EJWS

'Middle' in urban India: The conceptual limitations of the global middle class

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Abstract
The 21st century has been branded the age of the global middle class. Against this sweeping claim, ethnographies show that there are as many middle classes as there are ways of living. Beyond the plurality of middle classes, where do we arrive by conceptualising middle classes from the Global South? In this paper, I draw upon the narratives of young women in Delhi, who describe themselves as neither 'hi-fi', nor 'gae-gujre' [destitute], but in the 'middle'. I argue that young women's deployment of the English term 'middle' is an articulation of the ambivalence of world-making in the uncertain and uneven terrain of rapid socio-economic change. Rather than subsuming 'middle-ness' into a global middle class, the paper understands middle-ness as a position of gender, class, caste entanglements, where anxieties about the flux of social relations coalesce. Through a reading of 'middle-ness' as a middle range concept that emerges from the lived experiences of women in urban India, the paper suggests avenues for understanding class in and from diverse locations.

Keywords
Gender, global middle class, global south, India, New Middle Class

Introduction

When I met Nandita[1] in Delhi in early 2017, she was 31 years old, and her two children were 12 and 10 years old. At the time, Nandita was working as an elderly care provider for a private household. Having previously trained in data management and English speaking at a local skills training centre through which I met her, Nandita did not expect to find herself in care work. In our conversation, Nandita shared her personal ambitions, including for her children to get 'English-medium education'. In looking for a 'frame' to put her life into context for me, Nandita noted,

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You can't say that because we're in the *jhuggi* [slum],[2] we're *gae-gujre* [destitute]. If you see their [people in the neighbourhood] houses and where they work, no one can say this is where they come from. One of my friends, she has a parlour in the market. So expensive. This is a *hi-fi market* . . . we consider ourselves in the *middle* . . .

Nandita's narrative highlights the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of the concept of the 'middle'. In simple terms, being in the middle is about being situated in between two class positions – Nandita says she is neither 'gae-gujre' or poor/destitute, nor 'hi-fi'. At first glance, Nandita's distancing from the poor suggests an aspirational claim to emerging global middle class of the 21st century (Koo, 2016; Therborn, 2012). However, even as Nandita identified herself as in the middle, she reflected on the limits of this status, noting '. . . we can't plan for the future'. With her husband out of work, Nandita was the sole earner for their family. She thought of her 'middle' status as enduring, and importantly, not aspirational. Nandita's narrative also highlights the 'border crossings' (Johri and Menon, 2014) that she, and women like her, undertake between home in low-income neighbourhoods and feminised new service work[3] catering to the upper middle and upper class in urban India. These border crossings are central to emerging 'middle' claims. They also generate instability and anxieties that are fundamentally gendered (Jones, 2012; Liechty, 2003), but rarely recognised in the 'flattened' understandings of the global middle class (McEwan et al., 2015).

This paper engages with conflicting understandings of being middle class that emerged from my long-term ethnographic research with young women workers in Delhi, India. In particular, it emphasises the need to take seriously young women's articulations of being in the 'middle', without conflating this with the category of the global middle class. Based on their narratives, I understand the 'middle' as a position (a) constituted through feminisation of service work or emergence of 'pink collar work' (Freeman, 2000), (b) where anxieties in relation to the reconfigurations of global and local economic, social, and cultural relations coalesce, and (c) in which class, caste, and gender are inextricably tangled up. In that, I develop 'middle-ness' as a concept that disrupts the coherence that the category 'middle class' imposes on diverse people, erasing 'inconvenient realities' and positioning the middle class as evidence of the success of neoliberal economic reforms (Ballard, 2012).

When I started this research in mid-2016, the women were between 18 and 35 years old (with most of them in their early 20s) and mostly employed in cafes, shopping malls, call centres, and small offices. Some (like Nandita) were looking for such work, and others were in-between jobs. These women are the first generation in their families to engage with 'new service work' that has emerged in urban India following economic liberalisation of the 1990s. This new service work promises respectable professionalism, particularly to young women (Radhakrishnan, 2009; Vijayakumar, 2013) and is credited with enabling, in part, expansion of the New Middle Class (Fernandes, 2006; Upadhya, 2011). While these young women workers are central to discourses on the emergence of the middle class in relation to globalisation, development, modernity, their perspectives are rarely granted epistemic recognition and legitimacy.

The paper first engages with literature on the global middle class and the New Middle Class in India. Next, drawing upon my long-term ethnographic research with young

women workers in Delhi, the paper outlines the varied ways in which women invoke middle-ness beyond references to a neat middle class position. In that, the expanded concept of middle-ness accounts for intersections between gender, caste, and class, in the specific context of rapid socio-economic change in urban India. I then make a case for 'middle range' concepts (Collier, 2020; Ong et al., 2005), that is, concepts that are attentive to particularities, while also linking them with global transformations. Middle range concepts also do not explain away, but engage with the messiness of everyday lives.

Global middle class

Scholarly attention to the category 'middle class' is not new. In the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeois, the 'petite bourgeoisie' is an in between or 'transitional' class for Marx (1976). With a departure from the Marxist split between the proletariat and the bourgeois and subsequent proliferation of class categories based not only on socio-economic, but also socio-cultural aspects of class (Neubert, 2014), the middle category that in Bourdieusian terms is 'straddled between the habitus of . . . two classes' (Bennett, 2010: xxi) gained significance. In particular, a focus on middle classes has been valued for opening up class analysis that focuses on 'the ambiguity produced through struggle and fuzzy boundaries, rather than to fix it in place in order to measure and know it' (Skeggs, 2004: 5). In other words, the middle classes offer a magnifying glass to understand class as relational and in formation.

Relatedly, the 21st century has witnessed growing popular discourse and academic scholarship on 'global middle class' – 'a globally oriented, globally connected, and globally mobile segment of the middle class' (Koo, 2016: 449). While the term 'global' is affixed to 'global middle class', the reference is most commonly to the growth of middle classes in the Global South, particularly in China and India, as well as in Africa, Middle East and Latin America (see, for example, Drabble et al., 2015; Kharas and Gertz, 2010; Koo, 2016; Wheary, 2009). That much of the literature on the global middle class is situated in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis is not a coincidence. The attention to the middle classes in the Global South reflects anxieties about economic stagnation in the Global North and growth in the Global South (also see, Ong, 2011). The global middle class, as a term, is then not so much a reference to the connectedness of the middle classes around the world; rather it draws 'symbolic boundaries between the "established" upper middle class (Western, professional, affluent) and the nouveaux riches who – despite their superior economic power – are nevertheless positioned as "outsiders" in the global world order (Elias [1939] 2012)' (Maguire, 2019: 30).

Another function of the term 'global middle class' is to attribute economic success in the Global South, evident through the expansion of its middle class, to forces of neoliberal globalisation – 'Part consumer group and part social force, the new middle class is seen as a symbol of the steady retreat of poverty; an engine of the global economy; a creator of jobs; a new consumer market' . . . (Wheary, 2009: 75) (also see Ballard, 2012; Das, 2009). In this iteration, the phrase 'global middle class' establishes a linear economic growth model for the Global South, in which the global middle class is expected to 'automatically follow the Western course toward political, economic, and cultural liberalisation' (Burrows, 2015: 12). References to Hobsbawm's idea that 'the middle

class was born in the West' and has now been 'reborn in the East and the South (Gräser, 2019)' (Therborn, 2022: 439) orient studies of the global middle class towards searching for patterns of similarities or differences between the (older) middle class in the Global North and (new) middle class in the Global South, with the former serving as the conceptual model for class.

This has implications for how class is understood across contexts. Economists, for example, attempt to measure the proportion of middle class, both globally and within countries. These survey-based investigations are commonly based on income, expenditure, and (Western-style) consumption (McEwan et al., 2015). While I do not intend to offer a review of debates in economics over the measurement of class, I make this point to highlight the implications of Global North-centric conceptualisation of class. In other words, taking Global North understanding of middle class as the starting point, research on middle classes 'elsewhere' serves as self-fulfilling prophecy about the global convergence of middle classes in terms of income, expenditure, and consumption.

Emerging sociological and anthropological scholarship offers more nuanced and situated understanding of middle classes in the Global South (Jones, 2012; Lemanski and Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2013; McEwan et al., 2015; Mercer, 2020; Neubert, 2014; Phadi and Manda, 2010), highlighting 'the diversity of the middle classes within and between countries' (McEwan et al., 2015: 235), as well as the discrepancies between the imagination and lived experiences of middle classes. However, both the diversity and the discrepancies tend to share an understanding of the emerging middle class as aspirational. While not dismissing aspiration, I show that women are ambivalent about middle classness, at time even dismissing it as socially conservative. In doing so, I disrupt the tendency to identify how middle class in the Global South is 'different' from that in the Global North, and instead generate understandings of class from the Global South, whereby middle status is inherently unstable, contested, and constructed through entanglements of gender, class, caste.

New Middle Class in India

The scholarship on the New Middle Class in India is situated in the context of the discussion about the growth of the global middle class, and particularly discussion of India as an 'emerging' superpower and its middle class as an increasingly powerful consumer market, following the economic liberalisation programme effected in the early 1990s. Amid contestations over the size of the New Middle Class (Corbridge et al., 2013; Donner and De Neve, 2011; Fernandes, 2006), scholars have turned to suggest that the New Middle Class is new because there is something not just historically, but *qualitatively* different about the middle class of post-1990 India. Fernandes (2004: 2415) argues that the 'newness' of the middle class in India does not necessarily refer to social mobility or a structurally new class, rather it refers to a 'culturally constructed category' defined by 'attitudes, lifestyles and consumption practices associated with commodities made available in India's liberalising economy' (for consumption and class in India, also see Osella and Osella, 1999). A number of scholars have also particularly attributed the expansion of the New Middle Class, both materially and symbolically, to the boom of information technology services in India (Murphy, 2011; Radhakrishnan, 2011; Upadhya, 2011).

Through her research in Madurai in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, Dickey (2012: 568) argues that while caste is seen as immutable, class is associated with mobility, with socio-economic transformations of the 1990s leading to '. . . a large number of people who most likely saw themselves as poor in 1991, but who may see themselves as "middle class" or "middle people" now'. Fernandes and Heller (2006: 495) also argue that the New Middle Class 'is a tangible and significant phenomenon'. Dickey (2012) cautions that this should not be read as decline of the importance of caste in urban India (for further debate on class and caste, see Sheth, 1999; Sridharan, 2011; Velaskar, 2016), rather the predominance of class in people's narratives 'is an indication of its salience in the urban imagination' (Dickey, 2016: 41).

The imagination of the New Middle Class as beneficiaries of economic liberalisation, however, does not reflect the realities of middle class lives in India. Fernandes (2000: 102) suggests that the lives of the New Middle Class in India more closely resemble the 'industrial working class'. Scholars have also shown that the bulk of workers in modern and global work spaces that have emerged in post-1990 India, such as, shopping malls (Gooptu, 2009; Johri and Menon, 2014; Srivastava, 2014) and call centres (Patel, 2010; Remesh and Neetha, 2008), replicate the conditions of informal work (Gooptu, 2013).

The category New Middle Class also does not take into account the variance in the lived experiences of being in the 'middle' (Dickey, 2012; Fuller and Narasimhan, 2014; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009; Osella and Osella, 1999), reproducing the homogenisation of 'global middle class'. Derné (2005) distinguishes between the 'transnational middle class' – those who watch Hollywood films, speak English, are willing to accept new forms of gender relations – and the 'locally oriented middle class'. Other scholars distinguish between the lower middle class (see, for example, Ganguly-Scrase, 2003) and the secure and/or upper middle class. While these dichotomous approaches go some way towards disrupting the homogeneity of the New Middle Class, they still do not capture the 'polymorphous' (Beteille, 2001: 79), and I would add *messy*, character of the Indian middle class. In part, the messiness of middle classes in India is due to the entanglements between class, gender, religion, ethnicity, linguistic diversity. In part, it is also because '. . . [middle class] boundaries are constantly being defined and tested' (Fernandes and Heller, 2006: 495). As such, I agree with Dickey (2012: 560) that despite the proliferation of literature on the New Middle Class, '. . . we know little about who these middle-class people are, given the epistemological as well as ethnographic gaps in scholars' understandings of India's urban middle classes'.

In the middle

The refrain of being 'in the middle' has featured prominently in my research with young women workers in Delhi, India. Some women used the English term 'middle class', but there were other terms too that they used to refer to their own and others' status. For example, they spoke about being from *'chhote ghar'* or modest homes. They positioned themselves in the middle of poor people or those who do not have a roof over their head and 'bade log' or big people, 'hi-fi' people, and 'high class' people. Although it is recognised that linguistic expressions of class reflect 'a particular history of class formation and conflict' (Therborn, 2022: 2), there has been relatively limited engagement with the

languages of class around the world. Jones (2012: 148) notes the use of the concept 'gap' by Indonesians over 'middle class' since 'The Indonesian equivalent of "middle class", kelas menengah, is a loaded term. It tends to class up as much as the English term classes down in U.S. parlance, and it has resonances of wealth, newness, and even licentious freedom'. Phadi and Manda (2010: 82) highlight that '"Class" cannot be accurately translated into any of South Africa's indigenous languages. That is, there are no pre-existing words that can adequately convey all (or even most) of the connotations that the English word has accumulated'. The concern over the linguistic and geo-political trans-latability of class disrupts the homogeneous 'global middle class' category.

Reflecting on the class structures in 'New India', women referred to assessments of the class of people they came into interaction with through participation in service work. Jahanvi, who worked in a café, told me about a customer:

> Jahanvi: 'There's this one guy, he comes to have sandwich just to look at me, I can tell. He spends Rs.65 on a sandwich, he could have *chowmien* outside for Rs.50. He's from a *middle class* family, so I thought about whether I should say something to him'.
> [. . .]
> Asiya: 'You said he's middle class, how did you identify that?'
> Jahanvi: 'It's because of the way he talks. He comes and says to other guys, "*Bhai* [bro], you know when we were near Chirag Dilli yesterday, we had a bit too much to drink" . . . So it's all of this–way of talking, dressing, etc. – you can tell. I can tell, like with you, can't call you *middle* class, there's a difference of *personality, attitude*. I can recognise quite a lot of people.'

Jahanvi's initial assessment of class was based on the consumption style of this particular customer. Jahanvi pointed out the irrationality of his decision, suggesting that he could have had a more filling plate of food outside the mall, that is, at a street side food stall, but instead he came to the café to have a sandwich. In that, Jahanvi recognised, but did not seek to emulate, the aspirational nature of middle class, instead criticising its hypervisibility due to its newness. She pointed to me as an example of someone who is not middle class, in contrast to her own middle class position, as well as the middle class position of the customer. But she also empha-sised that my (high) class was more established, and thus, not in need of affirmation through new consumption.

Offering a similar relational understanding of class, Chandni described middle class as a 'feeling' with reference to people she met in the office she worked at:

> And then with Rohan [boyfriend], first time we met . . . Sumna [colleague] had brought her car, she belongs to a good family *[achhe ghar se]*. At that time, I was feeling quite *middle class* among all those *high class* people. I didn't even know how to say *pizza* . . .

Chandni referred to the participation of those who come from 'good families' in glo-balised consumption cultures (such as eating pizza at Pizza Hut), the lack of which meant that she *felt* middle class among all the 'high class' people. Again, here being middle class is not desirable. It is also worth noting that Chandni says that she felt middle class 'at that time', suggesting that she had been able to overcome this feeling eventually by starting to participate in 'high class' consumption cultures.

Some of this ambivalence – where women identified with but did not aspire to middle class position – was explained by Deepti, who worked in a multinational café chain. Deepti offered distinction between 'high class' customers, 'middle class' managers, and their own '*lower middle class*' status,

> Let me give you an example, the people who come to our cafés to drink coffee, are *high class*. If our manager says he is *middle class*, that's acceptable. His salary is Rs.50,000, he has a car, a house, everything. Things that he needs to live, he has them. We have to do so much more to survive, only we know, so we can't be middle class. If we have money, we eat, if we don't . . . We could call ourselves *lower middle class*. I guess there are people below us too but we're definitely not *proper middle class*.

Deepti's intervention provides an insight into tenuousness of class positions that these young women inhabit. In part, their use of the English term 'middle', 'middle class', or 'lower middle class' is a reflection of their familiarity with the English language, but in part, it is also a reference to the dominant discourse on the growth of the New Middle Class in India. In contrast to the ready discussions about class, the women were largely silent about their middle to low caste status (Islam, 2025). This can be attributed both to the salience of class in the urban imagination, as well as the possibility (at least in theory) of the mutability of class (as opposed to the immutability of caste) (Dickey, 2016). Their claims to middle-classness, as such, helped to establish them as part of the New India, characterised by growth, opportunity, and a stake in global markets. At the same time, they realised the tenuousness and failures of their claims as they navigated precarious conditions of work and life (Islam, 2021). The incorporation of women into labour markets is seen as a success sign of globalisation, while globalisation creates precarious conditions that commonly necessitate multiple incomes in a household (Sassen, 2002).

The women's identification as in the 'middle' is then intrinsically tied to the flux of gender relations as they enter labour markets. As educated urban women, who name claim to be middle class (or lower middle class), they push back against the compulsion to marriage and assert their suitability and desire for new service work (Islam, 2020). The women shared that although attitudes towards women's workforce participation were changing, indeed that 'working' women were fast becoming a prized commodity in the marriage market, their desire to be in work was often in conflict with their families. It is not that they were the first generation of women to enter paid work in their families, indeed many of the women's mothers had worked as paid domestic workers. Rather it was the novelty of the spaces that the women were working in that concerned their families. Jahanvi, whose parents worked together, setting up a daily stall for ironing clothes in a nearby neighbourhood, said her father did not want her to enter café work,

> My father said you can't go, you've never done this before. I cried a lot and stopped eating food . . . He just kept saying nobody has ever done this before, how will you even go there. Then mummy and others got him around'.

While middle class upbringing, whereby the women received a higher level of education than their parents,[4] suggested a readiness to enter labour markets, women faced resistance from their families. This then manifested in the women identifying the

families, who were supportive of women's workforce participation, as 'not middle class' or 'high class'. Meeta, for example, told me 'Like a lot of times I hear about they're saying this and that to their daughters. That kind of thing doesn't happen at my home. So, I think of my family's thinking as *high class'.* As such, for young women, workforce participation became integral to their attempts to transcend their middle class status (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003) (also see Evans, 2020 in a different context).

However, contradictory to their assertion to be in employment, they also commonly quit the jobs they had. Prachi, who quit her café job a few months after I met her, commented on how women are mistreated at work because their employers know that they come from modest backgrounds, *'chhote ghar'*, pointing out the class difference between them and managerial staff. Chandni reiterated this sentiment – 'Just because we're *working* should not mean that they can say whatever they want to us' . . . At times, the decision to quit work was the only mechanism available to them to challenge their managers. However, women also resigned from their jobs if they were needed to fulfil familial obligations. Meeta, a café worker, told me,

> . . . what happens is that girls leave in the middle because of some *problem*, so they don't make it to the top . . . Like if they have to go somewhere, they can't leave the girl alone at home. With me as well, I'm going to have this *problem*, I don't know if I'll get time off. My family has to go to the village for a wedding, my uncle's son, everyone will go.

Sarita, who also worked in a café, told me that she had quit her previous job because of low pay, to study for her exams, and for unstated 'personal problems'. In her new job, Sarita found herself contemplating quitting once again. She said,

> I'll continue here another 5-6 months. I have to go somewhere, so I'll need time off. If I can get time off, it's fine. If not, then I'll have to quit. It's important to go to the village as well. Mummy has *tension* about *didi's* [elder sister's] marriage. She's been looking for a while but can't find a match, don't know what the plan is . . . We have to go in May, we've booked it too . . .

These 'personal problems' that the women cited as reasons for quitting their jobs are distinctly gendered and broadly fall within the category of what Papanek (1979) calls 'status production work', and Stevano (2022) calls the 'reproduction of the social' (also see Elias and Rai, 2019) – work to maintain the status of families, such as, training of children, preparation of feasts, religious observances, mostly done by women. Both Meeta and Sarita saw such work as 'problems' but they also highlighted the importance of their participation in this work, even if at the cost of their employment, demonstrating the variations in their class claims with reference to home, work, community, and the inherently gendered character of these claims.

Furthermore, as neophyte professionals, women were placed on thin ground between professionalism and promiscuity and had to navigate social judgements about their workforce participation. Ranjini's family had made the move from their village in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh to Delhi, as many do, in search of better educational and economic opportunities. Ranjini, who worked at a fast-food chain, discussed this transition with me,

When I go to the village, people talk . . . they say they send their daughter to work . . . They feel jealous too. There was an *aunty* who used to say they send their daughter to work, she leaves in the morning, comes back at night, what kind of *job* is this . . .

Similarly, Neha, who worked as a sales assistant in an apparel shop in the mall, told me,

That happens a lot. You get dressed, you go out in *jeans* and *top*, see the girl is roaming around . . . Like when I used to come here for the *job*. People would say their girl is going out, she's started doing a *job*, she comes back so late at night, wonder what the area is like, she comes through lonely roads . . . all of these *comments* would start. And even when we'd shower and get ready, for a *party* or something, even a little *makeup*, they'd say their girls are going out like this.

The agency and pleasure that women found in and through their employment was constantly under threat, with their public presence seen as 'out of place' (Patel, 2010), portending social disorder. While the women dismissed these comments, asserting that they do not pay heed to them, to a certain extent, they reproduced these gendered and classed assessments too. Jahanvi told me,

Where I work now, one of my colleagues used to work at my old workplace too. He said to me one day, there are so many pretty girls around, *don't mind*, but during the *night shift* we used to talk about how we could run another business alongside donuts. Boys come because they're attracted to girls. He said they first talked about Prerna [another colleague] and how much men would pay for her, then the other girls, then it came to me, Jahanvi. As soon as I was mentioned, they all said, nobody can talk about Jahanvi, she's a very nice girl! With Prerna, even if she quits now, she'll still be talked about. If I hear things here, I'd quit from here. I have problems at home but that doesn't mean I keep working there. I'll eat less for two days but I won't tolerate that.

Jahanvi recognised the consequences of quitting her job, but asserted that respect comes before employment for her. Here, again, Jahanvi challenged what she saw as a middle class tendency to put up with undignified working conditions and distanced herself from it.

In these multifarious narratives about and related to class, the women identified with, but did not aspire to middle classness. While they assert their desire to be in work, and place attitudes towards women's work at the centre of class assessments, they also quit work to reproduce middle class respectability. At the same time, they critique the gender, class, and caste pressures they face in their neighbourhoods and wider communities to be respectable. These articulations of class, then, always exceeded class in their entanglements with gender and caste. They were also characterised by anxieties, and consequently contradictions, taking new shapes at different sites. Rather than adopt a conciliatory or mediatory position, the women stayed with these contradictions.

The conceptual value of middle-ness

It is, of course, possible to read young women's middle class-ness against what we already know about middle classes in the West, as well as what is suggested by the

'global middle class' discourse. For example, it can be argued quite simply that these young women are not the aspirational and entrepreneurial global middle class subjects, instead their subjectivities are based on 'locally oriented' gender and class reproductions. It can also be argued that their articulations of class are 'different' from those in the UK or the US, that rather than attempt to establish 'classlessness' (Lawler, 1999; also see Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997), they readily talk about class. However, the issue here is not so much that these young women's middle class-ness is 'locally oriented' or 'different', but that all class expressions are locally oriented and different. In other words, conceptualisations of class, produced largely in and about the Global North, are necessarily 'provincial'.

In emerging scholarship on middle classes in the Global South, scholars have highlighted the difficulties of translation of class categories/descriptors (Jones, 2012; Phadi and Manda, 2010), as well as the 'socio-cultural differences' of religion and ethnicity (Neubert, 2014) in these contexts. The focus is, however, still on categorising and defining the 'middle class'. While there is value in doing so, particularly for disrupting the homogeneous global middle class, such an approach lends itself to the exceptionalisation of the Global South (for example, one could use this approach to argue that in the Global South, 'religion' and 'ethnicity' are entangled with class, by default suggesting that in the Global North, those entanglements either do not exist or are not worthy of attention).

If we engage with the contradictory class narratives of young women in India, we see that the terrain of middle class is constantly shifting, that class is in formation and relational. These shifts become visible particularly through the narratives of women since 'women are in the middle of a very middle-class dilemma' (Jones, 2012: 159), as 'both victims and agents of a new social landscape' (Jones, 2012: 146). Some scholars have turned to understanding messy class narratives emerging from various Global South contexts through the more fluid and open concepts of 'middle class-ness' (for example, Liechty, 2003) and 'ambivalence' (for example, Jones, 2012). These concepts that aim to understand, rather than categorise, are required to understand class in contexts where class boundaries are shifting. I further argue that these constant shifts compel conceptualisations of 'middle-ness'.

Middle-ness, as a middle range concept (Collier, 2020; Ong et al., 2005), attends to the specific context of young women's multiple social positions at various sites *in relation to* the larger issue of an emerging middle class in the face of globalisation. In that, middle-ness is – '. . . a holding open of interpretation and staying with not-knowing . . . within the unfolding analysis' (Gunaratnam and Hamilton, 2017: 9). Engaging with this feminist ethic of partiality of knowledge production, this paper contributes to and encourages the development of middle range concepts to understand 'middle' lives amid globalisation. This is not to suggest abandoning middle class as a category, rather this is an argument for proliferating the category, with reduced investment in understanding it as a coherent position. The concept middle-ness stays with empirical and analytical contradictions as women navigate both the successes and failures of globalisation in their lives. Taking middle-ness seriously, rather than trying to place it into existing vocabulary of class, allows the debates on middle class to move beyond conceptualisations based on difference from Global North-centric understanding of class, towards understanding class in the messy ways in which it is experienced and lived by people.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to preserve the anonymity of the interlocutors.
2. The term 'jhuggi' here refers to a slum-like area. In Delhi, this usually means a congested neighbourhood, with small, although not makeshift, houses, often lacking access to basic facilities like water, sanitation, etc.
3. I use the term 'feminised' here to refer to both the concentration of women workers in the service sector (Neetha, 2014) as well as the precarious conditions of this work (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014).
4. The women who I conducted research with had completed secondary schooling and many were enrolled in undergraduate distance learning programmes.

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