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ABSTRACT

Women's Work: An Ethnography of a Pakistani Vocational Center

This paper will focus on the way young women enrolled in a sewing class at a vocational training centre in a mid-sized Sindhi town navigate specific roles and expectations grounded in gender, class and caste hierarchies and establish ephemeral, tenuous friendships within the sewing centre. Founded by a local Hindu charitable organization to impart vocational training, the centre is located on the premises of a temple managed by the same organization. The majority of students are young women from the surrounding neighbourhood, named after the temple but inhabited by Muslim, working- and lower- middle class descendants of Partition migrants allotted evacuee apartments abandoned by departing Hindus in 1947. Conversations in sewing class covered a broad spectrum from cuts and fabric to gossip, families, marriages, as well as castes and religious practices. However playful banter often reinforced Hindu vulnerability as religious minorities, even in an environment where the students all understood themselves to be recipients of upper caste Hindu charity. Drawing inspiration from Laura Ring's ethnography of Karachi women and the labour of peacemaking in *Zenana* (2006), I argue that paying attention to the ways in which friendly overtures contained demands for explanations helps understand some of the mechanics through which gender norms and religious hierarchies reproduce themselves in Pakistan, as well as how the intimate labour of friendship navigates these chasms.

SHORT BIO

Ghazal Asif is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore MD. From 2016-2018, she carried out ethnographic fieldwork between Mirpurkhas and Karachi, Sindh on a dissertation project entitled "Papering the Divide: Religious Difference, Bureaucracy and Belonging in Pakistan". Her research interests include gender, secularism, marriage and law, religious identities, postcolonial theory, and South Asia.