work. For women factory workers in the area, their employment outside of the home (and the gendered tensions that it holds) is stabilised by their physical and emotional labour within the domestic sphere. Pinky thus wakes up at 4 a.m. to make sure the meals are cooked and the children bathed and readied for school. She regularly contrasts her care towards her family (especially with regard to her children's health, cleanliness and physical appearance) with that of her sister-in-law, who despite "being at home all day, and doing god knows what, can't make sure that her children don't run around with

⁷⁵ Interviews, Delhi, October 2019. A *salwar* is a pair of loose pleated trousers typically worn with a long shirt, common in North India but not as much in Bihar, where Pinky is originally from.

⁷⁶ An extremely respectful term for husband, here used rather sarcastically. Can be translated as lord and master.

⁷⁷ Interviews, Delhi, October 2019.

⁷⁸ Interviews, Delhi, October 2019.

uncombed hair and snotty noses”.⁷⁹ Zulekha and Ruma, both of whom work as packers in the steel industry and have daughters in their twenties, similarly have to invest considerable emotional work in the management of social reputations. “Why am I getting f***ed in the factory everyday, if it is not so that my daughter can have a good life,” Ruma tells me with a fair bit of anger.⁸⁰ Many working women perceive judgement from their extended families and neighbours, and deal with snide remarks about their lack of concern with their children’s welfare. In this context, hardship emerges as an emotional burden that women have to bear. As a consequence, these women present themselves as the sole bearers of the ‘tensions’ of domestic life, which are most strongly reflected in their relationships with their daughters. Younger women’s romantic or sexual transgressions then call for their mothers’ visible public demonstrations of anger, disappointment and hurt that work towards a public adherence to dominant norms relating to social respectability.

5. Conclusion

At the end of this article, I would like to return to Sunita’s story that I began with. Sunita’s efforts to find suitable employment outside of the home is an attempt to alleviate some of the mental ‘tensions’ – of economic pressures, routine aggressions with her extended family, a sense of being hemmed in – that she feels within the domestic sphere. While her feelings towards the home reveals the divergence between normative ideals and lived experiences, the model of domesticity (and all the emotions that it claims) is undeniably potent in framing her expectations of work outside the home. This article has mapped the emotions of gender that are imbricated in the aspirational construction and the limits of working-class domesticity. I have tried to show how bourgeois social norms were reconfigured within the working-class context, as trade unions and the ‘labour aristocracy’ of the formal sector reflected and promoted values of feminine seclusion, care of the home and maternal devotion. Normative domesticity in the working classes was, in effect, a way of negotiating the anxieties around the fluidity of women’s emotions towards the home. These directives for women to feel a certain way about their homes and families also had material and spatial manifestations. However, the practical constraints of working-class life deeply unsettled the spatial enclosure and cohesion of the home, and notions of domesticity shifted to encompass waged work and domestic care. That is, there was great ambivalence and ambiguity in the emotional practices of domesticity within the Indian working classes.

As we move towards a consideration of working lives at the lower edges of the labour hierarchy (such as in the informal industry of Wazirpur), the distinction between the

⁷⁹ Interviews, Delhi, October 2019.

⁸⁰ Interviews, Delhi, October 2019.

domestic and the public and their attendant emotional practices becomes even more fluid. Emotions that women felt at work as well as their corporeal experiences puncture the ideology of domesticity. Not only limited to the question of time taken away from the care of the home, factory work also engendered feelings of tiredness and exhaustion that affected women's engagement with the home. Additionally, pleasure and pride in the work they do and the sense of self they derive, destabilise the normative structure of feeling. The circulation of actors across the range of spaces discussed in this article show the variable and fluctuating feelings that emerge in relation to women's experiences of work and domesticity. It is the fluidity of emotions relating to domesticity (such as the different ways in which maternal feelings and care are written and spoken about) that work to affirm women's gender roles as well as allow for their divergence. Thus, while domesticity continues to exert influence as an aspirational frame, its everyday practices are remarkably malleable. The ambivalent emotions of domesticity, the rhythms of mobility and circulation that shape the divergent practices of domesticity highlight the fluidity of feeling gender. That said, this fluidity remains constrained within gendered structures of power.

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