

# PLASTIC BODIES

## *Women Workers and Emerging Body Rules in Service Work in Urban India*

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*Drawing on the narratives of young lower-middle-class women employed in cafés, call centers, shopping malls, and offices in Delhi, India, in this paper I identify malleability or “plasticity” of the body as an important feature of contemporary service work. As neophyte service professionals, young women mold themselves to the middle-/upper-class milieu of their workplaces through clothes, makeup, and body language. Such body plasticity can be experienced as enabling: Identifying with the image of the “New Indian Woman,” young women enter the burgeoning service economy. However, they also experience this body plasticity as threatening; bodily changes to meet the requirements of work can, at times, feel inauthentic as well as be read as promiscuous by others. I draw attention to how women appraise plastic bodies as both generative of change and a site of labor discipline, thus offering insights into the relationship among bodies, social inequalities, and contemporary service work.*

**Keywords:** *bodies; service work; gender; class; India*

In August 2016, when conducting fieldwork for research on women’s employment in services in Delhi, I walked into a café for a break. As I stepped into its air-conditioned premises, two workers behind the till greeted me with big smiles—“Good morning, ma’am”<sup>1</sup>; Sheela and

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Prachi became two of my early and key interlocutors. We started hanging out at food stalls and in markets after working hours, when possible. Sheela and Prachi would change out of their work uniforms and into jeans and tops for these outings, more than once commenting on how they disliked “traditional” Indian clothing. Although most of their income went into household expenses, they could save some pocket money and buy Western wear, modeling themselves after the urban, modern, and professional image of the “New Indian Woman.” In tandem, both asserted that they are in employment because they *want* to be. But as our relationship outgrew that of customer and workers, they also started expressing dissatisfaction with their work environment. After Prachi quit her job over an argument with the café manager, she remarked that she really disliked having to “keep a plastic smile on the whole day.”

In this paper, I engage with corporeal changes—including clothing, makeup, and body language—among young women workers in the new service economy of Delhi, India, emphasizing workers’ appraisals of these changes. Globally, the emergence of new forms of service work has generated a new workforce—young, female, aspirational—to meet the needs of middle- and upper-class consumers (Freeman 2000; Otis 2011; Radhakrishnan 2011). The bodies of these neophyte workers require molding to fit into the urban, consumption-driven, middle-/upper-class milieu of their workplaces, ranging from hotels, cafés, and shopping malls to call centers and offices. To what extent do workers willingly, and even enthusiastically, comply with these requirements, perhaps initiating body projects as signs of aspiration and upward mobility (Baas and Cayla 2020)? Conversely, to what extent do workers critically reflect on, and perhaps even resist, the compulsion to become bodies for consumption in service work (Casanova and Jafar 2016)? What do these negotiations reveal about the changing pressures on women’s bodies in relation to new labor practices? Based on my research with young lower-middle-class women working across cafés, malls, and offices in Delhi, I show that young women workers are conscious of and reflexive about “new body rules” (Otis 2016, 156) as emerging labor practices in urban India. That is, they do not comply with bodily changes in a straightforward manner. Rather they recognize, instrumentalize, as well as criticize changes to their bodies in accordance with their settings.

I draw upon my interlocutor Prachi’s formulation “plastic smile” to develop the analytic of “plastic bodies” to understand young women’s reflections on their sartorial choices and modifications to their comportment and deportment in the context of socioeconomic change in urban

India. The term *plastic* has, of course, been widely used in reference to bodies and bodily practices, particularly those of women. Popular discussions about plastic surgery, for example, demonstrate the entanglement of women's bodies, consumer choices, and modernity (Edmonds and Sanabria 2014; Jordan 2004; Taeyon Kim 2003). The "plasticity" of women's bodies is also reflected in the evolving images of the "Modern Girl" (Weinbaum et al. 2008) and the "New Woman" (Dhawan 2010; Lau 2010; Oza 2006), figures that represent ideals of modernization and globalization. Historically, a key aspect of these constructions has been women's "professionalization," including most recently their entry into new service work, or what has come to be known as "pink-collar work." Whereas emotional labor (Hochschild 2003) is commonly identified as a key characteristic of such pink-collar work (Freeman 2000), in this paper, I draw attention to the requirement for malleability of women's bodies to meet the needs of middle- and upper-class consumption (Otis 2011).

Wolkowitz (2006) cautions against the tendency to view bodies as infinitely malleable, highlighting the exhaustion and injuries incurred by bodies at work. In this paper, I suggest "plastic bodies" as a wider conceptualization to account for (1) body malleability, (2) its limits, and (3) workers' appraisal of the same. This wider conceptualization, then, encapsulates "the mechanisms through which the body expresses its social, organizational, and historical location as well as the agency of the body and its material capacities" (Otis 2011, 15). In the way Prachi uses the word *plastic*, she refers to the synthetic nature of the ever-present material plastic. For Prachi, the "plastic smile" was laborious not only because it involved a modification in her appearance but also, and especially, because it was a forced modification—that is, she had to smile even though she did not feel like smiling. Similarly, other modifications—makeup, clothing, body language—which may enable entry into service work but not necessarily into better working conditions or better lives, indicate the synthetic or plastic nature of processes of modernity and globalization in urban India. I draw upon the philosopher Malabou (2010) (also see Dalton 2019; Malabou and Butler 2011; Sanabria 2016) to understand plasticity as a simultaneous possibility of construction and destruction: "plasticity is as much a resistance to change as it is an openness to it" (Crockett, foreword to Malabou 2010, xiv). On one hand, plasticity of form offers potential for being changed as well as effecting change. On the other hand, it generates fear of being "found out" as plastic, threatening status and respectability. Conceptualizing "plastic bodies" as both malleable and synthetic, I draw attention to the ways in which women service workers negotiate body projects in urban India.

The paper is structured as follows: I first explore the role of bodies in service work, focusing on how the expectation of malleability from women's bodies is a specifically gendered mechanism of labor discipline. Next, I provide an overview of the expansion of service work in post-1990 India, highlighting the uneven terrain of socioeconomic change, and elaborate on the position of the "New Indian Woman" in services. I then present findings from my research with young lower-middle-class women in Delhi, highlighting how they deploy plastic bodies to establish themselves as respectable professionals, deriving pleasure and confidence from the process. However, changes to their bodily comportment are continually under threat of being read as promiscuous and/or inauthentic, thus generating anxiety. In the conclusion to the paper, I discuss an expanded concept of plastic bodies drawing upon workers' appraisal of emerging body rules in service work in urban India.

### MALLEABLE BODIES AT WORK

The global expansion of service work has led to new conceptualizations of the relationship between bodies and work. On one hand, researchers note the emergence of "emotional labor" or exchange of emotions, made visible through facial expressions and body language, for wages (Hochschild 2003), as reflected through Prachi's comment on having to maintain a "plastic smile" at the café. On the other hand, researchers explore the expansion of "body work" or working on others' bodies (Cohen 2011; Gimlin 2007; Kang 2010), for example, in nail bars, salons, spas, nursing, care work, and sex work. Drawing together the various approaches to the body in service work—whether an instrument for emotions, or a resource for working on others' bodies, or on display for consumers—Wolkowitz (2006, 1) proposes the broader framework of "bodies at work" to highlight that "the body/work nexus is crucial to the organization and experience of work relations, and, conversely, that people's experience of embodiment is deeply embedded in their experiences of paid employment." By being attentive to this dialectical relationship between bodies and work, we can understand how social hierarchies of gender, race, class, and caste manifest and are negotiated through bodies at work.

Women's bodies, traversing the world beyond the domestic, have been variously considered "out of place," even dangerous (Patel 2010), inefficient, and in need of management (Edmonds and Sanabria 2014). The historical contestations over the embodied figure of the "working woman,"

constructed in conjunction with class, caste, and race, have served to (re) produce inequalities. The incorporation of women into factory work was dominated by the discourse of “nimble fingers”—that women (and specifically “Oriental” women) are naturally inclined toward labor-intensive tasks, which do not merit higher wages because these are “natural” rather than “skilled” work (Elson and Pearson 1981). The discourse of nimble fingers, as such, went hand in hand with understanding women as cheap and docile workforce (Reddy 2007; Vodopivec 2010). In contemporary service work, working-/lower-middle-class workers are expected to mold their “habitus” to the “dominant symbolic” (Bourdieu 1977; Skeggs 2004) of the middle- and upper-class service users, compelling a “nimble” body as a product in itself. The body may be molded through substantive changes, such as surgical and hormonal interventions (Edmonds and Sanabria 2014; Sanabria 2016) as well as through transient modifications, such as makeup, clothing, and body language. While all forms of body plasticity are implicated in a complex web of emerging labor, gender, and class relations and aspirations, arguably the latter provide an insight into the nimble adaptation of the body to the varied settings of work, family, and neighborhoods, opening a window into the flux of body rules.

In her study of a luxury hotel in Beijing, Otis (2011, 4) notes that “migrant service workers . . . use cosmetics and other accoutrements in abundance to counter urban stereotypes of rural people as unclean and backward.” Similarly, in the context of urban India, employability training at skills training centers in low-income neighborhoods offers “personality development” courses (Gooptu 2009; Nambiar 2013), which teach workers to adopt the “correct” body postures and body language. Otis (2011, 4) argues that the “aspirational urbanism” of rural workers is destined for failure: “The systematic attempts to conceal their rural roots at work . . . only accentuate their rural roots.” A consequence of this failure is that “Female staff members struggle to defend their dignity among managers, who view them as backwards, and customers, who, assuming they are sex workers, frequently touch and proposition them” (Otis 2011, 157). In other words, for women seeking to secure professionalism through body plasticity (makeup, body language, cosmetic interventions), even if plasticity is not always already a complete failure, it faces the constant threat of being read as promiscuity. Requiring self-management, especially through the outward manifestations of the body, the need to be respectable is a form of discipline in itself (Otis 2016), which may be exploited by employers to retain control over workers. However, workers may negotiate variously with “appropriate corporeality” or the station assigned to

their bodies at work (Casanova 2013) by both adopting and criticizing, even rejecting, body plasticity. Such appraisal of plasticity has been paid relatively little attention in the emerging literature on bodies and service work.

### THE NEW INDIAN WOMAN AND SERVICE WORK

In the three decades following the adoption of economic liberalization in the early 1990s, India's service sector has become the largest contributor to the country's Gross Domestic Product, as well as one of the fastest growing service sectors in the world (Economic Survey 2017–18 2018). Work in relatively new urban workplaces—such as shopping malls, cafés, call centers, telecoms, and e-retail companies—is distinct from older forms of service work in terms of its ethic and practices. The tenets of professionalism, entrepreneurialism, and consumerism characterize such new service work, which may be particularly attractive for women workers seeking “respectability” through employment. This is reflected in the concentration of women in service work in urban areas even as the overall female labor force participation rate is low.<sup>2</sup> These workers engage with the subjective construction of the New Indian Woman who is no longer only family oriented but is also seeking empowerment through work (Dhawan 2010; Lau 2010; Oza 2006). As market demand draws young women into work, their public presence becomes desirable as a symbol of modern and global India (Ganguly-Scrase 2003; also see Hanser 2005).

While a number of studies explore middle-class women's entry into information technology and related services (see, for example, Radhakrishnan 2011; Upadhyaya 2011), particularly in emerging urban IT hubs (such as Bangalore), there is relatively limited scholarship on women from working-/lower-middle-class backgrounds largely employed in the low end of emerging service work. Constituting a young, malleable, and relatively inexpensive workforce, these neophyte workers seek training to become service professionals. Responding to the class gap in the backgrounds of workers and the new requirements of work, training centers offering employability skills courses have mushroomed in urban settings. Fernandes (2000, 92) notes that these courses “prepare students to engage with a distinctive class culture that characterizes corporate settings . . . [through] acquisition of manners, taste and style, ‘the symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) perceived as necessary for an upwardly mobile middle class individual.” In popular

discourse, these workers make up an emerging “New Middle Class.” However, as various scholars have noted, with low pay, insecure contracts, and limited bargaining power in private service work, workers encounter significant discrepancies between the discursive construction and the realities of the New Middle Class (Dickey 2012; Fernandes 2000; Lukose 2009; Upadhya 2011).

In this context of changing market demand and relatively unchanging conditions of life, young women must navigate body rules at multiple stations. Through her study of women call center workers in Mumbai, Patel (2010, 4) points out that “As global customer service workers, women must now traverse the nightscape” and, therefore, negotiate judgment, disdain, and violence as women “out of place” (also see Ong 2010, 179-94). Similarly, in Vijayakumar’s (2013, 778) study, women working at a small-town BPO (business process outsourcing) center near Bangalore in India, distance themselves from both “old-fashioned housewives and promiscuous urban call center girls.” These studies highlight the gendered experiences of the new economy in urban India, where women are desirable as resource and symbol, but are also a source of moral threat. As the service sector continues to expand in urban India, it provides a rich context in which to examine the role women’s bodies and appearances play in both reinforcing and challenging social hierarchies at work (Talukdar and Linders 2013). I use the analytic of body plasticity to further elaborate on gender and class inequalities in urban India.

## METHODS, PARTICIPANTS, AND SETTINGS

This paper is based on ethnographic research with young women working in new services in Delhi; the project explores changing gender and class relations in the context of socioeconomic change in post-1990 India. The first stretch of the ethnography was conducted between August 2016 and May 2017, with follow-up visits in December 2017 and July 2018. Following the conclusion of the project, I have maintained contact with the interlocutors through WhatsApp, thus continuing long-term ethnographic engagement. The selection of Delhi as a site for this research was determined by multiple factors: (1) As the capital and a “worlding” city (Roy and Ong 2011), Delhi is emblematic of urban transformations, characterized by discourses of growth, development, and modernization, in post-1990 India; (2) in recent years, particularly following the gang rape of a young woman, Jyoti, in 2012, Delhi has also been the site of extensive discourse on gender



and class (Roychowdhry 2013); and (3) although I was not previously intimate with Delhi, I had the advantage of shared language—Hindi—that eased my access to and in the city. The study was conducted primarily in South Delhi—the diverse landscape of the area, featuring several expansive malls, high-end markets, and office buildings, along with posh residential areas as well as low-income neighborhoods, provides an interesting site for the exploration of uneven urban development.

The study of women's work in contemporary India has been informed largely by surveys, subject to macro-data analysis, with relatively rare use of ethnographic method (John 2021, xxix). To understand the complexities of women's decision making about work, experiences of paid work, and movement between paid and unpaid work, I conducted an ethnography of women's lives situated in the context of socioeconomic change. I found interlocutors through two main avenues: (1) by spending time in a café, initially as a customer and eventually introducing myself as a researcher to the café employees, and (2) through several non-government organizations (NGOs) and skills training centers providing education and employability training to young people. Although I had initially hoped to situate myself in a workplace, as is conventional with ethnographies of work (Smith 2001), my early observations revealed that women circulated among various kinds of short-term jobs in cafés, shopping malls, call centers, and offices. I therefore decided to follow their *working lives* rather than paid work in isolation (Islam 2021, 2022).

The initial contacts I gained through the café, NGOs, and skills training centers introduced me to their friends, including colleagues, neighbors, and old school friends. In some cases, a "friend" was all of these together, indicating networks through which women shared resources and found work (Andrew and Montague 1998; Green 1998). Having established an ethnographic group in this way, I spent time with the interlocutors at their workplaces, in public places such as shopping malls, street side food stalls, and parks, and occasionally at their homes, thus encompassing sites of work, leisure, and family. I prepared field notes based on informal conversations and observations with the interlocutors, their colleagues and managers, and their families. These were supplemented by 38 semi-structured interviews, which were distributed as follows: (1) 18 interviews with women between the ages of 19 and 23 years (all unmarried) employed in private service work who formed the core ethnographic group; (2) 17 interviews with women between 24 and 35 years (8 married, 9 unmarried) employed by NGOs; and (3) 3 with managers of skills training centers. By keeping the ethnographic group small, I was able to foster



trusting and long-lasting relationships with the interlocutors, leading to the production of rich ethnographic data, including on sensitive topics of familial control, intimate relationships, and sexual harassment. Although a larger number of interlocutors could have enabled comparisons of age, marital status, religion, and so on, it would have been at the cost of ethnographic depth.

In this paper, I draw primarily on the ethnographic research and interviews conducted with young unmarried women between 19 and 23 years of age and living with their families in one-bedroom flats in the adjoining low-income neighborhoods of Dakshinpuri and Khanpur. The interlocutors were either employed or had been employed in the last 6 months, across call centers, cafés, malls, and offices. They earned between Rs. 8000 and Rs. 12,000 (GBP 80–120) per month, close to the minimum wage for semi-skilled workers in Delhi in 2016–2017. The interlocutors identified as “urban” women, having grown up in Delhi. They highlighted their urbanity to distinguish themselves from *dehaati* or rural people primarily on the basis of their education, appearance, and attitudes. All the interlocutors had completed school to Class XII (pre-university level), and most were enrolled in undergraduate degree distance learning programs offered by Delhi University (DU) and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). This is a higher level of education than attained by the previous generation in their families, which has become necessary to gain a competitive edge in the demanding world of service work in Delhi. Although unlike women who migrate from rural to urban areas for service employment (as is the case in the study by Otis 2011), they did not have to counter stereotypes of rural people, they nevertheless tried to shed their class backgrounds. They described themselves as “middle” in terms of class, using the term to reflect their in-between position between the poor and the securely middle class. While I could claim affinity of gender, nationality, and language with my interlocutors, our class difference was obvious. On some occasions, it provided fertile ground for discussions of class—some interlocutors described me as “high class,” evident through my manners, appearance, and my residence in the United Kingdom. All of them addressed me as “Ma’am.” Rather than obliterate this difference in favor of establishing an insider position as a woman, I engaged in and encouraged these discussions. This approach is also reflected in my analysis, where I rely on these young women’s interpretations of their own lives, rather than impose unfamiliar categories or frameworks on their narratives (Oakley 2016; Sosulski, Buchanan, and Donnell 2010).

## PLASTIC BODIES IN AND BEYOND WORKPLACES

### Pants, Shirts, and B-grade Work

In initial days of fieldwork, I got in touch with an NGO that runs literacy and education programs for young girls who have dropped out of formal/school education. At the time, they had a center in Khanpur, which I started attending to gain a sense of the neighborhood. Over time, I got to know Aradhna, who was the teacher in charge of the Khanpur center, and I developed some familiarity with the students who attended the center regularly. On one occasion, Aradhna offered me an opportunity to speak to her students about my research. I started by describing my interest in women's participation in new service work and mentioned that I would like to meet women who are employed in malls, cafés, offices, and the like. One of the students said that her elder sister, Jahanvi, works in Select Citywalk mall, an imposing and well-known mall in the heart of South Delhi. Another one admiringly quipped "She wears pants and shirt to work, right?" The job in the mall, all the girls agreed, requires quite a makeover; women of Khanpur and Dakshinपुरi change their bodily comportment to *become* professional working women.

After the class, I accompanied Aradhna to a food stall, and we had a wide-ranging discussion about Khanpur, women's work, and gender equality. Aradhna had been working in Khanpur and Dakshinपुरi for almost 6 months by that time. Part of her job was to encourage families in the area to send their daughters who had dropped out of school to literacy classes. Through this door-to-door mobilization, Aradhna had gained extensive knowledge of the neighborhood. She told me that men in the area are mostly self-employed as electricians, plumbers, and auto drivers, while women work as domestic help and cooks in private households. The average family income is around Rs. 15,000 (GBP 150) per month. This job profile for women seems to be changing though, she added, with younger women choosing new professions. Aradhna said that one can tell by the way young women dress up that they work in a mall. They wear Western clothes and makeup to look sophisticated. It is common for them to enroll in personality development classes at local training centers to learn to be "professional." One of my interlocutors, Priya, who had previously worked for a call center and attempted job interviews at McDonald's and an insurance company, told me that her general employment training course at one such center included instructions on body language: "They told us how to behave when we go [for interviews], you have to wish good morning or good afternoon, you have to maintain eye contact and look

straight ahead, don't move your arms, stand perfectly, shoulders should be straight." These changes to comportment, Aradhna said, are hyper-visible in the neighborhoods due to their "newness."

Aradhna also told me she had a friend who used to work in event management, putting on shows at malls. Such events often hire women to promote products and services. These women, Aradhna said, are *used as bodies*: They are dolled up with lots of makeup and wear dresses that are rented out by the event management company. They are not paid per hour but according to who performs best by attracting the most customers, so they could earn anything from very little to a substantial amount for a few hours. Aradhna was critical of this work; she said she does not like the idea of women's bodies being used to sell products/services. One of my interlocutors, Chandni, who had experience of doing ad hoc events and promotions work, also told me that she is wary of such work. On one occasion, she was offered an events job for a few days, but when she turned up at the venue, she disliked the environment. She discovered that it was a "B-grade event" and they had employed "B-grade girls," implying that it was not respectable work; Chandni decided not to return to that work.

These varied reflections by Aradhna, Priya, Chandni, and the young students in Khanpur on emerging forms of work, particularly where women are desirable, are emblematic of the pressures women's bodies are subjected to in the new economy. On one hand, the bodily modifications necessitated by employment in malls, cafes, offices, and the like—changed appearance and body language—demonstrate respectable professionalism. On the other hand, the explicit *use* of women's bodies for profit is frowned upon. Indeed, the precarity of women's employment is betrayed by the fineness of the line between professionalism and promiscuity. For young women, it then becomes necessary to negotiate an "appropriate corporeality" (Casanova 2013) by decoding and carefully engaging with emerging body rules in order to preserve respectability (Radhakrishnan 2009; Vijayakumar 2013). I elaborate on the analytic of "plastic bodies" in the following sections as an expansion of possibilities, as further constraints generated through these very possibilities, and as critical reflection on these possibilities and constraints.

### **Plastic Possibilities**

I was introduced to Jahanvi through her younger sister, who used to attend the Khanpur literacy classes. In our early conversations, Jahanvi came across as a confident young woman, but as I got to know her, visiting her both at home and at her workplace, she told me she has not always

been this confident. In initial days of searching for work, against her father's wishes, Jahanvi had felt unprepared. At an interview, when she was asked to talk about herself *in English*, she told her prospective employer about her family. The employer reminded her that she has to talk about herself, but Jahanvi said "Nobody had ever told me how to do it in the interview, like you don't talk about your father and sisters, you have to talk about yourself." She realized that she had to change her strategy by focusing on her appearance:

Then the next day, I went in a black dress. I asked for vacancies, the girls there said there was nothing going, but there was a sir at the back. He asked me to come in. He said there are no vacancies, but you have a very nice face, very attractive, maybe we can keep you . . . Then he said go to our Okhla office and do the interview there, don't take tension, they'll select you, I'll call them. So, I went there and they selected me.

Through her failure at the last interview, Jahanvi had managed to gather intelligence about the nature and requirements of work at the mall. She decided to wear a black dress, which was not a small change of clothes, but a deliberate change of comportment that could signal her suitability for service work. Although Jahanvi was aware that she was relying on her attractiveness to secure a job, this was her way of getting her foot in the door without having to spend time becoming fluent in English. Although Jahanvi's father was initially opposed to her working in the mall, once she secured this job and started contributing a regular income to the household, his attitude about work, makeup, and "Western" clothes changed. Jahanvi thought that this was a response to her not doing anything "wrong" while working at the mall:

He [my father] used to tell me off for my clothes before, he'd say wear suit salwar [tunic and trousers]. Now he himself tells me to wear pants to work. Before he'd tell me off for even putting on lip balm, now I don't take off makeup when I come home from work.

Whereas Jahanvi had to choose her outfit every day, something that she enjoyed doing, some workplaces required workers to wear uniforms. The café Prachi and Sheela worked at provided branded uniforms, including t-shirts, pants, and caps. Interestingly, contrary to the understanding that uniforms make the bodies of workers invisible (Holliday and Thompson 2001), young women experienced their bodies as hyper-visible through their uniforms. Indeed, in India, uniforms have previously been associated

with jobs done predominantly by men, such as drivers and security guards. For these young women, uniforms thus signal distinction, especially that of gender, by professionalizing their appearance.

Chandni, who was doing ad hoc events work at the time, told me that she only started paying attention to her appearance once she started working. At school, she used to have oiled and plaited hair and she did not use any makeup—an image of a simple rural girl. But once she had her own income, a substantial part of which went into household expenses, she started buying makeup out of her pocket money:

With these events jobs, I can save my money and in one year, it could get to Rs.1 lakh (GBP 1000). I know, as a girl, I don't have many expenses. Cosmetics, makeup, perfume etc., I can buy in a month, and it costs quite a bit but I use it all for the next three to four months. I don't compromise on quality with these things though, for my face; I want to use good brands . . .

In this conversation, Chandni expressed excitement about using makeup and explained that she does so conscientiously, thus signaling that she is not wasteful, but that she is also not “cheap.” For Chandni, this makeover was prompted by her desire to fit into a world that she did not completely belong in. She told me that her boyfriend, who came from a better-off family, had made her conscious about her appearance:

He [my boyfriend] just comments on my look a bit, he says I wear bad color combinations, he wants me to wear better clothes . . . I saw all of these girls in his college, you know, I can't believe, I saw their shorts, their legs, their face, they're so cute!

Chandni's critical reflection on her appearance, although prompted by her entry into work, extended to life beyond work, suggesting that subjectivities formulated at work through seemingly surface transformations are embedded in broader changes in gender and class relations (Johri and Menon 2014). In part, Chandni modified her appearance to appeal to her boyfriend's aesthetic sensibility. But her body work was less about being desirable to men, and more about attempting to belong in certain classed spaces. By wearing makeup, Chandni could emulate the young women in her boyfriend's college, even if she did not have the resources to enter “regular” college education like them. Further, her boyfriend's remarks, she believed, were only well-meaning and conducive for her future aspirations: “after marriage too, he wants me to work. And I really like that.” In

this way, Chandni articulated a mutual relationship between her changed appearance and work: Her income provided her access to this new self, and this new self in turn helped her become a professional woman.

Women's appearance—including makeup and fashion—is an underexplored topic in academic scholarship, often dismissed as women's participation in or compliance with their own sexual objectification. However, for these young women, their changed appearances are connected specifically to their participation in the new economy (Hatcher 2019). Contesting the oppression/agency dichotomy, the need to assert oneself through appearances that signal “belonging” has been noted in the context of “race” in the workplace, whereby for Black women “wearing makeup is a necessary part of being respected as women of color in a racist world” (Dellinger and Williams 1997). Similarly, for these young women, body plasticity offers them the capacity to fit into service work, expand their future prospects, and to a certain extent, effect changes in attitudes among their families and others in close proximity to them, shaping processes of modernization in urban India.

### Limits to Plasticity

Prachi's reflection on her “plastic smile,” Priya's list of correct body postures, Jahanvi's decision to wear a black dress, and Chandni's indulgence in makeup are all *deliberate* actions that young women adopt for and through their employment in service work. This self-management is significant because it sparks reflection on these changes to the body, which in turn implies that young women contend with this plasticity being *plastic* or synthetic. While the young girls at the literacy classes in Khanpur admiringly noted that women who work at the mall wear pants and shirts, such changes were constantly at threat of being read as promiscuous rather than professional by families and neighbors as well as by (male) colleagues, managers, and customers at work.

Many young women reported community scrutiny of their changed appearance, particularly adoption of Western clothes and makeup. Neha, who worked as a sales assistant at a shop in the mall, described the unease that her neighbors caused her:

That happens a lot. You get dressed, you go out in jeans and top, see the girl is roaming around . . . Nobody looks at themselves. If our parents don't have a problem, then why do you have a problem? But then I don't care either . . . Like when I used to come here for the job. People would say their girl is going out, she's started doing a job, she comes back so late at night,

wonder what the area is like, she comes through lonely roads . . . all of these comments would start. And even when we'd shower and get ready, for a party or something, even a little makeup, they'd say their girls are going out like this.

Although Neha asserted that she does not care, such scrutiny about their new appearances made women and their families anxious. Often the result was that families restricted women's employment to workplaces that were close to their homes and offered morning shifts, thus limiting their opportunities. Women also had to carefully manage their appearance when traveling from home to work (and vice versa). When I hung out with Prachi and Sheela after they finished work, both changed out of their uniforms and dressed up in jeans and t-shirt in the café toilet (there were no changing or staff rooms). They did so to avoid walking in their own neighborhoods in work clothes that, while affording them professional appearance, may nevertheless invite judgment from neighbors.

Women workers also had to carefully toe the line between professionalism and promiscuity to ward off sexual harassment from colleagues, managers, and customers. Deepti, who worked for a multinational café chain, had gone through training and transformation processes as other interlocutors—learning new body vocabulary, gaining fluency in English, and putting on makeup. In the café, she said she was wary of “old sleazy men” and “drug-gies” who try to touch the girls when they serve them. She described managing this by establishing distance from them literally by positioning her body in a way that they couldn't reach her. This management of sexual harassment was more difficult when perpetrated by managers and colleagues. Some workers reported leaving work because they did not want to make a “big issue” out of it, fearing that their parents would stop them from going to work completely. Others negotiated this threat by distinguishing themselves from their female colleagues. Jahanvi, for example, noted:

Sir comments on them [girls in the café], especially on Poonam. Poonam is a hot kind of girl, she's quite an item. Sir would say, “Poonam, your back looks amazing, wow!” I don't understand how girls tolerate this. She'd just say, “Oh sir, please don't say all this.” I don't think you should tolerate so much. I told her, “Poonam, don't think you won't get another job, if you don't like it you can quit.” But she's still working there. If I heard so much, there must be other stuff he says to her. But I'm not that kind of girl.

Jahanvi also reported that her male colleagues spoke suggestively about women workers, evaluating their (sexual) worth in money, but



Jahanvi asserted that she was spared these insults because she behaved responsibly at work. While sexual harassment appeared to be a common reason for women leaving work, which has implications for their progression, my interlocutors did not necessarily name it as such. Instead, they reflected on how their bodies could send the wrong signals by virtue of being working women and how they had to be responsible for managing this themselves.

Young women reflected on deficiencies in their attempts to professionalize their bodies as well as on the failure of workplaces to maintain the professed professionalism in service employment. They expressed anxiety about either not passing as or passing too well as upper/middle class. Chandni suggested that her appearance differentiated her from other girls in the neighborhood; she worried that she could be perceived as dressing up to deceive people. She felt the need to come clean about her origins to her boyfriend at the time, who was from a better-off family (as is partly indicated by his family's ownership of a car):

I told him [my boyfriend] everything about me, where I come from, where I belong to . . . I thought he might think the girl looks smart, her father might have a lot of money. I told him not to go by my looks. He used to take me out in his car and all . . .

Similarly, although changing the way she dressed had helped Jahanvi secure a previous job, she was not entirely confident that she was doing it right. She was only too aware of the fragility of the reliance on her appearance to stay in work. She emphasized that she actually worked really hard, and that it was not just her good looks but also her charm that helped her to build relationships with customers, ensuring that they returned to the café. She also added that it helps that there are no other women workers at the café, joking that she enjoys the exclusive attention of male colleagues and customers. Her navigation between enjoying the attention of men and keeping them at a distance to avoid sexual harassment reflects the tensions inherent in body plasticity.

Finally, young women also identified and reflected on the deficiencies in their attempts to professionalize their bodies as well as on the failure of workplaces to maintain the professed professionalism of service work. This is demonstrated by Prachi's remark on the compulsion to maintain a "plastic smile" in the café, even when the conditions of work were not exactly conducive to smiling. Prachi had undergone 10 days of training before starting work at the café. This training, she suggested, created a make-believe world, not consistent with the standards at the café:

It was so formal in the training. Shirt, pant, black shoes, socks, belt . . . I was like what the hell are you trying to do. It's only Rs.7000 [GBP 70] salary anyway. Chandni also said it's so professional in the training, neighbors think we're going to a good job, then we go back to our aukat [status] . . . On the job, nobody even speaks English . . .

Prachi experienced this dissonance in terms of class: Although employers required her to be a “professional,” to speak English, and to dress formally, as one would be expected to do in a white-collar job, once at the café, the illusion of professionalism was exposed. During their interactions with managers, colleagues, customers, as well as friends, boyfriends, and extended families, the women recognized discrepancies between *who they really are* versus *who they are becoming*. The process of acquiring and exercising plasticity, as such, is limited by the deliberation it elicits. While engaging with emerging body rules for workers in the service economy, including body language, appearance, and attractiveness, young women also *assess* these rules, in terms of the meanings attached to their malleability at the sites of family, neighborhood, and work.

### CONCLUSION: PLASTICITY, BODIES, SELVES

In this paper, I explore the body/work nexus in the context of young lower-middle-class women's participation in the new service economy of urban India. This new economy demands a new kind of worker in the service of upper- and middle-class consumption. In this context, young lower-middle-class women emerge as an “in-between” class, which can be conveniently transformed into a cheap and malleable workforce for emerging services through the promise of upward mobility. I identify body plasticity as an important feature of women workers' experiences as they seek to establish themselves as respectable professionals. They engage with body rules at the sites of work, family, and neighborhood, highlighting discrepancies between the shifting requirements of the market and the relatively unchanging expectations of family and community for young women (Fantone 2007). In the case of young lower-middle-class women workers, then, plasticity is understood in three main ways: the capacity to modify their bodies, the expression of agency through these modifications, as well as fear and anxiety regarding such modifications.

As neophyte workers in the service economy, young women undertake body work, altering their appearance through makeup, clothing, and body language. While these changes are necessitated by their work, they are

adopted by the workers beyond work too, reiterating the significant dialectical relationship between paid employment and experiences of embodiment. These changes, seemingly outward and transient, are experienced by workers as more than just skin-deep. Indeed, in effecting these changes, young women engage with the tensions between traditional respectability and modernity, freedom, and mobility, encapsulated in the figure of the New Indian Woman. Through their participation in service employment, young women assert themselves as professionals. Some interlocutors discussed how employment had changed their parents' attitudes toward dressing up, using makeup, and going out to parties, which symbolized a transformation of the self. This embodied self, not contained in the workplace, is then expressed as agentic and assertive, highlighting how plasticity of form can be experienced as enabling—through their capacity to change themselves, young women were, to a certain extent, also able to effect change in their surrounding environments.

Although plasticity is commonly understood as boundless malleability, I show that bodily plasticity is inherently limited and limiting. At threat of being read as “promiscuous,” rather than “professional,” young women may experience this plasticity as a mechanism of labor discipline. The use of makeup, new body language, and Western clothing is accompanied by policing of behavior by families, neighbors, and the women themselves. This policing includes leaving from and coming back home at appropriate times, maintaining a respectable appearance in the neighborhood, and carefully navigating sexual harassment at work. Furthermore, the deliberate and concerted manner in which workers have to take up body projects invites reflection on the inauthenticity of belonging in the new economy. That is, young women are conscious that their makeup, clothing, and even body language is at risk of being found out as not authentic and at times feels synthetic or plastic. This understanding of plasticity—not quite artifice but *synthetic*—adds an important dimension to the concept of plasticity by demonstrating how plasticity is contained by its own functioning.

With this paper, I open up an examination of emerging body rules as a form of labor discipline in the new service economy of urban India and beyond. In particular, I demonstrate the importance of analyzing these body rules from the lenses of gender and class in the context of uneven socioeconomic change: Who are the body rules *for*, what does compliance with body rules *offer*, and indeed who can *access* them and to what extent? For young women from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds, who are part of the global service workforce, the realization of the plasticity of their body is integral to becoming professionals. Rather than suggesting that these workers are aspirational subjects who

unquestioningly adopt body plasticity to participate in service employment, I present workers' narratives to sketch a nuanced picture of multifarious engagements with body plasticity. Finally, I extend the concept of plasticity beyond its potential for simultaneous construction and destruction by offering an analysis of reflections that emerge through the collision of such construction and destruction. The concept of "plastic bodies" can be used for further studies of body/work rules, social inequalities, and socioeconomic change in varied contexts.

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### NOTES

1. All the conversations and interviews were conducted in Hindi, sometimes interspersed with English words and phrases. I translated and transcribed the interviews in English and maintained field notes about observations and informal conversations. The original use of English phrases and sentences is marked by underlining here. I retained some Hindi terms that did not have complete translatability (Young Jeong Kim 2012) and they are marked through italicization. The names of all interlocutors have been anonymized.

2. In 2019–2020, India's female labor force participation rate was estimated to be 24.7 percent in rural areas and 18.5 percent in urban areas (Periodic Labour Force Survey [PLFS] Annual Report [July 2019–June 2020] 2021). While these figures are striking, they need to be assessed with caution since surveys may underestimate women's work (Abraham 2013; Sudarshan and Bhattacharya 2008). In 2019–2020, 63.8 percent of women workers compared with 60.8 percent of men workers in urban areas worked in services (Periodic Labour Force Survey [PLFS] Annual Report [July 2019–June 2020] 2021).

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