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Rooted flexibility: social reproduction, violence and gendered work in the Indian city

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on feminist marxist and feminist geography scholarship the article develops the concept 'rooted flexibility' to examine the latent frictions between flexible labour regimes and the rooted, gendered demands of social reproduction in worker tenements and factories in Gurgaon, India. The article explores the everyday gendered terrain through which migrant women are incorporated into, disciplined and navigate flexible labour and precarious social reproduction in the city. Unlike the male migrant workers who are made flexible through ideologies and practices of mobility, the mobility of migrant working-class women whose stories are narrated in this article is constrained by patriarchal control and responsibilities to social reproductive labour. In the absence of labour mobility, the article explores how migrant women workers navigate conflicting demands of being both flexible waged-workers and rooted, 'respectable' housewives, resisting violent practices of labour discipline on the shop-floors and tenements. In doing so, the article examines how an embodied and differentiated politics of 'respectability' comes to materialise how 'rooted flexibility' is lived, contested and secured.

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Anita: rooted labour

Anita works as a 'helper' in a garment-export factory in Udyog Vihar, an industrial estate in the city of Gurgaon in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR) (all respondents have been given pseudonyms). Anita is hired as a piece-rate worker through a contractor, earning approximately ₹5600 (USD \$79) a month. Anita is in her mid-20s and has lived in various tenement rooms in Kapashera village, a workers' neighbourhood adjacent to Udyog Vihar since 2007. She has spent the previous eight years moving between various positions - thread-cutting, stitching, finishing - in a number of factories in Udyog Vihar and informal workshops in the worker tenements. Anita

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has never held a contract at a workplace longer than ten months and has experienced sexual harassment and abuse at numerous workplaces in the city. Unlike the city's 'footloose' male workers who move back and forth between city and village, from one workplace to the next, Anita was yet to return home to her village.

Anita's move to Gurgaon and decision to take up waged employment in the factories was precipitated by her husband's withdrawal from waged labour. After failing to secure a government job in the village, Anita's husband withdrew from all economic activity, fell out with his family, began drinking and eventually poisoned himself. To cover the costs of his medications, Anita sold their small parcel of land and migrated to Gurgaon. Ever since Anita has moved between precarious work in factories and workshops in order to piece together a wage to reproduce her household. Sighing forlornly, Anita noted that she was unlikely to ever return to her home village: her family didn't know she was working outside the household and were totally unaware of the difficulties she had endured navigating the abuses of working life in the city, 'I came here to make a living only ... I can't stay here [but] I don't know how I'll manage to go back'.

Anita's migration to Gurgaon, her transition into a factory worker, labouring across the city's flexibilised garment-export sector and experiences of harassment and precarity in the city, bring into focus some of the questions this article seeks to explore. Udyog Vihar is known for its highly masculine and hypermobile labour (Mazumdar 2007; Mezzadri 2016). Unlike the feminised manufacturing lines elsewhere in Asia, the factory shop-floors and labour tenements which surround the industrial estate are dominated by young, migrant men from North Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who work in the city's export units for three to ten-month periods before returning to home villages or rotating back onto new short-term flexible contracts elsewhere. *Udyog Vihar's* flexible and masculinised workforce are in this sense the quintessential 'footloose proletariat' that dominate accounts of manufacturing labour in contemporary India (Breman 1996; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Samaddar 2009).

Labour's mobility in contemporary India is an outcome of a profound restructuring and 'flexibilisation' of industrial production across the country since the early 1990s of 'Flexibilisation' involves the breakdown of Fordist divisions of labour and shift towards 'flexible specialisation', the increase in 'temporary' and sub-contracted workers across the production process, the criminalisation of collective bargaining and provision of shifting daily working hours and rates (Elson and Pearson 1981). Unlike flexible employment in the Global North which has expanded through processes of de-industrialisation, in Asia labour restructuring has been accompanied by expansion of export-oriented industrial manufacturing from the late 1980s (Campbell

2013) and regionally-specific processes of workforce feminisation (Pun 2005; Caraway 2005).

Flexible garment production regimes in Gurgaon demand a mobile labouring body. In Udyog Vihar workers are permanently temporary, required to train up for a variety of job-tasks in the industrial estate for a fixed period in the city, before quietly shifting back to rural villages, only to return for new contractors, firms, sectors and tenements in the city. Rather than through any distinct process of feminisation (as seen elsewhere in Asia, see Caraway 2005) the garment workforce within Gurgaon is reproduced as a cheap and flexible labouring class through everyday regimes of production and social reproduction - in the formal workplace and workers' neighbourhood - which ensure workers' constant mobility through the city. This preference for mobility demands a masculinised labouring body, and yet as this article explores has equally come to unevenly draw migrant working-class women into the production process.

While the mobile character of male labour in the Delhi NCR is now well founded (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015; Soni-Sinha 2006), this article examines the everyday experiences of those left behind following rounds of labour circulation, or like Anita compelled to pick up waged work yet unable to participate in migration between the city and the village. Examining the everyday practices that differently gender forms of exploitation across the workplace-tenement continuum (Fernandes 1997; Mezzadri 2016), this article explores the experiences of class formation of Gurgaon's less-than-mobile labouring subjects: migrant women.

Thus rather than telling a story of migrant women's subsidising labours within 'hidden' sites of social reproduction, this article explores how spatially rooted, patriarchal demands on migrant women's unwaged labour in the worker tenements shape their entrance into waged work and experiences of class formation, setting the terrain upon which migrant women's labouring flexibility is often violently secured and tentatively contested. Subject to spatially-bound demands of social reproduction, violent practices of labour discipline on the shop-floor and constrained movement through public spaces, migrant women's labouring flexibility in Gurgaon is constituted through quite distinct conditions from male workers.

Building on both feminist marxist labour scholarship and feminist geographers' work on social reproduction, the article draws from life history accounts of different migrant women living in worker neighbourhoods around Udyog Vihar as they attempt to navigate the conflicting ideological, embodied and material demands of flexible production and rooted social reproduction; what I am terming 'rooted flexibility'. Rooted flexibility, the article argues reflects the limits posed to flexible labour regimes by the rooted, gendered demands of social reproduction, building on Smith and Winders (2008) to highlight the

'internal frictions between demands of production and social reproduction in the present mode of flexible accumulation' (Smith and Winders 2008, 60).

In doing so the article explores how these frictions materialise in everyday forms of violence on the shop-floor and tenement, examining migrant working women's strategies to negotiate being both a rooted, domesticated housewife and a flexible, masculinised factory worker. The women's strategies of negotiation are at once clearly aimed at resisting exploitation and yet do not always crystallise in acts of defiant resistance, often reliant on enacting normative modes of 'feminine respectability' (Hewamanne 2003) in order to get on and survive in the city. As such, the article highlights the ideological and embodied faultlines through which claims to resistance and everyday survival under conditions of rooted flexibility are made, revealing how 'feminine respectability' materialises a key way rooted flexibility is lived and contested by heterogeneous migrant working-class women in the city.

Flexibility and social reproduction

Feminist marxist scholarship has long emphasised how labour's flexibility is a key source of both vitality and tension for capitalist regimes (Elson and Pearson 1981). Labour's flexibility - its pliability for capital - is not predetermined, rather factory managers, supervisors, contractors and landlords must constantly balance the need for a spatially fixed, unevenly skilled workforce, with the ability to dispose that workforce in response to the dynamic needs of the market (Harvey 1982; Gidwani 2008). Gendered and racialised differences have been essential to capital's balancing act, mobilised at different historically and geographically-specific moments across the supply-chain to constitute an uneven labour market and resolve potential blockages in labour's flexibility (Bair 2010; Werner et al. 2017). Drawing attention to these dynamic processes of differentiation, feminist scholarship has sought to unpack the normative 'factory worker' and unbound the factory as the key site of class formation emphasising the vital role historically-specific, embodied differentiations play in structuring particular kinds of labour-power. The labourers' embodied flexibility is, in other words, always a flexibility *for* capital; secured through historically and geographically-specific social and material practices.

In this regard, Mezzadri's research in the Delhi NCR (2016) has forcefully shown how naturalised gender tropes and relations of social reproduction have been mobilised to structure an unevenly priced labour market within organised sites of commodity production, in turn demonstrating how stretched supply-chains that extend out from the formal industrial estates are structured by patriarchal processes of 'housewification' (Mies 1982) that produce cheap commodity producers outside the factory gates. Elsewhere,

labour geography scholarship in India has emphasised how social differentiations of gender, ethnicity, caste have been mobilised to incorporate heterogeneous people into waged manufacturing employment, and further explore the means through which differently placed workers resist and rework patriarchal exploitation on the shop-floor (Padmanabhan 2012; Carswell and De Neve 2013; Dutta 2016).

Feminist scholars have been particularly attuned to the role which embodied difference plays in patterning materially differentiated labouring bodies – by sex, gender, race, caste – highlighting the crucial role discourses of embodied differentiation play in both shaping labour markets for capital and as terrains of resistance (Lal 2011; Silvey 2016). These accounts have shown how historically and geographically-specific articulations of embodied difference provide a ‘corporeal breadth’ (Wright 2006) for capital to etch out labour markets necessary for its own survival (Wolkowitz 2006; Gidwani and Reddy 2011). As Wright (2006, 13) argues, determining ‘how the body materialises as a site of multiple identities, where no single identifier establishes the sole definition of the subject’s existence’ is vital to understanding how gendered embodied subjectivities, spaces, constraints and capacities come to structure segmented labour markets and how workers’ themselves experience and navigate processes of exploitation and commodification in the city.

In this article, by exploring experiences of migrant working-class women as they navigate conflicting embodied demands of social reproductive and productive labour, I draw upon a wealth of feminist social reproduction scholarship that has examined the gendered, unwaged and hidden social practices that dialectically reproduce and every so often upend capitalist value (Bhattacharya 2017; James and Dalla Costa 1972; Federici 2012; Meehan and Strauss 2015). Social reproduction, at its most basic, involves the broad array of social practices which dialectically constitute conditions of production, inclusive of the daily and generational work to transform people and environments into the commodity form. As Katz (2004, x) argues, these reproductive practices are not simply a set of material structures but ‘embod[y] the whole jumble of cultural forms and practices that constitute everyday life and the meanings by which people understand themselves in the world’. This article draws specifically on materialist social reproduction scholarship that examines the latent contradictions and disjunctures within contemporary neoliberal production-social reproduction regimes (Meehan and Strauss 2015; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004). Here social reproduction is not considered simply functional to the whims of relations of production, but rather often operates itself as a heterogeneous terrain where hegemonic production regimes are worked through and upended. In particular, Meehan and Strauss 2015 draw from Smith and Winders (2008) work on Latino migrant labour in the American South, where the author’s explore how globalised capital’s demands

for a flexible, unmoored working subject conflicts with rooted demands and labours of social reproduction. Pushing back against functionalist readings of the production-social reproduction relation, Smith and Winders trace the tentative faultlines of flexible production in the American South; a hegemonic settlement shaped and disrupted by the 'place-making claims' of more rooted labouring subjects.

Building on Smith and Winders' (2008), in this article I develop the concept 'rooted flexibility' to help explain demands placed on socially heterogeneous groups of migrant women at the waged workplace and unwaged home. Women working in Gurgaon's garment-export sector, are expected to embody 'flexibility' at the point of production while answering to the spatially-constrained, ideological demands of feminised social reproductive labour within the workers' neighbourhood. The article examines the awkward suturing of the spatially-constrained feminised subject to the much idealised flexible and hypermobile factory worker; examining how the contradictory figure of the flexible woman worker informs socially differentiated experiences of productive and reproductive work, strategies of everyday survival and moments of compliance and resistance.

This conflict between the workplace and the household is not merely reflective of the material demands on labour, but also incorporates and is shaped by conflicting identities and practices attributed to production and social reproduction. In this regard, the article traces the ideological terrain of 'respectability' that is mobilised to discipline women carrying out 'masculine' work outside the feminized space of the home.

Rooted violence

The frictions of rooted flexibility were often relayed to me during my discussions and interviews through stories of workplace violence and harassment. On the one hand, the material deterioration of condition of social reproduction in Gurgaon's tenements pushes unwaged, often female, workers into sites of low-wage, precarious work in the cluster. On the other hand these shifts in household-workplace relations have seldom altered the ideological structure of the household premised on a feminine homemaker and masculine breadwinner (Lam and Yeoh 2018). The impossibility for working-class men and women to fulfil these ideological (middle-class and upper-caste) gender roles in the face of conflicting positions of what I am terming rooted flexibility, has the effect of differentiating the migrant working-class along gendered lines, posing female breadwinners as an out-of-place, unruly and un-feminine threat to be violently disciplined and re-inscribed as subservient homemakers in the factory (see Fernandez-Kelly 1983).

As will be shown, migrant women's ability and capacity to negotiate the conflicting demands of 'rooted flexibility' often plays out on a discursive and

material terrain of 'respectability' used on the shop-floor to discipline a female-yet-flexible workforce. Migrant women's subjection to sexualised harassment on the shop-floor and tenements materialises as key points of resistance against exploitation and uncertainty for migrant women interviewed during my research, and yet 'respectability' discourse is equally a terrain upon which caste, religion and class-based differentiation is reinforced, shaping different women's capacity and ability to resist. In other words, in Gurgaon's garment-export industry, gendered violence and discourses of respectability are key expressions of migrant women's different and often conflicting position between masculinised workplaces and feminised households.

Methods

This article is based on fieldwork conducted while living in a workers' tenement in Kapashera village on the border of Delhi and Gurgaon between 2014 and 2015. Kapashera is the main residential neighbourhoods for migrants arriving in the city to work in Gurgaon's garment-export cluster where I resided for ten months while conducting fieldwork. The article draws from ethnographic observation of the tenements alongside interviews conducted with tenement neighbours and those I met at the weekly meetings of a women workers' organisation based in Kapashera called *Nari Shakti Manch* (NSM). NSM are a small non-governmental organisation that support women working in the garment-export sector, file complaints with the local labour department and mediate disputes between workers, tenement landlords and factory management. While living in a labour tenement and participating in NSM's weekly meetings in Kapashera, I met and organised life history interviews with working-women over the course of several months.

As a male, foreign researcher interpreting and analysing the gendered experiences of South Asian migrant women, this work is steeped in and forms part of a longer historical legacy of colonial extraction which has sought to speak and act for a voiceless 'third world woman', drawing out and constellating experience through a universal, western 'Knowledge' (Mohanty 1988). In this article I put together dialogues from life history accounts of working-women in order to present my refraction of events and processes which I see as differently emplacing different women into geographies of capitalist development, and through which these women shape, navigate and resist such emplacement. In doing so, I seek to both emphasise how gender articulates with caste, ethnicity and religion to shape different experiences of class formation and give space for the disruption of the authoritative knowledges that I transported to my fieldwork, leaving space for my respondents' interrogations and displacements of that knowledge.

Producing flexibility in the labour tenements

Labour's mobility

The Delhi NCR's garment industry fully transitioned to export-led, Taylorised manufacturing from the mid-1990s, as regional garment clusters were integrated into global networks of production, and informal, flexible employment increased in response to the liberalisation of the economy and deregulation of labour codes and protections (Mazumdar 2007; Mezzadri 2016; Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015).

Garment production in the Delhi NCR has been historically gendered as a 'skilled' and thereby masculine job-task, a reflection of the 'high-end' garment commodities historically produced in the region compared with the faster fashion of Southern clusters (Bannerji 1995; Mezzadri 2012; Mazumdar 2007) together with regionally-specific patriarchal, upper-class and caste ideologies that constrain women's mobility and code women's moral value onto a proximity to the home and social reproductive duties (Lal 2011; Soni-Sinha 2006; Chowdhry 2007). In this context, as the Delhi NCR's garment sector transitioned towards export-led, flexibilised production and flexible employment relations in the 1990s, rather than seek to fully feminise the workforce, industries sought to draw on workers from a pool of more precarious rural-urban migrants arriving in the city from agricultural areas with high levels of unemployment (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015).

The industry's requirement for a short-term, temporary workforce, able to slot in and out of production lines in a timely manner implicitly patterns a masculine workforce, able to carry out desired practices of job mobility and flexibility. This mobility through the factories and tenements of the city were frequently cited and rationalised by male workers in my research through the language and practice of 'freedom' (see Gidwani 2018; Mezzadri 2018).

As Jitender one of my neighbours in Kapashera tried to explain to me:

'If we feel like working, we work... sometimes we work for three months only, then we go back to the village, then we come back, then we can work more... we don't have this in the village, here we are 'bachelors'... this is our freedom [humare azadi]'.

This idiom of masculine 'freedom' however rests upon a 'hidden' support system which enables free movement unconstrained by household responsibilities and gendered constraints on movement. Indeed, nowhere is the gendered contingency of male labour's freedom more apparent than in women workers' new-found position in both the rooted household and flexible workplace as a consequence of male relatives' engagement in rounds of labour mobility.

A gendered tenement labour regime

In *Udyog Vihar* migrant women are predominately employed in low-wage cutting, sampling and finishing departments on fixed term or piece-rate

wages, or else hired from as day-hires from the numerous women-only hiring points [labour chowks] that surround the estate. While these gendered processes of class differentiation have been wrought through structural changes at the point of production, the construction of a flexible, differently mobile workforce has equally been secured through the everyday practices through which labour is sourced, accommodated and disposed of through the city's labour tenements.

Indeed in Gurgaon both the process of flexibilisation and the gendered segmentation of the labour force has been fundamentally facilitated by regimes of social reproduction within labour tenements in the working-class neighbourhoods surrounding *Udyog Vihar*. In Pun Ngai's (2005) work on China's 'dormitory labour regime' the author highlights the fundamental role labour dormitories play in the capture and circulation of a just-in-time labour force that is disciplined and controlled at points of both production and daily reproduction. In Gurgaon workers' reproduction as flexible factory workers is organised and maintained through precarious living and rental conditions within the urban village tenements. In Kapashera a workers' neighbourhood a ten-minute walk from Udyog Vihar, migrant workers rent small, windowless rooms in densely-packed tenement blocks for periods of three to ten months. Rooms in Kapashera's blocks are either rented by groups of young men who swap bed-space between day and night shifts or occupied by small families of workers' who have resided in the villages across numerous ten-month cycles and have subsequently brought family members to the city (Cowan 2019).

Unlike labour accommodation described elsewhere (Fernandes 1997; Pun 2005) the tenements are not directly governed by factory management, but rather by a loose network of local landlords and their informal employees – tenement *pradhans* [bosses], caretakers and labour contractors who regulate the everyday life of migrant workers in the urban village; controlling workers' access to rooms, enforcing curfews, providing access to credit and advances, and disciplining workers' moral and social behaviours. Just as the factory seeks to reproduce a flexible worker through short-term, informal contracts, the tenement system seek to reproduce a similarly disciplined, mobile tenant through short-term rental conditions, systematic denial of residency paperwork and access to local social services, and often violently imposed living conditions that push migrant workers back to home villages to perform generational and social reproduction activities (Cowan 2019). As discussed elsewhere, landlords' desire for a flexible tenant is motivated by the perceived demographic threat that migrants pose to locals in their traditional villages, together with landlords' ambitions to transition into a rentier class, that rely on a disciplined, place-less tenant (Cowan 2018).

Importantly for this article, Gurgaon's tenement labour regime reinforces the gendered patterning of a 'free', masculinised waged workforce and a spatially-constrained, feminised workforce. Any time spent in urban village tenements in and around Udyog Vihar one will find large numbers of migrant women working in informal workshops, clinics, cleaning tenements, and carrying out daily reproductive work. As Mezzadri's (2016) work has highlighted, despite low levels of formal employment in the industrial estate, migrant women dominate informal workshop employment within the tenement neighbourhoods, these informal units that carry out 'job work' for nearby industries, are gendered as 'feminine' owing to the more precarious, 'unskilled' character of production and location in proximity to the feminised space of the home.

If flexible labour in the factories is ostensibly masculinised by male workers' greater access to mobility and circulation, migrant working-class women's spatially rooted and inflexible position within the labour tenements is buttressed by discourses and practices that stigmatise and discipline their free movement outside the feminised space of the tenement home. As Anita, introduced earlier, remarked, 'You cannot unite because there are so many kinds of landlords you cannot fathom ... [as a woman] you can't really relax or mingle with people ... Even the slightest misunderstanding causes big trouble. Better to stay in your room. Isn't it?' Migrant women are both expected to carry out daily reproductive labours of the household and are, constrained by patriarchal practices that impute women's worth to their proximity to the home and deference to male household members. This double bind is violently enforced in the everyday life of the tenement. Indeed, conversations with female neighbours in Kapashera village were littered with lengthy stories of sexual extortion, violence and harassment enacted by landlords, contractors and male neighbours often in response to women's outward presence on the alleyways and workplaces of the tenements. Crucially, as the following sections discuss these discursive and material restrictions placed on migrant working-class women in the labour tenements stand in stark contrast to those within the industrial estate.

Rooted flexibility

Pavitra was in her early forties and worked as a stitcher in the sampling department. She worked on piece-rate and had been recently promoted as a line supervisor. Pavitra had lived in workers' tenements around the industrial estate since 2005 when she arrived in Gurgaon to join her husband. After suffering 'tortures' while working in her in-laws' home for nine years, Pavitra heard news that her husband was working in Gurgaon and immediately left to find him. Arriving in the city Pavitra found her husband to be

unemployed, after numerous ten-month cycles of work he had withdrawn from work altogether and spent the day drinking in their tenement room. In the context of her husband's withdrawal from the labour market, and her refusal to move back to the oppressive village home, Pavitra became the household breadwinner and took up waged employment in the garment-exports factories. Critical of her husband's unemployment and scathing of her newfound role as both dutiful housewife and household breadwinner, Pavitra remarked;

'I work because I have to...but everything I earn he takes for drinking...he pretends to be unwell so that he doesn't have to work'.

Pavitra's husbands' permanent withdrawal from the workforce, much like Anita's husband discussed previously, speak to both to the mental and physical tolls of constant job insecurity and equally to the hidden role the household and female household members play in absorbing shocks of uncertain employment. In contrast to narratives of labour feminisation elsewhere in Asia (Lam and Yeoh 2018), Pavitra's narrative highlights a continuation in the gendered division of labour despite transformations in household breadwinning positions.

I first met Pavitra at an NSM weekly meeting addressing sexual coercion and abuses in the garment-export sector. Unlike all the other attendees who was sat crossed legged on the floor, Pavitra stood at the front every so often interrupting the NSM activists adding in her more exact knowledge of current production dynamics, shop-floor supervisors, and workplace conditions. At each weekly meeting, Pavitra's husband would sit on the floor patiently waiting for the meeting to run its course. In a subsequent afternoon meeting in Pavitra's small, windowless tenement room Pavitra was keen to make a distinction between her work as a line supervisor and that of male supervisors in the factory:

'The difference is I don't abuse...it is always the young, new girls that receive insults and harassment...so they come to me...last week a master was abusing a daughter on my line, using bad words with her, so my sisters and I thrashed him with our shoes...he was soon moved to a different department'.

Pavitra proudly claimed to have forced the dismissal of a series of abusive male supervisors from the factory, and in her more senior position on the shop-floor, described herself as a 'guardian' for the 'daughters' on her line.

Pavitra's experience moving to Gurgaon's tenements, from the 'tortures' of work in her in-laws' household to the fraught conditions of the tenement room and her newfound position as household breadwinner, illustrates two key dimensions of what I am calling rooted flexibility. First, if discourses and practices of labour mobility shape the flexibility of the male labour force, Pavitra's narrative points to what I think of as the 'afterlives' of such mobility; to the lives and labours left behind by male labour mobility and waged labour withdrawal. Pavitra justified her movement into waged labour as

necessary to reproduce the household and support her husband's unemployment and her children's futures. In this respect, Pavitra's narrative highlights the relations of social reproduction which underpin male mobility and shape women's formation as a particularly rooted and fixed kind of worker in the city. Less able to autonomously shift from workplace to workplace, tenement to tenement, Pavitra's narrative highlights how migrant women's different positioning in the waged workplace, is structured by particular embodied expectations of social reproduction in the tenements.

Second, in occupying conflicting positions at the household and factory, Pavitra must navigate the almost impossible demands and identities of being both the feminised, spatially rooted housewife and masculinised, mobile factory worker. As will be discussed in the following section, one way which the contradictions of rooted flexibility materialises is through a politics of 'respectability' that imputes women workers' natural place outside the factory and within the tenement home, a 'respectability' that is often contested through gender violence and resistances on the shop-floor.

Respectability, coercion and violence

I met Anita, introduced at the beginning of this article, as she was seeking NSM support to file a claim of unfair dismissal against her previous workplace. Sat on the roof of a tenement building, she explained:

'They [the supervisors] would make me work all day and then returned 'faulty' pieces to alter. In making 150-200 pieces, any human being can go wrong in one or two pieces ... I said sir, I do not make wrong pieces all day, for two faulty pieces a day you summon me to the inner offices, I have my honour too ... If it had been his wife going to the inner offices every single day how could he save her reputation? I told him as much. I am working here, not doing your shoddy business ... you might as well give me my daily wage and fire me on the spot ...

[the supervisor said] 'if you do not listen to what we say ... either we will take away that honour or get you kicked out of here'. I was furious ... I beat him and gave him a stream of abuse ... and a taste of my chappals [shoes] too ... I cannot simply lie there ... Soon, the manager and the supervisors all had come to inquire into the matter ... [they] fired me on the spot'.

A few days after the incident Anita was attacked and her arm broken in her tenement room by two female labour contractors who resided within the tenements. Following the attack Anita sought the support of NSM, who helped her access medical attention and lodge a complaint of unfair dismissal with the local labour department.

Scholars elsewhere have noted that gender violence on the shop-floor often materialises in the context of the perceived *threat* women pose to traditionally masculinised jobs (Fernandez-Kelly 1983). Accounts like Anita's

point to how conflicting demands and embodiments of flexible production and feminised social reproduction inform practices and experiences of sexualised labour discipline on the shop-floor. Violence materialises precisely at these points of conflict, as a means for re-inscribing Anita's out-of-place, unruly and un-feminine position on the shop-floor.

Kalpana: resisting violence

Kalpana had worked in twelve factories in Gurgaon over the past five years. Originally from Jharkhand, Kalpana moved to Gurgaon to join her husband who had been living in Kapashera for some time working as a tailor. After two years spinning in and out of different jobs in the cluster, Kalpana's husband left for work and never returned. After her husband's departure Kalpana moved from piece-rate work in an informal workshop into more reliable work in the cluster. Kalpana was particularly vulnerable to everyday exploitation as a lone woman in the tenements and had been robbed and evicted on a series of occasions before renting a room in the tenement 'lines'. There Kalpana met Rahul a security guard from Bihar who she has lived with ever since. Rahul was younger and from a lower-caste to Kalpana, she was keen to stress that it was a 'love' relationship that wouldn't be well received in her village. As such not only was Kalpana unlikely to go back to her absent husband's village, her new life with Rahul meant she was unlikely to ever return to her own home village. unable to go back to her home village. I met Kalpana at the weekly NSM meetings she had been participating with the group for six months. While she initially sought out the group's support to fight an eviction, these days, she noted, she attended simply to 'pass the time' and get out of the house; 'I like to listen to the grievances of others ... you get to forget your own problems when you see that someone else is in a much worse situation. I like to meet with these people and talk to them'. Kalpana had worked in twelve garment jobs since arriving in the city and has left each one in response to sexual coercion:

'The atmosphere in the companies ... is very dirty, very, very dirty ... I have already quit ten or twelve companies due to that ... We want to live here just the way we used to live back in our village. The master of the company I worked in fired me because of this just the day before yesterday ... I told him point blank that Sir, I am here to work ... women who cooperate with them stay and work, but I don't cooperate, so I am kicked out. In [the previous] two or three factories I slapped them before I walked out ... I slap and leave ...'

As the sole household breadwinner, responsible for funding the education of her son and two daughters, constant labour turnover in response to sexual harassment and coercion had a direct impact on Kalpana's ability to reproduce the household income:

'This previous month I received 2400 rupees [USD \$34]! I've never picked up [the minimum wage] in any month... The [last] place where I was working it was piece-rate... they gave [0.45 rupees] per piece. I am always employed for the least profitable pieces... Now I receive 2400 a month, they torture us in every way there, and what will you do with 2400!'

For women workers like Kalpana more spatially-constrained to the tenement by demands of household reproduction and the breakdown of the multi-sited household, it was harassment and coercion which produced mobility from one workplace to the next. Kalpana saw harassment and coercion on the shop-floor as the key instrument through which her waged labour was made mobile and her turnover ensured. Indeed many migrant women experience flexibility and job-turnover through constant subjection to gendered violence and harassment. As Kalpana notes: 'The way they treat us- I cannot describe... I cried inside these companies. They tell me to leave. How much longer can I keep quitting- quit this place, quit that place- where will I work?'

I view both Anita and Kalpana's refusal to co-operate with violent regimes of sexual coercion as unambiguous forms of resistance to regimes of labour discipline and control that seek to make their labour flexible and disposable. Their actions are particularly remarkable considering their relative structural weakness as sole breadwinners for their respective households; following their dismissals from the factory both women took up work in informal workshops earning considerably less and under more precarious conditions than in the factory. Anita and Kalpana's open defiance against sexualised modes of labour control displace dominant scripts on the pliable, deferent South Asian woman garment worker, highlighting a partial yet active role women play in negotiating the terms and conditions of their labour in global production units. Yet, in discussion with women including Pavitra, Anita and Kalpana seeking the support of NSM, I frequently encountered narratives which voiced opposition to harassment in a language of 'feminine respectability' somewhat reminiscent of the very discourses mobilised to oppress the women at the shop-floor and tenements.

Being respectable

Despite their own exposure to harassment and violence across the shop-floor-tenement divide, for example both Anita and Kalpana frequently explained their open resistance to sexual coercion by emphasising an identity of the dutiful housewife, resurrecting normative discourses of feminine respectability which may seem incongruous to their new-found positions as empowered, waged-workers. Kalpana explained:

'Most of the times it's the women... who make the atmosphere dirtier... Some of the women make it worse all because of money. No matter how much they receive

they find that it's not enough, they think that if we do *aise-aise-kaam* [sexual favours] we'll be paid more... we came here to work... if we are *izzatadar nari* [respectable women] let us remain that way.'

In identifying as a 'respectable woman' Kalpana resurrects the normative, upper-caste figure of the respectable housewife, morally and socially distanced from those whom she notes 'make the atmosphere dirtier'. Marriage, child-bearing, emplacement in the home and a moral distance from 'other' women were all frequently highlighted as justifications for Anita and Kalpana's opposition to gender violence. I am wary here to imply that that there ought to be any sort of natural alliance between working-women or presume that a diverse range of women's experiences could be characterised as homogeneous, as Anita reminds me: 'Ahh... the ladies-in-charge are all caught up. One is sleeping with the manager, another with the head-tailor... There are all kinds of women. Not just one.' Nevertheless, I am interested in why many of the NSM women I spent time discussing work and conducting fieldwork interviews with often voiced their opposition to harassment and job-turnover, by registering an embodied difference to 'other' women. If workplace harassment is intended to flexibilise women workers and reinscribe their subservient household position within the factory division of labour, discourses of respectability appear at least to resurrect that same figure for oppositional means.

This was underscored by the common claim that women unable to resist or who engage in sexual relationships with male supervisors have better working conditions and are paid higher salaries. That to be successful in the workplace requires an erosion of the position as a housewife. Kalpana notes: 'If you know how to cooperate and you're 'good', you're given the best machines; whether you work or not your salary will keep pouring in, each girl picks up almost thirty-five thousand rupees, thirty-five thousand!' Here Kalpana opposes the materialism of deferent victims of sexual violence with the moral superiority of resisting, of being respectable.

Yet Kalpana and Anita's frequent appeals to 'respectability' are equally tentative. Neither Kalpana nor Anita had normative household conditions, both were household breadwinners whose husbands had withdrawn from household reproduction, both had implicitly characterised the family home as a site of violence, and both were permanently bound in some way or another to the 'temporary' space of the tenement. As Kalpana remarked, uncharacteristically forlorn, that despite identifying as a respectable housewife '[being treated] with honour... never happens, it's the same torture everywhere - we work [outside the home] due to our desperation'. While, over the course of my many meetings with Anita, she was quick to ridicule her husband, referring to him as lazy, 'mentally unhinged' and openly derided her marriage as a mistake. In the context of transforming divisions

of household labour and seemingly immutable demands of social reproductive labour, these narratives speak to ways Anita and Kalpana seek to navigate the violence of rooted flexibility, the incongruity of material conditions forcing them into waged work and enduring ideological demands of being a housewife, through tentative performances of respectability.

Rakhi: performing respectability

I first met Rakhi in the aftermath of a short-lived riot at her factory which shut down parts of *Udyog Vihar* for two days in 2015. A male worker arrived late for the morning shift and was beaten and hospitalised by the security and HR staff. News of the incident spread quickly onto the factory shop-floor, by mid-morning workers had stopped production and began breaking machines and smashing windows in the factory in protest. By the evening contractors and police were sweeping through the tenements, rumours abound that the riot was started by factory 'goons' to clear out the workforce, others assured that the rioters would be long gone by now, having enacted their 'freedom' to shift to new tenements and new industrial estates. The NSM meeting the following Sunday, held in a large empty room in Kapashera was attended by around thirty women, some with young children and husbands in tow. Rakhi sat at the front of the meeting and spoke only to answer questions concerning conditions at the factory. I met with Rakhi the following week at her tenement room in Kapashera.

On hearing that Rakhi preferred to speak in Bengali I asked a Bengali-speaking friend to accompany me to our meeting. Rakhi met us at the foot of her building and ushered us quickly up the tightly wound stairs of her tenement. We reached the top of the building, the least coveted floor owing to Gurgaon's intensely hot summer months, and sat down in a typical small, windowless room with a small single-bed, adorned with calendar, an old television and a small Hindu shrine. I asked Rakhi what brought her to the city.

'Originally, I left home with my sister and her husband, but after a year here they left, I've been here, alone now for ten years... I come from a very poor family, I was completely dependent on my father and I couldn't be dependent on him much longer... I had to get out of there.'

Rakhi works in a large garments-export factory unit in *Udyog Vihar*. She is hired through a contractor, earning ₹6400 a month. Rakhi's role is in stitching, she stitches single pieces as part of chain production, there are around 100 women working in various positions on her floor.

'At first, I worked just cutting thread, I was only earning ₹1700 so I had to leave... the thing is... in this place, you cannot ask for more money or to simply move position... as soon as you say anything you have to leave. That is how it

works here, you speak, you leave then you work somewhere else, there are many people that want jobs... after this I took a job that paid more for around three years and then in 2014 I took this job... At my previous job I suffered a great abuses just for being Muslim... after three years I decided I had to leave the job and I went back to [the village].'

Rakhi's indirect identification as a Muslim seemed strange, she had a fairly common Hindu family name and a Hindu calendar and shrine adorning her room. We discussed Rakhi's reluctant involvement with NSM, which she repeated was purely for safety reasons, she had been warned by neighbours not to involve herself with the group and create problems, but as a lone woman in the neighbourhood she explained that she needed someone to keep check on her, 'I live alone so I cannot afford to make any situations, if something happens to me, those aunties will know about it'.

We discussed Rakhi's experiences in the workplace and tenements at length, her struggles to maintain employment, her inability to return to her village and strategies navigating insecure rental conditions, and harassment in the tenements. At the point of our conversation slowly wrapping up, Rakhi realised my friend was Bengali. Immediately the content and tone of our conversation, now in Bengali, changed. Rakhi passed around some *supari* [betel nut], we chewed, watched television and discussed life. Rakhi remarked, 'In ten years, I have never had any visitors to my room... without these four television channels I'd go mad!' She explained that without any friends or home networks in the tenements, she had fallen in love with a shop-keeper and relied on his companionship to survive life and work in the city: 'When my sister left, I had no one... I befriended a Bengali man, we fell in love and spent many nights together.' Rakhi reached towards a plastic folder on a hanging mirror fixture and pulled out an old passport photo of a young, moustached man.

'While I went [back to Assam] I knew I had to return... I decided that I would dress like a Hindu and take a Hindu name... I am all alone so I cannot afford to make any situations, I suffered all kinds of abuses before... [he] taught me Hindu customs, the correct things to say, how to arrange the shrine, carry out the things like this [gesturing to her room].'

Rakhi pulled out another photograph from the folder, a faded identity proof of a young Rakhi, her younger face accompanied by an altogether different name. Since performing Hindu-ness, Rakhi had avoided the 'abuses' of previous employments and had managed to hold down employment. She was insistent that we spoke quietly about her hidden identity, her landlord didn't know, and she didn't want to give him any reason to evict her. She explained that, despite her love for the shop-keeper, since he moved his wife and children to his tenement room they rarely see each other. The man had enrolled Rakhi in a series of pyramid scheme investments and borrowed

sums of money to fund his small business. Alongside her performed respectability, there is an irony that in an environment where patriarchal capitalist abuses and exploitation dominate Rakhi's experience of everyday life, her mobility and access to secure employment in the city, it is her adulterous and somewhat exploitative male lover that she received most support and comfort from.

Rakhi's hidden identity and illicit relationship are characteristics of what other women and men I interviewed identified as being un-respectable. Lacking the embodied qualities of a 'respectable' woman, Rakhi had to rely on altogether different, more precarious kinds of support, kinship networks with Bengali speakers and the affection of transgressive relationships in order to manage seemingly intractable conditions of rooted flexibility.

Sandya Hewamanne's (2003) work in a Sri Lankan Free Trade Zone highlights how women workers critiqued middle-class, patriarchal cultural hegemony by purposefully 'performing dis-respectability'. In my research 'respectability' appeared a more complex and contested set of identities, discourses and practices. Respectability was clearly performed in order to resist harassment and disposability on the shop-floor, in each case the normative figure of the respectable Hindu housewife was mobilised by the women to navigate conflicting demands and associations of the household and factory. Yet Rakhi's compulsion to perform Hindu-ness highlights that which is obscured in Anita's and Kalpana's accounts. In Rakhi's case it was not enough to perform an identity of a respectable working woman, she was in addition compelled to outwardly obscure her Muslim faith. As Leela Fernandes (1997, 527) notes in her work on gendered public spaces in working-class Kolkata, bourgeois and worker discourses on gender can and often do converge to enforce a singular model of acceptable female spatiality and identity; that of the married woman fixed to the space of the family. This excludes the disruptive, single, non-Hindu woman, and obstructs her access to the embodied subjectivities, material goods and social support mobilised by others to resist abuses and navigate life in the city. As such, Rakhi's narrative deepen an understanding of the discursive and subjective conditions of rooted flexibility, not only reflecting on the conflicting demands on women's *labour* at points of flexible production and rooted housewife, but equally highlighting the differentiated subjectivities required to navigate everyday life.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to explore the everyday practices through which migrant working-class women are produced and resist modes of labour flexibility across the tenement-workplace continuum. Building on Smith and Winders (2008) this article has sought to highlight the conflicting demands

of flexible production and rooted social reproduction, exploring how this rooted flexibility materialises in entangled identities of masculinised waged-workers and feminised housewives, and is policed and resisted through a differentiated politics of 'respectability' on the shop-floor. In doing so, rooted flexibility helps explain how ideological and material relations of social reproduction come to constitute the working conditions of migrant women embedded in labour regimes designed for hypermobile men.

An analysis of rooted flexibility fundamentally speaks to the specific conjuncture of gendered flexible production and social reproduction in Delhi's fringes. While the conditions of rooted flexibility may not be directly applicable to other contexts where women workers' perhaps dominate waged industrial employment or where patterns of labour mobility are distinct, in this article I have sought to build on feminist marxist methodologies to attend to the dynamic 'cultural and material grounds' (Chari and Gidwani 2005) and living histories (Dutta 2016) that sustain flexible industrial production in the contemporary Indian city. In doing so the article has sought to show how labour's flexibility, while an object of capital's desire, is not achieved by decree of industrial management, politicians, landlords or labour contractors, but must be secured socially, ideologically and materially. Attending to the social life of labouring flexibility across the production-social reproduction continuum draws attention to the points of reinterpretation, conflict and negotiation through which 'flexibility' is awkwardly constituted.

The experiences of women living and working in Gurgaon's garment-export sector displace and extend narratives of the Delhi NCR's hypermasculine labour geographies, revealing the gendered terrain through which women workers are awkwardly incorporated into and contest waged labour in the city. Exploring women's narratives of rootedness in the city tenements, transformations in household breadwinning positions, and harassment and coercion on the shop-floors the article offers an alternative reading of labour flexibility that focuses on the experiences of less-than-flexible migrant female working-classes. In particular the article has sought to highlight the manner in which gender violence comes to constitute experiences of rooted flexibility, the particular localised relationships between regimes of flexible accumulation and gendered social reproductive demands in Gurgaon; in doing so the article has explored how discourses and practices of 'respectability' come to materialise as key ways rooted flexibility is lived, contested and secured.

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