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Reimagining Work: Labour, Identity, and Inequality in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Work is socially constructed and reconstructed. Although there has been no specific consensus on the meaning of work, often it is paid work that becomes known as work. This issue expands the notion of work, going beyond it as only industrial or economic in character. It consists of ten articles and an interview with Gayatri Nair, exploring major trends in existing scholarship on the study of work. The articles look at work as a site of negotiation between creativity, identity, socialisation and cultural expectations. Women's work is often invisibilised and largely overlooked in economic contributions and policymaking. Scholarship on India's informal economy demonstrates how caste, gender and capitalism intersect to structure work. The informal sector is regarded as a space that creates employment opportunities, but often reproduces the existing social inequalities and uncertainties. This special issue seeks to destabilise the narrow economic understandings of work and analyse emerging intersections with digital capitalist transformation.

Keywords: Invisible Labour: Gender, Informality, and the Politics of Work

Reimagining Work: Labour, Identity, and Inequality in Contemporary Society

Introduction

Work evokes both broad and ambiguous concerns in academic writing, often politically, socially, culturally and economically determined. It is contrasted with leisure, which is considered to be recreation or relaxation. In most modern societies, only paid work is recognised and valued. For example, the hours spent at one's job are seen as work, but the effort to get ready, travel and get to the workplace is not considered significant. Money becomes a crucial factor in determining its worth or value. The state also plays a role in categorising and defining work, especially as paid and unpaid. What these categorisations do is create distinctions between paid and unpaid work. A nation's human resource worth is seen as dependent on its working-age population or labour force. Almost every country conducts periodic surveys of its labour force, outlining participation, etc.

This special issue intends to go beyond understanding work only as industrial, occupational or employment-oriented work. Instead, the focus is on work in its diversified meanings. It consists of eleven articles and an interview with Gayatri Nair, exploring major trends in existing scholarship on the study of work. This editorial introduction attempts to present an overview of some major scholarly works and directions in how work has been conceptualised by social scientists, with a particular focus on the Indian context.

Work is distinguished from labour; the former is the creation of a lasting world of objects. Labour, by contrast, is seen as designed to ensure survival, with the results consumed almost immediately (Arendt 1958). It involves participation by both human beings and nature (Marx 1867). Work is seen as transformative, whereas an occupation connects people with the market. Occupation is central to social classification, giving people status, prestige and

wealth (Caplow 1954). In fact, occupational division of labour is found even among communities bound by mechanical solidarity in the Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 1893).

It is this occupational labour that is paid and valued. Most studies of work look at industrial sectors, occupations, employment, etc. Work is masculinised, with the workers being seen as men. This is appropriately represented in signboards on roads with construction underway, as they display a warning of 'men at work' and ask pedestrians and drivers to be careful. But work is not restricted to men and paid work alone. It also includes unpaid domestic labour, emotional labour, care work, etc., most of which is performed by women. Women's work is often invisibilised and largely overlooked in economic contributions and policymaking.

Industrial sociology looks at diverse forms of work that are institutionally derived from the human relations school of management. It is closer to the organisations and bureaucracy literature (Abbott 1993). However, anthropological works have shown that the economic idea of work is Western in nature. Bronislaw Malinowski's scholarship on the Trobriand Islands shows that money is not the biggest incentive in a cashless economy, where social obligations determine engagement in labour (Malinowski 1984). Similarly, Marshall Sahlins demonstrates from his work on hunting and gathering societies that their work stops as soon as the minimum necessary activity has been achieved (Sahlins 1972). The concept of time itself varies in non-Western societies. Time is usually related to familiar processes in the cycle of work or domestic chores at different points of history. The Nandis of East Africa, for example, measure time in terms of 'domestic' activities like cattle grazing, making rice, etc. (Thompson 1967).

Gendered notions of work

Marxist thinkers such as Friedrich Engels linked women's oppression with changing notions of work (Engels 1884). As men's work and production grew in importance, the value of women's work and production, as well as the status of women within society, decreased. The source of the oppression of women came from the exclusion of women from social production and the conversion of household tasks into private service. Both of these developments resulted from the replacement of communal ownership of property by private male ownership of the basic means of production. He speculates that such a shift took place with the rise of domestication of animals and the breeding of herds, which created new social wealth. The hierarchy between men's and women's work is also a result of how the public and private spheres were dichotomised. Leacock (1992) argues that this dichotomy is not suitable to understand societies such as those of the Australian Aborigines, the Ojibwa and the Iroquois. In these societies, the public-private separation did not exist in the same way as it does in modern societies, with the public ranked higher than the private. In the former, women were separate from men but egalitarian: they were decision makers.

Draper's study (1975) of the !Kung society also challenges Western Eurocentric notions of work. Among the !Kung, a hunting and gathering people living today mostly on the western edge of the Kalahari sand system in southern Angola, Botswana, and southwest Africa, women are the primary providers of food. The stereotype of women's foraging role in hunting and gathering societies as individualised, repetitive, and boring is inappropriate to the !Kungs. Draper argues that not only do women contribute equally to the food supply, but also retain control over the food that they gather after they return to the village. Adults of both sexes are willing to do the work of the opposite sex, and gathering and water collecting are tasks which also frequently involve men (Draper 1975).

Feminist scholars as well as Marxist thinkers have argued that the subordination of women's work is not a universal trait of all societies, but is primarily tied to the capitalist mode of production. In capitalist societies, there is a clear distinction between men's and women's work, with the latter being ranked lower. This separation is seen as a division of labour. The family is a site where production and redistribution take place. The nature of the work people do in the family, and their control over the products of their labour, determine their socio-economic positions. Although family members have distinct interests arising out of their relations to production and redistribution, those same relations also ensure their mutual dependence. However, the same historical processes that created households in opposition to the state also augmented men's power within households, as they became household heads, thereby aggravating tensions within households (Hartmann 1981).

Men maintain control of women's labour power and thus perpetuate their dominance. Their control of women's labour power allows them to benefit from the women's provision of personal and household services, including relief from child-rearing. Patriarchy's material base is men's control of women's labour, and the gendered division of labour benefits men. Housework largely consists of purchasing commodities and transforming them into usable forms. In modern industrialised societies, this work is exclusively allocated to women rather than to adults of either sex. It is associated with economic dependence and also a status of non-work (Oakley 1974). It includes preparing and cleaning up after meals, doing laundry, cleaning the house, caring for children and other family members, etc. Even when women work outside the home, they have to do housework, which becomes a double burden or a second shift (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Very often, housework is naturalised as women's work with the argument that women enjoy it and are biologically made for it. Ann Oakley's *The Sociology of Housework*, published in 2019, challenges the prevailing view that women enjoy doing housework. She interviewed 40 urban housewives to analyse their

perceptions of housework, in which they expressed dissatisfaction. In a later work, Oakley also highlights how housework is rendered insignificant, especially by gendered assumptions led by male academics. Domesticity is rendered a female space with constant undervaluation of housework (Oakley 2024).

Within the purview of domestic work, carework has received special attention from feminist scholars. Caring for family members is unpaid and unacknowledged, but is foundational to the functioning of society (Folbre 2006). Kirti Koushika's article titled *'Second Shift' for Whom? Classed Inequalities in Women's Rest and Care Work in Urban India* argues that class determines who can claim rest and leisure. She highlights how class hierarchies perpetuate unequal access to well-being among women. It is not just gender, but also one's class that determines one's access to leisure activities. The burden of the double shift is shifted to women of poorer classes, who do paid domestic labour. Similarly, Nikita Barman's paper *Everyday Struggles of Unpaid Care: A Study of Informal Caregiving in Guwahati* illustrates how caregiving is sustained through cultural idioms such as seva and matri rin, which provide moral legitimacy while simultaneously obscuring its gendered dimensions. Caregiving sustains kinship cohesion and cultural continuity, yet produces emotional exhaustion, time poverty, and economic dependency disproportionately borne by women. Based on the lived experiences of informal caregivers in Guwahati, the paper conceptualises caregiving as both an affective practice and a part of the broader gendered political economy.

Maria Mies argues that although women perform two-thirds of all work in the world, their designation as non-working housewives is necessary to exploit their labour in the home as well as in the informal sector. Her work among the women lace workers of Narsapur in the

West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh shows how women's categorisation as housewives makes capital accumulation possible (Mies 1981). Women were engaged in lace-making for six to eight hours per day whenever they found time from their housework. The men sold women's labour and became exporters and recognised workers, whereas the women are seen as non-working housewives. Feminisation and housewifisation of work reduce the economic value of certain tasks.

The non-recognition of housework prompted the Wages for Housework movement in the 1970s. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici and Selma James, who led the International Feminist Collective, argued that in a capitalist society, the best way for women to achieve economic parity with men is to demand wages for the productive work they do at home. The wages were symbolic to make domestic work visible. However, the Marxist feminist argument that it is only capitalism that has created a hierarchy between men's and women's work is also critiqued. Even in communist and socialist societies, women continued to do domestic work in the home "for free," whether or not they had a paid job outside the home. This makes it evident that while class is important, sex too plays a crucial role in women's subjugation through housework.

It is women's labour which enables men to participate in the world market, but their work is not recognised. Even when women enter the workforce, there are different ways in which hegemonic masculinity is maintained in the workplace. Men distinguish themselves from women in the workplace by segregating into male-identified specialities. They also dominate higher administrative positions and decision-making roles. In fact, this happens even in what would be understood as female-dominated occupations. More men are likely to teach in the higher grades in elementary schools, and more male nurses will be found in hospital emergency rooms and psychiatric wards than in obstetrical wards (Williams 1995).

Contrary to popular perceptions, Williams finds that men who work in predominantly female jobs do not define themselves differently from men in more traditional occupations. They embrace conventional masculine values.

Male workers dominate the technical and managerial occupations. Often, women themselves settle for less demanding jobs as they are also responsible for housework (Ng and Mitter 2005). As women moved into the economy, they had to manage both housework and outside work. But most workplaces have remained inflexible in the face of the family demands that their workers face. Therefore, women often have to sacrifice and settle for what are seen as less complex, less skilled, and less demanding tasks (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Discrimination in the workplace is also extended into expectations about women's appearance. Wolf (1990) argues that women are required to engage in beauty practices and fulfil professional beauty qualifications in corporations. This was tightened in the 1980s as a backlash against the threat of women's greater entry into the workforce. Unnati Dhiman's essay *The Gendered Unconscious of Labour: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Reading of Professional Women in Modern Literature* emphasises a gender-sensitive definition of work, which can be a site of negotiation between creativity, identity, and cultural expectation. She draws from modern women's writings and psychoanalytic feminist theories to argue that work for women is not merely an economic or intellectual activity but a deeply gendered and unconscious struggle.

Informal work and social identities

However, women's work also needs to be understood in relation to their other social identities, such as class, caste, race, religion, ethnicity, etc. Scholarship on India's informal economy demonstrates how caste, gender and capitalism intersect to structure work. Caste has played a crucial role in determining one's position in the social hierarchy as well as the

division of labour. Ambedkar argues that the caste system is not merely a division of labour but also a division of labourers. It was also a graded hierarchy of labourers decided even before birth. It is not by choice (Ambedkar 1936). For instance, in the Indian context, most domestic work is done by women belonging to marginalised sections. Caste plays a key role in determining what kind of work is performed by whom. Poor women not just experience inequalities of class and gender, but also those of caste and religion. Most of these women are employed informally at the bottom of the Indian society and belong predominantly to Dalit, tribal or Muslim communities (Dubey 2016).

The higher castes are located in professional and business work. They dominate white-collar jobs and mostly avoid manual work (Vaid 2012). Manual labour, including domestic work, manual scavenging, etc., is relegated to the lower castes (Ray and Qayum 2009; Gothoskar 2013; Ray 2015). Scholarly literature on India's informal economy looks at its size and role, predominance of women workers, as well as the significance of informal work to capitalism. Industries such as garment factories, call centres, etc., explore cross-cutting themes of caste, gender, ethnicity, and class. This literature primarily uses analytical frameworks from labour process theory, feminist political economy, mobilisation and organising, etc. This interdisciplinary perspective enables deep engagement with varied perspectives and concepts. Bottom-up perspectives, such as Jan Breman's, enable us to vividly picture and powerfully demonstrate the conditions of work of India's vast informal force (Breman 2013). Similarly, Alessandra Mezzadri's scholarship explores how localised production organised in multiple industrial sectors in the Indian subcontinent impacts the implementation of corporate social responsibility regulations on labour standards. The production clusters deepen processes of class differentiation among local embroidery contractors in the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR), confirming their in-built elitism and market-oriented logic. She argues for the need to re-integrate the study of labour and

capitalism into network, commodity or cluster studies within the broader political economy framework (Mezzadri 2014).

Initially, conventional economic thought portrayed the informal economy in developing countries like India as a sector. The expectation was that it would fade away with the formal economy's expansion. However, that has not materialised, and what was initially seen as a problem is now projected as a solution (Breman 1996). Informalization and casualisation are no longer limited to industrial and agricultural labour, but have become a part of other sectors too. In fact, the lines between the informal and the formal have considerably blurred in the economy, with most of the workforce employed casually. Although the 1980s and 1990s promised development in the neo-globalisation era, this development has remained uneven. Many countries, especially in the global South, have become production centres because they offer cheap labour, which is rooted in pre-existing social inequalities (Mezzadri 2008).

Jan Breman’s critical work on India’s informal economy highlights the importance of the non-agrarian economy for the employment of the local proletariat. His study of wage labour in the lower echelons of the non-agricultural economy of South Gujarat towards the end of the twentieth century draws attention to increased labour mobility and migration. Breman observes that there is an increased casualisation of labour, which also increases mobility. Working-class people migrate in search of jobs and are forced to work in poor working conditions for low wages. He uses the term footloose labour to refer to the nomadic lives that these working-class labourers are forced to live (Breman 1996). Rising unemployment meant that landless labourers were more than willing (read coerced) to become footloose. The majority of landless labourers left their villages in search of new livelihoods in what would later be known as the informal sector.

Labour is their only skill, which they sell in the informal economy. This informalisation, Breman calls a bane of the labouring poor under globalised capitalism (Breman 2017). Karl Marx had outlined in the nineteenth century itself how wages are determined through the antagonistic struggle between the capitalist and the worker. The worker's labour power becomes a commodity (Marx 1844; Marx 1867), as illustrated by Breman in the Indian context. Breman's work, drawn from fieldwork done in Gujarat for over forty years, has also been useful to understand global political-economic processes, as there has been increasing informalisation of labour in the West as well.

In the Western context, Ulrich Beck outlines the shift from a standardised system of full employment towards a risk-ridden system of flexible, pluralised, decentralised underemployment. Employment insecurity extends to workforce structures, a feature unknown in the old system of industrial society (Beck 1992). The oppression of workers within export-oriented production networks is a significant characteristic of contemporary globalisation. This is despite various regulatory attempts on the part of governments, international organisations and private actors to improve labour standards. Mezzadri highlights how the sweatshop continues to exist in its highly exploitative form. The organisation of the global apparel industry structures production "as a complex regime of exploitation and oppression, organised in a joint enterprise shaped and commanded by multiple global, regional and local lords that link processes of surplus extraction to different realms of social reproduction of the workforce" (Mezzadri 2017).

It is difficult for workers to negotiate with oppressive structures. There is a ready replacement available owing to the presence of a 'reserve army' (Marx 1867). Kasivajjhala Sahithy Kiran's paper, *Half Dust, Half Deity - Women and Labour: Case Studies of Female Migrant Construction Workers from Varamkheda Village, Dahod, Gujarat,* highlights how

the exploitative labour market makes collective action difficult using women's lived experiences from Varamkheda village in Gujarat. In both the household and the labour market, women have hope at an individual level. They therefore sustain rather than subvert the existing order. Similar observations are made in the article *Care, Confinement and Capital: Women's Work in Homestays and the Gendered Political Economy of Hospitality* by Priakshi Kausik. While homestays offer women economic visibility as entrepreneurs, they reinforce rather than bring transformative change in patriarchal labour hierarchies. Women's hospitality work is feminised, and their emotional labour is devalued. The flexible working hours in a fixed domestic space limit their social mobility and contribute to the reproduction of traditional gendered differences as marketable assets for a globalised economy.

Not all paid work is valued in the same way. There are also gradations within informal work. Along with the social dimension of work, its moral and cultural aspects are also important. Sex work, for instance, is not considered to be 'good' or 'valued' work. The paper *Hasina Pasina: Examining Work and Its Imbrications Using Three Films as Catalysts* by Garima S and Carol Blaizy D'Souza looks at varying notions of work. Using Paromita Vohra's Working Girls (2025), Saim Sadiq's Joyland (2022) and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022), it explores how the question of choice is embedded in certain work, such as sex work and intersects with the possibilities of pleasure, violence, precarity, and play. Similarly, the paper by Kadambari, *There are Many Streets...But I Don't Go to Them...Because They are Very Narrow: Dynamics of Sex Work and Space in Delhi and Kolkata* adopts a comparative approach to explore sex work in a variety of spaces, including homes, hotels, bushes, spas, and brothels, cutting across Delhi and Kolkata. It looks at how the materiality of spaces shapes the everyday experiences of sex workers. It sheds light on how sex workers negotiate these spaces as well as social relations with other actors in their work.

Similarly, tasks like manual scavenging, cleaning toilets, etc, although involving hard labour and dangerous working conditions, are not regarded as valuable. Occupation plays a major role in determining individual prestige and social status (Caplow 1954). These workers also continue to be underrepresented in scholarly discourse. Roshan Pandey's paper *Bearing the Burden: Human Rights, Working Conditions, and Health Hazards of Head-load Workers in Azadpur Mandi, Delhi* addresses this gap by providing an in-depth examination of the living and working conditions of head-load workers (palledars) in Azadpur Mandi, Delhi, the largest wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Asia. These workers are engaged in physically demanding tasks involving the manual transport of goods, typically by carrying heavy loads on their heads and backs. Particular attention is given to the health and safety issues associated with the nature of their labour and to the limited legal and institutional protections afforded to them.

Labour and digital platforms

One can also observe the intersection between social identities and informal labour in the digital labour platforms. The informal sector is regarded as a space that creates employment opportunities, but often reproduces the existing social inequalities and uncertainties. In an increasingly digitised economy, women's access to productive resources is determined not only by their gender but also by other intersectional identities. Mitter (2005) has argued that women experience a greater sense of techno-fear in comparison to men because of a lack of encouragement in solving technical problems in educational institutions as well as familial spaces. Many companies have moved labour-intensive information work out of the workplace into the arena of suburban homes, where work is performed at piece rates. At the core of such transformations are women workers, who are

offered low pay with no benefits, under the banner of flexibility (Freeman 1998). This becomes even truer for already marginalised work like domestic labour.

While flexible or gig work has become the norm in the new Indian economy, one needs to be mindful of how it impacts vulnerable populations. Gig work is sourced both globally and locally, especially with the entry of digital platforms. Much like informal work, gig workers bear a significant risk of precarity, with their work regulated by social identities of caste and gender. These social hierarchies are further exacerbated in conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where workers' incomes were cut even as they were exposed to greater risks to their health and safety (Nair 2023; Nair 2022). The digital platforms and the gig economy have received support from the Indian state, especially for their role in creating jobs. These platforms also see themselves as playing a crucial role in the country's social transformation. However, while they claim to introduce formalisation to otherwise informal work and disrupt informality, it is only a half-truth. The platforms continue to be fraught with economic insecurity, minimal social security, and structural conditions of social identities, which also mark the informal economy (Nair 2026). In this issue, Anwesha Ghosh's essay *Precarity Amplified: Technology, Gender, and Informality in India's Paid Domestic Work Sector* examines how technology intersects with the fragile and unregulated domain of domestic work to amplify preexisting vulnerabilities. Platformisation of domestic labour is mediated by access to smartphones and technology. Their working conditions are run by algorithms which manage their timings and tasks. Digital labour platforms build, connect and reconstruct social relations among workers, consumers and businesses. As such, there is a need to focus on different social contexts of digital platform work in the Global South as well as platform regulation (Lata et al 2026).

In neo-liberal capitalist economies, work often becomes associated with drudgery. As such, workers face several crises ranging from low wages to job loss to professional burnout. While workplaces talk about promoting workers' well-being, very often these talks remain performative. In the age of Artificial Intelligence and algorithmic optimisation, these crises have only been multiplied. Workers are facing both a ‘crisis of purpose’ and a ‘value vacuum’ as is illustrated in Nancy Malhotra’s article *The Humanistic Anchor: Reconciling Fayol’s Administrative Principles with the GGS Triad for Purpose-Driven Management in the AI Era*. Work is required to be embedded with a sense of humanistic significance, beyond its administrative functions.

Conclusion

Work is socially constructed and reconstructed. While work transforms nature, what is considered work is socially determined. The state, too, plays a crucial role in defining who is economically active. Economic value is significant in determining the value of work. Although there has been no specific consensus on the meaning of work, often it is paid work that becomes known as work. This issue expands the notion of work, going beyond it as only industrial or economic in character. The articels look at work as a site of negotiation between creativity, identity, socialisation and cultural expectations.

India’s economic conditions present a paradox - it has one of the world’s youngest demographic dividends. Yet, at the same time, most of the workforce is informal and insecure, with women and disadvantaged groups the most vulnerable. Thus, there is a need to explore the intersections between technology, identity, marginality and work in the new economy. This issue seeks to destabilise the narrow economic understandings of work, foreground questions of invisibilised labour, examine how social inequalities structure labour relations, and analyse emerging digital capitalist transformation. It contributes to the rich

scholarship that exists on care work, hazardous work conditions in the economy, characterization of sex work and understandings of the inforaml sector.

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