

## 20. Work and Place: The Non-Boundaries of Women's Work

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### Abstract

Issues around women's unpaid labour and their difficulties in balancing paid work with domestic duties have received attention in academic and policy circles, raising questions about women's invisible contributions to the formal and informal economy. These questions point to the need to rethink the fundamental categories of work and workplace, the ways in which women negotiate the fuzzy boundaries between domestic and paid labour, and the material realities of where and how this takes place. What notions of security and safety might operate, what does a workplace look and feel like, and how does a woman understand and build her creative and economic identity when this must be shaped within the domestic sphere? This chapter draws on conversations with women bangle makers in the Indian city of Hyderabad to unpack their daily negotiations between private and public, personal and occupational spheres as they carve out space for paid work.

**Keywords:** women workers, artisanal workers, informality, workplace, worklife, India

Ask a woman what work she does, and she may have to pause for a moment (or longer) and give you an answer that is almost always incomplete. Ask a woman if she has a job, and the answer may come a little easier. A job has a box around it. It has a name. It represents hours that can be packed into a discrete container. Possibly, if she is lucky, it includes a sense of regularity and a level of recognition. If you are of a modern mindset, you may ask if she works “outside the home,” distinguishing then, in the manner of our times, the paid work that is distinguishable in the employment marketplace from the unpaid labour that all women do within the confines of their homes.

Much has been written about the need to count women's unpaid domestic and care work, through the lens of feminist economics (Himmelweit 1995; Bhattacharya 2021) and the sociology of gender (Shelton 1999), and more recently, in relation to its impact on gender relations in India (Singh and Pattanaik 2020). There has also been concern expressed globally on the need to recognize women's unpaid work as an integral part of a nation's economy, and the ways in which it impinges on women's opportunities to engage in other spheres of public life, including paid work, civic, political, and leisure activities (Robinson 2006; Kabeer 2007).

Our preoccupation in the FemLab<sup>1</sup> project has been to understand how the everyday textures of women's lives contain and constrain their engagement with paid work, and if and how they seek and nurture solidarities through networks of mediated and unmediated communication. In this chapter, I focus on one small subgroup of women—home-based artisanal workers—to understand the micro-dynamics that are at play when the home is the place of work. Drawing on conversations with women bangle makers in the Indian city of Hyderabad, I seek to unpack their daily negotiations between private and public, personal and occupational spheres as they carve out space for paid work. I argue that increasingly, definitions of informality, security, and even labour, must expand to accommodate the realities of women's lives, particularly those whose paid work is done within domestic spaces.

## There's Work ... and There's Work

*"Meri naukri nahin hai magar kaam karti hoon."* (*I don't have a job but I do work.*) This is what many women who work in India's informal labour force may say, when asked if they have a job. Just as in English, there are many words in Indian languages that refer to work of various kinds, each carrying a different charge and evoking a different imaginary. The Hindi word *karamchari* literally translates into English as "worker," but it is applied almost exclusively to those who perform visible, measurable, nameable tasks. The image of street sweeper, construction worker, farmhand, or factory worker is what comes to mind: those who earn a living by the sweat of their brow. The imaginary of the worker—the individual often at the bottom of the service and product value chain—is restricted to such visible work and

1 For more details and background of the project, please see <https://femlab.co>.

this is the imaginary that most often influences policy and welfare measures related to informal workers.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO) estimates that close to 147 million women around the world work in or close to their homes, simultaneously managing duties such as child or elder care and other household chores.<sup>2</sup> In India, home-based women workers numbered approximately 17.2 million (16.4 per cent of all women in the informal sector) (Raveendran and Vanek 2020), and are among the large group that have little or no access to social protection and are not easily governed by any labour regulations. Their terms of work are informal, almost always with no written contracts, operating on the basis of loose oral agreements.

Bangle making work in Hyderabad is concentrated in the old city area, a historic part of the city that is now a criss-crossing network of congested lanes and buildings pressed close together in a complex of the commercial and the residential. At the northern end of the area, marked by a fifteenth-century monument that is emblematic of the city—Charminar—is the bangle bazaar, or Lad Bazaar. The many homes in which women work, making the famous gemstone-studded bangles, are spread across a three-kilometre radius from the Bazaar. The conventions of the Muslim-dominated area restrict women from going out to work, so in order to supplement family income, they take on petty jobs, ranging from embroidery and tailoring (for those more skilled) to rolling incense sticks and making bangles. One study estimated that around 15,000 women in Hyderabad are engaged in bangle making,<sup>3</sup> but it is likely that this number is an under-estimate, as my conversations with the women revealed that they often co-opt the help of family members and neighbours to complete an order even as only one of them interacts with the contractor. In fact, their introduction to the work is by word-of-mouth, as Femida<sup>4</sup> described to me:

My *chachi* [aunt] used to take it from three to four people, and she told us about this work. So I used to send my sisters to her and get the *Gota*<sup>5</sup> from her. My sister learnt it from her and told us about it. My younger sister learnt it. They learnt it and told us about it that this is how it is. I

2 <https://www.wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/home-based-workers#snapshot>

3 <https://www.icmrindia.org/casestudies/catalogue/Economics/Economics%20of%20Bangle%20Market-Case.htm>

4 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

5 The base material used for embedding stones.

started it after observing them. And now I am doing this work from the last so many years (Personal interview, August 31, 2021).

My interviews with the women revealed that this was work they did in the interstices of domestic life, and even as their households desperately needed the income, they counted it as “extra,” something that they serendipitously came into, thanks to their kinship or community networks. And because it is not considered “employment,” families are less likely to object to the women taking it up. Femida says, “I do not even have the permission for doing this work ... but because my daughter is small, they say you do it,” implying that it is the convenience of not leaving the house—and the consequent invisibility—that makes such work permissible.

### Circles of Responsibility

The entrenched social norms and gendered roles make the home a multi-purpose domain of activity for these artisanal workers. Take the case of Afreen, whose workspace is a small corner of her one-room home that folds back whenever it is needed for other things. Here, she spends six to eight hours a day, time garnered from domestic duties, making the gemstone-encrusted bangles. Her children often help her. When her husband returns, she puts away the materials, turning her workspace back into a kitchen, and gets busy making dinner.

Nadia, a fellow bangle maker, describes her routine thus:

I used to complete the household chores in one hour or half an hour. However, I used to face the problem of having food timely. If I leave the Gotas [bangle moulds] like that, they would dry up. And if they dried up, I had to do all the work even more quickly. I had to wash clothes and all that. So I had to wake up early in the morning and do all the work. I used to continue working at night till 8:00 or 9:00 p.m., till the time my husband returned from work. And then again I would continue the household work at night like soaking and washing the clothes. That is how I had to do the household work. I had to wash clothes during the night, and then again I had to start doing the Gota making work the next morning (Personal interview, August 30, 2021).

The lack of separation between household work and paid work, while offering flexibility and convenience, also makes it impossible to even conceive of

leisure. The low pay makes it necessary to work long hours to make the income worthwhile.

I do all the work along with keeping my daughter with me. I wake up early in the morning, do all the work. My sisters, or my younger daughter and all get the Gota, come to me and give it to me at home. I keep my daughter along with me and make it side by side. [...] I feed her [daughter] food and water quickly and make her sleep, and I continue the work while she sleeps. When she wakes up, then I feed her, she plays, I look after her, and that time I stop doing the work. After that I start working again in the evening. My father and all return from work and they take her and look after my daughter. And till 12:00 a.m-12:30 a.m, or till whatever amount of time I give my daughter to them, all of us keep working and making together till that time (Shahida, Personal interview, August 31, 2021).

The poor ventilation and lighting in most of the homes, and the long hours spent hunched over the bangles has led to severe eye strain and chronic neck and shoulder pain—occupational hazards that are not listed in any workers' manual. There is no such manual, no authority to whom one can appeal for better working conditions. The complex negotiations they must make within the family to be “permitted” to do this paid work also preclude any room for sympathy within the home.

### **The Unwritten Contract**

Once every few days, a contractor brings the raw materials to the women's homes—bangle frames covered with lac, a pouch of glittering stones, and a set of designs. The exchange of materials is recorded in a notebook. And every few days, they return the finished product—several sets of stone-studded bangles, for which they each receive a payment of roughly INR 60 a set (about 80 ₹). In a good week, a bangle maker may earn around INR 1,500 (about \$20).

They keep a complete written record of the number of pieces made by me in a notebook, like if I made 100 pieces or 50 pieces. They keep the entire written record under my name. After writing it down, they update all of that in the evening on a piece of paper and tell me that today you have done the work which is worth X rupees. And then they total the work done during the entire week on the eighth day and give me my salary. They

pay me my salary along with giving me the written record, which could be around 1300 rupees [...] (Rashida, Personal interview, August 30, 2021).

It's a supply chain built on word-of-mouth, a handwritten register, and an exchange of materials and cash. The bangle maker is the last rung—or the first—in a ladder that begins in these tiny one-room homes and ends in the shiny shop shelves of Lad Bazaar, where the bangles are sold at a price that is nearly fifty times the cost of labour. The women have no room for negotiation, as one of the women tells me; if one of them is unhappy with the deal, the contractor can find many to take her place. There is an informal understanding of what quality means, and a tacit acceptance that the buyer's word is supreme.

If I make a mistake some time, then what those people do is they deduct the money, and say that we do not pay in such cases. If I make one piece wrong, then I need to make it again from scratch. Then they give the next lot of Gota after some time (Femida).

Farzana, another bangle maker, adds, "They say that we have many people here who can do the work, you are not the only one who is doing it."

The distance from the market—in psychological and physical terms—and the lack of a defined worker identity make it difficult for the women to get a sense of what their work is worth. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have been working for some years in the old city on women's livelihoods and empowerment issues have been trying to get the government to recognize these women as workers, a first step to accessing some form of social security. Shaheen Women's Collective<sup>6</sup> and Kriti Social Initiatives<sup>7</sup> are among these. Jameela Nishat, founder of Shaheen, and Himani Gupta, founder and trustee of Kriti, in separate interviews emphasized that one of the main challenges was to get the women to see themselves as workers, as people who had a skill that had value in the market. Working in the home, without direct interaction with the market, clearly defined work norms, or a sense of the larger group that they are a part of, these women think of themselves as just doing something for a bit of much-needed extra cash. The absence of established contractual norms emerged as a huge disadvantage during the COVID-19 crisis, when the demand for bangles dropped drastically, along with the amounts they were paid.

6 <https://shaheencollective.org>

7 <https://kriti.org.in>

## When Work is a Collapsible Box in the Home

The COVID-19 pandemic turned the idea of work-from-home into a trope, a meme-able moment in which many workers across the spectrum were forced to turn their living spaces into work spaces, experiencing all the conflicts and the conveniences that this collision of contexts brought. For those with large enough homes and the ability to draw clear lines between the personal and professional both in terms of time and space, there was less to worry about. But for many who had to juggle childcare (with schools shut) or face the impossibility of setting up video call-worthy backdrops in cramped quarters, it was not that simple. Suddenly everyone was discovering a new politics of the familiar that demanded new types of negotiation and boundary making.

For women who have always worked from home, and whose living spaces have never allowed for much differentiation or separation into zones of personal and occupational, these are not questions they have ever been asked to consider. In some countries, white collar personnel who choose to work from home must subject their workspaces to scrutiny—for reasons of occupational safety, separation from domestic space, and other productivity-related concerns. Can there be similar attention paid to the context of such home-based work as artisanal crafts? Or can we imagine collective spaces of work that are more like communal courtyards, where women can come together to work a little more comfortably, even as they remain close enough to have an eye on their domestic responsibilities? Would this kind of physical coming together also engender a sense of the working—skilled—self?

For the bangle makers of Hyderabad, for whom the domestic and the occupational are leaky categories that inhabit the same space, skill is, for now, a matter of ensuring that they make the best of the Gota they are given, and do it within the hours they have.

## Conclusion

All work is messy and multi-layered, shaped by forces often beyond the control of the individual or even the collective. But in an economy and society whose rules reflect patriarchal norms and beliefs, women's work is particularly fraught. This influences what is considered work worth paying for, the definition (and recognition) of a worker in the eyes of the state and the self, the regulation and organization of workspaces, and ultimately, the micro-negotiations that need to be made in order to engage in work, let

alone set the terms for it. There are now opportunities for women in such occupations to enter online marketplaces, where their work is contracted by piece for sale on digital storefronts. This may be an opening for digital entrepreneurs to consider rethinking fairness in compensation and contractual terms, keeping in mind the contexts where such work takes place. When one looks at these issues in relation to the most vulnerable women in the informal sector, it is clear that we need to reset the frame, and sharpen the focus on their lives. The questions we need to pose to those who set the terms for work, must be based on a redefinition of how and what counts as work—and what counts as workplace.

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