

## 21. The Future of Dishonourable Work

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### Abstract

What is the “honour culture” and how does this travel to the digital world? Is there a place for dishonourable work in this contemporary age? This chapter argues that we need to break free from this historically and often patriarchally constructed shackle where individual virtue and vice is dependent on our work. No human being should be valued based on the nature of their labour, but rather, the level of integrity they bring to it. Given that human beings can’t help but imbibe meaning from their toil, we need to move away from a template that devalues us by what we do, and fuel an alternative paradigm that centres on the dignity of labour. As long as honour holds a place in the world of labour, it serves as a cancer that eats into the fabric of human dignity.

**Keywords:** honour culture, future of work, gender inequality, innovation, digital dignity

I was a waitress for three and a half years at an Indian restaurant in San Francisco in the early 1990s. I come from an economically well-off family in Bengaluru, so “waiting” on people was a novel experience for me. I was excited though as it was my first job abroad and I saw it as performing a part. We waitresses had to wear *salwar kameez*, traditional Indian attire, and *namaste* people as they entered. When the restaurant closed each night, the staff got to eat their dinner for free before heading home. There was a ritual to that. The owners, an old Gujarati couple, sat at the front desk, the waitresses and the cooks ate their meals on the floor of the kitchen, and the Mexican dishwasher had his dinner in the backroom storage space. Looking back, what strikes me as odd was how quickly I slipped into this social arrangement. At the time, it did not occur to me to ask why we didn’t all just sit at the table and eat together, using the nice restaurant cutlery.

## Lesser Than ... Are We What We Do?

It is easy to fall into the explanation of the centuries-old Indian caste system as a way of sorting “our worth” based on the “purity” of our occupation, “once a servant, always a servant” logic. This was one of the most imaginative social ordering inventions, of rationalizing group hierarchies along arbitrary principles, including that of occupation. This system of applied status has somehow stood the test of time and persists in the global and modern economy.

What is remarkable is how this valuation of human virtue based on the work we do has manifested across the world, albeit in different ways. For instance, Sara Asselman, in her thesis (2019) paints a vivid picture of Filipina domestic workers’ struggle for respect and recognition in Morocco as what they do is largely considered “dishonourable work.” The stigma that comes with engaging in the economy of care has an added ethnic dimension in this context, given that the majority of the domestic workers in Morocco are migrant women from the Philippines. Ironically, the very devaluation of these migrant women’s labour fuels the demand for them. This is due to a common and historically built perception of this group as natural caregivers who are best suited for this kind of work. As Asselman argues,

[...] in Morocco domestic labour is viewed as dishonourable work, that only women should be responsible for this kind of labour, and that somehow, Filipina women’s ethnic and racial identities make them better at it. I suggest that because of the history of slavery, and it being a prevalent phenomenon in Moroccan society as late as the 20th century, the collective imaginary of the Moroccan society continues to hold ideals and principles of domestic and care labour having low value in society, and that it should therefore be relegated to marginalized groups. I also argue that domestic and care work are not simply viewed as women’s work because of the role that women play in procreation but also because there is an apparent devaluation of womanhood and female bodies (p. iv).

Naturalizing an entire group of people based on their gender, ethnic, and national status as intrinsically adept at a given industry and simultaneously degrading that industry as “lesser than” has served the political economy of global supply chains through reduced wages and increased exploitation (Fougère and Moulettes 2007; Christopher 2020; Hall 1993). We see this through the circulating of global clichés, from women as naturally good at care work, to Chinese as not the “creative type” but the “manufacturing type.” Carly Fiorina, a former boss of Hewlett-Packard, remarked in an interview

(Schumpeter 2015) with *The Economist*, that, “Yeah, the Chinese can take a test, but [...] they’re not terribly imaginative. They’re not entrepreneurial. They don’t innovate—that’s why they’re stealing our intellectual property.”

Almost a decade later, despite China taking the global lead on 5G networks, FinTech and cryptocurrency, smart apps, renewable energy, e-commerce, and much more, we still get respected media outlets churning out articles that uncritically celebrate the Western culture’s innate gift to innovate unlike “collectivist” cultures like China. For instance, in a 2021 *MIT Sloan Management Review* article, economist Carl Benedikt Frey makes his case of how the “individualistic” culture gives the United States an innovation edge over China. He feeds into the tired old evolutionary logic of how Christianity, migration, and mobility-based occupations such as herding, baked in distinct psychological traits over time in the Western mind, such as “greater interpersonal trust, less conformity, and less reliance on authority, which helped facilitate the flow of ideas.”

This perspective is nothing but a rehash of the psychologist Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory of the 1960s (Hofstede 2016) which neatly demarcated entire groups of people as individualistic or collectivistic. It became and still is the preferred management template for cross-cultural organizational work. Experts across the spectrum have used this trope over the decades to explain away global hierarchies and inequalities, attributing this to group cultures and mindsets, instead of persistent colonialist discourses, policies, and infrastructural and institutional arrangements that shape labour markets across the globe. The decades of critique of this theory as reductive, essentialist, and deterministic, have made few dents on its popularity.

This framework continues to bracket entire groups of people with certain propensities for certain kinds of work—Western people as “innovators” and Eastern people as “laggards,” stuck in what Frey sees as an “obedience trap.” Frey (2021) doubles down on this argument to explain the Chinese plight by attributing it to their tradition of collective work practice as a malady or “affect”:

The legacy of rice farming, which required a high degree of collaboration, continues to *affect* [added italics] the Chinese. Rice paddies require standing water, so people in rice-growing regions had to build elaborate irrigation systems. Suddenly, one family’s water use affected their neighbors, making societies more collectivist.

Collective practice here translates to traditional legacies that weigh down entire cultures. From this worldview, individualistic innovators bring more

value to society than a community of rice farmers. Never mind the fact that innovation has been overhyped as a solution to our collective contemporary problems of planetary health and the climate crisis, global pandemics, poverty and social inequality, and democratic and political upheavals (Cillo et al. 2019). I have argued elsewhere (Arora 2019) that what we need is less innovation, especially when innovation has come to mean tech solutionism in the form of a new app, a platform, a software. Instead, societies can boost the well-being of their people by committing to reforms and empathetic values that are rooted in well-established cooperative practices. Moreover, as voices for sustainability grow louder, management gurus and experts of our day such as Frey succeed in normalizing a schizophrenia in the culture and innovation discourse—talking up sustainability, collaboration, and cooperation by culturally appropriating the rhetoric of community practices in the Global South, while simultaneously valourizing Western individualism as a pathway to innovation.

### Moving up the Value Chain

The social labelling of entire groups as innately better or worse at certain kinds of work, becomes more complicated as the “virtue” of that work shifts over time. If we follow social progression over the ages, under traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs, work was considered penance for Adam and Eve’s disobedience. The Greeks viewed work as a curse, while the Romans saw artisanal work as “vulgar.” The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century turned this around, tying morality and virtue to an “honest day’s work.” As Gayle Porter, Organizational Change Management scholar, explains (2004, 425), “the meaning of work has varied across time and culture – a curse, a calling, a social obligation, a natural activity, a means to better life, or simply what we do because we have to.”

While the value of work may evolve, the worker may not share the same momentum. As women have entered what used to be “male turfs” in professions like education and medicine, it resulted in the devaluation of these domains, manifesting in lesser pay, reputation, and honour. Surgery, a long male-dominated expertise with high esteem, dealt with the influx of women doctors through a reorganization of their specialities along conventional gender lines, and their systematic devaluation:

The subsequent collective abandonment by men of now female-dominated fields is, at least in part, because of the gender-specific stigma and wage

penalty associated with working within a “feminine” occupation. A tipping point, when approximately one-third of a field becomes women, leads to a precipitous decline in men employed in the field (Temkin 2020).

The fact is that those who have the power to assess value are those most likely to value themselves the most and reorganize the structures to support these renewed and oftentimes patriarchal value systems.

### **The Double Burden—Honour and Work**

Honour is a resource that can be accumulated and/or reduced based on established behavioural codes, signalling one’s inherent worth. These codes are often distinctly gendered across societies. In honour cultures, typically women working outside the house, being mobile and interacting with and alongside strangers, is looked upon with “a tinge of immorality”—shop girls, daytime security personnel, airline hostesses, traffic cops, beauty technicians, *tuk-tuk* drivers, and tourist guides.

Communications scholar Katy Pearce (Pearce and Vitak, 2016) captures the spectrum of fears of many young women in the “honour culture” of Azerbaijan as they go online. The “right” women’s behavioural codes require them to be modest, quiet, decent, and chaste, else they would bring dishonour to their families and communities. One of her participants shares her experience of regularly receiving disapproving comments on every Facebook post—even if just a photo of a sunset—saying things like, “Don’t you have anything better to do?” Eventually, she blocked most of her friends and family members to avoid the harassment, although that resulted in self-ostracism.

The management of reputation has become even more confounding as women workers are compelled to take to social media platforms, as in the case of Indian and Bangladeshi artisanal workers to resell wares due to market lockdowns during the pandemic. Given that honour can be “taken away” by inappropriate and visible behaviour, social media poses specific and new forms of threats for women as they struggle to manage their digital self-impressions while trying to eke out a living with their customers online. Dishonour can be triggered by any number of digital “wrongs” driven by patriarchal norms—an upload of an “immodest” photo or video, liking an “inappropriate post,” of being too forward, too outspoken, too social (Wikan 1984; Dawley 2000).

In a recent fieldwork in India on girls’ digital engagements, their mothers shared a common belief that the family’s honour comes before

their daughter's personal aspirations, desires, or dreams. As one mother explains,

The world is so bad, and the phones give you access to these bad things. I don't want Aju [her daughter] to see bad things—if men and boys find your number, they can send you wrong messages. Aju is a girl—if she posts something bad, the society will blame me—the mother, and not the father. It is the mother's responsibility to teach her daughter the ways of the world and to make her smart so that she can stay safe and away from society's eyes. If something bad happens with Aju online, the entire family will suffer and feel dishonored. Also, we have three daughters. Who will marry them if they think our family is bad! (Bhatia, Arora and Pathak-Shelat 2021, 4765).

For women in the Global South (Ghosh 2021; Komarraju et al. 2021) who jump into the workforce despite these challenges, they deploy several online tactics to manufacture honour. In Nepal, many rural women have moved to the city to work and send money home. Kabita, a first-generation wage earner, is a case in point. She works as a tour guide and is aware of the thin line she treads as she interacts with “open” lifestyles of the city in terms of social freedoms, perceived as dishonourable to her community. While she enjoys the pleasure of being independent, she crafts her identity online to show her family back home that she is still a “good girl” through her modest choice of clothing. She leverages the digital remittance economy, a conventional pathway for earning honour by sons who send money back home and make their families proud. The “assumption is that a daughter engaged in a ‘dishonourable’ profession would be too ashamed to send any of her earnings to her parents,” argues International Studies scholar Barbara Grossman-Thompson (2017, 501).

Other strategies are to obscure their identities by using stock photos for their profiles, self-censorship, posting only about “serious things” and business-related matters, and often holding multiple accounts, handles, and profiles. Collective self-presentation is important as women work together to manufacture the reputation of their industry, their work, and thereby themselves through tactical tagging and sharing with the right social networks to reinforce certain impressions of their work to those back home.

The fact remains though that despite these tactics, the burden to preserve individual and family honour falls disproportionately on girls and women in the Global South. This pushes women's digital work to operate on a landmine of morality. They face an uphill battle to strive for inattention in an attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001). While women's labour

participation has improved over the decades at a global level, regions with strong patriarchal norms like the Middle East, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa are witnessing a stagnation or even a decline in their participation. According to 2021 World Bank estimates,<sup>1</sup> India has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world. With less than a third of women (fifteen or older) working or actively looking for a job, digital platforms promise to exacerbate an already critical situation on gender participation in the workforce. For such women to have a future in the workplace, we need to confront our patriarchal past.

### Our Choice to Let Go

Choice is a privilege. In times of COVID-19, the choice of work is an astounding luxury to most people, particularly in precarious and vulnerable contexts. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), more than 1.7 million Kenyans lost their jobs in the first three months of the pandemic. The Kenyan government is offering hundreds of thousands of such citizens alternative urban maintenance jobs, many of which are considered undignified work. In Kibera, one of the largest informal settlements in Nairobi, Abdul Aziz, a driver who lost his job, scoops up plastic bottles, dirty nappies, and garbage from the open sewer, trying his best to dodge the “flying toilets” of human faeces that is swung out from homes while he toils. “It’s disgusting work,” says Aziz, but he recognizes that it’s still better than staying at home, “hungry and jobless” (BBC 2020).

Inserting honour in this equation is perverse. Yet, this social “quality” that somehow people at the margins have found themselves needing to defend and preserve seems to accompany several types of jobs they engage with, such as tailoring, butchering, artisanal work, domestic care, and sanitation.

It is time to let go of honour.

We need to ask ourselves—who benefits from this added layer of self and group degradation in the face of precarity, informality, and misfortune? What are the markers for meaningful labour—is it our payslip, our corporate title, the size of our office, and educational credentials? We need to move the needle from individualistic-centred markers to more inclusive markers with an eye on the triple bottom line—to nurture the self, our community, and our planet. It is time for a decolonial reckoning, redressal, and redistribution of value of the material and immaterial kind if we are to truly be in this

1 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>

together. Culture has become a dirty word—a proxy for action and thought that is backward, gendered, colonial, mediaeval, prehistoric. Let us reclaim culture as a critical and creative human resource that can generate solidarity, empathy, and collective action—perhaps then we will have a future in the work we do.

We need to break free from this historically and culturally constructed shackle where individual virtue and vice is dependent on the work we do. No human being should be valued based on their labour; rather, we should value the level of integrity they bring to it, whether as a street sweeper in Bengaluru or a Wall Street executive in New York. Given that human beings can't help but imbibe meaning from their toil, can we move away from a template that devalues us by what we do? Let us fuel an alternative paradigm that centres on the dignity of labour.

As long as honour holds a place in the world of labour, it will always serve as a cancer that eats into the fabric of human dignity.

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