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Paper Submission

From “New Womanhood” to “New Working Class”: Gender and Class Ambiguity in Pakistan’s New Service Economy

Abstract: Pakistan’s recent transition to a service economy has created an expanding group of women beauty and retail workers in a country that has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world. Drawing on ethnography and interviews in Meena Bazaar (a women-only marketplace) and Delight (a mixed-gender department store), this paper explores the monetary and moral economies that shape the popular occupations of beauty and retail work. I find that these jobs are associated with contradictory economic, moral, and social statuses. Like other working-class employment, beauty and retail jobs are low-paid, grueling, and stigmatized. Culturally, they are associated with sexual promiscuity and “public space,” which further intensifies stigma. Yet they also offer symbolic advantages over other working-class jobs, through their “modern” practices of dress and consumption, promise of upward mobility, and, in the case of beauty work, moral status because it usually occurs in women-only spaces. As a result, I find that beauty and retail workers are simultaneously considered to be “good women” and “bad women,” but are neither considered to be “working class” nor “middle class”. To explain these contradictions, I develop the concept of “class ambiguity” and demonstrate that gender dynamics intervene in the occupational field and broader labor market to create this ambiguity. My research makes a case for supplementing analyses of “new womanhood” with analyses of the “new working class” in scholarship on South Asia.

Short Bio

Sidra Kamran is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the New School for Social Research, where she has also completed a graduate certificate in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She uses ethnographic and interview methods to study work, gender and sexuality, and social class. Her book project examines the flourishing yet stigmatized occupations of beauty and retail work in the context of Pakistan’s transition to a service economy and her second project analyzes working-class women’s digital practices on TikTok in Pakistan. Her research has been published in *Gender & Society* and the edited volume *Sociology of South Asia*. Her work has been supported by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, Wenner-Gren Foundation, the New School for Social Research, the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, and the Robert L. Heilbroner Center for Capitalism Studies at The New School. Prior to her graduate studies, she worked as a Research Assistant at the Collective for Social Science Research in Karachi.