

Asiya Islam

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A Woman's Job: Making Middle Lives in New India

*In this excerpt from **A Woman's Job: Making Middle Lives in New India**, Asiya Islam examines the lives of educated young women working in precarious jobs in Delhi's service sector. The book's rich ethnography explores how these women navigate work, home life, gender norms and class dynamics amidst socio-economic transformation and globalisation.*

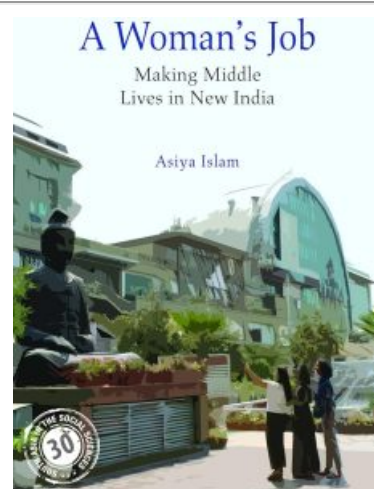
A Woman's Job: Making Middle Lives in New India

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***A Woman's Job: Making Middle Lives in New India.* Asiya Islam. Cambridge University Press. 2024.**

The Select City mall occupies 1.3 million square feet of prime land in South Delhi. A Quora search reveals that is equivalent to almost 21 football fields, 40 White Houses, and 10 Walmart Stores. Its looming glass building houses international brands – Zara, H&M, UNIQLO, Sephora, Dior, MAC, Burger King, KFC – providing an “upscale” shopping experience. Its air-conditioned and gleaming interiors with high ceilings and spotless (somewhat slippery) floors, open on to an expansive landscaped plaza, featuring tropical palms, fountains, and a giant statue of the Buddha. The year the Select City mall opened – 2007 – falls in the early period of the emergence of malls in India, following the opening up of the economy to global trade in the 1990s. In the first decade of the 21st century, malls were still a novelty, but by the end of the second decade, they have become a much more common feature, alongside cafes, call centres, and high-rise offices, transforming the urban Indian landscape. These spaces signify the advent of a global culture that has influenced the



social fabric of urban India and perhaps most remarkably, altered the desires, attitudes, and aspirations of the youth, who comprise “**liberalization’s children**”.

New Indian women

Against the glitzy picture of malls, cafes, and high-rises, there is a growing corpus of qualitative research on the lived realities of middle-class youth. Much of this scholarship focuses on the lives of young men, including **emerging ideals of masculinity**, their participation in “**globally familiar**” cultures, as well as frustration at the lack of life choices, suffering long-term unemployment, engaging in “**timepass**”. As such, we know little about the lives, and indeed livelihoods, of the young women who are heavily present in discourses of globalisation and development – as (potential or already) **victims of sexual violence**, their bodies in public spaces rendered as antithesis to India’s claims to modernity; as targets for development initiatives, such as, **microfinance** and family planning; and as latent workforce, with concern over the **low female labour force participation rate in India**. This book ethnographically attends to the everyday lives of those who could conveniently be categorised as “Modern Indian Women” or “**New Indian Women**” – urban and educated young women seeking work in the expanding service economy in Delhi, working across cafes, call centres, shopping malls, and offices.



In navigating work, home, and leisure, women grapple with competing discourses of modernity, freedom, urbanity, domesticity, respectability, consumerism, mobility



The jobs that these women were in had embellished titles, such as, barista, brew master, beauty assistant, customer relations executive. These frilly titles provide a front of professionalism for jobs that are largely poorly paid, with little opportunity for stability and progression. At the time of research (2016-17), their salaries in these varied roles were between INR 7,000-12,000 per month, close to the minimum wage in Delhi. For young women, these were “*jobs*” or short-term work, rather than “*career*” or long-term professional engagement that yields higher material rewards. And yet, a *job* was preferable over “*labour-type*” work or manual work that some of their parents did, and “*ghar ka kaam*” or housework. In rejecting labour-type work and housework, women made assertions

about the type of work that was appropriate for them on the basis of their higher educational levels.

Gender, globalisation, development

Beyond work, this book features Delhi's young women in varied settings, including their residential neighbourhoods, and spaces of leisure, such as, malls, cafes, and parks. We meet their friends, families, and colleagues as we encounter some of the sights, sounds, and feel of these spaces, ranging from the traffic passing by street-side food stalls to music playing in the food court of a shopping mall. In this course, we also encounter *things* that are significant in young women's lives. These are things that they either already have access to or desire access to in order to signal "distinction". Importantly, they are things in circulation in the popular discourse of globalisation – smartphones, burgers, jeans, credit cards, and, of course, malls. As such, these things connect the minutiae of women's everyday lives to the larger picture of socio-economic transformation in urban India and development and globalisation in the Global South more generally.



The way we tell our life-stories is deeply embedded in the sense we have of our place in the world. But this place is not static



The sequence of the chapters follows a loose temporality of women's entry into (Chapters Two and Three), experiences of (Chapters Four and Five), and exit (Chapter Six) from paid work, drawing to a close with discussion of the conditions that structure women's longer-term futures (Chapter Seven). Each chapter explores how these women use middle-ness as a strategy – they cherish employment for offering them an opportunity to traverse the city, but they worry about being branded "fast-forward"; they desire to be fluent English-speaking, but they do not want to be mocked for being "madams"; they want to dress as professionals, but they emphasise that do not want to deceive people as "heroines" do; they come from "middle-class" families, but they distance themselves from middle class-ness through their behaviours and attitudes, and importantly, not through money; they are "working", but they quit their jobs intermittently to assert agency that is denied to working women.

Making middle lives

In navigating work, home, and leisure, women grapple with competing discourses of modernity, freedom, urbanity, domesticity, respectability, consumerism, mobility, and so on. But rather than reconciling these, my research shows that women sit with and draw out the tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences of being in the middle. This middle-ness is, therefore, not simply conciliatory of two extreme positions; rather it interrogates and challenges various positions. This culture of middle-ness does not simply “aspire” to the dominant symbolic of the upper classes, but can be wayward, messy, and disruptive. In other words, these women are not, contrary to popular imagination, aspiring to become elites. Indeed, I argue that it is precisely by adopting *middle-ness* as the framework of their lives that women are navigating reproduction of inequalities as well as effecting social change.

At the heart of it, I was, and continue to be interested in how women narrated their lives – their past, their present, and their futures – themselves. The way we tell our life-stories is deeply embedded in the sense we have of our place in the world. But this place is not static, it is constantly shifting and evolving, and may be particularly volatile for those who are marginalised in processes of globalisation and development.

*Note: This excerpt from the introduction to *A Woman’s Job: Making Middle Lives in New India*, by Asiya Islam is copyrighted to Cambridge University Press and the author, and is reproduced here with their permission.*

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About the author



Asiya Islam

Dr Asiya Islam is Assistant Professor in Gender, Development and Globalisation at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She studies the relationship between gender and work and is particularly interested in the gendered shaping of the service and emerging digital

economy in the Global South, as well as in advancing critical and creative feminist approaches to ethnography.

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