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Daily Border Crossings: Negotiations of gender, body and subjectivity in the lives of women workers in urban malls.

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Abstract

The last two decades have seen the emergence of not just new markets but new market spaces that provide a visual experience of products and persons that closely approximates the field set up by the global media. Malls represent the concrete representations of unabashed celebration and acknowledgment of desire. Malls are one of the spaces that shape everyday lives suggesting the rightfulness of fulfilling sexual, cultural, social and gastronomic desires. One 'category' of persons presumably shaped by these spaces are those who work in them. Our concern is particularly with the negotiation of body and subjectivity as women travel daily, crossing borders of class and caste and neighbourhood -from the lower class world that forms their residences to the space of erotic bodies and hyper real images. The mall is a temple dedicated to the gratification of the body and all its senses. The young nubile woman working in the mall is an ideal conduit for the creation, communication and the consummation of this desire. While these women are selling the dreams of a perfect body and all manner of bodily gratification they need themselves to project a certain kind of body, but the question is can they inhabit this body outside the boundary of the mall? Do they discard this body at the exit of the mall? 'Its hard to wipe it off'. This reference to the make-up she uses as a part of her work at the outlet of a multinational brand suggests the difficulty in carrying this bodily self back to her habitat.

Keywords

border crossings, women mall workers

Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract:

The last two decades have seen the emergence of not just new markets but also new market spaces that provide a visual experience of products and persons that closely approximates the field set up by the global media. Malls represent the concrete representations of unabashed celebration and acknowledgment of desire. Malls are one of the spaces that shape everyday lives, suggesting the rightfulness of fulfilling sexual, cultural, social and gastronomic desires. Some of the persons presumably shaped by these spaces are those who work in them. Our concern is particularly with the negotiation of body and subjectivity as women travel daily, crossing borders of class and caste and neighbourhood—from the lower class world that forms their residences to the space of erotic bodies and hyper real images. The mall is a temple dedicated to the gratification of the body and all its senses. The young nubile woman working in the mall is an ideal conduit for the creation, communication, and the consummation of this desire. While these women are selling the dreams of a perfect body and all manner of bodily gratification, they themselves must project a certain kind of body, but the question is can they inhabit this body outside the boundary of the mall? Do they discard this body at the exit of the mall? “It’s hard to wipe it off.” This reference to the make-up she uses as a part of her work at the outlet of a multinational brand suggests the difficulty in carrying this bodily self back to her habitat.

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1. Introduction:

Borders are notoriously porous, especially political borders that demarcate nation-states. But it is not just modern states that have borders; social arrangements are held together by borders and mechanisms to

uphold these borders. Borders need not only, however, be of the political kind. Social structures such as race, caste, and indeed gender have notions of borders and policing built into them. Markets, by keeping out certain kinds of producers and consumers virtually act like entities with borders, albeit notional and not concrete.

Elaborate mechanisms exist to penalize and prevent transgressions of any kind. The complex of caste structures and practices in India based on a much nuanced network of purity and pollution exemplify such borders—whom one can touch, with whom one can eat, marry, or have sex—there are clear borders, and transgressions are painful to say the least. Despite the strict policing, transgressions of borders have been numerous and persistent. Every such transgression is an instance of human agency and the desire to confront limits. Every such transgression converts rigid borders into fluid boundaries.

The predicament of human life is the constant presence of borders on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the tantalizing prospects of infringing those borders. Every such infringement, however, we believe, comes with its attendant costs. We seek to explore this in this paper. Our focus is on the young women in urban India who have found avenues of employment in the newly launched and extremely seductive symbol of a globalizing India—the malls.

2. Gender and Space:

In many ways this paper is located within and extends questions pertaining to feminist writing on the gendered nature of space. Here ‘*space*’ refers to a complex construction and production of an environment—both real and imagined; influenced by socio-political processes, cultural norms and institutional arrangements which provoke different ways of being (Shilpa Phadke, 2009). The gendered nature of physical spaces is evident from the pervasive though problematic notion of public and private space. The gendering of space defines who can appear in a public space, the appropriate ordering of time that determines when these appearances are deemed legitimate and the manner in which these appearances may be performed. Despite the problematic conceptualization of the binary of public and private space, it may be that one of the characteristic features of contemporary urban India is in the increased fluidity that marks the boundaries between private and public space.

In other ways this project draws upon the work of Elizabeth Grosz (1999). In working out the complexities of the bodies’ production in cities, she defines both terms.

By body I understand a concrete, animate, material organization of flesh , organs, nerves , muscles and skeletal structure which

are given a unity, cohesiveness and organization only through their psychic and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality. ... it is a series of uncoordinated potentialities which require social triggering. (p. 382)

This body produces the psyche through the symbolic order mediated in part by the family. This body and its psyche become part of a world order that structures relationships as well as the forms through which these may be understood and known. The city in turn is a network that links social and spatial relations. Bodies and cities are mutually constitutive of each other.

In her paper, Grosz seems to suggest that neither the body, nor the city have a prior location in determining the other. However—and this is particularly significant for the current project—she names at least two components that go into the making up of the body-psyche. These are the family and the city. The malls located in the public space of the city form one part of the sources that structure the body. However, the family remains the other, perhaps more significant one. From a psychological perspective, it may be argued that the body first comes to be known within the psychological matrix of the family saturated in its cultural and historical specificity. However, the city, and more specifically the mall, provides contradictory cultural images that allow for a transformation of the familial body into a potentially altered body that allows for new explorations and possible subjectivities. Our concern with border crossings may be seen as an attempt to throw light upon both the difficulties and the potential for agency arising from these fragmentations.

As concrete representations of unabashed celebration and acknowledgment of desire, malls are one of the spaces that shape everyday lives, suggesting the rightfulness of fulfilling these sexual, cultural, social, and gastronomic desires. Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (2000) suggest that the mall is the most significant “delivery system” (p. 117) for postmodern constructions of the body. The relationship with the body is evident from the preponderance of stores that cater to the body. These include stores that sell food, clothes, and cosmetics and help create the new feminine body.

One group of persons presumably shaped by these spaces is those who work in them. Our concern is particularly with the negotiation of body and subjectivity as women travel daily, crossing borders of class and neighbourhood from the lower class (and in all likelihood backward castes) world that forms their residences to the space of erotic bodies and hyper real images. The mall is a temple dedicated to the gratification of the

body and all its senses. The young, nubile woman working in the mall is an ideal conduit for the creation, communication, and consummation of this desire. While these women are selling the dreams of a perfect body and all manner of bodily gratification, they themselves need to project a certain kind of body, but the question is can they inhabit this body outside the boundary of the mall? (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Edl1meUp5tA>)

We seek to understand how the mall in urban India reconfigures traditional hierarchies and class distinctions—it is an interesting site because it showcases a specific way in which the local and the global come together, creating a new set of closeness and distance. Physically, their work in the malls brings these young women much closer to the global life styles of the rich, but their inability to afford that lifestyle and the alien nature of the lifestyle that it sells creates a huge distance between them and the space that they occupy. This is virtually like crossing borders on a daily basis from what is little better than a shanty into the glitzy and opulent world of the mall, only to trudge back in all probability into the dingy and uncomfortable homes in their unauthorized colonies.

This border crossing involves a near total bodily transformation—from simple, plain Janes in traditional Indian clothing into western style trousers and make up and shoes. This border crossing involves a change in the language employed and in manner. English is the lingua franca of the mall, and these young women, most of them school dropouts of the underperforming state school systems, acquire a kind of Pidgin English very different from the fluent upper class accents of the customers that they attend. This, too, is a border crossing—where a cheery hello replaces for instance more traditional forms of greeting, or the familialized practice of addressing customers as sister, mother is replaced by the supposedly smarter ‘madam’. All of this is in a bid to extend to the shopper in the mall an international experience uncontaminated by its immediate setting (de Kooning, 2007, 66).

(http://www.academia.edu/2627728/Urban_Spaces_Disney-)

Most of these young women, we learnt based on our series of interviews, live in the urban sprawl of Delhi—the capital of India, the most popular neighborhoods being Sangam Vihar and Kotla.

(http://www.google.co.in/imgres?imgurl=http://www.fluor100.com/ckfinder/userfiles/images/Sangam_Vihar_Water_shortage.JPG&imgrefurl=http://www.fluor100.com/Community_pr)





This border crossing can be explained by referring to political theorist Partha Chatterjee (2001) as the disjunction between the civil society and the political society. The civil society here refers to the typical institutions and settings so familiar in western democracy—institutions that emerge in the wake of modernity and share many background features in common with the modern nation state. It is characterized by institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles (<http://notesonscholarlybooks.blogspot.in/2009/05/partha-chatterjee-on-civil-and.html>).

The reality of countries like India is that a vast section of our citizens live either somewhere on the margins of this civil society or indeed outside of it. Many of the young women we interviewed inhabit such spaces—where the modern nation-state and the civil society are hardly in evidence. None of its celebrated virtues, but rather the oppressive features of a modern nation-state are plenty in evidence—neglect by civic agencies, oppressive police brutality, and criminal gangs that work in tandem with the local police. Everyday life for inhabitants of such neighborhoods is all about negotiating the state and its functionaries, not as citizens but as

mere occupants of a space within which they are barely tolerated, although they are very essential for the smooth running of the lives of the more privileged sections of citizens— all of whom, of course, are full members of the civil society.

The members of the civil society are citizens, but the occupants of the political society are merely ‘population’ that needs to be managed and monitored. Our young respondents hail from this political society—they are aware of the nation-state—the membership of which bestows citizenship, dignity, and security. Coming to the work in the mall, is like a border crossing, because they are moving into a distinctly different physical landscape: Flyovers, glitzy buildings, wide and brightly lit roads, traffic signals, the metro service, avenue trees, parks, and regulated transport services. This is a far cry from their neighbourhoods where garbage is never cleared, where there is no street lighting, and where roads, regulated transport, and so on, are absent. The occupants of this political society create their own makeshift solutions for the smooth conduct of their everyday life—in South Asia this is often referred to as *jugaad*, creative albeit temporary solutions that are more often than not on the wrong side of the law. This explains the terror of the law enforcement agencies and the reign of gang lords in these areas.

The law and the population in these areas that are described in official language as ‘unauthorized colonies’ are constantly at loggerheads. Constant demands, nevertheless, are made on the state—most of these demands are interestingly based on a violation of the law. Thus, groups of ‘encroachers,’ ‘unauthorized users’ of electricity or other public utilities, organize and pressurize collectively and bargain with the state. The agencies of the state and of non-governmental organizations deal with these people not as bodies of citizens belonging to a lawfully constituted civil society, but as welfare candidates.



<http://www.google.co.in/imgres?imgurl=http://paknews.pk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/electricity-theft.jpg&imgrefurl=http://paknews.pk/8074/power-theft-a-silent-crime.html&h>

Thus, the young women we have been interacting with move from their world, crossing the borders into another world daily, fully aware that they are a temporary presence and tolerated because they are the point of entry for the ‘citizens’ of Delhi into yet another border and its crossing—that of global consumerism. In that sense the malls of Delhi are witness to two kinds of border crossing: The ‘population’ of the political society that works in the malls experiences a border crossing from the political society to the civil society, whereas the citizens of the civil society while visiting the malls cross over to the glamorous metropolitan cities of the West.

3. New Economic Policies 1990s

The Indian state was firmly committed to economic growth that would be equitable in nature. In order to achieve this in a highly unequal society, there was no substitute to state involvement in the economic

process, given the exploitative backdrop of two centuries of colonialism. State sponsored and aided capitalism resulted in some spectacular successes; however, agriculture, industry, and services were regulated to varying degrees by the state. This created a network of patronage dispensation mechanisms within the large and slothful bureaucracy that became very powerful. The overall impact on the economy was stagnation. The balance of payment crisis in the early 1990s led the Indian state to approach the World Bank and the IMF for a structural adjustment programme to invigorate the economy.

Of the many conditions imposed by the loan givers was the folding up of state enterprises, cut back of state subsidies and open initiations to foreign investments in sectors that had been hitherto not allowed. The service sector has benefited a great deal from this, and the expansion in the retail sector is consequent to this. Here, one needs to mention that the earlier state-sponsored development initiative, especially in the realm of science, technology, and education, combined with exposure to English language has created in India a large and vibrant middle class that aspires to a western style of life. All this has gone into making malls the new temples of India.

Malls, with their sanitized, cool (in a country where heat and sweat are constant companion), clean, and indeed safe, ambience, provide an escape from the grime, poverty and inequality of everyday life. Anybody is free to enter the mall and walk around; it is quite common to see young men and women holding hands while walking through the malls—a sight that is rare elsewhere in public in Indian cities.

Expansion in the number of malls is directly related to the expansion of the retail sector and the growing numbers and presence of the middle class. The mall has become, in a manner of speaking, the symbol of a new lifestyle—breaking away from traditions, both old and more recent. Nehruvian India in the immediate years after independence valued restraint in consumption and caution in expenditure. The new consumerist lifestyle, on the contrary, celebrates opulence and pursuit of luxury. The multi-brand retail possibilities offered by the mall facilitate the translation of this aspiration into reality.

The young women who work in the stores in the mall are an important link between the customers who seeks to cross over to the other side of the border. This crossing over requires a passport, albeit of a different kind. It requires a new dress code, new appearance, hairdo, makeup, shoes, food and drink, accessories, language, and even body language. It is not simply enough to either buy or sell these new goods on offer—the experience has to be mediated by a whole series of unspoken and unwritten codes. A cheery Hi! Replaces the old-fashioned folded

hands and Namaste; the burger replaces the local bread, roti; the Coke replaces local drinks; the western attire replaces the *salwar kameez*; shampooed and blow dried hair replaces the oily braids, and so on. These are subtle but significant changes and the young women working in the malls as well as the customers who throng these malls both participate in this exercise, albeit to different extents, and indeed from different vantage points.

For the young women who work in the malls, this transformation is fleeting and temporary, for they do not have the wherewithal to sustain this different way of being, either economically or culturally. This daily border crossing does impact the psyche and being of the women in many ways, and we are in the process of finding out how exactly it impacts.

The story of the reception of Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) in India is not uniform and experience of it not universal. Citizens of the civil society have, by and large, been more enthusiastic about the new economic regime and its attendant changes, whereas the population that occupies the political society hopes that the state would extend to it some of the benefits that the civil society had taken for granted in the past.

The poorest sections of society and those with no skills to offer to the new market forces have been systematically squeezed out of the so-called success stories of the Indian miracle. Technology and software driven sectors have capitalized on the large English speaking middle class (created to a large extent because of state subsidized education), but the bulk of the people have been marginalized. Call centres and retail businesses have created new work opportunities, but the fact is that these opportunities are once again limited in reach. Women have made extensive use of these opportunities; however, the terms and conditions of women's engagement with these sectors continue to remain gendered, even in India's famed software sector.

4. The construction of gender in domestic spaces

Our concern with the difficult nature of border comes as much from the political impossibility of truly crossing the border highlighted above as from the psychological distance this involves. It is difficult to provide a short description of the construction of gendered subjectivities in the lives of women in India. *Towards Equality*, the first report on gender inequality in India, was published in 1974 and highlighted a declining sex ratio, high mortality, and low levels of female literacy. Gender bias was evident in all aspects of a woman's life. The natal family was the first location where such bias operated. The bias was visible in such

demographic indicators as sex ratio, access to nutrition, education, and health resources. Early marriage was common.

Sixty years later and despite many changes in the socioeconomic domain, much of the above described situation remains unchanged. Girls who play a parental role even during their childhood years are also mothers well before their childhood is over. Most married women perform the dual role of household work and work outside the home. Women are also at all stages of their lives and in every community the recipients of greater violence. The nature of this violence varies from femicide and female infanticide to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.

Marriage and motherhood remain significant ideals for young women and their families. In most communities marriage is a social arrangement that requires the consent of the family. In upper caste North Indian communities in particular, the construction of the daughter as belonging to another home (*parayi*) remains a dominant ideal within which much of the girl's life is constructed. Girls grow up with the notion of temporary membership. The years close to puberty are often described as periods of enhanced vulnerability for the daughter. Cultural symbolisms around menstruation mark her entry into a new phase of life. Experiences with students of elite women's schools and colleges certify the prevalence of menstrual taboos in many homes although the relationship with these may be of increasing ambivalence. For the longest time and perhaps currently too, puberty has resulted in an increase in restrictions on the physical movement of girls. Within the home, relationships, particularly with men including the father, change. Research suggests that there are constant references to danger and shame. A process of training the daughter to become a good wife and daughter-in-law, always an inherent part of the messages she received, are now enhanced. (Dube, 2001). Girls and boys are differentially entitled such that girls are likely to receive less and different food or education. At the same time differential entitlements also reinforce a gendered understanding of the self and of power relations. Motherhood, particularly of sons, becomes the cornerstone of the woman's identity in many parts of Northern India.

For many women in North India, adulthood was marked by a single border crossing from the parental to the marital home. Regardless of the space for agency, the primary location of the woman in many communities included the construction of a chaste body that was largely for providing pleasure, nurturance and the maintenance of the patriarchal family. This is not to suggest that women's lives and subjectivities have been confined entirely within this description, but this remained the dominant order.

5. Neoliberalism, Globalization and Women in India:

Some shifts in the formation of women's subjectivities can be understood in terms of economic liberalization. The complexity of the issue when gauged from the perspective of women can best be articulated through an analysis of the shifts in the labour market since the 1980s when a large female work force entered the labour market. As Ghosh (2009) points out, the entry of women was encouraged because it was cheaper, unorganized, and more flexible. The positive outcome of this included a greater recognition of women's capacity for remuneration, improved bargaining power within homes and enhanced self-esteem. However, as feminization of the work force took place, it also enhanced the pressure for improving conditions of women workers, simultaneously decreasing their value for employers. The vastly altered availability of resources such as fuel and water that have been the underside of economic development in India also meant a considerable increase in women's unpaid labor.

The processes of globalization and neo-liberalism promise prosperity for those who enter it. The question of the impact of globalization on the lives of women in India has been a contested one even amongst feminists. The material conditions of women's lives particularly amongst the poor and lower middle class have deteriorated; yet, it has been suggested that globalization has opened up questions of sexuality and subjectivity in hitherto unknown ways. Paradoxically, middle class women see neo-liberalism as self-enhancing and empowering, despite evidence of a lowering of economic power. In some ways, this is to be expected because it is precisely in the media that current notions of equality and empowerment are being defined (Ganguli- Scrase, 2003).

It also seems that there are significant changes in the nature of family life in India. Changes in the nature of work have meant that more couples live outside joint families. The age of marriage has gradually increased and more girls go to school. The divorce rate has increased, and the average size of families has decreased. Mothers and daughters have more space for interaction both before and after marriage. Nevertheless, the marriage of a daughter remains a major preoccupation for most parents. After marriage, violence against women is rampant and rates of sex-selective abortion continue to grow. The latter is evidence of the paradoxical coming together of modern technology and traditional ideology, a hallmark of many aspects of gender in contemporary India.

A critical question, from our perspective, concerns whether the space of the home, the domestic sphere remains outside or is shaped by the processes of globalization. Does the new body necessary for work on the mall shop floors constitute an infringement of the chaste body

considered so central to femininity in the north Indian Hindu upper caste context? Or, is the new a part of the reconstitution of the embodied subjectivities of these urban women, encouraged albeit within limits within the space of the family? Is the decision to work encouraged by the family or does the young unmarried woman have to struggle to occupy this new space? A partial answer to these questions may come from an analysis of the visual media that increasingly find their way inside the home. Oza (2007) has argued that the near-universal enthusiasm amongst the middle classes for an unshackled economy in the 1990s is however not matched by a similar enthusiasm for the unshackling of sexual, social, and cultural mores. Globalization takes over the economic sovereignty of the nations, which, she argues, is compensated for by an attempt to control and regulate the sexual and social aspects of life resulting in greater surveillance and control of women especially.

However, post 1990s, this sovereignty is sought, to be exercised through a rigid control and construction of sexual and gender identities. This is a complex process; the recent judgment on Section 377 on the issue of homosexuality is one such instance. The aggressive market assisted reinforcement of feminine beauty is yet another. The explosion in the beauty and cosmetic industry is a case in point. The innumerable spas and gyms and the expansion of cosmetic surgery, and permanent hair removal centres point in the same direction. The packaging of this new middle class has to be in conformity with a carefully calibrated global standard, calibrated in such a way that traditional patriarchal, heteronormative and caste privileges are not challenged or recast in any way.

It is at the intersection of patriarchal India and the neoliberal economy that the new Indian woman has made an appearance. She watches these images flashed on television within her home. It is this woman who frequents the malls as a shopper and the one the mall worker aspires to be. One imagines the mall to be an extension of the television, creating a seamless world between the home and the mall. Yet, unlike the world of images, the world of the mall requires a subjective negotiation on a daily basis, a point of entry and a point of exit that continually reminds one of the border.

6. Shopping malls of Delhi:

The history of shopping malls in Delhi begins in 1999 with the opening of Ansal Plaza in south Delhi. Today Delhi is dotted by around 100 such malls spanning all parts of the sprawling city. Select City Walk, where much of the research for this paper has happened, is described by Bharti Chaturvedi (2010) as a place buzzing with people. These are not necessarily the extremely rich and credit-card-carrying consumers often

associated with such swanky places. The mall is as much a space for people with little spending capacity, benefiting from the comfort of air conditioning and the relative safety whether for parents of young children or dating couples. At the same time, the restricted entry means there is monitoring of who can find a space within this space (Voyce, 2007). It is probably true that these 'new fortresses' render invisible all but the middle class shoppers. For these middle classes, however, malls give a sense of belonging to the world anywhere and perhaps a sense of escape from the local. The spatial representations of the mall are of safety and security. Malls are represented as spaces associated with particular lifestyles, which in turn assume a normative quality. In the context of an unequal, hierarchical, and squalid urban Indian context, malls produce a sanitized and glamorous public space that is supposedly non-hierarchical. Malls and glitzy shops are the conduits of a new global way of being that celebrates pleasure and its fulfilment. Voyce (2007), writing about consumers, sees the mall culture as falling in line with the depiction of the middle class as lacking civil awareness and responsibility and the mall as a space of purification and safety, but there is little reference in his and much other writing about those who work in these malls.

7. Research process:

It is this understanding that has prompted us to look closely at the life and times of the young women employees of stores located in the malls of urban India—specifically Delhi, the capital of India. We argue that, despite greater fluidity in the divide between home and the world outside, the context of work is so different from the context of their lives—physically, spatially, culturally, and, of course, economically that that they would definitely be experiencing a certain amount of discomfort and difficulty in the negotiation of these two disparate worlds.

This paper is part of a larger, ongoing study on the lives of young women workers in the malls of Delhi. The primary focus of the study is on the possibilities of new subjectivities that emerge in the new spaces of work, particularly with reference to the experienced body. The women we have studied are mostly in their 20s. They have largely completed school. Some of them are continuing their education. The group we interviewed has some married women. We met a few pregnant women, and a few had children. They also include women whose families are in Delhi and some who have migrated. The women we spoke to were selected primarily on the basis of their availability and the stores they worked in.

It is in a bid to understand this that we interviewed 30 young women. We conducted 20 preliminary interviews with women who worked in stores that sold food, cosmetics, and clothes in two malls located in East

and South Delhi. The two locations were selected because they represent different subcultures within the large sprawling city of Delhi. East Delhi borders on the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and is a new area that has provided housing to many middle and upper middle class sections of Delhi. The more elite and economically privileged South Delhi developed earlier in the history and is the home to many of Delhi's elite professionals and business classes. Until two decades ago, however, even South Delhi was serviced by small local markets, with the poorer populations finding a residence at the fringes of these residences and markets. Malls emerged about two decades ago, first in South Delhi and now in virtually all parts of the city. Our initial interviews conducted by a research assistant focused on the experience of mall work, the workers relationship to the products available on the mall, their sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the conditions of work, and the relationship of their families to their work life.

A second stage consisted of more detailed interviews with ten women workers. These interviews required several visits by the research assistant to establish contact and rapport with potential participants. Given the surveillance in malls, a significant aspect of this process was to establish confidentiality. More significantly, these interviews were about the experience of work in the mall and not about specific organizations they worked for. This paper is part of an ongoing work. More detailed interviews will be conducted by the two co-authors to try to gauge the subtleties associated with maneuvering daily life between the shop floors and their residences.

7.1. The worlds of the mall workers

For the women workers of these malls, daily life involves occupying multiple divergent spaces. Although the women themselves would not classify their worlds as such, we could describe their worlds as constituted by three distinct spaces. The mall and home form the worlds of work and domesticity respectively. As noted earlier, there are sharp differences between these worlds. However, the most significant contrast was surprisingly not between the mall and home, but the mall and the world outside. In the following sections we will try and describe the three worlds of these women and the dynamics of travelling between them.

7.2. The world of the malls

The space of the mall, in one participant after the other was seen as a distinct space marked by difference from the world outside. The mall is described as a safe space where you can be as you wish.

'In the mall, you can wear whatever you want, no one notices you, no one comments.'

Although unreasonably expensive, it is clean and comfortable and represents the world of progressive India. Apart from the material comforts of air conditioning and the clean toilets, life on malls was exciting. The word 'new' came up often. It was fun to meet new clients. There was always something happening. The malls were clearly experienced as an entry into the new world. A striking quality that bears directly upon the question of the middle classness of the workers was the repeated references to their work and life on the mall as a source of new learning. Being in the malls taught you how to belong to this world, seeming almost like a form of education into the contemporary.

7.3. A microcosm of the neoliberal ethos

Perhaps the special characteristic of the mall lies in its capacity to combine safety with excitement. Malls provide the young women the ways to become someone else. It would be facile to suggest that the transitions into the world of the mall come easily, and we will discuss later that they do not. There are other spaces of work too, but the mall offers the possibility of specific pleasures that may not be available elsewhere. Here it seems that the mall becomes a site for the education of young women into the new world of desire. By working on the shop floors, women learn about the latest fashions. Their everyday interactions with customers help them to understand the manner in which individuality is expressed and cultivated through the utilization of the products they sell.

Much of the work they do is concerned with the enhancement of femininity. Customers bring varied approximations of the contemporary ideals of this femininity to the shop floors, and their interactions with the workers often take the form of imparting new 'knowledge' to them. The skills involved specially dressing up and applying make-up, where *'we can actually show our skill as applying make-up comes naturally to her and to women generally.'* *'Customers are well dressed, watching them teaches us how to dress.'* Over here our participants meet new people every day. Each customer has different demands and unique choices, and she has to understand what they would like which is like a new challenge for her every day. They like working at the shop, because they like following the latest fashions and like to get ideas for designs for their clothes that they have made because they themselves cannot afford the clothes at the store. In addition, the work provokes an imagination of better prospects, becoming a manager, setting up a factory back home, etc. As part of the shop floor, women enjoy trying out the new things they launch and going along with popular trends. *'Times keep changing and they always introduce new things regularly. Throughout the year we keep getting trainings and all, it's a constant process.'* In a world

dedicated to the new, where awareness of latest fashions constitutes knowledge, the work creates a refined personality. Meeting new people, learning about brands, learning to speak English, listening to Western music and learning to drink coffee are some of the new cultivation that work in the mall teaches.

To work on the mall requires acquiring a new habitus. AbdouMaliq Simone's (n.d.) observation of the dense proximity of urban spaces seems at least partially at play. Class backgrounds, amongst other characteristics, though visible, are highly under-coded in comparison with the world outside. This absence of certain criteria that mark out class distinctions creates a pattern of greater attention to the other and of greater risk-taking in the relational sphere.

Paying attention to small details helps to create authority in areas that are often considered outside those that are their usual business. It is not certain how these details are assimilated into a new identity. However, it would seem, as AbdouMaliq Simone observes, that these provide "a materialization of different possibilities, different routes in and out towards the rest of the city."

7.4. Anxious encounters, regulated bodies:

Listening to one slice of their narrative, life inside the mall is one of absolute pleasure. Yet, there seems to be a virtual splitting of experience for the self that seem to register the excitement and pleasure is quite disconnected from the equally traumatic processes through which they negotiate their entry into their workspace.

You know the first time I was very nervous.....there was no training. I was told to join and the existing staff they told me about everything about products. I picked up by watching others. When customers came I used to be very scared. How will I attend to them, what will I say, I used to move away to one side. At times customers also told me off. I did not know the different types of shoes—Golf shoes, tennis shoes. I had no knowledge about all these. Customers would come and say show me some tennis shoes. I would go blank. I knew nothing. Then I used to search for a staff to help me. Once a customer got really angry, 'when you do not know why are you attending to me?' Within a year I learnt everything through trial and error.

Despite their own description of malls as spaces of freedom, it is clear that they cannot actually dress, behave or speak as they wish. Rather dress codes and the presentation of the body are clearly spelled out in

malls. Western dress is compulsory, mostly trousers and shirts, and make-up is mandatory in most stores. They are also expected to speak English, an accomplishment they enjoy but which also evokes apprehension. There are many other rules. In one store where loud music was playing, a woman told us, *“We are not allowed to lower the volume.”* Many shops do not have chairs for workers who literally stand up and serve for the entire duration of their shift.

Malls also involve frequent experiences of humiliation from customers. Children can be particularly classist. *“They can pull at anything, tear it, spit at it. We can’t say anything. See in the morning that I had arranged everything, a child came, biggish built, he sat on it and when I tried to point out he ruined it even more.”*

Workers also learn to accept the differences between themselves and the shoppers.

“To tell you the truth, one gets used to it. Initially it feels weird but now I think, of course this is how much things will cost in a mall. Customers spend so much money. Sometimes I think why don’t they save their money. But then everyone spends according to their requirements. The more their capacity, the more they spend.”

8. At home: A different habitus:

Expectedly the second space that emerged in the narratives was the space of the home. On the basis of the limited interviews we have carried out, it seems as if most women come to work with the permission of their families. From our interviews it seemed that families largely accepted, perhaps gained from the income of these women. The time spent at home was a time of relative freedom particularly from the regime of the body that characterized their work space. At home, most women did not wear western clothes (although they did not report criticism from family members about their dress). At home they said they preferred to dress in ‘simple’ clothes. Strikingly, almost all women referred to freedom from make-up which one woman described as *“hard to take off”* as characterizing the hours they spent at home.

Home does not provide them all the comforts of the mall. Although home is believed to be cleaner, there is a conflicted relationship with the material comforts of the mall and the psychological comfort of home. The body becomes very used to some of these comforts such as air conditioning,

“In the summer months, they keep the malls very cold. Sometimes we have to request them to switch it off then you get so used to it that you feel really hot at home with just the

cooler. Winters are better. At least you don't get into the habit: Aadat tho kharaabh nahin hoti."

Or, as another woman shared:

At home we have coolers, etc. I get a cold over here. Then in some days it becomes a routine, the body gets used to it. Then you get so used to it that you have to go home and take a bath with cold water. I feel really hot at home, it gets a bit uncomfortable. Here we spend 10- 12 hours in air-conditioned comfort. Thank god there are no power cuts at home.'

Several women expressed relief that malls were air conditioned and, unlike home, there were no power cuts. Despite these discomforts, the home also allows a freedom of expression that is disallowed in the apparent perfection of the mall.

"At home if I get angry I can sometimes express it. Here if you feel angry with the customer you cannot even express it. You really have to keep yourself under control. You can't say anything to the staff either. I come here to work, at home, I relax."

Scholars writing in India have suggested that vestiges from India's feudal past co-exist and remain unchallenged, despite liberalization. However, the understanding of the institution of the family seemed very varied amongst the women we spoke with. Amongst unmarried women there were concerns about whether they would be 'allowed' to work after they got married. Women also wondered if family life would be sustainable if they continued to work. Yet, we encountered a heart-warming husband and wife who worked together at the mall.

"In the morning we both wake up early, we cook together, finish the housework and then we come to the mall. At night also we quickly freshen up, then we cook dinner together. We are the only ones here (in the city). If we don't take care of each other, who will? My husband is very supportive, what stress can I possibly have?"

9. The world outside:

Outside and in between the mall and home are the public spaces of the city. These are the streets, local shopping markets, bus stands that the

participant must pass through to make the daily journey from her home to the mall. These are defined as the problematic spaces that impede the free movement of women, pushing them into an earlier space of feudal patriarchy.

Clearly the women saw the public space as divided into two distinct worlds. Monica, who worked in a garment store, spoke about the mall and the outside world.

Over here you can be on your own terms, you can dress the way you like, no one talks badly or curses you. Outside people are rowdy and they spit on the streets, inside the mall you cannot behave like this. Everyone changes. No one does anything wrong in the mall, everyone becomes prim and proper the moment they get into a mall. They have to show that we too roam around in the malls. You know outside being a lady you really have to take care of your own safety. In malls there is nothing to be scared of. We feel unburdened. We are totally relaxed. We can be or do whatever, the world outside should be like this too. Malls have changed India.

There are huge differences between the mall and the outside, differences of cleanliness, atmosphere. Being out is very difficult, you have to watch out all the time'

Not only is the mall a safe space, it represents the ideal world.

Deepali, who worked at a lingerie store, also emphasized safety and freedom.

If I wear the very same dress 'outside', where the autos [small three-wheeled vehicle used for public transport] are, they stare at you, make comments. It's a little odd and uncomfortable. In the mall life feels completely different. Earlier I would never listen to English music, but now I like it.. I put on earphones and I hear it at home too. There is a lot of difference between people here and those on the outside. In fact, when the very same people come into the mall, they also change. If they want to toss something away, they will throw it into the wastebin. I wouldn't do the same job in a shop located in a conventional market. It is safe here.

Deepali and Monica's descriptions when read together with the rules, regulations and anxieties associated with work at the mall remind of Foucault's docile bodies. The safety of the mall comes from its panopticon like structure which despite obvious sharp hierarchies creates a sense of

equality. Whatever dissent is experienced is located elsewhere. At the same time, it is precisely this consenting relationship with the mall that makes a clear critique of other feudal public spaces possible. Women feel tired navigating these spaces and fighting fear, but they are compelled, both for economic and psychological reasons, to return to the mall.

Our research is an ongoing work in progress. We need to know more women and know them better. However, even a preliminary dwelling upon their worlds reveals its fragmented and contested character. This contest creates new anxieties and challenges. The young women in our study represent this anxiety and this challenge very forcefully. They traverse and navigate many spaces and many worlds— our modernity that straddles the feudal, hierarchical world as well as the supposed neutral space of the mall. They navigate among the unsafe and machismo-ridden public arena and the ‘safe’ space of the mall and of course the traditional roles in the household versus the new, empowered roles in the market. On the debates regarding women and neoliberal cultures, we cannot see a simple answer. The experience of earning and living daily amongst the objects of desire is an education into middle classness, creating aspirations and fantasies that are sometimes captured by Bollywood characters. Yet, there seem to be tyrannies in the world outside that neither these women nor the malls that they work in have any control over. The dangers of that world must be managed by them and their families. Families too permit them to work, sometimes also enjoying it. Yet, these are contingent freedoms. Do these women represent new femininities? We would argue that they do. Are they empowered? Possibly, with limitations.

It is evident, however, that the three worlds form distinct spaces. The malls and the home provide the space for performing subjectivity in distinct ways. The safety of home produces selves that experience themselves as authentic, free to express anger, leave their hair open and be without makeup. Yet, these selves do not find a place in the new world of desire and aspiration. The malls create a utopian vision of an ordered and safe world with the promise of development. This world enables the imagination of an escape from the heat and dust of home. Both worlds have boundaries that can be navigated but between them is the violent territory of the outside. Perhaps even more than the home, it is this world that sees the young women as transgressors, sanctioning neither the freedom of the mall, nor that of home. It is this large border space that young women must navigate on a daily basis.

Chatterjee’s (2001) distinction between the political and the civil society is very useful to understand the two worlds that most of our respondents inhabit; yet, the challenges, conflicts and the assertion of agency in the context of these young women are to be seen most in the

process of moving across from one world to another—in the traversing of the boundaries.

The recent brutal rape of a young girl in the winter of 2012 on the streets of Delhi suggests that misogyny is ever present in the public spaces of Delhi. The malls, despite their nature as a public place, are clearly different. The malls of Delhi are characterized by the experience of safety and security and indeed a degree of freedom and autonomy by the women who work and shop, eat and party within them. Of course, the underbelly of this deceptive safety, hygiene, freedom, and autonomy are repressive, exploitative, and indeed surveillance-driven work ethics. It is in this tensely constituted space that our respondents are trying to assert themselves and gain some agency, in order to do so they need, however, to cross the border from their ‘unauthorized’ settlements to the urban conglomerate of Delhi.

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