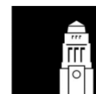
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Becoming ‘working’ women: Formations of gender, class, and caste in urban India

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Abstract: This paper explores the value of Skeggs’ *Formations of Class and Gender* for the study of changing social relations amidst rapid socio-economic change in post-liberalisation India. The paper is based on insights and reflections from long-term ethnographic research with young lower middle class women in Delhi, employed in the emerging services sector. For these young women, ‘working’ is not merely an activity, it is an identity. And employment is not merely a source of income, it is a site for renegotiation of social relations. As they traverse between home, work, and leisure, their new subjectivities come under contestations. In conversations, young women readily talk about gender and class, but are relatively silent about caste, even though it plays out in subtle ways in the workplace and more generally in their everyday lives. This context throws up a set of new questions in relation to *Formations* – Can we understand the entanglements of gender, class, and caste in the same way that Skeggs proposes the inextricability of gender and class? What, if any, are the differences between respectability, honour, and prestige? Does a Bourdieusian framework open up or limit the avenues of analysis for this context? Engaging with these questions, this paper demonstrate the wide-ranging appeal of Skeggs’ astute thinking in *Formations of Class and Gender* and brings it into dialogue with Global South feminist scholarship.

Keywords: Gender, class, caste, work, India

Introduction

It has been a decade since the infamous gang rape of a young woman – Jyoti, proclaimed 'Nirbhaya' or 'without fear' in popular media – in Delhi. The crime garnered international attention (Raychowdhry, 2013) and led to debates over the media portrayal of the case. In particular, Leslee Udwin's documentary 'India's Daughter' flickered controversy for its problematic portrayal of working class men as the main perpetrators of sexual violence. In that, it reflected a more widespread tendency in the media to show '…that Jyoti, the victim, was a hardworking, English-speaking graduate assaulted by unreformed working class Indian men' (Banaji, 2015). Through these discussions, I became interested in formations of and contestations over gender and class relations in urban India as they coalesced around the issue of violence against women (John, 2019). I was conscious that although the subject of the young, lower middle class, aspirational woman – the New Indian Woman (Lau, 2010; Oza, 2006) – was ubiquitous, there were few accounts of the lived experiences of women who seemingly fit this profile.

I was attracted to Skeggs' *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (Skeggs, 1997) (hereafter *Formations)* to understand gender and class formations through reflexive ethnography that centres women's voices. Further, I was inspired the way in which Skeggs treats women's voices not just as data, but as articulations of theory (in this, I was also influenced by Charlesworth, 1999). Initially started as doctoral fieldwork in 2016, my engagement with young women in Delhi has evolved into long-term ethnography and is ongoing. Through many years of learning (and un-learning) on the field, I have reflected on the co-constitution of gender and class, paying attention to the varied meanings of 'middle class', and especially how these vary from the meanings attached to 'middle class' in *Formations.* In relation to the apparent ease with which the young women in Delhi spoke about class, again distinct from the reluctance of the women in *Formations* to talk about class, I have also come to be more conscious of the silences around caste. Turning to feminist scholarship that theorises the intersections and formations of gender, class, and caste (Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1991; Rege, 1998; Sangari & Vaid, 1990; Velaskar, 2016), I ask – can we understand the entanglements of gender, class, and caste in the same way that Skeggs proposes the inextricability of gender and class?

Skeggs' proposition of 'respectability' as a value that is most desired by those not deemed to have it has informed my insights into young women's decision making in the labour market. Indeed, the young women in Delhi articulate concerns around respect, more specifically the potential for loss of respectability, in relation to their participation in new service work. However, developing an understanding of these concerns is complicated by the politics and difficulties of translation (Kim, 2012). Is respectability similar to or differs from the concepts of 'honour' and 'prestige', highlighted in Indian feminist scholarship, particularly in relation to violence against women (Grewal, 2013;

Velaskar, 2016; Yadav & Tripathi, 2004)? There are similarities between respectability and honour – both are something you *have* and both need to be maintained. But there are differences too – the concerns around honour are more commonly articulated in terms of *threats* to honour, rather than *lack* of honour. Further, Skeggs revises the Bourdieusian concept of 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984/2010) to understand women's engagements with respectability. Skeggs' work delves into the complex dynamics of seeking distinction, but there is nevertheless a (Bourdieusian) *neat-ness* to the class markers at play. In Delhi, on the other hand, as I explore the tentative forays of young women into new fields, I have reflected on the difficulties of using a similar framework to understand honour. Amidst rapid socio-economic change, where the markers of class are shifting, boundary making is itself in flux. In this paper, I engage with these questions – what and who is the middle class, whether respectability and honour are significantly different concepts, how we can use conceptual diversity (Madhok, 2020) to enrich the field – in relation to the cross-cultural and global potential of *Formations*.

Field of inquiry

Since mid-2016, I have been engaged in long-term ethnographic research with young lower middle class women entering emerging service work. In that, I situate work as the site for contestations and formations of social relations. Rather than approaching employment in isolation, I highlight women's engagement in multiple forms of work, including salaried employment, unpaid domestic work, and the work of preparing for work through education, skills training, and self- or personality development (Islam, 2021). My focus on the tenuous category 'lower middle class' – not working class, but not secure middle class either – provides a magnifying lens for understanding the processual nature of social relations. The young women comprise the youth (although they are largely marginalised in youth studies) who are centre stage in the story of growth and development in India post-1990 – 'liberalization's children' (Lukose, 2009) – having grown up in a 'new' India, following economic restructuring that opened it up to the world economy.

As expected, over the years, the kind of work women engage in has changed. When I first started doing fieldwork in 2016, the young women were employed in cafes, shopping malls, call centres, and offices. Mostly, these were their first jobs (or at least first full-time jobs). They were also 'new' jobs in that such service work boomed in India following economic restructuring of the 1990s and thus the previous generation was not familiar with such professional work. The women were also simultaneously pursuing graduate degrees through distance programmes and enrolled in short-term skills training courses when they were in-between jobs. Recently, some of them have transitioned to jobs in e-commerce start-ups, doing administrative, human resources, and sales/retail work. Most of them have completed their higher education degrees and largely exhausted upskilling courses, such as, computers, English speaking, customer management, data management, etc. In the time I have known them, the women have

been living with their parents and siblings, only a few have got married in this time and moved to live with their partners' families.

Formations: Gender, class, caste

In the field, as I attempted familiarity with the young women, conversations around class emerged organically. Unlike the women in Skeggs' *Formations,* these young women were not hesitant to speak about class. Most commonly, class first came up as a topic when to highlight differences between us, particularly between our lifestyles, they pointed to me as someone who is *'high class'* or *'hi-fi'* and not *'middle class'*. Jahanvi[1], a 23 year old café worker, said – 'I can tell, like with you, can't call you *middle class*[2], there's a difference of *personality*, attitude. I can recognise quite a lot of people.' In this context, distinct from the context of the study that informs *Formations,* middle class is not a desirable or aspirational position. The women referred to themselves, their families, and their neighbourhoods as 'middle class' and sometimes as simply 'middle' (also see Dickey, 2012).

In relation to employment, women highlighted gender and class inequalities, with their managers being largely men and from higher class backgrounds. Deepti noted in detail that they differ from their managers not only in terms of their gender, but also in terms of access to a good life – 'His [the manager's] salary is Rs.50,000, he has a car, a house, everything. Things that he needs to live, he has them. We have to do so much more to *survive,* only we know…' In contrast, I was conscious that young women did not readily refer to caste in the same way. While some scholars have argued that caste hierarchies are declining in modern India (Sheth, 1999), others have persuasively asserted, as Skeggs has about class[3], that silence around caste does not necessarily imply that it is not important (Deshpande, 2007). Rather, caste remains persistent (Desai & Dubey, 2011) and the unwillingness to talk about caste is an indication of the historic and systemic injuries of low caste positioning.

It is telling that when the women did speak about caste, they mostly talked about failures that were related to their low to middle caste belonging. Prachi shared – 'I belong to SC [Scheduled Caste] but our SC card didn't work…' when she attempted to gain entry into the undergraduate programme at Delhi University. Chitra, on the other hand, was anxious that her family would oppose her relationship because 'He [her boyfriend] comes from a *high caste*, I'm from a *low caste*. Even if our *relation* progresses, my family would never agree.' In their workplaces, as they positioned themselves as urban and modern women (Islam, 2022), they did not make reference to their, their colleagues' or their managers' caste explicitly. Indeed, Prachi asserted – 'Education

[1] All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
[2] The young women and I spoke to one another primarily in Hindi, but there were English words and phrases strewn throughout, as is fairly common with the spoken language in urban India. Where I have retained the use of original English words and phrases, I have highlighted it through italicisation.
[3] As Skeggs (1997, p.12) writes – 'To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist any more; only that some theorists do not value it.'

might have finished off *caste*, but now we have *upper class, middle class*' (for a discussion of the salience of class in urban imaginations in India, see Dickey (2016)). However, politics of caste emerged in relation to distribution of work tasks. Women who worked in cafes and malls distanced themselves from manual labour, particularly cleaning work. Chandni quit her café job, arguing – 'We were serving, clearing tables…I thought it would be *kitchen work*, *customer management*, till operation…that would be fine, I didn't think it would be *servicing* too, like *hotel* work would be done by those who can't do anything else.'

These are complicated accounts to unpack – in part, women asserted that cleaning work was not commensurate with their education levels. In another part, they distanced themselves from the paid domestic work their mothers had done. But in their workplaces, by refusing to do cleaning work, they also removed themselves from the low caste employees specifically recruited for and assigned this work. Cleaning, with connotations of 'dirt' and 'pollution', has historically been assigned to the lowest castes (Carswell & De Neve, 2014; Gatade, 2015) and poor people (Ray & Qayum, 2009). But cleaning is also overwhelmingly done by women. I postulate that in distancing themselves from cleaning work, women attempted to claim middle class professionalism, distance themselves from their caste backgrounds, *as well as* reject gendered expectations.

Skeggs' project inserts class into feminist literature while theorisation of the intersections between gender, class, and caste in the Indian context largely attempt to address the de-gendered or un-gendered nature of caste and class analysis. The direction of the inquiry is significant in so much as it shows how social relations are intertwined and how they come to coalesce at specific sites. Importantly, both directions of the inquiry disrupt the homogenous category 'women', highlighting the significance of class and caste in the formation of gendered subjectivities, discussed in the next section.

Respectability: Distinction, prestige, honour

As women negotiated social relations in and outside of workplaces, they voiced concerns relating to the need to establish respectability (or something akin to it). In *Formations,* Skeggs identifies respectability as a key mechanism of class, sketching out the history of the construction of the working class as lacking respect. Her contribution lies in demonstrating how the stakes of respectability are gendered. Women are expected to be upholders of respectability through the practices of housekeeping, child rearing, and the crafting of their appearances. Similarly, scholars of caste-class-gender in the Indian context have argued that women are seen to be 'protectors of the honour of caste' (Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1991, p. 2132), and that 'the structure of social honour is a key source of difference between women of different castes' (Velaskar, 2016, p. 107). More recent scholarship has used the concept of 'respectable femininities' (Krishnan, 2020; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Vijayakumar, 2013) to refer to practices that

women engage in to assert their respectability against the backdrop of a changing socio-economic context where the boundaries of propriety are under contestation and re-formation.

The gendered negotiations of respectability, honour, and prestige as a mechanism for seeking distinction come up strongly in my own work too. To participate in new service work, women transform them'selves' into professionals through their body language, dress, and appearance (Islam, 2022). However, just like the women in *Formations,* 'They operate with a dialogic form of recognition: they recognize the recognitions of others. Recognitions do not occur without value judgements and the women are constantly aware of the judgements of real and imaginary others' (Skeggs, 1997, p.4). The women are conscious of how their transformations are perceived at the different sites of the workplace, the home, and leisure spaces, leading to '…their clothes, body, caring practices and every other aspect of their lives [becoming] a site of doubt' (Skeggs, 1997, p.90). Anxiety about their transformed selves informs their subjectivities.

In toeing the line between urban professionalism and urban promiscuity, they respond to negative judgments through an assertion of what Otis (2011) calls 'virtuous professionalism' as well as through identification against or disidentification from other women. Jahanvi's first job was at a café in the mall. She told me that after initially experiencing failure at job interviews, she decided to wear a 'black dress'. This tactic paid off as she secured a job in a café. But it did not last very long. Upon refusing to entertain a manager's sexual advances, she was asked to resign. Jahanvi asserted that she immediately quit this work to preserve her self-respect and dignity, unlike other women in the café who continued to tolerate sexual harassment. Jahanvi also noted the material implications of her quitting the job – 'I'll eat less for two days, but I won't tolerate that,' adding – 'For a little bit of money, I can't lose my *respect*.'

Jahanvi's reference to the hardship her family might face without her income ties in with other young women's reflections on how their *'majburi'* or *'jarurat'* or necessity (although this is an insufficient translation) is a source of vulnerability in the workplace. Chandni and Prachi discussed that they are mistreated at work because their employers know that they come from '*chhote ghar'* or lower class families. Being enmeshed in conditions of necessity, even as women attempted to distance themselves from it, threatened their respectability. There is a difference here, however, from Skeggs' conceptualisation of respectability. It is not completely the case that these young women are seen to lack respect, rather they are seen as 'available' and vulnerable. Their families' reluctance in granting them permission to seek employment lies much more with the *threat* to their 'honour' than to *lack* of respectability. And honour, as Velaskar (2016) and Kannabiran & Kannabiran (1991) show, is a mechanism through which gendered caste and class relations are produced and exercised.

Following Madhok (2020), I argue for the need to diversify concepts from different geographic spaces – in addition to respectability, how do we conceptualise honour, particularly in relation to the changing market dynamics that may push women from lower class and lower caste background into the modern workforce because of *'majburi'* or necessity? This flux of relations is discussed in the next section.

Becoming: 'Working' women

For young women, 'working' is not a verb, it is an identity. As discussed above, being 'working' makes women vulnerable to being seen as 'available' and exploitable. But being 'working' also creates access to claims to being *not* middle class. Through their participation in employment, women asserted that although their material circumstances may be so, their thinking is *not middle class.* They extended this assessment to their families if they were supportive of their employment.

Jahanvi had faced opposition from her father when she secured her first job at a café. Her father was unfamiliar with the environment of cafes and worried that people would ask questions about where she goes every day. Chandni's father had similarly opposed her employment, but he eventually came around. Chandni attributed her desire for employment to the not-middle-class way in which she was raised. She told me – 'Yeah, I belong from a small…*middle class family*, but my family's thinking is not this way,' adding – 'My mom has educated us and not like *middle class* children.' Meeta, whose family had been supportive of her employment from the beginning, said – 'Like a lot of times I hear about they're saying this and that to their daughters. That kind of thing doesn't happen at my home. So I think of my family's thinking as *high class.'*

This claim to not-middle-class through the identity of 'working' was disrupted by the women being rendered vulnerable in their workplaces, as discussed above. They identified as 'working', distancing themselves from 'housewives', as their mothers and some of their peers were. This was premised upon their education, with women making the argument that their education would be wasted if they sit at home (Islam, 2020). While asserting their desire to be in work and the pleasure they derived from it, they also reflected on their vulnerable position at work and emphasised that their employment is virtuous in that it serves to financially support their families.

These contestations over gender, class, and caste (although caste contestations are under the surface) take place at the site of employment for various reasons. Through and for employment, women adapt their appearances, traverse the city[4], come into interaction with and become part of the 'public'. In that women are challenging gender scripts, but they are also entering spaces that primarily cater to high class and high caste consumers. This entanglement highlights, much as Skeggs does in *Formations,* that

[4] For discussion of women occupying public spaces to 'loiter', see Phadke et al (2011).

it is not possible to understand gender, class, and caste as separate or extracted from one another.

It is also significant that the entry of lower middle class women into the workforce is primarily geared towards mitigating the precarious conditions of livelihood for their families. One of the implications of these changing conditions, whereby families need multiple sources of livelihood, is that attitude towards women's employment is becoming favourable. But there are still reservations over changes in other arenas associated with employment – dress, consumption, mobility, sexual freedom, and so on. This 'blurring of carefully drawn lines of demarcation' (Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1991, p. 2131) informs women's subjective formations.

Conclusion

> Extract from *Formations* (Skeggs, 1997, p. 84):
>
> Mary: 'I like to look good, I like to have things no one else round here will ever have. I spend less money now that I've got the house, now I buy a dress for £70 or so every six months. It's better than £20 on a mini-skirt every month.'
>
> Bev: 'What's the image?'
>
> Mary: 'I don't know I've always wanted to be different. You see them round here with all the same clothes. My clothing says I'm different. I think my clothing says I'm respectable.'
>
> ***
>
> Extract from my interviews:
>
> Chandni: 'With these events jobs, I can save my money and in one year, it could get to Rs.1 lakh. I know, *as a girl,* I don't have many expenses. Cosmetics, make up, perfume etc., I can buy in a month and it costs quite a bit but I use it all for the next 3-4 months. I don't compromise on quality with these things though, for my face, I want to use good brands…'
>
> Asiya: 'How would you differentiate between middle and upper class?'
>
> […]
>
> Chandni: 'With *behaviour* and *thought.* Not with money. I know people do it because it shows with what you wear. But even if you earn less, you can still care for yourself.'

The context of Skeggs' *Formations* varies significantly from the context of my research. In particular, the context of Skeggs' study is relatively stable whereas urban India is undergoing rapid change and boundaries/demarcations are under contest. There is also a gap of two decades between our respective fieldworks. But I am often surprised by the overlaps and similarities between our work, demonstrated in the extracts above. Just as Mary asserts her respectability by being 'different' not only through her choice of clothing, but also through her practice of conscious consumption, Chandni emphasises that she spends money judiciously on good brands of makeup as she fits into a new world. What is it about *Formations* that lends it to cross-cultural analysis? Among its many contributions, one of the main offerings of *Formations* that I keep returning to is

that women's voices can contribute to the development of concepts and theories. As Skeggs' argues for reinstating class into feminist and cultural theory and I draw upon Indian feminist scholarship that aims to insert gender into class and caste theory, what remains common is that this can only be achieved by addressing the assumed universality of concepts based predominantly on men's experiences. The co-constitution of class and gender in *Formations* and the 'conjoint and mutually constitutive caste–class-gendered structuring of relations of production, relations of reproduction and relations of prestige' (Velaskar 2016, p.408) are only made visible through a gendered reading of everyday lives and occurrences. *Formations* demonstrates the value of ethical long-term engagement that highlights women's lives through their narratives.

More broadly, my engagements with *Formations* also lead to reflection on what it means to draw upon but also depart from texts that have shaped, inspired, and advanced our understandings in important ways. In this, I am particularly interested in what it means to 'internationalise' and indeed 'decolonise' research. While the scope of the paper does not allow full exploration of the topic, the analysis developed here (and more broadly in my work) demonstrates that the cross-cultural value of *Formations* lies in its adaptability, whereby adaptability refers both to the ways in which *Formations* borrows, revises, as well as, at times, refuses dominant theoretical trends, and the ways in which it is *open-ended*, that is, the ways in which it does not claim complete knowledge. In that, *Formations* allows, and indeed encourages, departures that extend its relevance. Just as *Formations* borrows, revises, and refuses, it is careful to not claim universality, and thus, invites those engaging with it to similarly borrow, revise, and refuse. The intrinsic adaptability of *Formations* means that departures to internationalise and decolonise research are not a moving away, but a moving with the text.

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