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SPECIAL FEATURE ARTICLE

Special Section on Productive Hierarchies in Global Perspectives: Gendered Skill, Labor Control and Workplace Politics

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From the nineteenth century, when the new social question of women's factory labor came to preoccupy the (middle-class) public imagination, to the present times of globalized labor chains, discourses on gendered labor have been at once fluid and constitutive of labor hierarchies.[1] These discourses and social relations affirm their centrality within processes of industrialization and workplace restructuring as well as in development policy, urban formation, and indeed, nation building.[2] Depending on the political economy of the labor market, the images of laboring women accordingly oscillated between, for instance, helpless and exploited victims to national heroines in the service of developmental projects. At the same time, since the early nineteenth-century, the steadily accumulating social reform, labor inspection, or social scientific accounts of women's paid and unpaid labor testified to states' and employers' growing comfort with hiring what was and is still, in many ways, a cheap, easily exploitable category of workers, one whose profitability increased the more precarious their employment became. Such discourses and labor control practices were deeply racialized and classed.[3] On the other side of the public imagination and employer's surveillance, women who engaged in paid work sometimes appropriated the discourses and reshaped the practices that were used to characterize their labor and judge their choices.[4]

The articles in this special section examine these processes from four places considered "peripheral" to debates and to capitalist developments across the twentieth century. We frame this issue through three considerations. First, the variability and variety of discourses, and the centrality of women's paid and unpaid work to economic projects of state and nonstate actors, demand further careful investigation. Second, the impact of global patterns and cultures of inequality on women's work, and the impact of women's work on (re)shaping patterns of inequality have very seldom been conceptualized from the vantage point offered by (post)colonial and semi-peripheral geopolitical locations and attendant historical experiences. The specificities engendered by colonialism and geopolitical (semi)peripherality have not been

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interrogated enough. Third, although the study of women's labor has received much attention, the production of difference in the labor process along gender lines has often emphasized determinations constituted outside of the workplace. But processes such as gendered skill differentiation and wage valorization have also been embedded and reproduced in and through the workplace. The very labor process itself constitutes gendered identities, norms, and valences as well as resistant subjectivities and antagonisms.

The production of difference through the workplace is both "productive" of value to the capitalist labor process, and it is a productive site of comparison of how specifically constituted forms of gendered hierarchy are both made and contested by women workers at particular times and in relation to particular national and regional political terrains. Each of the papers engages with an overlapping set of concerns spanning manufacturing, service, and agricultural work and imbricating relations of caste, class, race, and gender from Indian plantations and beauty parlors to Turkish textile and tobacco workers to Romanian tobacco workers to South African retail workers.

This special section asks the following questions: What kind of normative discourses and normativizing practices accompany shifts in women's labor force participation in these very different places and times? What can a historicization of dominant (and dominating) discourses on gender and skill bring to the literature on gender and skill? How were gendered constructions of skill in various sectors entangled with macro-economic processes, but also with (post) colonial and (post) imperial constructions of social hierarchies? What are the diverse ways in which attention to the laboring body can lead to new lines of inquiry and to new methodologies, including comparative endeavors, in understanding the gendering of labor in peripheral economies competing for status and "progress"? How can we understand working women as productive labor and as consumers in new markets where women's economic power and relationships become debated in specific ways at specific times?

This cluster of four articles considers the processes by which specific forms of women's labor become constituted historically and in the present within workplace hierarchies shaped by prevailing national paradigms of progress and modernity, in contexts struggling with perceived or ascribed economic and political marginalizations. All four papers demonstrate that contradictory discourses on women workers and the female laboring body proliferate during political economic crises. It brings together papers on women as industrial tobacco workers in Romania in the 1920s to the 1960s, as Turkish textile and tobacco industrial labor in the 1940s and 1950s, as retail clerks in South Africa in the 1940s to the 1970s, and as new migrants from tea plantations to service work in beauty salons in urban India in the 2010s. This special section investigates the constitution of gendered workplace hierarchies through local labor processes defining skill, assigning status, and shaping labor markets. It also investigates how these discursive and material relations were produced, reproduced, and resisted in four places, each in a significant moment of the reconstruction of "nation," sovereign statehood, and its political economy. In particular, three of the four papers spotlight how *femininity* as norm, discursive formation(s),

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and embodied practice hierarchically structured workplaces but also provided a language and space of action for women workers.

The benefit of the cases assembled is that each offers a rich study of gendered labor processes in which women workers enact gendered subjectivities that reflect national and regional imaginaries at the same time that women workers negotiate their jobs and their work as consumers, residents, and family members in a broader context of debate around women's economic participation. Furthermore, we think about how these processes unfold in places that are not often brought together in the same frame. We suggest that the specific processes of gendering labor were critical to each context at a precise moment of the constitution of new nations internally and also in relation to global political economies.

The pieces in this special section cover different geographical areas and time periods and bring together many different research fields in labor studies. Because the authors locate productive hierarchies at the nexus of the material and the discursive, the articles feature histories of nation and political economy, of technology and change in work organization, of labor and workplace struggles, and symbolic, and often contradictory, representations of gender and sexuality. They also feature a mixture of methods. The authors use a wide range of archival sources such as policy documents, newspapers, union archives, and surveys, which they read against the grain as well as ethnography and interviews. We consider three key dimensions of our comparison: gendered skill, workers as consumers, and women's agency and resistance.

Gendered Skill, Nation, and Labor Control

With regards to the gendering of skill, the articles build on the following two premises. First, an exploration of the gendered meanings of skill should start from women's status as subordinate individuals, which they bring to the workplace. Second, once this status enters the workplace, it acquires new meanings within the framework of productive relations. This picture is further complicated by the instability of women's status due to the ongoing processes of political, ethnic, and racial regime change. The shifts in women's labor force participation destabilize the normative discourses and normativizing practices on the gendered constructions of skill.

Ghiț and Akgöz address contestations around skill in relation to the broader forces of regime change and nation-building. In taking struggles as an entry point to uncover features of women's labor activism in Romania, Ghiț explicitly adopts a cross-regime perspective in the first half of the twentieth century. Skill, Ghiț argues, is a site of struggle that encompasses not only factory-based production processes but also social construction processes outside the workplace. She connects women workers' construction of a skill-mediated political self within the labor movement to the wider political and social changes Romania underwent between the 1920s and the 1960s. In the 1920s and '30s, women tobacco workers had strong work identities because they held a higher status to agricultural workers, and significantly contributed to household budgets; in many cases, they were even sole or main breadwinners. Working as teams, women tobacco workers carried out operations that required strength, dexterity, and fast coordination and exercised a degree of artisan-like control over the rhythm of work. Still, however, the structure and composition of wages

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assigned these women the status of unskilled workers. In the mid-1920s, the introduction of new production processes forced the factory management to recognize that women's contribution extended beyond unskilled work, and they implemented new work methods that entailed skill acquisition. But it was only in the first years of the planned economy under the Popular Republic of Romania that women became the focus of workplace-based skilling programs. Supported by the new regime's legislation of legal equality and equal pay, women now faced male resistance to their challenging of skill and status hierarchies at the workplace level. In the end, the gendered hierarchies at work largely continued although managers more explicitly acknowledged women's concentration in unskilled positions.

A crisis-laden political economic context also characterized postwar Turkey, where Akgöz argues, the expansion of capitalism increased the demand for young female labor needed for the tedious, repetitive, unskilled tasks. Unlike in Romania in the same period, however, the Turkish state did not follow a policy of bringing women into positions of responsibility. Building on her earlier work where she showed that women's low status at work had not changed from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, Akgöz argues that postwar expansion of capitalism and the demand for young female industrial labor did not change women's work status either, despite the strong allusions to machines in depictions of female industrial bodies. Akgöz reads these allusions against the multiple historical narratives on the tension between femininity and the machine, and argues that the combination of two factors laid behind the enthusiastic depictions of women as machine-like joyful workers: The centrality of gender to secular state-making and the image of women at the machine as a key component of industrial modernity in late-industrializing economies. "Women as machines" served as a metaphor for national participation, economic modernity, globally competitive production, and (specifically) Muslim participation, even as most women labored in unskilled jobs. Women's unskilled (manual) labor was linked to evaluations of efficiency through the "machine" metaphor at the same time as gendered assumptions on work continued to follow the well-known tropes of women's unique capabilities, soft skills, and essential qualities.

Kenny and Banerjee both show how gendered skill and respectability become important signifiers to reinforce hegemonic ideas as ruling regimes consolidated power. Kenny details changes to retail service work and how the figure of the "shop girl" both called up and ameliorated tensions of class difference among whites in South Africa from the decades of segregationist rule in the 1930s to high apartheid in the 1960s. White working-class women labored as shop assistants in downtown Johannesburg stores, servicing white customers. Understood as low skilled, retail work nevertheless offered obliging service to this white clientele and reinforced ideas of belonging and modernity in a settler (post)colonial context, reinforcing state arguments for racial separation. The shifting integration of working-class white women over the decades in Johannesburg required new discourses on their contribution to and skill for the job, initially through occupational identification with white labor as Johannesburg grew as a manufacturing center in the 1930s and 1940s. Once the National Party came to power and introduced apartheid in 1948, the state prided itself on ensuring white class mobility for its citizenry. White working-class women were anathema to this message, and thus the ongoing

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presence of the "shop girl" required discourses of respectability to reform women's shop work as glamorous, and yet to assure the public that workers were responsible mothers and wives. The embodied labor and the skill of the job defined through ideas of racialized femininity signified Johannesburg's modern urban status in comparison to the metropoles of the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. As retail work was deskilled in the late 1960s, white women's labor became redefined as professional work and Black women entered the labor market as shop assistants for the first time with new meaning for city life.

Similar to Kenny's charting of how discourses of women's labor inflected and reinforced processes of regime consolidation, Banerjee traces the changes to meanings of women's low skilled work as India's rule neoliberalized. She shows how Nepali working-class and lower caste women tea plantation labor moved to new forms of low skilled but higher status beauty work in Delhi and other cities, as plantation capital restructured and retrenched in the twenty-first century. Urban beauty salons expanded in the period following India's 1991 economic liberalization, which supported growth in consumer markets, and as these spaces were made popular by a globalized and commodified self-identity associated with neoliberal culture. In this context, women's embodied labor and meanings of skill changed between sectors, even as the signifiers remained decidedly feminine. The specific symbols of women's skill in both labor processes emphasized feminine qualities, as discussed below, but another feature of this migration included the move from a collective labor process in tea gardens to an "individualized neoliberal feminine subject," as she calls it. These labor market and skill redefinitions, then, reinforced the political economic shifts with which they aligned.

As each paper traces ideas of skill, work, and women's labor and their centrality to nation and state power, "femininity" becomes one of the contours defining women's skill. In the context of postwar Turkey, apartheid South Africa, and neoliberal India, femininities constituted ideas of women's work, shifted ideas about women's labor in specific time periods, and enabled terrains of contestation around skill. In the Romanian context, femininities were not explicitly the terrain of discourse and practices shaping workplace hierarchies, even as femininities could be said to be implicit to skill differentiation between women and men. Furthermore, skill was understood as a political ground and mediated through understandings of workers' "political selves."

In South Africa, while retail work was an occupational category marked by increased wages for years of experience for men and women workers, women earned lower wages than men for each level. White women shop assistants and their union reinforced their own understanding of skills of selling and emotional labor. Shop work became de-skilled by the 1960s, with self-service and mass retailing and Black women moved into jobs by the 1970s. Femininities worked differently to shape the respectability of the work in different periods, but discourses of femininities served in all periods to mediate class difference within white society, both reproducing class tensions and containing them within gendered reconciliations. These included a focus on the innocence of unmarried young women, the glamor of shop assistants' dress, the commitment of women workers to children and husbands, and later the professionalization of their work. The union engaged within these

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debates and reproduced the fine line between worker identity and gender respectability, defending white women workers, even as the work was considered lower skilled.

For Banerjee, women's labor became naturalized differently through "ideologies of femininities" in different ways in tea plantations and in beauty work. In both, women's labor was constituted as unskilled through recourse to specific discourses of femininities, but new discourses of skill were brought in to define new work. In tea plantations, women worked in low skilled, low paid jobs. Plucking tea leaves required dexterity, patience, and care. A gendered body was central to understandings of the capacities to carry out this work. It demanded speed but with the care of nimble fingers, to preserve the integrity of the tea leaves. Multitasking was further taken as a competency of working-class femininity. In beauty work, skill was constituted through appearance and learned competencies. Women were hired because they had fair skin and were stylish, traits also associated with their particular ethnic and caste locations. Different embodied assets were recognized such as soft hands and the emotional labor of service. While much of the beauty work conducted by Banerjee's interlocutors was considered unskilled, it accrued status as glamorous and relied on the embodied femininity of women workers. In each sector, the specific content of what was considered "feminine" skill required an *other* (a non-feminine) to define against the feminine. These were different for each (men; "ethnic"/racialized others). Women workers also worked on their own appearances as part of the labor of service, and thus they normalized certain ideas of beauty through grooming and make-up.

For Akgöz, femininities were constructed by the state, employers, and commentators, remarking on women workers as the solution to the persistent problem of low productivity. Cultural references on femininity and productivity circulated inside and outside the industrial workplace as we shall see below, bringing young working-class women to the forefront of public discussion. Banerjee, by contrast, emphasizes how femininities themselves became a locus of contestation, and differently so in the different sectors. Through her attention to repressed narratives, she shows how women engaged, subverted, and co-produced meanings around their skill and the status of their work. For Kenny, femininities became a potent language to obscure class tension among whites. She tracks an ambivalent class difference in "shop girls," which relied on changing femininities of service work unlike factory work.

The normative discourse on femininities operated, then, often as labor control. Akgöz argues that, the construction of working-class femininity is not only one of the key principles of women's entrance in the labor market; it is also inscribed in gendered labor control on and beyond the shop floor. In postwar Turkey, for example, these powerful normative discourses integrated workplace labor control. The convergence of racist and sexist stereotypes elevated industrial efficiency into a gendered and nationalist aesthetic, producing a normative framework of femininity that informed the disciplinary practices employed to control young female laboring bodies at the point of production. This labor control extended beyond the confines of the workplace when the moralities of consumption placed the nation's women as a whole in the spotlight of public debate, producing a complex interplay between workplace conditions and extra-workplace societal norms.

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Women Workers as Consumers

In addressing consumption as a specific register for productive hierarchies, the articles connect the construction of women's identities as "feminine" members of the working class at the point of production with gendered ideologies that transcended the workplace. Through illustrating how normative femininity traveled between the spheres of production and consumption, the authors underscore two related processes: First, the combination of a quest for productivity and the emergence of a broader consumer culture fuels discourses on the female laboring body. Second, the contradictory discourses on women workers as producers and as consumers highlights the sociocultural tensions over female bodily autonomy and produces a lack of a sense of stable femininity.

In Ghiț, Romanian tobacco products were sold to local male consumers in the interwar years, and this was linked to their remuneration. Regardless of their skill category, male workers' wage included a monthly allocation of cigarettes (the *tain*). Until 1928, semi-skilled women workers also received cigarettes. The cancellation of this in-kind benefit for women workers reasserted male dominance within the factory and reflected men's status as main intended consumers of tobacco products beyond the factory walls. Women workers thus manufactured cigarettes for men, in another turn of gendered meaning.

While tobacco consumption by men (including male workers) served to valorize this consumer product in Romania, Akgöz, shows how consumerism formed negative meanings of sloth and excess used to discipline women workers on the shop floor. Consumerism by working-class women was specifically tied uneasily with independence, mobility, and embodied self-presentation in postwar Turkey. Women's consumerism became another foil for defining disciplined femininity, directed toward a nationalist project. Akgöz argues, then, that these discourses of both production and consumption offered interlinked means by which women's labor was controlled. The seemingly contradictory discourses on young women workers as metaphorical machines and mindless consumers communicated a normative framework of femininity that functioned according to the importance of efficiency and frugality, and informed the disciplinary practices employed to control young female laboring bodies at the point of production and consumption. Defining benevolence, modesty, and a tireless concern for the welfare of others as the basic components of young working-class female identity, the socio-cultural regulation of femininity at the point of consumption enhanced managerial control of women workers.

The intensified circulation of global ideas and images of beauty are central to beauty and retail work as Banerjee and Kenny demonstrate. Women and gender historians have underscored women workers' double role as consumers and producers and the middle-class anxieties over the unbridled consumer desires and spending habits of working-class women.[5] The anxieties aroused by financial freedom and the expression of beauty culture surfaces in Akgöz, Kenny, and Banerjee, suggesting the long-lasting evocativeness of the linked metaphors of freedom and threat.

In Kenny, white women as consumers and the growth of consumption in Johannesburg was a terrain signifying white belonging, on one hand. On the other, she argues that the site of consumption also produced class tension among whites, where working-class white women serviced middle-class and elite women customers.

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The realm of shops, though, enabled the discourses of respectability to obscure these differences. Like Banerjee, Kenny shows the connections of service work with gendered labor through the centrality of glamor and personal appearance of women workers. She emphasizes how class intervened to complicate women workers' capacities to maintain seamless respectability, particularly with middle-class women customers. The figure of the "shop girl" was a global character circulating through film, theater, and novels to urban consumer audiences. These ideas played off of local conditions in ways that narrativized shop assistants' demeanor and looks within the service encounter.

In Banerjee, consumerism defined the context for the growth of beauty parlors in neoliberal India. "Beauty" was a marker of modernity and middle-class respectability, which suffused the labor of beauty work with a special status. The salons were feminized spaces, marketed through their decoration and branding, such as magazines, posters, and color schemes. Women workers' appearance and stylishness was acquired often through consumer culture of TV and other media. Their relationship with their clients relied on a mutual recognition of these consumer styles, including beauty and fashion standards. The various services sold in the salons highlighted consumer choice. The women's emotional labor shaped the products on offer in these shops. These women workers thereby produced both middle-class customers through their service work and an ongoing aspiration of consumerism through the beauty industry for the public and, indeed, themselves as consumers, recalling Akgöz's women factory workers. In other ways, women workers became objects of consumption themselves, objectified by men's gaze in city streets in ways similar to Kenny's discussion of the purported sexualized, young modern woman and shop girl of the early twentieth century.

Women's Agency and Resistance

Women workers and their unions both reproduced and transformed discourses of gendered labor and skill. Resistance occurred through campaigns and organizing and in terms of how women workers reclaimed narratives of their own laboring bodies. In the process, women workers redefined "feminine" skill and also participated in and legitimated gendered divisions of labor.

Ghiț describes how some trade unionists organized across skill lines in the late 1920s, thereby attempting to bring the interests and demands of skilled men and unskilled women closer together. These efforts opened the space for the political participation of women in trade unions. Women trade union activists took this gap and organized women workers by using other criteria than skill. In these processes, in Romanian tobacco factories, unskilled women workers were not necessarily upskilled, but contestations around gendered skill led to campaigns to build forms of political inclusion in response to skill barriers. In this way, workers and trade unions sidestepped contests around gendered skill by focusing on expanding women workers' roles in unions through other directions. Ghiț allows us to see how, in the interwar period, trade unions and women activists framed struggles outside of direct confrontation with gendered skill meanings.

In contrast, Kenny shows how the South African commercial workers trade union both utilized the metaphors of femininity of their women membership to win campaigns, for instance to limit store trading hours by protecting white women as mothers and

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wives, and insisted on defending women shop workers as skilled at their jobs. Like Ghiț's women trade union members, women unionists in South Africa in particular backed women workers as class subjects, thereby resisting uniform discourses of feminine skill. In Kenny's case by the 1950s, white working-class women were simply erased from any political discourse of the National Party, appearing only in domestic roles. When the union claimed its female members as hard workers and as household contributors, it resisted discourses that excluded white women from public debate.

In other ways, women workers engaged the gendered presumptions about their work. Banerjee argues that women's narratives of their work reclaimed a sense of their own identities. In plantation work, women workers claimed their knowledge of working with the plants and the effects of their "healing touch." In the light of the denigration of their work as easy, beauty salon workers re-signified it as physically demanding, involving time on their feet, long hours, and unpleasant interactions, all while they were required to remain cheerful. They claimed their professional appearance to valorize their status and to critique its invisibility. They inverted the meanings of the work's embodiment by locating their skill in appearance and recognizing it as cultural capital. While the gendering of tea plantation work seemed rooted in the naturalization of physical capacity, beauty salon workers emphasized their talent and labor to learn and practice grooming.

Akgöz finishes her article by acknowledging that women workers appeared acted upon rather than as acting. Two factors hindered her from covering how factory girls responded to the formulation of a new industrial femininity that naturalized and enabled a gendered labor control over women as both producers and consumers: Trade unions became legal in Turkey in 1946, and trade union archives were almost non-existent until the late 1960s. In the later years of fast-developing trade union movement and the socio-economic transformation the country underwent beginning in the late 1950s, the smoldering undercurrent of women's discontent on the shop floor rose to the surface. Women workers challenged the normative discourses on femininity, and confronted the socioproductive hierarchy at work by questioning the wage inequity and the gendered hierarchies of power at the workplace.

In closing, gender ideologies that justified occupational segregation traveled worldwide, iterating with preexisting local cultures of patriarchy. Gendered divisions of labor persisted on shop floors, but the content of those differences altered as workplace and extra-workplace relations combined in each of our places. The pasts and presents of gendered hierarchies at the workplace link productive hierarchies to ethnicity and race, and how these evolved in different sectors and countries at different times. The tropes of femininity and gender hierarchies shifted across time and space in accordance with wider political economic changes and the reorganization of work through deskilling and intensification. A contribution of this special section is to show how the multiple and shifting discourses of gendered labor and skill articulate with periods of political economic crises, generating and consolidating the productive hierarchies.

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