
Migrant-Women at the Mall: Understanding Empowerment and Habitus

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Abstract. The present paper is based on field work involving semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with women employees of the DLF Promenade Mall, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi. The paper seeks to examine the ways in which, opportunities of work at the shopping mall have enabled these women to negotiate dominant practices of their social class. Engaging with Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and various forms of capital that together constitute social structures and practices, the paper investigates the complexities of employment and 'empowerment' encountered by these women. Additionally, the paper attempts to bring out how working at the Mall, overall, leads to these women's alteration of their habitus and 'fields', primarily through their generation of capital in different forms.

Keywords- Habitus, Social Class, Empowerment, Mall, Social Capital

1 Introduction

In one of his last but most powerful works, *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu engages with habitus in the context of sexual division of social structures and recent changes: If the old structures of the sexual division seem still to determine the very direction and form of these changes, this is because, as well as being objectified in disciplines, careers and jobs that are more or less strongly characterised sexually, they act through three practical principles which women, and also their social circles, apply in their choices. The first is that the functions appropriate to women are an extension of their domestic functions- education, care and service. The second is that a woman cannot have authority over men, and, other things being equal, therefore has every likelihood of being passed over in favour of a man for a position of authority and of being confined to subordinate and ancillary functions. The third principle gives men the monopoly of the handling of technical objects and machines (94).

Though Bourdieu's critical oeuvre does not lay out a clear elaboration of gendered habitus, feminists, over the years, have employed Bourdieuan framework, to examine women's

subordination in different arenas/contexts. Most recently, Gowri Vijayakumar's article "I'll be Like Water: Gender, Class, and Flexible Aspirations at the Edge of India's Knowledge Economy" (2013), utilises Bourdieu's notion of "the practical anticipation of objective limits" to show how women in a small-town BPO near Bangalore display "flexible aspirations" in accommodating familial roles, while continuing to work in globalised arenas. The following discussion would draw upon Bourdieu's formulations, particularly habitus, field and capital to understand women's work and 'empowerment' in the Mall. The discussion builds upon field work undertaken at the DLF Promenade Mall- including detailed case studies of Mall-employees belonging to different social locations, or 'fields' as Bourdieu calls it.

2. **Migrant Workforce at Mall: Bourdieu's 'Field' and Gendered Work**

The DLF Promenade, located at VasantKunj, New Delhi has built its niche with brands that cater primarily to the middle and upper middle classes. Located in the posh stretch of South Delhi, and in close proximity to the international airport and some educational institutions, the Mall attracts consumers of all ages. According to the Operations-Manager of the Promenade, Malls in India today should be understood as "destinations" that offer avenues much beyond shopping. The Promenade registers a footfall of about 30,000 people on weekdays and double the number on each day of the weekends. Women, we were informed, constituted the majority of mall-goers and about 90% of shoppers/consumers of the Mall. This makes these "destinations" of particular importance for studying women's mobility/visibility in public spaces, especially in spaces created by forces of globalisation. Additionally, by offering platforms for consumption, lifestyle displays and changes, and services of various forms, Malls have increasingly brought together different "status groups" looking to utilise its amenities and goods. This, in turn requires the presence of a sizeable workforce that must facilitate the day-to-day business within the Mall. In case of the Promenade, the Operations-Manager shared that around 500 to 600 employees, consisting of security team, house-keeping staff and personnel in-charge of the overall maintenance of the Mall, were employed for the Mall's daily upkeep. Similarly, the brands present at the Mall had hired sales-persons and brand-managers for handling business at mall-outlets. The Mall-administration itself was divided into multiple teams-lease, operations, sales- each consisting of employees at different levels.

Over 90 per cent of the workforce at the Promenade is constituted by migrants from different parts of India. From store managers (such as of brands like Nike, Marks and Spencer), to sales-persons of different brands (such as Mothercare), to house-keeping and security staff, and the Operations-Manager of the Mall himself, the majority of employees at the Promenade has migrated to Delhi for education or employment. While each migrant-worker brings a story of her/his own, the chequered yet similar trajectory of their migration remains one of constant negotiation with changing locales, lifestyles, economies, and even value-systems. This opens up the 'fields' or social locations/conditions within which they move, as members of a social structure. Bourdieu defines field as:

...a field of forces, whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it, and a field of struggles within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure. (as cited in Reed-Danahay, D, 2004).

The sociologist also links these fields with equations of power, attributing possibilities of change, transformation, subversion to agents inhabiting a field: ' "The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force, in as much as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it." ' (as cited in Lois McNay's "Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the limits of Self Reflexivity", 1999)

Migration, prompted by the prospect of jobs in a globalised economy, as well as by promises of upward mobility, has offered possibilities of playing with and within a more dynamic social 'field' to large sections of the new middle class in India. Within the Mall-space, migrant-women from different parts of the country were seen in a wide range of roles- whether it was the young woman from Meghalaya working as sales-person at *Mothercare*, or the Kashmiri-migrant in her early twenties, working as store-manager for a lingerie brand, or young women from West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa working as house-keeping staff. The paper would later take up case studies to understand shifting 'fields', in relation to capital and 'habitus' of such migrant-workers from the Mall.

Before moving to an analysis of case-studies of migrant women-workers at the Mall, and decoding 'empowerment' through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, it is imperative to understand the continued gendering of 'space', of the nature of work and consumption within Malls such as

the Promenade. As Bourdieu elaborates in *Masculine Domination*, sexual division of all spheres-work, spaces, social circles, technology, among others, is integral to social systems that hold women in a subordinate status. Additionally, the sociologist also details how massive inequalities are established not by explicit institutional principles, but through complex/subtle cultivation of dispositions, at the very level of corporeal training. Shopping malls, even at the most apparent level, function through a clear demarcation of gender lines- whether through separation of products within stores, or by organising brands and consumption along gender divides. For instance, the Promenade Operations-Manager explained that the selection of brands and outlets was done with a view to cater to feminine sensibilities, derived from the fact that women were the predominant mall-goers. This translated into inclusion of only two stores in the sprawling Mall that dealt in gadgets and other devices- products that required familiarity with technology.

The impact of such gendering on the nature of women's work is more complex. Though the globalised economy has provided newer avenues of work that contribute to the 'pulls' of migration into metropolitan centres, studies have shown that such migration has not made any alteration to gender segregation of work. Within the DLF Promenade, a large number of migrant-women were employed as sales-persons and sometimes as store-managers too. Most women shared that an emphasis on appearance, attire, personal grooming was crucial to the sales-person's work. Though this was also a guideline to male sales-persons, the emphasis on recruiting only 'young' women, and the complete absence of women sales-persons at technological stores, provided an insight into the way the nature of work available to men and women was shaped by gender-divide and biases. Neither the Samsung store, nor the I-World Store at the Promenade had hired a woman-worker (almost all the workers at these stores being migrants). Prakash (name-changed), the male sales-person at I-World shared that a graduate degree in any discipline was the job's minimum requirement, but when asked why no women were taken for the sales job he shared the existing perception within such stores that men were more capable of explaining/handling technology. Similarly, the focus group discussions conducted with housekeeping women-workers and their supervisor provided insights into eligibility, work-profile and training of the housekeeping staff. The women-workers of this team had to be less than 30 years, and were provided with training on applying light make-up for their daily duties, as well as on etiquettes and greetings to mall-goers. Many women-workers shared

how this was their first exposure to make-up and grooming tips, particularly referring to the ‘puff’ hairstyle they were wearing, as integral to their ‘work-look’.

Bourdieu’s study of Kabyle women’s appearances and how it reflects their training and resultant subordination within a masculinist structure, appears relevant here. Exposing subtle forms of domination, the sociologist says: “femininity is imposed on the most part through an unremitting discipline that concerns every part of the body and is continuously recalled through an unremitting discipline that concerns every part of the body and its continuously recalled through the constraints of clothing and hairstyle (*Masculine...*, 27).”

3. Women-Workers and ‘Habitus’: The Generation of Capitals

Bourdieu terms this form of domination- involving tacit, yet often unrecognisable forms of inequality as “symbolic violence”. Communication, cognition, misrecognition, as well as feeling are all involved in this kind of violence that complicates issues of agency, awareness and adherence by making such restrictions appear “normal” (2). It is with regard to this “gentle” violence directed against women, their awareness and chequered empowerment through work, and its effects on women’s participation in “fields” and social structures, that ‘habitus’ becomes important as a concept.

Bourdieu has provided multiple definitions of ‘habitus’. Researchers on Bourdieu such as Gayna Davey perceive habitus as a concept that could be utilised as a tool of analysis, rather than be referred to consistently as a definition. Davey highlights a formulaic understanding of habitus, as a concept linking social classes and their practice through the equation: **‘(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice**. The formula links habitus to other critical elements affecting social classes and resulting ultimately in social practices. Most critics, according to Davey, agree that habitus represents a mediation between subjective and objective, individual and structures, where the latter stands for history, through a focus on the material (Roy Nash, Raey). Bourdieu, in his recent elaborations related to the working of habitus describes it as a set of choices, corporeal injunctions, dispositions that work through “network of relations” ’ binding individuals to a system. This transpires by making the system itself appear as an “objective and subjective necessity”, where the individual ‘participates’ unconsciously, with her/his very thought and cognition being structured in line with the system (hence, through mis-cognition/recognition).

This pre-reflexive working of the habitus has made critics like Rao Nash associate a certain “soft determinism” with habitus.

Feminists engaging with Bourdieu’s critical work, point out to how habitus brings back social conditioning and materiality into the critique of patriarchal system by cross-examining division of labour, consumer tastes and class dispositions, as well as all social exchanges and systems of honour (in practices such as marriage in *Masculine Domination*). Lois McNay revives habitus for a feminist cause by underlining how individual action is not foreclosed. McNay quotes Bourdieu who states “[habitus] is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by the in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures” (McNay, 103). Apart from foregrounding the crucial role of experience in altering structures (and hence reshaping habitus), Bourdieu also emphasizes on temporality of material and social relations that offer prospects of changing existing systems. Additionally, habitus itself is linked to factors such as capital in together defining social practices. The role of capital and the kinds of capital analysed by Bourdieu are particularly enabling in approaching the domain of work, as well as in understanding the way women have made inroads into gendered practices through their experiences over time. Critics like Skegg have found immense potential in Bourdieu’s ideas on capital (especially cultural capital) in understanding agency and possibilities of change. The movement, levels and composition of different capitals, along with habitus, open up ‘fields’, as well as affect social practices. Summing up the three kinds of capital (apart from economic) - cultural, social, symbolic that Bourdieu lays out, Rosalind Hooks writes:

‘Cultural Capital’, for example, exists in three different states; in an embodied state in the form of durable dispositions in the mind and body; in an objectified state existing in the form of cultural goods such as books or paintings; in an institutionalized state such as academic credentials (Bourdieu 196a/; 243). ‘Social capital’ refers to ‘the connections and networks an agent may call upon in their effort to achieve a specified goal’ (Crossley 2001: 97), while ‘Symbolic capital’ refers to ‘the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate’ (Skeggs 1997: 8). (1)

The remaining section of the paper would undertake an analysis of three case-studies from the field work at the Promenade to further the premise that though tied to their habitus, the

women-workers at the Mall display active negotiation with their fields by the very act of migration. Moreover, work at the Mall, though highly gendered, allows them to accumulate different forms of capital, which, over a period of time, offer possibilities of altering social practices. This complex scenario, in turn contributes to a better understanding of the layered empowerment that such women-workers are able to obtain within larger social structures.

4. Understanding ‘Empowerment’ in the context of Migrant Women Workers at the Mall

“Look at me; this is how far I’ve come, from a burqa to this”. Shazia (name changed) appeared very much at ease within the Mall, wearing a yellow top and jeans, as we began our long conversation with her. Store-manager at the popular lingerie store ‘Bwitch- cast aspell’, the 23 year old was a Kashmiri. Though initially inhibited about interacting with us, Shazia gradually opened up about her migration to Delhi and the altered trajectory of her life. Though not very comfortable speaking in English (a pre-requisite in the Mall environment), she kept replying to our questions (put forward in Hindi) in English. Shazia revealed with pride her status as the first girl of her family to come outside the valley and lead an independent life. She had obtained a graduate degree in Arts from Kashmir University, which had helped her migrate to Delhi, though not without considerable struggle with her family. Her brothers wanted her to marry and then go out to work, but somehow she had been able to convince her father.

Shazia came to Delhi in 2011 and thereafter pursued a Diploma in Aviation, specialising in ground staff handling. The Diploma had provided her a job with Spice jet. Shazia however, had reservation about wearing short dresses that was part of the “look” for the aviation-sector job. It was at this juncture that employment at the Promenade offered her an opportunity to remain in Delhi, and carve out a living post her education. As the store-manager though, Shazia does expect a groomed and professional appearance from all her women salespersons. Entrusted with responsibilities of sales, maintenance, of staff-management and the overall functioning of the outlet, Shazia looked quite comfortable with her role at the store. Having adjusted well to the Mall set-up she now aspires to become a cluster manager with a better brand in the near future.

In elaborating further how different her life in Delhi was when compared to what it was in Kashmir, she also mentioned that it was only when she came to Delhi that she started visiting a beauty salon and got herself “groomed”. While in the Valley, Shazia wasn’t even allowed to go visit her aunt who lived right across the street, without her brother’s prior permission. She now

called herself the master of her own choices and shared her delight at being able to pursue a career. She would also buy gifts and take her family out for vacations. Perhaps the most crucial insights into Shazia's choices came from her personal relationships. Discussing her circle of people in Delhi, she mentioned having a boyfriend in the city, a scenario she could not have ever imagined in Kashmir. Revealing that the boyfriend was a Hindu, Shazia said she was aware of her family's possible reservations, but was equally determined to marry him.

The research team also visited residence of Mall employees at Masoodpur ghetto- a locality that offered a paradoxical blend of wide concrete roads and huge houses that sheltered working class families, small shops, and even buffaloes used in the milk business within the area. The team visited the quarters of housekeeping staff Rani (name changed) here, who was a resident of one of these huge houses in Masoodpur. The building in which Rani and her family lived had cemented staircase without any railing. The flight of stairs was littered with garbage and water cans and the entire locality was poorly maintained. What looked like an immense house from the outside was actually divided into ten rooms on each floor with common toilets. The building lacked proper water and sanitation facilities. Rani's room, a window-less one, was one of the five such rooms on one side of the passage on the first floor. A table with cooking gas stove and some utensils was all that the family possessed.

When the team first met her, Rani appeared happy wearing a bright salwar-suit and a necklace. A housekeeping staff- she was in her early twenties, with two children- a girl of six years and a boy three years old. She had migrated from a village near Lucknow a year ago. Though she did not clearly articulate any form of resentment towards the village set-up back in UP, it was clear that she had renegotiated familial structures by shifting away from the extended patriarchal family of the village. Her husband had migrated first, and she had subsequently managed to join him. Rani also shared that there was little discrimination in her current locality in Delhi between people of different backgrounds, contrary to her village back in UP. She belonged to a Scheduled Caste (*Chamar*) community.

Starting out as a domestic help in *kothies*, Rani was able to network with people in her locality at Masoodpur, being finally introduced to the mall management through a neighbor. Rani declares working in the Mall has made life better than working in *kothies*. Her husband also works as a housekeeping staff in the food court in the adjoining Mall. He gets 7000 INR per

month, while Rani earns 8000/-INR per month. A school drop-out herself, Rani has enrolled her daughter in a school. In terms of support system at home, she counts on her 15years old sister who hasalso migrated from the village and now stays with them. She looks after Rani's children while both Rani and her husband are away for work at the Mall.

Rani aspires to obtain a better job in the near future. She manages to display a groomed and apparently happy demeanor borrowed from the Mall, which conceals the difficulties of her habitation. The challenges of her working class life complicate her sense of 'place' within the Mall. However, employment, especially, in what she perceives as a more 'respectable' space, like the Mall(vis-à-vis *kothies*), and an income exceeding that of the male of her family, seemed to have enabled Rani a place of her own in the city, away from oppressive caste structures and familial hierarchies of the village back in U.P.

The long interviews with the housekeeping staff-23 years old Kiran and 25 years old Kunal (names changed) who have been married to each other since the past five years, opened up a parallel area of examination pertaining to women's active roles in migration, career goals, status, and financial targets of households. Hailing from Darjeeling district, West Bengal, Kiran had come to Delhi a year before her marriage to live with her sister and her brother-in-law. She was married to Kunal at the age of 17 in her village. After her marriage, Kunal also moved to Delhi. Kiran has studied till class 12, while Kunal dropped out of school after class ten.

Kiran has been working as a housekeeping staff in the mall for the past one and a half years before which she used to work in an export company in packaging. Her interview revealed a constant desire to improve financial and societal status for the couple, as well as a strong desire to learn, experiment, shift across the socio-economic field. The job at the export company wasn't well-paid because of which Kiran switched to the housekeeping work at DLF Promenade. She was also pivotal in making Kunal leave carpentry and move to a more 'stable' job like that of housekeeping. More than Kunal, expressed the urge to switch to a better work-profile like that of a supervisor, or a salesperson. She also expressed her desire to join college or learn computers after marriage, but financial constraints had forced her to start working. She had still managed to do a course on designing in computer for six months back in her native-place. Desiring to move upward in the ladder whenever there's an opportunity, she keeps looking for vacancies of better work-profile in other malls.

Networking and bonding with relatives and superiors emerged as critical to Kiran's social and economic mobility too. Her migration to Delhi was possible with the help of her sister who used to work as a salesperson in Gurgaon, while the job at Promenade was acquired through a neighbour in Masoodpur who introduced Kiran to the supervisor at Promenade. It was only then that she visited a mall for the first time in her life. Family planning, along with the financial road-maps was also her domain in the household. Kiran insists on having sufficient savings before starting a family, desiring to raise kids in the city, rather than in their village. She had a still birth almost two years ago and is under contraception since then. She wishes to conceive again in the near future, though not without the required material requirements.

Though eager to continue working in the Mall, neither Kunal nor Kiran likes the nature of their work at the mall. Kiran emphasised that she would never recommend the job of housekeeping to her relatives. Caste issues remained underpinned to lifestyle and career choices. In Bengal, *Mandals* (their family surname) the couple said, though SCs are upward in the hierarchy than the SCs in other regions and hence cleaning jobs – such as the housekeeping one are widely stigmatised. In fact, the couple had not disclosed to their job to families back home due to the stigma attached to cleaning washrooms. Additionally, the larger family, the couple says, also had inhibitions around women going out to earn a living. However, the desire to 'progress' and succeed in a metropolitan city like Delhi has made the couple carry on with such jobs that they would otherwise not have preferred to do. The two also often work overtime, sometimes a double shift by turns.

What perhaps added to Kiran's critique of the housekeeping jobs was the stress on the grooming attached to her job, best reflected in the "puff hairstyle". Alien to the term "grooming", Kiran had never used make-up. However, clearly understanding the requirements of her job, she had taken to using light make-up when on duty, so as to remain "presentable". Kiran stated that this on-duty requirement of being always "presentable" had, to a large extent, marred her initial interest in make-up. In terms of attire however, the job had brought about changes to the values existing in the family. Though Kiran would not wear western clothes and only drapes sarees, work at the Mall had now made "pants" permissible within their household.

Conscious yet not overwhelmed by the structures of regulation back in Bengal, Kiran appeared to be powerfully drawn to the lifestyle of status-groups around her. She pointed out that

the city is starkly different from her village. What made the city a different site to her was the everyday interaction with different types of people at the Mall that she said, added to her experience. Beginning with the most basic item of her everyday work- the black “garbage bag” that she had never heard of, to the very appearances of woman in the restrooms, Kiran stated that she had entered an absolutely new terrain with her job.

5. Conclusion

The case-studies exemplify how the very fact of movement within a different ‘field’ has opened up their own fields for examination for the migrant women employed at the Mall. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus proves useful in decoding the complex ways in which these women understand and shape their goals, displaying both a socio-cultural pattern of choices, as well as an engagement and critique of the structures they inhabit. More importantly, ‘empowerment’ within such a framework is examined keeping in mind women’s internalisation of available roles, and their ultimate subversions of it. Bourdieu’s enumeration of the different forms of capital lends a much-needed aspect of temporality in trying to capture change or empowerment. For these women-workers, ‘empowerment’ does not involve mere shift of terrain that may or may not have been ‘choices’, but an investment to newer lifestyles and experiences over a period of time. More appropriately, their empowerment resides in the generation of networks, support-system (cultural capital), alterations to existing familial systems and marital equations, building cultural capital- through technical skills and degrees for themselves or their children, and an overall aspirational project to live with dignity.

6. References

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