Article

Sociology

Embodied Acting, Belonging and Gender Inequalities in Service Work

Asiya Islam [iD]
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Shannon Philip [iD]
University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

This article proposes the concept of 'embodied acting' to understand workers' transformations of their appearances (clothes, makeup) and related behaviours (English speaking, eating out, dating) to create belonging in new service work in Global South contexts characterised by continuing social inequalities amid rapid socio-economic change. The concepts aesthetic labour, emotion work and acting at work, theorised from the Global North, do not account for the aspirational and contested nature of these transformations. Through ethnographic research with young women and men in Delhi, India, the article highlights the role of peer disciplining in translating embodied acting into belonging. While men have patriarchal peer support to realise body rules of service work, women's embodied acting is intensely scrutinised, rendered hyper visible and delegitimised. This peer disciplining reproduces gender inequalities, negatively impacting women's belonging at work. Through ethnographic insights into service work in the Global South, the article advances global sociologies of work.

Keywords

acting, embodiment, gender, India, inequalities, service work

Introduction

This article examines gender inequalities in service work by drawing upon the narratives of young workers transforming themselves to establish belonging at work in Delhi, India. In postcolonial Global South contexts, expansion of the service sector has led to the creation of a low-paid, casual, precarious workforce. Notwithstanding poor working

Corresponding author:
Asiya Islam, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: a.islam1@lse.ac.uk

conditions that resemble informal work, service work is nevertheless a site of aspiration (see, for example, Bardalai, 2021; Barford et al., 2021; Gooptu, 2013) – it promises upward mobility and inclusion in 'global' markets. As such, service work in the Global South is highly coveted and competitive. To fit into precarious, but aspirational service work, workers may engage in 'acting' (Becker and Cropanzano, 2015; Boland, 2016; Shanock et al., 2013) by undertaking 'aesthetic labour' (Cutcher and Achtel, 2017; Pettinger, 2004; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Williams and Connell, 2010) through their clothing and appearance, as well as 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979). Additionally, they may signal belonging through skills, such as English speaking, and attitudes and behaviours, such as active participation in new consumption cultures. This relationship between embodiment, behaviours, skills and attitudes, underpinned by aspirations and precarity, which informs workers' self-cultivation is not adequately accounted for in the scholarship on 'aesthetic labour', 'emotion work' and 'acting' at work that derives largely from research in the Global North. In this article, we introduce the concept of 'embodied acting' to address this specific gap and offer a sophisticated understanding of social inequalities in the relational process of 'acting' at work, particularly in postcolonial contexts like India and the Global South more broadly.

We define 'embodied acting' as the process of workers crafting a persona suited to service work most apparently through bodily practices (such as clothing, accessories, makeup, body language), whereby these bodily practices are closely tied to attitudes, behaviours and skills (such as English speaking, dating, fast food consumption) to compensate for their lack of 'natural' belonging in these emerging environments. Embodied acting is necessarily about social inequalities and socio-economic change that characterise postcolonial Global South markets – workers in service work tend to come from low to lower middle-class backgrounds, but are expected to mirror middle to upper middle-class comportment. This expectation in itself makes service work a site of aspirational upward mobility, and consequently, of intense competition. Further, although much of the literature on acting at work, aesthetic labour and emotion work focuses on the relationships between employer and employee or worker and customer, 'embodied acting' draws attention to the relationships and contestations between workers competing for a place in the service world. In particular, the concept highlights that the transformed self of the workers, rather than unconscious habitus (Bourdieu, 2010) that employers may use as a resource for aesthetic labour in service work (Williams and Connell, 2010), is consciously cultivated, and is importantly realised relationally.

As such, embodied acting goes beyond the circulating concepts of aesthetic labour, emotion work and acting at work to focus on the significance of peer contestations over and recognition of acting for its translation into belonging as workers navigate deeprooted social inequalities amid rapid socio-economic change. We develop this concept from the accounts of service sector workers in India as these are not adequately explained by existing concepts. The purpose of putting forth a new concept here is not to make comparative claims between the Global South and the Global North, neither is it to treat the Global South as exceptional sources of data (Connell, 2014). Rather the intention is to draw attention to the limitations of theorisations of service work in the Global North that tend to assume universality, and to contribute through conceptual diversity (Madhok, 2020) to the advancement of global sociologies (Bhambra, 2016) of work.

The article first elaborates on embodied acting as a mechanism of belonging by bringing the scholarship on acting at work, aesthetic labour and emotion work in conversation with scholarship on service work as a site of inequalities and aspirations in the Global South. It, then, outlines how the authors conducted research with young workers in Delhi, highlighting the value of conducting the ethnographies separately with young women and men. Findings are then presented to show the specific gendered body rules and peer surveillance that the workers experience. The implications of the findings are drawn together in the discussion section, where a comparative analysis shows how peer disciplining is shaped by gender inequalities. The conclusion highlights the value of theorising from varied settings and comparative ethnographic research for advancing global sociologies of work. The article makes a distinctive contribution through the concept 'embodied acting' – it not only fills a conceptual gap around emerging gendered worker identities and new service work in the Global South, but also offers new conceptual vocabulary for understanding precarious service work globally.

Literature Review: Acting, Belonging and Gender Inequalities at Work

Existing scholarship focuses on acting as a mechanism for conforming to the requirements of work, noting its implications for job performance, employee engagement, job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion (Becker and Cropanzano, 2015; Boland, 2016; Shanock et al., 2013). Much of this scholarship derives from Goffman's (1971) theorisation of the everyday presentation of the self, whereby he argues that people act to craft an impression of themselves, and if they do not act correctly, they can be seen to be out of place. Goffman (1979) highlights gendered inequalities in 'acting of the self' in workplaces, noting that women in suits or formal wear are framed as always playing an 'unnatural' role whereas men in suits are presented as 'natural' (also see McDowell, 1998). The scholarship on acting at work has focused on two mechanisms – acting through emotions and acting through the body (although, as we argue in the article and other scholars have argued too, the two are interrelated) – advancing the key concepts of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979, 2003), 'body work' (Wolkowitz, 2002, 2006) and 'aesthetic labour' (Cutcher and Achtel, 2017; Elias et al., 2017; Pettinger, 2004; Williams and Connell, 2010).

Emotion work, which Hochschild (2003) identifies as a key feature of service work where workers come into direct interaction with customers, is the trading of emotions of wages. Body work (Wolkowitz, 2002, 2006), on the other hand, centres the body both as an instrument for display of emotions through 'interactive gestures and exchanges' (Otis, 2011: 8), as well as a product/service in itself. Largely explored in retail settings, aesthetic labour, related to emotion and body work, points out the significance of 'employee aesthetics as an extension of the aesthetics of the products and store environment' (Pettinger, 2004: 177). Much of this scholarship, while exploring the *presentation* of self, does not consider acting as contributing to the *formation* of the self. Further, while scholars have argued that the demands of emotion work and aesthetic labour, concurrent with feminisation of service work, are placed disproportionately on women (Cohen and

Wolkowitz, 2018; Elias et al., 2017), there has been limited intersectional analysis of these gendered differences.

Accounts of service work in the Global South have extended the scholarship on aesthetic labour and emotion work to examine related transformations in attitudes, behaviours and skills. Further, they have importantly placed these in the context of inequalities amid globalisation. They show that in Global South settings, new service work (e.g. in offices, shopping malls, cafes, gyms, call centres, etc.) provides a visage of globalised professionalism while also maintaining social inequalities, with workers largely coming from lower to middle-class backgrounds and customers from upper middle and upper-class backgrounds. Baas and Cayla (2020: 223) discuss how workers in urban India mediate these 'conflictual, power-laden, class-inflected' interactions by transforming themselves not only through body cultivation, but also English speaking and new patterns of consumption. Similarly, Otis (2011: 9) highlights that working-class, rural and migrant workers entering contemporary service work in China on the promise of upward mobility have to undergo a process of transformation: 'The stylized bodily labor of service employees constitutes a resource used to appeal to customers' class and gender expectations and aspirations'.

At the same time, sociologists of gender have pointed out that workers in these new globalised workplaces face gendered pressures to mediate the local and the global. Through her study of workers at a business process outsourcing unit in India, Vijayakumar (2013) argues that women workers have to juggle patriarchal demands to maintain appropriate femininity in keeping with local social and cultural structures while transforming themselves into globalised service professionals (also see Radhakrishnan, 2009). As such, service work, besides being a site of aspirations for young workers in the Global South, is also a site for contestations over gendered norms. These accounts highlight the interrelated nature of body work/aesthetic labour, emotion work and attitudes, behaviours and skills. They also show that the need to cultivate the self to belong is not equally distributed, rather it is framed through intersecting inequalities of gender, class, caste and location. The focus in this literature is largely on the unequal relationship between employers and employees, or workers and customers/clients. In this article, through the concept of embodied acting, we distinctly delve into the inequalities *among* workers and the ways in which workers may discipline themselves *as well as* their peers and thus contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of inequalities.

Methodology: Researching New Service Work in India

We – both the authors – are engaged in longitudinal ethnographic research with young middle-class[1] women and men in the Delhi and National Capital Region area (commonly referred to as 'Delhi NCR'). Our work converges in its interest in understanding the ways in which young people make meaning in and of their lives amid socio-economic change. Our studies are situated in the context of post-1990 or post-liberalisation India, commonly referred to as 'New India', whereby the adoption of economic liberalisation in the early 1990s has led to far-reaching social, economic and cultural changes. Scholars have noted the emergence of aspirational youth subjectivities, the gendered dimensions of which are encapsulated in the symbolic figures of the 'New Indian Woman' (Lau, 2010;

Lukose, 2009; Oza, 2006) and 'New Indian Man' (Baas, 2020; Dattatreyan, 2020; Philip, 2022). However, rather than concur with popular discourse that frames these changes as 'progress', we critically interrogate this changing landscape. In particular, we draw attention to the simultaneously precarious and aspirational nature of emerging service work, with reference to the following characters of the Indian labour market despite three decades of relatively high economic growth: (a) persistently large informal economy, accounting for more than 80% of non-agricultural employment (International Labour Organization, 2019); (b) high rate of unemployment among educated youth, estimated to be 29.1% in 2022 (International Labour Organization and Institute for Human Development, 2024); and (c) low female labour force participation rate, particularly in urban areas, estimated to be 20.2% in 2022–2023 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2023). We place gendered and classed subjectivities in such continuing and new patterns of inequality at the site of new service work.

Our ethnographic engagements in Delhi NCR started with our doctoral research in 2016 (Asiya) and 2015 (Shannon). Our ethnographic approach weaves together observations with interviews and life histories. Our research design builds on feminist ethnographic methodologies that are attentive to the reproduction of power in the everyday (Skeggs, 2001, 2004) by offering in-depth engagement with the everyday work-life of our research participants.

> Asiya: I reached out to young women working in new services in a variety of ways – through non-government/third sector organisations, skills training centres, as well as individually through spaces of new service work. With the latter, I was successful in establishing a relationship with two workers in a cafe in South Delhi. I introduced myself as a researcher and sought their consent for participation in the research. Initially, following the conventions of ethnographies of work (Brannan et al., 2007; Smith, 2001), I planned to situate myself in the cafe for observations and conversations. However, I changed my strategy to follow the actor (Marcus, 1995) once I realised that the workers did not remain in the same job for long periods of time. I have, as such, been following young women's lives, as they move in and out of various kinds of work, including unpaid domestic work, as well as education and training since mid-2016 (Islam, 2022a). This engagement was initiated with nine months of fieldwork (August 2016 to May 2017), including a combination of observations, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with 35 women between 18 and 35 years of age, their family members and friends, managers of skills training centres, and non-government organisations facilitating women's entry into the workforce. In this article, I focus on the women who were, at the time, between 18 and 23 years old, unmarried and living with their families in the neighbourhoods of Dakshinpuri and Khanpur in South Delhi. They worked in a variety of jobs in cafes, call centres, shopping malls and small offices. Following this initial stretch of fieldwork, I have kept in touch with some of the women through WhatsApp groups and annual visits (lasting between one to four weeks).

> Shannon: My initial fieldwork with young men in Delhi NCR over 18 months (April 2015 to September 2016) introduced me to young men who were either students, or working in white-collar jobs in banks, multinational corporations and other forms of new service sector work. My initial focus was on the gendered and classed consumption practices of these young men, but their work lives became part of several conversations. Hence, for my postdoctoral research, I focused on young men's working identities. As part of the field work for this project, I carried

out two stints of qualitative data collection, three months over December 2021 and May 2022, and then a follow-up trip of one month in April 2023. For the data collection, I was based at a co-working space in Gurgaon looking at how young middle-class men in service jobs perform masculinity. I built a close friendship with eight young men who became my 'key informants' and through these key informants I used snowball sampling to interview 48 men. All the young men were aged between 21 and 30, and worked in various sales and marketing jobs.

As young Indian female (Asiya) and young Indian male (Shannon) researchers, we were able to get unique and in-depth access to groups of young men and women wherein they felt comfortable talking about their anxieties and aspirations with us. Particularly while discussing gendered vulnerabilities at work, the same gender spaces allowed for intimate exchanges. There was also significant class distance between us as researchers, and our interlocutors. With interest in intersections of gender and class, both of us engaged with this difference in the field. For Asiya, conversations about class came up organically with the interlocutors identifying the researcher as 'hi-fi' or 'high class', and themselves as middle or lower middle class. For Shannon, similarly, discussions around class difference came up with informants seeking advice on 'how to speak better English' or look more 'western' for professional success. These experiences contributed towards developing a relational understanding of class, which informs this article.

The rationale for this article emerged from our discussions about how masculinities and femininities are formed and interact in emerging workspaces in urban India. The young women and men we worked with are *likely* to have crossed paths with one another. For instance, some of the young women worked in cafes, where they served customers, particularly young people, from nearby educational institutions as well as offices. The young men frequented such cafes close to their workplaces. Thus, we understand and situate the comparison of our data in the context of emerging and interrelated work, consumption and leisure practices of youth in urban India. In bringing our data together in this article, we present rich and unique comparative ethnographic insights into subjective formations of young women and men through their engagement in service work.

Findings: Acting, Gender and Body in New Service Work

New Indian Women at Work

> I prepared a resume first, then I went to each shop in the mall one by one. In shops they asked me to talk about myself in English. When I did, they said, this is myself like you'd say it in school, try to say it better. But I didn't know how to do it. Then she said, sorry, we can't offer you a job in that case. Nobody had ever told me how to do it in the interview . . . Then the next day, I went in a black dress. (Jahanvi, cafe worker)[2]

Jahanvi's parents worked as *press-walas*, informally setting up a clothes ironing stall in a neighbourhood of South Delhi. Her grandparents had also done the same work. By seeking work in a mall, Jahanvi was then entering a New India. Lacking social capital, Jahanvi found herself unprepared for this world, unsure of how to perform in interviews. She was also not very confident about her spoken English, a common prerequisite for entry into service work. But she knew a way around – she decided to wear a black dress.

Changing into a black dress was not a small adjustment to the way she dressed, but a deliberate alteration to her 'self'. To some extent, this is an illustration of 'aesthetic labour', a characteristic feature of global service work. However, delving into Jahanvi's motivation for this aesthetic labour – the need to compensate for not speaking English fluently – requires extending the analysis to understand this aesthetic labour as shaped by social inequalities. In other words, by wearing a black dress, Jahanvi was not simply conforming to the aesthetic requirements of service work, rather she was indicating that although she comes from a low socio-economic background, as evident through her inability to speak fluent English, she has *potential* to overcome it.

While Jahanvi changed and found confidence through her comportment at the point of entry into service work, Chandni, whose first job was in a domestic call centre, shared how it was *through* work that she transformed into her current self:

> I hated boys before. My personality now and before is very different. You'd say, who is this village type girl, my hair would be sticky . . . Rohan [boyfriend] used to say what kind of girl is she, his friend would say, you should see her after she takes a bath, she's really fair, she deliberately looks like this. I didn't like him at that time, he used to irritate me. (Chandni, ex-call centre worker)

Tellingly, Chandni explained the transformation in her 'personality' with reference to changes in her appearance. While previously she was a 'village type girl', through work, where she interacted with peers, she cultivated an urban modernity and sophistication, reflected in her dress, hair, makeup and relationships with young men. For Chandni too, aesthetic labour was intrinsically interwoven with wider changes in attitude, behaviours and 'personality' indicative of upward mobility.

Other young women too adopted 'western' clothing to fit into the professional service work world, with these changes spilling into their lives beyond work. Prachi, a cafe worker, told me she prefers western clothes (because they are smarter), western movies (because they are more realistic) and western countries (because they are cleaner). Sheela, Prachi's co-worker and friend, agreed with this and said that wearing jeans, just like being in work, was an agentic act for her:

> I had thought for a while, since class 10th, that I'd do a job . . . In our family, no one does a job. Girls are not allowed to go outside, they can't wear jeans. But when no one cared for me, no one cared for my studies, why should I care for anyone? . . . I know what I'm doing is right, so I do it. I like working, wearing jeans, so I do it, and I go out of the house. (Sheela, cafe worker)

For Sheela, as for her peers, these assertive transformations – of appearance and personalities – are strongly tied to their participation in work. In part, women derive pleasure from embodied acting; however, even as embodied acting is required and common in the world of service work, it is still a social novelty. Embedded in the dynamics of rapid socio-economic change, promises of globalisation and continued inequalities, especially those of gender, such embodied acting is fraught and in flux, leading to anxiety among women workers.

In particular, the embodied acting that women deployed at work was closely interrogated by their peers, with questions over their validity and with implications for their

belonging at work. Jahanvi was conscious that her colleagues, particularly men, suggested that she had been hired as a 'dummy' to be put on display to attract customers. She reported:

> [A colleague] 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. (Jahanvi, cafe worker)

She told me that she worked doubly hard to prove that 'I'm good not just by my *face* but also by my work.' Jahanvi's worry that she would be found out as an impostor at work was informed by peer surveillance and disciplining, as experienced in her first job:

> Second day at work, I cried a lot, but I didn't tell them [the parents]. I cried because some girls at work told me that I shouldn't try to act like a heroine when I'm there. They told me I should wear my work dress from home. (Jahanvi, cafe worker)

Jahanvi's colleagues, both men and women, reprimanded her for wearing jeans and a top to work, only changing into the work uniform (shirt and trousers) once she had reached the workplace. They mocked her for *acting like a 'heroine'*, in other words, trying to be who she is not, acting in ways that are not genuine/becoming of her. By not wearing the work uniform when she left from home, perhaps Jahanvi was leaving her neighbours guessing about her work destination. Perhaps it was also the case that by arriving at work in western clothing, Jahanvi was showing (or indeed *showing off*) to her colleagues that she was *already* an urban, modern, professional woman. By reprimanding her, then, her colleagues attempted to keep her in check. They told her that despite her appearance they know where she *really* comes from, and pushed her back into her gender and class station. This conflict among workers is an indication both of the reproduction of social inequalities and the precariousness of service work in urban India. In work that is not only aspirational, but also highly competitive (also see Freeman, 2000), workers use their social advantage to try to gain a competitive edge.

Similarly, after Chandni had effected a change in her appearance and personality, and started going out with a colleague, she was criticised by others, again both men and women, in the office. Chandni reported: 'Office people got us to talk, then they said Chandni turned out to be very *fast forward*.' Through the rebuke 'fast-forward', Chandni's colleagues disapproved of the speed with which she had transformed herself. As Chandni acted as an urban professional through her looks and behaviour, rather than gaining her peers' approval, she was labelled as someone who was *trying too hard* to belong in a space where she did not naturally belong. Affected by this peer feedback, Chandni felt the need to clarify her class position to her boyfriend: 'I thought he might think the girl looks smart, her father might have a lot of money. I told him not to go by my looks.' Tellingly, to come clean, she emphasised the rift between her embodied acting, encompassing her 'smart' looks and her willingness to enter a romantic relationship, and her family's lower middle-class background.

While Prachi and Sheela asserted wearing western clothing both as a symbol of belonging in the globalised world of service work and freedom from familial constraints,

at work they came up against the conservative views of their colleagues. As Sheela told me about how by working and wearing jeans, she distances herself from housework, and domesticity more broadly, her male colleague remarked that as a woman, she would be compelled to do housework eventually. He further insisted 'She's not from such a big family, she won't have servants', highlighting that despite Sheela's adoption of western wear for work, her life would be determined by her gender and class. Prachi thought this pushback from colleagues came about 'because they've probably never met a girl who can answer directly in front of them', referring to the newness of women's assertion of their professional subjectivities in service work.

Young women's embodied acting, as these varied accounts show, were a characteristic feature of their professional engagements. Importantly, these transformations were undertaken to signal belonging in the new economy. However, these transformations were not straightforward and never complete – women were anxious about the fragility of their engagements with new body rules, and yet aspirational about creating an embodied belonging in 'New India' and its new service work. The accounts show the multiple pressures on women's bodies in emerging markets – while women are desirable to signal modernity (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003), their presence also threatens social order (Patel, 2010), leading to surveillance and disciplining of their appearances and actions as they enter new service work in urban India. The success of workers' engagement with body rules (Islam, 2022b) is then, at least in part, realised through collective peer-based consensus about 'appropriate corporeality' (De Casanova, 2013: 579).

New Indian Men at Work

> In a corporate office space, you have to act different, you can't be a local type of guy who is just walking in, you need to know how to behave, dress and interact with people properly, how to deal with customers and clients, it has a totally different culture. (Suraj, marketing for a corporate office)

Suraj's parents were low-level government employees with relatively low levels of education and income. Suraj, as an educated and upwardly mobile young man, managed to secure a low-level job in marketing in a corporate office in Delhi. He explained that getting the job was not easy but that he worked hard to get it. For young men like Suraj, the work environment of corporate service sector workspaces marks a distinct break from the 'older' social setting of postcolonial India and its various inequalities. Suraj explained that this workspace is not like other workspaces and has a 'different culture', which requires him as the worker to also be different. In order to belong in this new workspace, Suraj was clear that you have to 'act' differently and cannot simply 'walk in'.

For Suraj, and many men like him working in corporate spaces, embodied acting is crucial to establish belonging. Interestingly, this process is strongly gendered and classed. Suraj was clear that young men like him have to 'act' differently to 'local' types of men who are deemed to be inappropriately equipped for this form of labour. The body and its intimate body rules (Otis, 2011) become an important way in which young men create and enact this belonging. For Suraj, for example, dressing and bodily comportment when interacting with customers was important in belonging to this new work culture. For

other men carrying a laptop bag, having well-groomed facial hair and wearing leather shoes instead of trainers were all embodied acts to create a sense of belonging.

The importance of appropriate embodied acting was evidenced within the office space when a young man called Rajeev thought he was dressed inappropriately and sought to remedy it:

> Bro do you have a formal shirt? I've got a client meeting suddenly, I thought it was online but they have made it in person. Because it was online I came in a T-shirt, but I can't meet the client like this, I need to change. . . In front of clients it is important to act appropriately, you have to act professionally and look decent. T-shirts give the wrong impression. . . I need to find a shirt. (Rajeev, start-up sales employee)

For Rajeev, the body rules that define clothing and wider comportment choices were central to creating an appropriate identity of the 'new' masculine worker. He understood that wearing a 'formal shirt' for the client meeting was essential to act the part of a young male professional. Although there is no substantive difference in going to a meeting in a T-shirt or a formal shirt, embodiment of labour, shaped through social and cultural codes, is fundamental in service work.

Interestingly, within the workplace, peers policed and supported the embodied acting of other young men to ensure that appropriate body rules are followed. On the hunt for a formal shirt, Rajeev asked another male colleague called Deepak if he had one. While Deepak did not have a shirt to offer Rajeev, he decided to go around his friends to ask. As it turned out, one of Deepak's friends was wearing a 'formal shirt' that day, so he offered to go to the toilet and swap shirts with Rajeev. This instance demonstrates that young men in the office collectively accept and understand the body rules around wearing 'formal clothes' to 'act' professionally. They furthermore also support other men (such as by lending the formal shirt to Rajeev) in collective recognition of the importance of maintaining body rules.

As Deepak explained to me after this incident: 'I wanted to help Rajeev find that formal shirt because in these kinds of international offices you can't just turn up to work wearing anything. . . you have to act the part, you have to dress appropriately.' For Deepak, as young professional men, he and his male colleagues are under scrutiny in these new global workspaces, and hence have to assert belonging through embodied acting. In the case of Rajeev's search for a 'formal shirt', Deepak affirmed that Rajeev was breaking the rules of acting, and thus re-emphasised the body rules in the workplace. Deepak in 'helping' Rajeev find a formal shirt, also engaged in peer surveillance and regulation of masculine embodiment. Interestingly, this strong peer-based consensus reveals the ways in which patriarchal power operates within the workplace. There is a masculine camaraderie wherein men police but also support other men and their actions, establishing a patriarchal brotherhood in these workspaces. As various masculinities and work scholars have argued, workplaces are often organised around patriarchal and heteronormative structures that privilege appropriate men and masculinities, both individually and collectively, while disciplining women and marginalising men who do not conform (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; McDonald and Charlesworth, 2016; McDowell, 2001).

Women are, on the other hand, subject to more intense peer disciplining and excluded from men's peer support networks. This is evident in further comments by Deepak:

> Girls are often overacting at work. . . you know for small small things they want to make a big show and get attention. . . that sort of behaviour I don't like. They don't want to shine on their hard work or their talent, but they want to get the limelight from other things. Guys are just putting their head down and working, we are not acting so much, not trying to be over-smart, but girls are always overdoing it. Not all of them, but most of them I think. (Deepak, start-up sales employee)

Deepak, and several other young men like him in the office, routinely complained about the excessive 'freedoms' women now enjoyed in the workplace. Deepak complained that women are 'overacting' at work and seeking attention. He contrasts this with men 'putting their head down' and quietly working. For Deepak, women did not 'shine' on their own merit but were seeking limelight through 'overacting' of various kinds. Several men in the office narrated instances when women had allegedly surpassed their gendered station and were 'acting bossy' or 'pretending to be competent'. Through these narratives of women 'overacting' at work, there is an attempt to bring into question the embodied acting, and hence the belonging of women in service work. Relationally at the same time, men's embodied acting is not seen as 'acting' at all. As Deepak explains: 'We are not acting so much, not trying to be over-smart, but girls are always overdoing it.'

As such, men are framed as naturally belonging at the workplace and as the norm against which women are 'overacting', thus reinforcing gendered belonging in the workplace. For Deepak and his male peers, women's overacting is a reference to their understanding that women are acting in contravention of their appropriate gendered roles. Men claim that women are not 'ideal' workers (Acker, 1990) (e.g. they do not just put their head down and work), that they are able to 'see through' women's acting at work and hence call it out as 'overacting'. Through their assessment of the embodied acting of men and women, it is evident that the boundary between acting and overacting is arbitrary, but importantly it reveals patriarchal hierarchies in the workplace.

Discussion: Embodied Acting and Gender Inequalities

The findings reveal that in the context of wider social, cultural and economic transitions, embodied acting at work is enmeshed in gender and class relations and inequalities. For both young men and women, the ways their bodies are groomed, dressed and adorned are important practices that shape their acting, including practices such as going out, entering romantic relationships, seeking mobility in the city and participating in modern and globalised leisure practices. This embodied acting enables them to become professionals in New India, signifying an upwardly mobile status. This process of embodying the new gendered worker identity is a deeply reflexive activity, whereby our research participants appraise the need for acting as well as the success of their embodied acting in critical ways. Interestingly, converse to Goffman's (1979) understanding, premised on a static conceptualisation of gender, as well as McDowell's (1998) understanding that the burden

of acting is placed on women, we find through an intersectional frame of gender and class that men are also 'acting' and are anxious about their embodied acting.

As such, both women and men seek new subjectivities through their engagement in service work; however, a closer and more granular examination shows that there are important differences in (a) the forms of distinction that women and men claim through their participation in work, and (b) the extent to which their embodied acting is legitimised by peers, and thus translated into belonging. As Shannon's data show, for men, it is important to establish distance from 'local type guys' referring to young men who are unemployed. They contrast themselves against the type of young men discussed in Jeffrey's (2010) ethnography in Meerut, India who are waiting to find employment commensurate with their education, which will enable their transition to full adulthood. This distancing is, however, vulnerable given the insecure nature of private service work (Fernandes, 2000). Therefore, the men in Shannon's research continually assert, through their appearance – wearing formal shirts, carrying laptop bags, wearing leather shoes – that they are not local type guys. For young women, on the other hand, dressing for and going to work – wearing jeans and makeup – establishes distance from home, domesticity and rural settings (also see Radhakrishnan, 2009; Vijayakumar, 2013). This is reflected in the agentic assertions they make regarding the crafting of their appearance, and relatedly participation in work (Islam, 2025). In addition to the insecurity of service work, for women there is the vulnerability of being pulled back into domesticity as a consequence of marriage. Thus, women and men have different reference points in claiming mobility and new subjectivities through their participation in service work.

Further, the peer surveillance and regulation of embodied acting, whereby peer validation is central to the legitimising of such acting, also happens along gendered lines, creating gendered hierarchies and exclusions. Among men, as in Shannon's data, the peer networks offer support (e.g. by lending a formal shirt to a colleague for a meeting) to act appropriately as New Indian Men at work. This peer support, while not entirely absent among women, was not evident in the case of young women workers in Asiya's research. This is not to suggest that there was no peer support among women, indeed women developed and maintained friendships through work (Islam, 2020). However, when it came to their embodied acting, both authors found that peer surveillance and criticism of acting was heightened for women. In other words, women are more likely to be policed for what is seen to be excessive, inappropriate or hyper visible, and therefore, a failure to act appropriately, leading to a failure of belonging at work. The men working in offices judged women's acting as 'overacting' that men do not indulge in, or perhaps do not need to indulge in since they, through peer support, can belong at work seemingly more naturally. For women, on the other hand, it is difficult to ascertain the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate acting. While the accounts from Asiya's data show that the women in changing their appearance and relatedly their personhood only followed the emerging body rules of service work, they were repeatedly pushed back into their gender and class station by their colleagues. This becomes a mechanism for reasserting masculine power at work and putting women 'in their place' (McLaughlin et al., 2012: 635).

These peer dynamics demonstrate gender hierarchies in new workplaces, counter to the popular narrative that new work rejects the 'older' ideas of gender. This is not to

assert that there is nothing new about emerging forms of work or that gender and class relations are fixed. On the contrary, new work offers some scope for class mobility and reconfiguration of gender relations. As discussed above, both young women and men engage in new service work to distance themselves from what are becoming undesirable gendered subjectivities (local type guys, housewives, rural people). Yet, at the same time, new worker subjectivities, rather than an outright rejection, are reconstitutions of continuing inequalities. As such, new work also offers scope for reproduction of patriarchy and restabilisation of gender (McRobbie, 2007). This article shows that while men's embodied acting is focused on becoming urban professionals, women's embodied acting is not only challenged by their peers, but also under constant threat of surveillance more generally speaking. Therefore, in undertaking embodied acting, women are under intense scrutiny and pressure to prove the validity of their acting, that is, to prove that they *really* are who they are *acting to be* – urban professionals. This serves a specific purpose, that of reaffirming men's belonging in work. These work dynamics indicate wider anxieties of rapid socio-economic change, women's presence in work and public spaces and threat to men's place in society.

Conclusion: Reproducing Patriarchy in New Workspaces

This article explores an under-researched and under-theorised aspect of 'acting' at work, that is, embodied acting – encompassing embodied expressions closely tied to skills, attitudes and behaviours and embedded in social inequalities – as a mechanism of belonging. In particular, by paying attention to who is required to act, in what ways and importantly whether their acting is legitimised, and thus translates into belonging, we offer insights into the possibilities as well as limitations of challenging inequalities through inclusion in emerging forms of work. The theorisation of acting at work and related concepts that have now become commonplace, such as aesthetic labour and emotion work in service work, is largely based on studies in the Global North. Indeed, the adoption of Goffman's and Hochschild's approach to understanding acting at work – as a presentation of the self and as a way to translate emotions into wages at work – has been criticised by scholars studying the emerging dynamics of service work in the majority world. In these contexts, including the context of postcolonial post-liberalisation India that we study, the article finds that emerging service work is an important site of distinction and consequently for contestations over inequalities. The article proposes the concept of 'embodied acting' to fill a conceptual gap in connecting the complexities of emerging worker identities with continuing and emerging social inequalities amid socio-economic change. Through unique comparative ethnographic research, it draws attention to the nuances of service work and social inequalities in Global South contexts.

Interestingly, both young women and men are occupying workspaces that are *new* for them and *distinct* from their home spaces. As such, they participate in embodied acting, that is, they perform a professional self through bodily practices, such as clothing, accessories, body language, which are always necessarily related to other aspects of transformation of the self, such as English speaking and partaking in consumptive leisure. The article shows that while both young women and men, disadvantaged in terms of not having secure middle or upper-class capital, act to fit into new service work, men's acting

translates into belonging more readily through peer support and approval. Although young women are, similar to young men, entering new service work in urban India, their belonging at work is more fraught, with peers challenging and de-legitimising their acting as *overacting*, as excessive, as hyper visible. The article shows that peer challenge to women's embodied acting serves to maintain gender hierarchies at work, whereby women are outsiders despite their presence in new service work. Similar to McRobbie's (2007) formulation of a new sexual contract, there are new, or perhaps new versions of the old gender rules in emerging work. While the article does not allow for a full exploration of this new gendered labour contract, it is a meaningful next step in our comparative research.

The article highlights the need to advance global sociology of work by theorising from Global South settings and the value of the method of comparative ethnography. Interrogating the predominance of Global North settings in the sociology of work (specifically service work), the article demonstrates the value of accounting for the specific dynamics of youth aspirations and social inequalities in service work in the Global South. Rather than arguing that the 'case' of India demonstrates a departure or exception from research in the Global North, the article finds that the insights gained from this context can be used to advance new directions in the sociology of service work, particularly accounting for its precarious and aspirational nature. Finally, following the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid uptake of working-from-home, there are emerging questions over the mechanisms that workers would employ to establish belonging at work (Islam, 2021, 2022c); future research can explore this interesting avenue.

Ethical approval

Both the studies were granted ethical approval by the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge.

ORCID iDs

Asiya Islam (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1983-9944
Shannon Philip (iD) https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4306-4787

Notes

1. The scope of the article does not allow for a full discussion of class but the term 'middle class' is used broadly to refer to the way our participants describe themselves.
2. We have used pseudonyms for all research participants to preserve their anonymity. Our conversations with the participants were largely conducted in Hindi, and have been translated into English.

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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. Asiya is the author of *A Woman's Job: Making Middle Lives in New India* (2025).

Shannon Philip is Assistant Professor in the Sociology of Gender and Sexuality and Fellow at Girton College, University of Cambridge. He is also a Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg. Shannon is the author of *Becoming Young Men in a New India: Masculinities, Gender Relations and Violence in the Postcolony* (2022).