

# Women and Maids

Perceptions of domestic workers, house work and class among young, progressive, middle-to-upper class women in Delhi

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## *Abstract*

This thesis analyses ten in-depth interviews on domestic workers, class and gender roles with ten young, politically inclined and often adamantly feminist women towards the upper end of the Indian class spectrum. It aims to deepen the understanding of employer-worker relations and gendered domestic roles in contemporary Indian households. Previous literature on the middle-to-upper class employers of domestic workers in the subcontinent has tended to emphasize the uncritical attitude most exhibit towards their employment practices. Distance from physical domestic work has been noted as a key site of class distinction, and a commonality for the otherwise fractured ‘middle’ classes. *The maid* is hired for the reproduction of not just everyday life but, importantly, of class. Further, since Indian men are largely removed from the sphere of domestic work, and the domestic workers are mostly women, the problems around maids have come to be seen as socially second-rate ‘women’s issues’. In India, maids play a central role in the age-old issues around reproductive labor.

My findings corroborate previous research and also go on to provide a perspective of potential change. Far from just accepting what has been termed an Indian “culture of servitude”, my interviewees exhibit a deep reflexivity and often highly critical attitude towards the idea of employing maids, as well as towards the domestic assumptions put on themselves. Generational change, desire for democratization, and increasing expectations on male partners are central themes in my participants’ discussions. At the same time, the interviewees also display an often anxious ambiguity as to whether or not they are able to resist social and parental pressures, and to live up to their own ideals. My findings emphasize the existence of a critical, progressive, highly self-reflexive yet often politically pragmatic twenty-something-year-old, largely overlooked in discussions on the “new Indian woman”.

*Keywords: Domestic workers, Delhi, Class, Gender roles, Reflexivity, Social change, Family*

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## INTRODUCTION

In middle class urban India, domestic workers are both everywhere and invisible. Well-off households are dependent on their labor, yet they are routinely devalued and abused (Neetha 2004). In fact, domestics are consistently seen to perform the “most undesirable tasks in society” (Ray 2000: 692;). Stuck between bad working conditions and expectations of subservient loyalty, the Indian domestic worker has to cope with “the worst aspects of both feudalism and capitalism” (Menon 2012: 18).

This thesis deals with the perceptions of domestic workers (*‘maids’*<sup>1</sup>) and housework among ten young, unmarried, politically minded, feminist, middle-to-upper class women in Delhi. In-depth interviews with the women – who all have experience of hired domestic help – were conducted in early 2016. Participants were asked to share their thoughts on the employment of maids and on the gendered nature of housework in their current and family homes. The aim of the thesis was firstly to probe in what ways a *culture of servitude*<sup>2</sup> (Ray and Qayum 2009) can be said to exist in the mindsets of among young progressives, and to shed some light on in what ways practical gender roles (i.e. the relationship to housework) are being challenged among young metropolitan women in India.

The findings in earlier studies of employer attitudes have all been quite negative: Employers, it has been said, do not really care for their maids and do not see their chronic ill-treatment as an issue. In fact, as e.g. Hamid (2006) and Mattila (2011: Chapter 6) write, many employers feel that they are benevolent in providing employment. Focusing on people with an inclination for social justice, this thesis is about whether or not my participants see themselves as different from their larger social settings. It asks if and in what ways a change in maid-related attitudes is happening. While doing so, it revisits many of the themes discussed by previous

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: I consciously use the word ‘maid’ throughout this thesis. While ‘domestic worker’ is the politically correct term, ‘maid’ is the most often used term in discussions and popular culture in India. It is what female domestic workers are called in English in India. It also captures the semi-feudal and gendered dimensions of the relationship.

<sup>2</sup> “A culture of servitude is one in which social relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres”, “culture involves a total lived process not only of consciousness but also of experience and practice” (Ray and Qayum 2009: 3)

authors. We also meet some new themes arising from the daily lives of young single Delhi women.

Secondly, this thesis looks at the sense-making that happens when individuals reflect upon the structures that make up their surroundings. The literature on changing gender roles in post-liberalization India has so far focused primarily on (older, married) women in corporate environments, and paid little attention to their active political convictions (e.g. Belliappa 2013; Radakrishnan 2009; Phadke 2005). If personal politics have been talked about, it has been in cases of upholding ‘traditional’ (neoconservative) class values or about the clash/marriage of consumer capitalism and Hindu-chauvinism (e.g. Kapur 2014; Upadhyaya 2011; Chowdhury 2011). My participants – unmarried students, scholars and NGO-workers in their mid-twenties – offer a glimpse of another perspective on ‘the new Indian woman’.

**Thesis question:**

*To what extent can a class-based culture of domestic servitude be said to exist among my participants?*

**Subquestions:**

*What new domestic worker-related questions arise from my participants’ status as young, unmarried and politically conscious women?*

*In what ways do my participants agree with, disagree with and negotiate gendered expectations and the use of domestic workers in relation to their families?*

*How do my participants look at men and marriage in relation to domestic work?*

In the next chapter I will explain my theoretical starting points regarding class and gender. In the two chapters that follow I will shed light on the organization of household work in India, and summarize relevant parts of the earlier literature on Indian maids and class distinction. Then, before moving on to my findings and analysis, I present my field and method and the ethical considerations related to them. Finally, in the conclusion I return to the questions above.

## CONCEPTUALIZING CLASS AND GENDER

The making of class in domestic settings is at the center of this thesis<sup>3</sup>. My general outlook on it is heavily indebted to Bourdieu and feminist readings of him (such as Skeggs 1997, 2004, 2005; Moi 1991), and also borrows a lot from mainly Fraad et al's Marxist-feminist writing on the household (2009; Fraad 2009; cf. Barker 2015; Federici 2012).

We can demarcate two meanings of class: a class relation – that is any instance of exploitation<sup>4</sup> – and class as an idea of distinction, of 'worth'. Class, in the latter sense, is produced in more than just the extraction of surplus labor; it is produced and felt discursively and in a myriad of micro-level distinctions. Yet, I empathically do not wish to create any "false opposition" between class as economic structure and class as discourse (Holgerson 2011: 150). As Weininger (ibid: 84) writes, following Bourdieu, "class analysis can not be reduced to the analysis of economic relations; rather, it *simultaneously* entails an analysis of symbolic relations". Nor can economic relations be reduced to symbolic.

This needs to be emphasized: 'The maid' is an important site of study precisely because it combines – and bears the brunt of – all forms of classist inequality, and thus shows the intimate connection of ideas often thought separate. While scholars have argued about whether class happens on the "shop floor" or in the home (Weininger 2005: 91), the case of the domestic worker becomes a kind of synthesis par excellence: it is shop floor and home, paid and unpaid, economic and symbolic all at once. The place that produces leisure, privacy and home for one, produces capitalist exploitation, feudal servitude and symbolic alienation for the other. It also bridges the equally old questions of whether to look at class through production or consumption. The employer of the maid both extracts the different physical and emotional<sup>5</sup> values produced by

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<sup>3</sup> Caste is very much alive in India and the issues of maids and cleaning are not in any way removed from this. In this essay I however focus solely on distinction in terms of class and gender. Caste and class should not be seen as oppositional concepts or tools of discrimination; they are both entwined and incommensurable. On maids and caste see e.g. Frøystad (2003; 2005), Sharma (2016), Mattila (2011: Chapter 7), Raghuram (2001); Gopal (2013). On the class-or-caste-debate see Herring and Agarwala (2006).

Region and language are two other potential axes of analysis that I do not explore in this thesis. Beyond caste, or on top of it, employers often discriminate against workers from certain geographical or linguistic backgrounds (cf. Mattila 2011: 239).

<sup>4</sup> Following Fraad et al (2009), I regard all class relations as always *more or less* exploitative, 'Exploitation' is defined as "the appropriation of surplus labor from the direct laborer" (ibid: 42), and by Wright (2005: 23) as inverse interdependent welfare, exclusion, and appropriation.

<sup>5</sup> On defining emotional labor in the home see Fraad (2009).

the worker, and consumes the leisure of abstaining from reproductive work.

Three ideas guide my thinking on the class positions my participants. Two are borrowed from Belliappa (2013). My participants all have “the ability to accumulate and deploy several forms of cultural capital, including education, fluency in English and access to technical and professional qualifications as well as more intangible attributes such as a cosmopolitan outlook, the ability to interact with people outside of one’s caste group, exposure to metropolitan lifestyles and familiarity with a broader range of cultures and languages” (ibid 51). Secondly, all my participants self-identify as middle-to-upper class<sup>6</sup>. The third, which closes the circle, is the use of maids. Class does not just exist *out there* but is *made* in the process of using maids: class makes maids make class (Dickey 2000; Ray and Qayum 2009, 2011; Mattila 2011).

Class is here viewed functionally, in action and relation. This lets us rid ourselves of the idea that classes are something large, coherent, defined or necessarily conscious. Classes are neither random nor given: they are what happens when different people fight for, gain, and protect their access to different forms of capital. Further, any given social situation will simultaneously involve a number of qualitatively different class relations (Wright 2005: 12, 17). Being a part of one class in one situation does not rule out having another location at the same time in regard to something else. The functionality of maids is important: While the Indian middle-to-upper classes are vague and internally fragmented, they constitute a common class through their use of maids (Ray and Qayum 2009).

To understand maids in middle-to-upper class India one needs to have at least a summary view on the general situation of these classes<sup>7</sup>. The picture of the middle class is largely defined by its upper layer (Fernandes and Heller 2006). The incomes, professions and lifestyles that make up the ‘middle class’ as it is represented in media are really only accessible for a fraction of perhaps

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<sup>6</sup> Dickey writing about employers of maids already sixteen years ago, “class provides [them] an additional and largely distinct hierarchy and source of identity [except for caste]”, and that socioeconomic divisions and not caste define what employers mean with “people like us” in the context of domestic workers (2000: 464, 467). This, I argue, is even more the case in contemporary Delhi.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on the Indian middle classes has exploded in the last 10-15 years; I cannot even attempt to sketch more than a few chosen points here, based on Fernandes’ work. On other conceptualizations on the post-liberalization middle classes see e.g. Baviskar and Ray (2011) and Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase (2009)

2 % of Indians (Kochhar 2015)<sup>8</sup>. Thus, neither the material nor the symbolic notions of ‘middle class’ have anything to do with being in the actual middle, even if we include the lower middle classes. Yet the “victory” of the Indian elite is seen as somehow reflecting well on other Indians too (Kapur 2014: 34). This ability of the purported ‘middle’ to define itself as the unpolitical, enviable norm is why middle class studies are so important (Belliappa 2013: 9; Skeggs 1997, 2004). I purposefully use the word middle-to-upper both to reflect both my participants self-identification and to highlight the constructedness of the idea of a ‘middle’.

It is assumed that India is doing ‘better’ than before: “[L]eading intellectuals of the new middle class have been able to frame the terms of discourse about India’s development, shutting out much of what is happening in the ‘other’ India. [...] India is consistently represented as surging ahead, with many problems still to be overcome but essentially on the right track” (Upadhyaya 2011: 189). Yet, the “new middle class” is new merely in its outward appearance and lifestyle, and is built on “old” class privilege (Fernandes 2006). Fernandes’ Bourdieusian focus on the *reproduction of inequality* (2011) can be adapted for the purpose of this study: “the contours of the [new middle class] can be grasped as a *class-in-practice*, that is, as a class defined by its politics and the everyday practices through which it reproduces its privileged position” (Fernandes and Heller 2006: 495).

Within their privileged group, the well-off often exhibit a combination of hyperbole and anxiety about not being like ‘the rest’ (cf. Mander 2015). According to Kumar (2011: 221), growing up middle class in contemporary India means being “daily exposed to the message that theirs is a sacred mission – to succeed”. The middle classes are promoted as saviors of India but this privilege is never fully secured. Kumar talks about how telling children they’ll “end up” as a “farmer” or a “laborer” is a common scare tactic used by parents to motivate kids. Successful class distinction needs a symbolically ‘safe’ side. One needs to show familiarity with the legitimated part of culture, especially if one’s position is under potential threat (Kumar 2011). Thus, parental scare tactics are as much classist insults as signs of an uncertainty regarding one’s own position. To understand the importance given to the handling of maids, we need to

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<sup>8</sup> However, this layer does not nearly always have ideological dominance. Fernandes (2011; Fernandes and Heller 2006) looks at the larger ‘middle class’ spectrum through the lenses of hegemony and fracture.

understand this class anxiety.

In Bourdieusian thinking, the middle class is the class most dependent on the reproduction of social capital. In India too, the well-off are dependent on “professional capital as a means of advancement” and “must put [their] children through a rigorous training and educational process” (Kapur 2014: 16). For example, if your parents cannot get you into the right school at age four, your chances of ever seeing the upper tiers of employment and society are quite slim. This, according to Belliappa (2013: 94, 131), creates emotional debt and dependency, especially for women. Since the success of the girl child is based on the economic and care-related ‘sacrifices’ of the parents, the child is then expected to pay back through her emotional allegiance: “rather than engaging in the labour market as individualized workers, [women’s] motivations to work are closely bound with their family responsibilities.”

This thesis is about female employers of female maids; it is about the inseparability of gender and class. Like class, I look at gender in a functional way, inspired by Skeggs (1997, 2004, 2005), Belliappa (2013) and Thapan (1995).

Skeggs insist on the comorbidity of class and gender, and toys with the idea of looking at gender as another form of capital. For her, there is no reason to ask which comes first, gender or class, but in what proportion and interplay they exist at a given moment. There is no one single womanhood at any given instance: for some, in some instances, ‘being a woman’ can be a good thing while for others not. Gender, like social capital, can become a valuable resource to be used “if it is symbolically *legitimated*” (2005: 24). Skeggs argues that sexual difference is always learned through *bodily practices* (e.g. the division of housework). The body is always learnt in relation to social standing (ibid 21), and no non-classed ‘woman’ exists. Like class, we should thus not think of male-female as just as either-or, but as something people can possess and deploy in various forms at various times.

Like Fraad et al (2009) I see the household as *the* site where gender and class meet and co-create. People have tended to see women’s gender roles as changing only when coming in contact with the ‘outside’ through e.g. work – implying that gender on the ‘inside’ is somehow unproblematic and that women only ‘get ideas’ when they begin lives elsewhere (Mulinari and

Sandell 2009). I agree with Mulinari and Sandell who say that dismantling this divide is essentially what feminism is about.

The idea of “respectable femininity” (Radakrishnan 2009: 201-2; Gilbertson 2014; Daya 2009) is important in the construction of new India<sup>9</sup>. This ‘new’ woman is celebrated for her purported ability to combine a career with ‘traditional’ womanhood. Talukdar and Linders (2013: 106-7) put it somewhat sarcastically: “What is new about this woman is her ability to participate in the modern economy as both worker and consumer but still largely stay within the confines of traditional gendered values. [...] the ideal modern Indian woman was now an ambitious, career-oriented, and successful executive by day, but a devoted and demure daughter/wife/mother by night.” This “*modern urban middle-class progressive but respectable woman*”, as Phadke (2005) put it, has thus become a trope of the “empowered” India (Dhawan 2010; cf. Belliappa 2013: 66). Showing this ‘respectable modernity’ on the very surface of the body – e.g. through the consumption of the right clothes – is a central class marker.

This new woman is based on a double erasure. The woman who respectably goes out to work can only be new if we forget the working class woman, who in India and elsewhere has always worked out of necessity (Dhawan 2010). The working-class working woman was however never seen as a signal of national empowerment (cf. Parry 2014). The other erasure is that of the maid specifically. In day to day terms, the upper class family’s very possibility of accumulating social capital through the empowered woman is based on the economic and emotional exploitation of the poorer woman (cf. Sangari 1993).

Gender and class also interplay with individual agency and the convictions of each person. Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus (Moi 1991; Maton 2008; Adams 2006; Holgersson 2011) are useful here. Habitus is *structured* and *structuring*, i.e. shaped but never passive. Habitus also means predispositions, means it is likely for someone to think of something – in my case keeping maids – normal for one’s class (Weininger 2005: 91). Further, habitus has the character of inertia, meaning it takes time to change. Looking at social situations as Bourdieusian fields, again, lets us see them as having internal ‘objective’ rules (Moi 1991: 1021). Like

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<sup>9</sup> The literature on the connections of neoliberalism, Hindutva, gender and subjecthood in contemporary India is thriving, cf. Oza (2006), Dewey (2008), Chowdhury (2011), Uberoi (2006); Lau (2006).

movements in a computer game, our strategies are both free and unfree (Jenkins 1992: 72; Skeggs 1997: e.g. 162)<sup>10</sup>. Thapan (1995: 42) writes, importantly:

“[A] woman's resistance to the dominant discourse is dependent on her variously marked and changing subjectivity which, at different times, will influence her resistance differently depending on which factor is most important at any given time. In certain situations, a woman's class and social background determines her response while in other situations her educational background, ideological and political commitments may shape the nature of her response”.

Like Bourdieu argued (1984), class sometimes binds more than gender or ethnicity.

## DOMESTIC WORK AND WORKERS IN INDIA

The organization of housework is one of the primordial feminist questions. It is a key site where the supposed public-private divide shows its own constructedness. Men, classic patriarchy says, are concerned with the outside while women stay at home (either literally as housewives or mentally as the main keepers of the domestic sphere). Housework is politics embodied (Gothoskar 2013). “The household is not a capitalist enterprise but nonetheless is a site where husbands appropriate the surplus labor of their wives” (Barker 2015: 432; cf Fraad et al 2009). The household has been described both as fundamental to capitalism and as neo-feudalist<sup>11</sup>, but what feminists agree on is that patriarchy thrives on denying that housework de facto is *work*<sup>12</sup>. Society is dependent on the work performed in the home, yet this labor is profiled as ‘caring’, ‘affection’ or ‘love’. The magic of housework is that is portrayed as simultaneously invaluable and worthless (Sangari 1993). Feminists have for decades challenged this and emphasized how much energy, work and oppression goes into this construction of this female desire to self-sacrifice (cf. Fraad et al 2009; Barrett and McIntosh 1982; Mies 1986; McMahon 1999; the

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<sup>10</sup> For me, agency is always *tactical*, i.e. it relates and is restricted to a specific context and can only be judged within that. We need to stop thinking of ‘individuality’ or ‘choice’ and neutral, non-political concepts. Thus, like e.g. Skeggs (2004) I want to both criticize the idea of equal access to individualization under late capitalism, *and* show that not having access to a certain type of self-creation does not mean we all do not self-create in other ways.

<sup>11</sup> For the first position see e.g. Federici (2012); for the latter see Fraad et al (2009).

<sup>12</sup> I here avoid the problem of *value* inherent in a lot of the discussions on housework as *work*. The crux of this debate is whether or not one should accept the economic assumption that something has to be ‘productive’ – in contrast to ‘reproductive’ – in order to be taken seriously.

list could go on for ever).

India has one of the largest gender disparities in the world in terms of time spent on unpaid housework (McKinsey Global Institute 2015). Cooking and cleaning have been identified as the most time-consuming and most acutely gendered of all domestic chores (Saraff and Srivastava 2010). Women are also in charge of raising the children and generational transferring domestic expectations (Luke et al 2014): A girl-child is expected to do housework in a way a boy is not (Lin and Adserà 2013).

Contrary to popular belief, things have not become better in recent decades: Indian women do more or less all household work, while the share of women participating in any kind job giving them direct payment has been *decreasing* since independence and intensified in the last ten years (John 2013). As John writes, the intensification of the trend has coincided with “a time when India has witnessed the highest growth rates in its economy, and where a certain commonsense would have us believe that we live in a time of unprecedented job opportunities” (ibid 180-1).

According to John (ibid. 181; cf. Mazumdar and Neetha 2011), a staggering 85 percent of Indian women work without receiving any direct payment, which makes them dependent on a family unit. The women who do have some form of salary fall into a U-shaped curve: “namely, high labour participation among the poorest as well as among the relatively well to do at the other end of the spectrum, with very low levels for large sections of women in between (unlike most other parts of the world where women’s labour participation increases with education and income)” (John 2013: 184). The employment choices of poorer women are often determined by their embodied woman-ness, since they are perceived to be suitable for ‘womanly’ things like housekeeping (Gothoskar 2013)<sup>13</sup>.

Participation in outside employment does not guarantee women physical or mental freedom from the domestic (Luke et al 2014; Saraff and Srivastava 2010; Dutta 1999). Moreover, many women caught between the home and the workplace ‘compensate’ for the lack of ‘respectable’ femininity arising from their outside employment by either working extra hard in the home (Lahiri-Dutt and Sil 2014) or performing extra tasks of emotional labor through care of

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<sup>13</sup> This argument works by taking into account the idea of respectability. There are thousands of Indian working class women employed in highly visible, ‘outside’, not ‘respectable’ professions such as construction work.

the extended family (Belliappa 2013<sup>14</sup>). The Indian men who do participate in housework in some form usually get to cherry-pick the tasks they want to do. Indian women also routinely overestimate their partners' involvement (Saraff and Srivastava 2010; Belliappa 2013).

Domestic expectations can cut through classes and lifestyles. Yet, the situation in middle-to-upper class India is complicated by the omnipresence of paid domestic help, today mostly female maids<sup>15</sup> (e.g. Gothoskar 2013; Neetha 2013; Ray and Qayum 2009, 2011; Mattila 2011; Dickey 2000; Sharma 2016; John 2013; Neetha and Palriwala 2011; Uberoi and Chakrabarti 2004). India is peculiar because “there is no necessary relationship between the employment of domestic servants and middle-class women’s labor-force participation” (Ray and Qayum 2009: 9). The amount of work, combined with a wide availability and cheap prices definitely play key roles in the prevalence of maids in middle class India<sup>16</sup>, but maids do more than just clean. As a woman interviewed by Dickey (2000: 474) put it: ““Everyone decides to have a servant in order to get prestige from commanding someone else's work, not because they need a servant to help them with the work they are incapable of doing””.

On the employers' side, the man's retreat from household work conveniently also makes him distant from the issues regarding maids (Mattila 2011: 82). As Gothoskar (2013: 66) writes, this makes the issue a socially second-rate one, because seemingly the “contradiction and the conflict is between two women”. The general devaluation of domestic work and bad situation of the domestic workers go hand in hand (Sankaran 2013; cf. Sengupta and Sen 2013) but they are not the same thing. While the woman doing housework in her own home can gain a certain legitimacy within patriarchy, the maid cannot (John 2013).<sup>17</sup> For the middle class women unable

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<sup>14</sup> Belliappa (2013: 72) points out that Indian extended family structures mean extra emotional labor for women, something she aptly calls “kinship work”.

<sup>15</sup> Histories of domestic servants in India state that some employers used to be prefer male workers since they were seen as both more capable and more status-conferring (Ray 2000; Raghuram 2001).

<sup>16</sup> The rapid urbanization of India, powered by neoliberal displacement, fuels a continuous stream of workers coming to cities like Delhi (see e.g. Ganguly-Scrase and Vogl 2007; Harriss-White and Prospero 2014; Wadhawan 2013; Singh and Hoge 2010). Most maids are unorganized and not protected by any national laws, although attempts to change this have been underway across India (cf Neetha 2004, Gothoskar 2013; Sengupta and Sen 2013). As Menon (2012) points out, that a large-scale study of Indian sex workers found that a huge number of women preferred sex work over domestic servitude says a lot about the conditions many Indian maids face (cf. Sahni and Shankar 2013).

<sup>17</sup> In this thesis I am explicitly concerned with the ideas of the employers. This shall of course not be seen as the maids not resisting domination and actively participating in the creation their own realities. For studies discussing workers' agency, see Sharma (2016), Wasiuzzaman and Wells (2010), Mattila (2011), and Ray and Qayum (2009).

or unwilling to challenge the men around them, maids are the next best thing since “the double burden on middle class women is reduced without disturbing the traditional patriarchal system” (Neetha 2004: 1682).

There is one more complication. While middle-to-upper class women can abstain from performing the less desirable parts of housework *physically*, this does not guarantee mental freedom. Lahiri-Dutt and Sill (2014), Talukdar and Linders (2013) and Belliappa (2013) report that women feel unable to shake away the feelings of domestic responsibility even while employed outside. ‘Managing’ maids and making sure everything goes smoothly in the household is still their responsibility.

Dickey (2000), Ray and Qayum (2009) and Matzner (2014) have characterized the employment of maids as *the* dividing line between the Indian middle classes and those below. *Not* having a maid is then an anomaly demanding explanation. This is the functional description of class. The authors argue, along with Mattila (2011), that for a number of employers it is less important how *well* a maid cleans than that she performs the symbolic act of cleaning.

## **EMPLOYER TECHNIQUES OF CLASS DISTINCTION**

The literature has identified a number of techniques of class distinction related to the employers of maids. We already looked at freedom from undesirable housework. Here I talk about distance through gendered stigmatization<sup>18</sup> and fear, and the obsession with managing the ‘problematic’ maids.

In a way that echoes Bourdieu’s talk of the power of misrecognition and the “symbolic veil of honor” (Weininger 2005: 101-2; cf. Wacquant 2013; Sayer 2005), domestic workers are generally looked down upon. Their ‘culture’ is perceived as lower than that of the employers (Dhawan 2010). Maids can be said to work as a “‘foil’ for the middle classes ways of creating meaning and value” (Weininger 2005: 97). Domestic violence, alcohol abuse, dirtiness and general vulgarity are some common stigmas attached to them. Their work is seen as undignified

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<sup>18</sup> John (2013) gives a good conceptualization of stigma, although she is talking about caste. As e.g. Skeggs (1997) has shown, a class identity can be as stigmatized as any other base on caste or ‘race’.

and meaningless. The worker's body is constantly threatened by her class-related assumed dirtiness, and keeping it "neat" (Dickey 2000: 474) requires constant effort.

This causes substantial anxiety for employers, for one's house can never be clean as long as the person cleaning it is 'dirty'. 'Respectable femininity' can only arise from a 'respectable' home, so the moral and physical grooming of the maid is of utmost importance to the family status. Still, the maid should never look or behave like you, for that could be subversive (ibid<sup>19</sup>). The domestic worker is to look spotless but nevertheless look like a maid. On the other side, employers are to take precautions so as to not "look like maids" (Frøystad 2005: 106, quoted in Mattila 2011).

Dickey (2000: 473) describes the maid as both a necessity and a threat. Sharing your home with an outsider brings vulnerability; it "involves the mixing of categories that might otherwise be kept separate" (ibid 469-470; Sharma 2016: 53). The working class and the middle-to-upper class woman should not, by the logic of distinction, not meet (Weininger 2005: 100). Yet, "they are actually highly integrated" (Mattila 2011: 103). Since distinctions can no longer be kept through physical distance, other ways have to be created. Fear is one such way. It works in two directions: "[Maids] may transport in dirt, disorder, and disease and contaminate children with lower-class habits and language (cf. Bourdieu 1984); they may remove valued belongings and information through theft and gossip" (Dickey 2000: 473). Most employers see their maids as at least potential thieves, liars and cheats (Hamid 2006). That maids steal is a commonly known 'truth' even if one has not experienced it personally (Mattila 2011: 172). If not outright criminal, the maid is assumed to try her best to avoid work. There is a presumed rising impertinence and greed among maids, reported by e.g. Ray and Qayum (2009: Chapter 6). As Mattila (2011: 149) argues, explaining the workers' fight for labor rights in terms of their personal maliciousness effectively delegitimizes it.

The maid might also be dangerous in other ways. Sexual fears are discussed by both Ray and Qayum and Dickey. These fall largely into two categories: the fear of a direct sexual threat

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<sup>19</sup> Marxist critics like Kapur (2014: 41) would argue that there is nothing systematically subversive about poor people adopting the symbols of the rich.

from a male domestic, and the fear of the purportedly loose sexuality of the female domestic reflecting badly on the respectability of the employing family<sup>20</sup>.

A live-in maid would traditionally be much more status-conferring than a part-time worker. The two types are seen as bringing with them different problems and threats. While people living in your house brings with them further responsibilities, loss of privacy and the potentiality of being assaulted when alone with the worker, employing outsiders mean more insecurity about money and control over work (Mattila 2011: 176; Ray and Qayum 2009: 62).

Consumption patterns of the maids, whether physical or immaterial, are another reason for anxiety. Employers feel that maids should not use their small salaries on conspicuous consumption – they should not try to “acquire the status symbols of the privileged class” (Dhawan 2010: 53), such as ‘Western’ clothes, mobile phones, or physically embodied signs of confidence (cf. Ray and Qayum 2009: 151, 157; Mattila 2011: 182).

Among domestic workers, an internal hierarchy is upheld (Mattila 2011: 10-11). People performing different tasks are seen as being of different value<sup>21</sup> and are treated accordingly. Sharma (2016) argues that the hierarchy is also strictly controlled by the workers themselves.

Taken together, these fears reveal something important about class and gender. Although in practice often extremely rigid, class is at least in theory mutable and cannot be taken for granted (Dickey 2000: 481). If maids are central to performing middle-classness, it means that a misbehaving maid can threaten it. The stigmatizing portrayal of the working class as fundamentally bad is a technique used to soothe some of this anxiety (Dickey 2000 and Ray and Qayum 2009: 9, echoing Skeggs 1997). Further, the workers’ gender performances and sexualities might threaten the family harmony. As Ray and Qayum argue, the maid is in a “dialectics of dependency” with the employer – both parties are central in the production of each other’s identity (2009: 5).

Kapur (2014) identifies a larger fear of the ‘common’ outside among the better off. According to her the “freedom” of the upper-class Indian has to be incessantly guarded by

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<sup>20</sup> On Indian working class women and sexuality as class distinction, cf. Parry (2014).

<sup>21</sup> This is one of the main sites of study when looking at caste, since this hierarchy largely mirrors assumptions of caste purity.

air-conditioning, gates and militia from the “sexual harassment, rape and kidnappings” outside (ibid. 4). What remains to be done is to “minimize the threat” as well as one can (Mattila 2011: Chapter 5.3). For employers, domestic workers are an issue to be (endlessly) discussed when they are seen to not perform as wanted (cf. Menon 2012: 17-23).

Employers take “safety measures” (Mattila 2011: e.g. 177) in order to convince themselves of the good intentions of the workers. These can range from making sure the maid takes a bath before work to forbidding her to enter certain spaces or never being alone with her. Spatial politics are upheld even though when maid is inside your house (Dickey 2000). Forbidding the maids to sit on sofas, using family bathrooms, or serving them food on separate plates are mechanisms of symbolic distance. Practices like these are often “so much part of the habitus that no explanation is or in a sense can be given” (Wasiuzzaman and Wells 2010: 285) .

The current discourse on maids has been identified as being between “feudal” and “modern” (Ray and Qayum 2009: 16)<sup>22</sup>. In employers’ discussions, maids of yesteryear were projected as ‘servants’ happily entwined with the family, while they today are nothing more than callous workers. The move is said to be partly encouraged by younger employers. Yet the relationship is in reality largely “still governed by the discourse of dependency and loyalty rather than the work contract” (Sharma 2016: 58). According to Mattila (2011: 148), “[d]espite the gradual and partial shift from relations between families to market relations, the employers were reluctant to discuss workers’ rights and to recognise their role as what they actually are: employers”.

The lingering feudalism benefits employers by bringing with it the possibility of demanding more than what was agreed on. Employers “love” for the worker, Mattila (2011: 155) notes, is used as a technique of control (cf. Dickey 2000: 478). Through this, Ray and Qayum (2009: 2) argue, maids help the employers “produce themselves as the class destined to lead India to modernity”, while the workers become “premodern and dependent”.

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<sup>22</sup> Mattila (2011: 143) uses the corresponding terms “maternalism” and “contractualism”.

## FIELD AND METHOD

My method of data collection was the semi-structured qualitative interview (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Sherman Heyl 2001). Although I did not have the time frame or the possibility of mixed strategies needed for a proper ethnographic study, my thinking is largely indebted to Skeggs' writing on feminist ethnography (2001). Feminist ethnography posits a level of epistemological and ethical companionship between the researcher and the participant (cf. the chapter below) which in my opinion cannot be sustained without face-to-face engagement between the parties both in and outside the interview situation. I emphasize an on-going relation with participants, working immersed in their social space, and a political desire to document the production of gendered and classed life as it is understood when *lived*<sup>23</sup>.

Following Cortazzi (2001), in-depth narrative interviews were the obvious option. As he writes, "in recounting events in narratives, tellers also directly or indirectly give their own interpretations and explanations of those events. They also evaluate, in their own terms, the principal people and others featuring in narratives, the meaning of events and wider relevant contexts" (ibid 6-7). Narratives of the self, while a grand-sounding term, do not have to be more than what we choose to tell our parents about a late night out. In my analysis of the interviews I was looking for how stories were constructed on the three levels identified by Cortazzi (2001: 12) – *events* (i.e. employing maids), *experiences* (participant interpretations of these), and *narratives* (how these were combined and told to *me*) – through vocal and visual clues such as emphasis, choice of confidence, joy and awkwardness. These, I feel, would have been hopelessly lost in more quantitative approaches (cf. Reissman 2008).

Belliappa (2013) points out that narrative research is always open to the question of how a story of the self as told to the researcher compares to another story of the same self. How do the ones told to me differ from the stories told to close friends, parents, lovers? They are probably different on certain, perhaps important, accounts. Still, none of these would be more 'authentic' in any deeper sense. As Belliappa (ibid. 136) argues, the self is always constructed in interaction with others and there is no legitimate reason to believe that a narrative told to a

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Williams' (1977: 132) *structure of feeling*.

researcher would be somehow more ‘untrue’ than another one. In the analysis of my interviews I pay attention to this. I am interested in how the story is told *to me*, what voices (e.g. first or third person) are used for expressing which sentiments. Since none of my participants had been interviewed on the topic before, they were all self-creating in the act of telling.

I asked all participants a set of relatively fixed questions, divided into four groups, taking about 1 ½ hours in all: General background; experiences of and opinions on housework; experiences of and opinions on maids; and thoughts on personal gender relations. I also asked the participant to comment on what kind of feelings her participation had created. The questions were tailored slightly to suit the previous responses<sup>24</sup>.

Within the megalopolis of Delhi, my interviews took place in the south and central parts. South Delhi – a synonym for both wealth and ‘Westernization’ – is where nine out of ten participants lived, although in varying settings<sup>25</sup>. I asked my participants to choose a location that was comfortable for them. Meetings took place in coffee-shops or at the home or university of the interviewee.

Participants were chosen through what can be called a steered snowballing method. The women have both a lot in common and a lot of differences. I have no claims to giving anything like a full picture of young politically active women in Delhi, but I have made sure to only include people that I somehow ‘knew’ beforehand would fit a politically-adjusted version of the class definition given by Belliappa.<sup>26</sup> My participants were at the time of the interviews all unmarried women between 22 and 28 years of age. They all had lived in Delhi/NCR for at least a number of years. They all self-identify as middle or upper class. They are all highly educated, having degrees in social sciences or arts from some of the most famous universities in India. Some have further degrees from prestigious European universities. All speak excellent English and live large parts

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<sup>24</sup> The interviews became much more structured than I had originally envisioned. After conducting short test interviews at a separate occasion in the summer of 2015, I came to realize that a more structured approach was more suitable than open discussions. New theoretical revisions arose from my encounter with the field. While I had originally imagined only looking at my participants relations to their workers, it became clear to me that neither families nor boy/girlfriend relations and potential marriages could be ignored.

<sup>25</sup> Many class-related implications this urban geography exist. On the social spatiality of the Indian capital see S. Srivastava (2014) or Dasgupta (2014).

<sup>26</sup> Although it would have been interesting to do a parallel study on young men, this was impossible for reasons of time.

of their lives in the language<sup>27</sup>. Right now, they are students, research scholars, university teachers, or working in NGO's connected to social rights. They are politically engaged and feminist, in one way or the other (some much more strongly than others).

The living arrangements of my participants varied from living alone or with flatmates, to living in a university hostel, to never having lived outside the family home. Residential choices had to do both with the money available and family attitudes.

An ambivalence runs through this thesis: I am, for all intents and purposes, presenting the participants as variations on the theme of young progressives, while at the same time acknowledging that these women do not all know each other or at all agree with each other on nearly all points. In many ways, they only exist 'as a group' for the purposes of this essay. As Weininger writes in a text on Bourdieu (2005: 99): "any social collectivity is the result of the combined symbolic acts of self-classification and classification by others that are applied to its members (and, therefore, also, to those who are excluded)".

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

We can now turn to ethical considerations. Obviously, all my participants were well informed about how the information they provided would be used. Participants were given the chance to read the unedited chapter on findings<sup>28</sup>. They were all guaranteed anonymity. These are basic steps of any research process and give a level of formal equality to the situation. Here I focus on issues remaining within the murkier questions of power politics.

How could I, a white Finnish male with no experience of employing maids, interview brown Indian women about such sensitive issues? Wasn't I an outsider with a project about 'uncovering' secret inconsistencies in people less fortunate than me, and on top of that hold them accountable for moral paradoxes? If, following Bourdieu, we argue that every culture creates its own accepted notions of knowledge and truth – and that "[o]nly insofar as one does things is it

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<sup>27</sup> Chaise LaDousa (2014, 2006) has argued for an metropolitan-provincial class distinction along the lines of English-language fluency and accent. In this thinking, the way you speak English is a primary factor in where you will end up in Indian society.

<sup>28</sup> This chapter originally included more information than here. Participants were thus privy to everything I was claiming they said, as well as the profiles in the appendix.

possible to know about things” (Weininger 2005: 69) – this has serious limitations for my possibility of understanding my participants. Yes and no. We need to not conflate practical knowledge and the idea of identity-related ‘true’ knowledge.

It is true, as Kapoor (2003: 632) writes, that ‘Southern’ knowledge still largely remain a resource to be mined by unwittingly imperialist academics. Kapoor, following Spivak, argues that the global south provides raw material to be refined in Western higher value-added universities, in a way that is eerily similar to (neo-)colonial exploitation. While it is possible for me to go to India for fieldwork, few Indians could or would do the reverse.

Yet, this is today the postcolonial mainstream. No Western student or scholar of the non-West goes a day without a moral hangover. Instead of reiterating what is obvious, I want to here offer a glimpse of postcolonial criticism of postcoloniality. The crux of the matter is identity. I have already argued for looking at class and gender as morphing and situational. I want to do the same for physical heritage.

Postcolonial feminism has, since at least the days of Mohanty (1984) argued against the monolithizing tendencies of much of the scholarship on the non-West, against ideas of there being an ‘average’ southern woman. Yet, it sometimes upholds this very idea. Critical sociology has a natural desire to change the world through understanding discrimination, oppression and exploitation. It is inclined to sympathize with the ‘victim’. What it does less well is realizing that every ‘victim’ is in another situation a ‘perpetrator’. We need to not only study groups in virtue of their oppression, but talk with and theorize the same people in their privileged roles too. The women in my study are all at least triply oppressed (gender, ethnicity, nationality), yet they are also powerful by virtue of class, connections and individuality<sup>29</sup>.

As Belliappa writes, “[n]ot all Southern women are oppressed or even marginalized in the same way” (2013: 4). It is on this post-sisterhood, post-women-as-necessarily-righteous feminism that my own thesis also rests. For me it is demeaning, exoticizing and intellectually dishonest to perceive a young Indian middle-to-upper class woman *only* in virtue of all the oppression she faces. These women are also agents, active and creative. And, importantly, a part of this agency includes actions and ideologies that might in turn oppress someone else – such as

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<sup>29</sup> A study on caste would add that here.

a maid. As Thapan (1995: 32) argued, subjects are both *resisting* and *complicit* in the structures around them.

While post-nationalistic scholarship would never ask for ‘authenticity’ in White people<sup>30</sup>, the flip-side of the argument is used when denying the possibility of an ‘outsider’ to ever understand a place like India. While the Western subject is viewed as fragmented, a new cultural essentialism is put into work on the Southern subject in the name of diversity and multiculturalism. It assumes that being *from somewhere* or being *something* is a stable identity. (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 69). While trying to work against neocolonial racism, it actually creates a picture of a “Southern” subject with access to forms of knowledge not available to others (Narayan 1998; 1997). Southern voices, through expressions such as ‘Southern voices’, are made into authentic representatives of a point or way of life essentially different from the ‘Northern’, something criticised early on by e.g. Trinh T. Min-ha (1989) and called “ethically suspect” by Belliappa (2013: 6).

As Spivak pointed out a long time ago (1988; cf Kapoor 2004), we need to be able to distinguish between representation and re-presentation. I am not here to represent the women interviewed; they are more than able to represent themselves. I am not here to ‘solve’ anything. I am here to paint a picture, to re-present.

My main concern with this thesis has been to do justice to the people I worked with. They are my friends, regardless of how well I know them, and people I often admire. This project would not have been possible without the extended periods of time spent in India over the last five years, without seeing my life as much there as much as anywhere else. For me – in relation to these particular people, not ‘Indians’ in general – it is these things that determine how power relations played out.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

We can now move to the empirical material. Using the conceptualization of class explained and

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<sup>30</sup> The idea of me being an ‘authentic’ Finnish person with access to ‘real’ Finnish knowledge is either absurd or fascist.

the studies on maids referred to before, this chapter highlights and analyzes my participants' descriptions of class, domestic workers and gender roles.

I will start by looking at how the women interviewed saw their upbringings in terms of domesticity and housework. I will also talk about what expectations of someday being 'proper women/wives' my interviewees face. After that, I talk about the different ways domestic workers have been employed by my interviewees or their families, as well as the related spatial politics and fears.

After having looked at distance, I will highlight the ways my participants have seen different relationships with domestic workers as close or meaningful. I also narrate my interviewees' opinions on whether or not their and their families' practices regarding domestic workers have been different from people around them.

Finally, coming back to the question of gender roles, I look at my participants' perceptions of people of their own generation, in relation to domestics and gendered expectations of housework. I inquire whether the future can be any different.

### **The idea of a proper girl**

In this segment I look at what my participants' families have expected from them in terms of housework and gender. 'Family' of course means very different things for different people. Two of my participants grew up in nuclear families while the settings of remaining eight can be described as 'hybrid'. Members of their extended families either co-habited with the nuclear family, or lived very close by. A few can be said to have grown up in stable 'extended' families. One participant grew up in a household where all adults were female and another participant lived significant amounts of time with only her mother and her brother.

These differences were reflected in my participants' influences: While many expressed extended families to be a major, mainly negative influence on their self-determination, others reported very limited influence from non-nuclear family members. In the introduction we read that the initial relation to housework is often taught by the mothers of female children. This was

also encountered in my interviews. Female family members of different generations were seen to have had the main direct influence on gendered assumptions, corroborating studies on internalized patriarchy. While many were of the opinion that men ultimately exerted patriarchal power through the women, this power rarely needed explicit voicing.

My participants exhibited a large variety of past and future expectations. While some were expected to contribute from an early age and other cited daily routines, many expressed rarely or never having done ‘anything’.

The participants who had not done housework while growing up were somewhat divided as to whether this was uncommon or not. Some expressed never seeing it as uncommon since no other children in their peer groups did it either and others expressed only “realizing” that it was uncommon much later. Others said it was markedly different from other female children around them.

Those of my participants who had fathers around the household all but one expressed a lack of participation from his side. Some mentioned this with a mild humor that might imply seeing it as impossible to change, while others were explicitly upset that their fathers saw housework as a “woman’s job” or “none of [their] concern”. In the cases the participants reported some level of involvement by the father, it was usually qualified either through gendered hierarchies of tasks (the father doing ‘manly’ things) or through the level of recognition the performance received (as one participant said, her father does “one thing” and then “boasts” about it for the rest of the month). The pattern follows previous studies, although my participants were aware and critical of the unequal burden.

There was little implication of serious conflict between mothers and fathers. The interviewees often implied a resignation or internalization on their mother’s part: “It’s not like he’s told my mother to do it, but it is assumed that it’s her work”, as the 25-year-old Riddhi<sup>31</sup>, who works at a classic feminist NGO, expressed it. The following quote captures this tendency of internalization as well as the negative impact of the extended family:

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<sup>31</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

“[My dad] doesn’t do a thing in the house. My mother complains about it but she also accepts it. Because my father is an only son – so his parents who live with us are very protective about his right to do nothing.” – Aditi, 24 years old.

Ishana, a 25-year-old pursuing an MPhil in cinema studies, was the only one who denied there being a gendered division of labor in her home. She saw everyone in the house having their own responsibilities according to what they were good at.

In contrast to this, when it came to the upbringing of my interviewees’ male relatives, some of my participants expressed a desire from their mothers’/aunts’ side to institute change. As Lalita, a 22-year-old politics student, expressed it:

“My mother is really adamant about [my brother] doing his own stuff. Maybe she’s noticed how difficult it becomes to handle everything if you yourself don’t do your own work.”

Another participant used the same word, “adamant”, while stating that her aunt made sure her male cousin would be able to take care of himself, in spite of this causing anxiety for the grandmother.

Others reported that there never were any expectations on their male relatives, and that these therefore had internalized a “sense of entitlement” or an expectation for things to “just appear”. Some were angry at male relatives or family friends for not appreciating the work done by others. Even Vinaya – a 24-year-old social right activist whose family had generations of clear feminist tendencies – felt that patriarchy still creeps in despite best efforts, that men “just don’t do certain things”.

When asked about whether or not class made a difference for how much they were expected to do, all but one said yes. For most, the fact that there was or could always be a number of maids taking care of things meant that there was never a true *need* for them to contribute. Ananya, a 27-year-old chef and former feminist NGO worker, said she was never taught to do anything:

“In India, especially people of my class, we look at housework as drudgery because we've never done it. We don't know what it is. We don't know how it feels to pick up a broom and clean the house – none of us have done it. [...] So we're so alien from it, we don't even think of it as *anything*.”

In several discussions, a distinction arose between *knowing* how to do things and actually *doing* them. Elite women were said to take pride in not doing anything even if gender dictated that they should know how to, thus showing a culture of servitude in action. Aditi, a 24-year-old NGO worker who identified as very upper class, summarized this position: “My mother wants me to know how to cook and wants me never to have to do it.” Later, she mused over a kind of psychological dependency this upbringing had led to and described the production of habitus and predisposition:

“[N]obody really wanted us to do [housework] – we were brought up to be rich kids who didn't do *that*. And in a sense we were being trained, I guess, to *need* that much comfort so that we would then pursue careers which would allow us to *earn* that comfort subsequently. So in a sense it was getting us used to a certain way of living.”

Class was seen to practically or symbolically shield one from physical messes. Noor, a 24-year-old working on social justice, told a self-critical story about buying new underwear instead of washing old ones. Dharini's comments show a liminality currently offered to her by virtue of being unmarried and living on her own. In her opinion, she is not seen as a “real adult”. Therefore she is not as responsible for upholding class and gender status:

“I can live like this and my extended family will understand it because for them I am *not yet married*. But the point is that for me as a 28-year-old my family would expect me to be living in a very different kind of world right now, but they'll excuse this because I've been a student, and I'm whatever. For my family again, this is not adult life.”

Rules of respectability could in this case be bent without fearing *really* slipping down the class ladder.

Yet, others expressed a number of conflicts between their current class status/performance and that of their parents. Except for too modest living arrangements, career choices that did not provide large salaries were also looked at somewhat strangely by families.

The class locations of my participants were complicated by the fact that all of them live on a spectrum of dependence-independence in relation to their parents' standing and finances. Some of my participants are virtually independent financially and socially while others are economically dependent and under a lot of control. This supports the idea of a person existing in several different class relations at once, some more permanent and/or valuable than others.

Participants were also often highly aware of the constructed (moral) neutrality of the term middle class, even while using it themselves. One of my participants, who awkwardly self-described as upper middle class after admitting she had not really thought so much about it since she had "had almost everything always" went on to argue that most people would call themselves middle class because it's "safe" and avoids the extremes on both sides. Another participant explained in length that the middle class does not exist except for in the heads of people like her parents who really are not middle class. All participants were keen on stressing their class privilege, resisting dominant narratives of the 'excellence' of the well-off.

Participants' comments on growing up complicate large-scale studies on Indian children's participation in housework (e.g. Lin and Adserà's 2011) that do not take class into serious account. Still, social class wasn't the only reason not to do housework for some of my participants' families. In some cases, mothers' gendered concerns were seen as highly important

<sup>32</sup>. Staying with Dharini:

"I think part of the reason – I remember my mother actually saying that – was that I was a girl. And so she said that – I think she was kind of torn about that – that she didn't want to teach me to do housework. I think there was an anxiety of that being gendered. I remember she used to say that if I was a boy, she would find it much easier to get me to do work around the house."

For Dharini, her mother had the luxury not to have her contribute. The mother didn't want her daughter "doing it for someone else someday", and to be able to focus on other things. This sentiment was shared by Aditi, who made a connection between certain kinds of 'progressive' status and not doing housework:

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<sup>32</sup> This would warrant it's own study. On "feminist mothering" in India, cf. Phadke (2013).

“[F]or the women that I know it’s sort of asserting your own empowerment to say that ‘I never needed to learn how to cook’, you know, ‘I don’t know how to cook, I can’t cook a thing’. People say it with a lot of pride [...] I think it kind of shows that no-one has ever, that where you come from is sufficiently progressive that they don’t need to enforce cooking from you.”<sup>33</sup>

Vinaya also expressed disbelief in any clear correlation between class and feminist individualism. For her it was the fact that her family had for generations encouraged women to do “other things” that made it possible for her not to worry about stereotypical ‘womanly’ expectations. On the opposite side of my spectrum is Nalini, a 26-year-old gender scholar, who said some members of her extended family felt that it was a matter of prestige to “train your daughter properly”, i.e. to take care of a household. Such comments point to a level of distinction along the axis of conservative-progressive, each with their own set of gendered symbolic capital, each with their own idea of ‘good’ womanhood. This follows its own logic, where for some performing partial social or gender equality becomes status, while others gain the same by following more traditional ways. The question of class is thus more complex than a path from more money to more maids to less expectations on the household women.

Not all of the women who *had* done housework felt that this was purely for sexist reasons. While some suspected that their mothers’ arguments about self-reliance weren’t as anti-sexists as they wanted to sound, others stressed that their mothers’ taught them to take care of themselves because everyone should know how.

One participant expressed not being able to shake the feelings of domestic duties from the back of her mind. Yet, a clear difference was portrayed between my participants and their mothers. The existence of maids did not mean that the mothers’ of my interviewees were free from domestic labor, regardless of whether or not she was working full time outside the home. All participants stated that their mothers (in some cases together with grandmothers) were ultimately responsible for the smooth functioning of everything practical, as well considerable amounts of emotional labor. This follows sentiments in the previous literature. My participants implied that they themselves were less entangled in domestic expectations. This was interpreted

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<sup>33</sup> This echoes Federici (2010 [1975]: 22), who made a point about feminist women not wanting to be identified with the poor “losers” who are still stuck with housework.

as a combination of (proto-)feminist engagement from either my participants' or their mothers' sides<sup>34</sup>.

The idea of marriage was for most a conflicting or outright scary situation, whether or not one supported it in theory. Potential partners, families, and the fear of oneself succumbing to gendered stereotypes all worried participants. The family differences regarding future expectations varied. Some participants laid emphasis on their families “*never*” having any expectations of them being ‘good wives’ (or even wives at all) and instead telling them to much rather focus on being independent. Others said these things had not really been discussed explicitly but that they could tell such expectations existed. At the other end, several of the women interviewed were currently engaged in complicated, often tumultuous, negotiations over marriage. Of these, some expressed a sense of shock when suddenly having been confronted with expectations that had not been talked about before. Others tried to politely put off everything marriage-related to some as distant as possible future. Marriage was one of the key sites of strategic resistance and collusion, born out of a combination of structural (an Indian culture of marriage) and individual (how strict one’s parents are) factors. A couple of cases will illustrate this point:

Maya – a semi-openly bisexual woman who lives on her own, describes herself as a radical feminist and grew up with a divorced mother – said the mother still “obviously” expects her to get married someday. She feels that it was “liberating in some ways” not to have a father’s influence and that seeing the drawback of marriage and the possibility of an all-female household gave her a feminist spark. For her, “it would be ridiculous” as a feminist to comply with any of her mother’s demands. Still Nalini, an equally staunch feminist who currently lives with her family, was very pessimistic when it comes to being able to negotiate marriage although other victories could be achieved:

“Some of these things you cannot negotiate, but one has to be strategic about it. Like when it’s about everyday things like who will cook or all of that, so I can fight on these issues [...] On issues like marriage it’s very difficult”.

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<sup>34</sup> Still, this difference can be caused as much by my participants' still being seen as ‘daughters’ in family settings as by generational political change. It would be interesting to return to my subjects in ten years to see if the cycle repeats itself.

Some thus felt that marriage will be inevitable, and tried to instead focus on damage control. One participant expressed a desire for life-long commitment, something she saw as “a pretty controversial decision to take in certain liberal circles”.

### **Stories of maids**

According to my interviewees, people employed maids<sup>35</sup> mainly for three reasons: Firstly because it made life easier, secondly because it was to be expected of someone of one’s class, and thirdly because it was felt to be a social responsibility. Not employing a maid would potentially be met by confused or bemused ‘Why?’s. For some participants’ families it could also be potentially embarrassing not to have one.

Mayas’ and Lalitas’ stories constitute the ends of my spectrum: While the former grew up in a northern town without domestics (saying there was “no concept of maids”), the latter grew up on large compound in a hill station, with workers whose families had been with her family for generations. From birth, Lalita was partly taken care of by a then nine-year-old daughter of older workers. Maya did not stay in a house with maids until after college. The other eight fall somewhere in between – six had or had previously had live-in workers while two had only had part-time maids. At the time of the interviews, Maya and Aditi (who both live independently) did not in their own households employ maids in any form, while seven did so either directly or indirectly by virtue of living with their families. The one remaining participant lives in a university hostel. Two who live on their own employed part-time workers.

Interestingly, three of the women used to full-time maids implied that only having part-time workers is more or less the same as having none. Comments such as these point to a vaguely understood connection between the level of exploitation and the level of status produced by it:

“We haven’t had a domestic help for over 9-10 years now, no sort of domestic help – we have part-timers who come

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<sup>35</sup> The focus of my research lies on cooking and cleaning and thus only looks at domestic workers involved these tasks. Nannies, drivers, watchmen and similar are not considered; this shall not be understood as them not existing in participants’ family settings.

in, but besides that we have to manage things amongst ourselves.” – Ishana

“They don’t employ maids – they employ just part time.” – Ananya, when asked if her newlywed friends have maids.

I asked my participants whether there were other reasons for hiring women than just their availability.

Disturbingly, tales of sexual violence perpetrated by male domestics were common. One participant told of having been sexually abused by a former male worker. Another told of narrowly escaping a molestation attempt. Two more told of similar things happening to female members of the immediate family. This had in all cases led to a preference for female workers, who were seen as less of a threat to the family. Even without personal traumas the remaining half also expressed similar feelings in themselves or their parents. The fear of the inherently bad male worker was expected by parents to be implicitly understood. One was supposed to know that ““These kinds of people do these kinds of things””, which could lead to victim-blaming in case something happened. Puberty was often seen as a particularly dangerous time.

The male domestic could cause very real hurt to female family members, but the female domestic was not problem-free either. Participants mentioned families fearing female workers potentially causing moral hurt. Aditi’s grandmother was said to see female domestic workers as a “pressure cooker that’s going to go off”. According to the grandmother “there will be all these love affairs and moral degradation” unless you police the maid’s sexuality. Aditi felt things are changing with younger generations but that both her mother and sister exhibited similar ideas. She herself saw this as a part of a patronizing tendency:

“[I]t’s a thing with class difference. Not just difference, in terms of they think people from certain classes – very Victorian idea – they think people from certain classes are more likely to be sexually sort of...immoral.”

Similarly, the reason Ishana’s family hadn’t had a live-in worker for ten years was because their sexuality was felt to cause trouble. The more time the maid spent in your house, the more responsible one was felt to be.

These statements correspond what has been said before and also show that there

sometimes is a gruesome reality behind them. Separating real and ideological fear is thus important; fears regarding female domestics fall into the latter category. When talking about sexual fears, participants made a clear linguistic separation by quoting older generations' ideas in ways that painting these as absurd. Even in the cases of actual hurt coming to my participants, the implication was that regressive parental attitudes made the situations even worse. Participants poked holes in their families' use of essentializing language and voiced their own criticism of actual happenings in socio-economic or individual terms instead.

While everybody recognized an existence of the hierarchy of workers mentioned in previous literature, not all had seen this in practice<sup>36</sup>. Those who had experience of it at home reported different reasons for its existence: inability to change parents' or grandparents' ideas, family ideas of class-related cleanliness, or the workers' own insistence on keeping up such practices. In all cases such hierarchies visibly upset and embarrassed participants. Many compared their parents to their grandparents, saying that at least the former were less "feudal" than the latter. Descriptions of discrimination from the employers' side figured liberally, yet the most common reason given for the hierarchy of tasks was that the workers themselves insisted: "It's not just that I would have someone separate doing the bathroom and this thing, but they themselves don't", was a common sentiment.

Ishana, whose family was extremely vigilant about not letting anyone but family members cook and kept a strict separation from the cleaners, said they did so because one cannot know where the workers have been. Thus, the 'dirtiness' of the maid does not come from her cleaning dirt, but from undisclosed "different things" she might do elsewhere. In Ishana's comment, the symbolic and material switch place:

"[I]t's all again the idea that my grandmother had in terms of the cleanliness, that service class people you do not know where they're coming from, you do not know what all they're doing in other people's houses. You know what they're doing in your house – they're cleaning – but in other people's houses they could be doing ten different things. So in our house it's completely due to the cleanliness factor."

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<sup>36</sup> Class-based prejudice was often talked about more freely than caste-based. While the hierarchy of maids is the site where caste becomes most prevalent, participants' comments showed that the same stigma could be rationalized in classist terms too.

While distancing themselves from the thought, several others mentioned their family members and society at large having similar ideas of working class people being inherently “unclean” and “dirty”. This shows knowledge of the dirt discourse mentioned in earlier literature. Sometimes, the same was resisted through doing ‘dirty’ tasks oneself. For example, three women with maids expressed always cleaning their bathrooms themselves for ideological reasons, “because dirt is so political”. This practically and more importantly symbolically reduces the workload of the maid. As an approach, it also shows the creative political pragmatism of these individuals: In family settings, it makes a statement which forces family members to acknowledge the politics of domestic work, while at the same time avoiding undesired open confrontation.

Gender and the duration of employment were seen as factors affecting a worker’s position vis-a-vis employers and other workers. A person who had worked for the family for decades was seen as able to wield more negotiative power. Although live-ins were generally considered more important than part-time workers, and although tasks like ironing and dusting were seen as ‘better’ than mopping the floors, this could be undone by gender. For example, a male part-time floor cleaner was reportedly seen by the others as being higher in the chain of command than a live-in woman taking care of dusting and ironing.

The overstepping of boundaries, too close a fraternization leading to an undefined contamination, was a central concern in earlier literature. Ishana, while in theory speaking about her mother’s views, revealed some of these fears in herself:

“[W]hen you’re letting someone enter your house you don’t know what’s gonna happen. You don’t know whether they’ll be lacing your food with some kind of stuff for you to pass out or something.”

To combat this, some participants’ families had instructed them not to be too “soft” in front of the maid, lest she will not “fear” you anymore. Others reported having as children been told not to play with children of workers. Some level of spatial restrictions existed in almost every house. Again, participants said these “social taboos” were enforced as much or more by the workers as by the employers.

All the women whose families had live-in maids provided them with their own bathrooms. According to Ananya, the segregation is internalized by the maids: When the maid's toilet broke she refused to use Ananya's in spite of repeated reassurances that it was okay to do so. Part-time workers were in most family homes expected to either use servants' bathrooms located somewhere in the building complex, or not to use bathrooms when at work. Dharini's family was according to her an exception. The women who employed maids in their own homes expressed putting no such restrictions themselves.

When it came to the practice of separate utensils, Dharini and Vinaya denied their families ever supporting it. Dharini said she does not know of anyone in her peer group who upholds such practices<sup>37</sup>. Vinaya said their maid did it for a long time, but that she and her parents eventually talked her out of it. Noor said the practice existed when she lived with her paternal grandmother but was "done away with" when living with her mother. None of the women who lived on their own practiced separate utensils in their current home, and all participants were highly critical of the practice. However, seven out of the ten said such it exists in their parental homes regardless of their best efforts to talk their parents out of it. Grandparents were again seen as a major reason for the continued survival of the practice.

Restrictions on where maids were allowed to sit were said to exist in all family homes. In certain cases, more lenient rules applied for long-term workers or for the children of workers. The situation for those who lived on their own was again very different. Like earlier literature, my participants also mentioned the fear of information leaking out. While Vinaya said that their old maid is "like family" and privy to most family secrets and Dharini denied ever being told to keep particular things secret, most others reported being told not to let the maids know certain matters.

Throughout our discussions, spatial politics were told to be changing. Participants denied personally practicing any such except when forced by the family situation, or when the maids themselves insisted. It is interesting that the roles were expressed to be so rigid, even with live-ins in progressive households. One could think that an employer-employee relation free of direct outside influences or fears of retribution would facilitate change more easily. Yet,

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<sup>37</sup> The issue of utensils is again one topic where caste and class come to mix.

participants claimed it was extremely hard to change things – even when the whole family desired to do so. This both shows the durability of class and makes the argument of the maids as upholder of distance sound somewhat suspicious. Yet, the findings of e.g. Sharma (2016) support the latter. Regardless of the ‘truth’, blaming the maid is in itself notable for its distance-creating effect. As with the case of gender roles above, we see different forms of social capital emerging. Being (or appearing to be) an exceptionally ‘progressive’ employer becomes a new marker of status for some.

The expression “looking like a maid” was readily recognized by my participants. This “one of many class based insults”, as Dharini put it, was mostly used to describe a disheveled looking person high in the class hierarchy. While criticizing it, Riddhi slipped into classist language:

“[‘Don’t look like a maid’] just means that don’t look like someone from a lower class than yours. [...] They are from a different class in the sense that they don’t have access to all the things that we do, they might not always have clean clothes.”

Noor told the following story about her instinctive reaction to a friend using the expression to describe her, saying it was “not a very happy moment” in her life. Again, it shows both intimate knowledge of discriminatory practices, and the desire to not succumb to these oneself:

“So the first instinct because of everything I’ve grown up with is ‘Oh shit!’. Then the other, the one that has *unlearned* the things and has gone through this, was like ‘Okay fine, thank you! Okay. It means that I’ve worked a lot’.”

The expression had another side to it, which as in previous literature puts the domestic worker in a lose-lose situation. The maid would be scolded if she tried to look like the employer. According to my participants, people expect female maids to dress in traditional Indian wear, and would be upset if they would show up at work in jeans and a t-shirt – the outer signs of the ‘modern respectable woman’. Ananya tells of an aunt whose maids do dress in ‘Western’ wear, something that has upset Ananya’s parents:

“[M]y mom and dad when they went to visit my aunt who lives in Noida, they were like ‘Oh wow look at your maids, how they’re dressed’. So it was like a shock, not a shock but like ‘What is happening, how can she be dressed like that?’. Somehow it’s like an attack on your culture and your values – not your values – but it’s an attack on your culture, because you see your maid as someone less than you.”

Noor said people “won’t be able to deal with” a maid in jeans because it would imply “that there is a certain mobility which is happening”. This relates back to Skeggs and words about bodily embodiment of gendered class and the mentioned employer desire for immutability. As identified previously by e.g. Dhawan (2010), maid-ness is supposed to readily show on one’s body. Participants said that clear expectations on clothes only extend to female workers, which further supports the idea of women as ultimate guardians of class and the culture of servitude being particularly female. The otherwise potentially ‘un-Indian’ (thus ‘un-respectable’) ‘Western’ clothing worn by privileged women can only work as a signal of modern middle-to-upper class respectability as long as the female maid acts as the foil. Such examples of class servitude were openly ridiculed.

We already touched upon the threat of sexual abuse and on the policing of the maids body. Several other fears were central. All participants expressed growing up with an internalized mistrust of maids. This could be consciously analyzed and so potentially dismantled:

“I feel we’ve just been brought up to distrust people from a lower social class. You see everywhere, you know you always automatically assume that the maid is evil and she’s gonna cheat you some way, things like that. I think it’s a general thing – every person I’ve lived with ever has always – including myself – has always been suspicious to if the maid is trying to take advantage of you in certain ways.” – Riddhi.

The fear of stealing was the most widely recognized one. In something that echoes Mattila’s (2011: 179) words on safety measures, some reported their families “testing” new workers by leaving 100 rupee bills somewhere in the house, in order to check if the maid was stealing.

Many participants told a story of something going missing and the maid always being the first suspect because “she is the Other, she’s somehow not even from your own class”. The

sociological language of participants' self-analysis clashed with memories of past participation in discriminatory practices. Riddhi chastises herself for having done this:

“That's when we realized that you know we write papers on class and we write papers you know about this and that and at the end of the day...we ourselves are so condition in such a way that...[trailing off]”

Participants were engaged in a process of unlearning. The suspicions maids face were dismissed in terms expressing disgust. In some cases, participants did however report instances of maids stealing things of little value, which could lead to contradictory actions from participants. A remorseful Riddhi says she once fired a maid who was caught stealing vegetables:

“I mean obviously she's only stealing because she can't afford it at all herself, right? I mean she lives in a camp – she was telling me one day that they have one bathroom in between some eighty families, so if you're living in a place like that you can't really...So...”

In a clear display of attitude change, most showed understanding towards people who steal. Nalini and Maya said they would do the same:

“I feel it's perfectly okay to steal even if one does. I mean given their harsh conditions, *yaar*, they work 24/7 to get that kind of...to have the amount to survive. Who would not steal? I would steal if I was in their position.”

“[I]f you belong to a different class, and you come to a household that's one class above you let's say, it could be a possibility that thoughts of you know stealing would come. Like for example I go to a hotel and I see a very shiny amazing something right, something I can't afford, the thoughts pass my mind like I could just take it, like ‘Fuck that I could just take it’.”

There is among the older generations, some of my participants said, a fear of things changing, of maids wanting more and more. This again is in tune with what has been researched before. Older people, it was said, remember days when the workers *wanted* to work. Participants disagreed with romanticizing the past. Ananya says maids used to be “basically just slaves” who had to be completely subservient to their employers, and that people in her extended family are now talking anxiously about how the maids nowadays demand things like “salaries” and “days off”.

Balancing between third and first person, Ishana says her mother is very concerned about the workers using cell phones or listening to music while working:

“According to her, gone are the days when the service class people were actually dedicated to their work, or in it because they *wanted* to do it. Now they have – or what she likes to say – ‘they believe they have a life equal to us’.”

### **New gendered fears**

New uncertainties arose from being a young unmarried woman, and a potentially dangerous connection between the maid and one’s parents was expressed. This puts further internal qualifications on the middle-to-upper classes. Parts of my participants’ lives – considered high-status within their peer group – were not always readily understandable by older family members. Hence, when the maid was around caution had to be exercised in order to keep her from gossiping. Participants’ abilities to run their lives in ways closer to what they desired were often dependent on parents knowing as little as possible. While families were often seen as somewhat ridiculously conservative, participants also willingly decided to rather keep a distance than openly challenge or ‘hurt’ them, showing typical diplomacy. Sexuality, late nights out, alcohol consumption, smoking and similar were things to be kept secret from the domestic worker:

“She should not know that I drink. Or she should not know that I’m sexually active. Because I am unmarried and it’s looked down upon to be an unmarried non-virgin in India somehow. [...] I don’t know why but they will tell your parents that you’re sexually active or you’re smoking or you’re drinking.” – Maya

“That [the maid would gossip to parents] was one of my biggest fears...like I would smoke...have friends come over...I feel my parents are quite liberal but they’re still probably not okay with say a guy staying over at my house at night, even if they’re just friends.” – Riddhi

The maid herself could also be the reason for moralistic nuisance. Riddhi mentioned that her boyfriend is afraid of being seen with her by the maid because he thinks Riddhi will be seen as a “loose character”. The maid had sometimes told her to “be careful with these boys”, i.e. her

boyfriend, because “they’ll take what they want and they will leave you in the end”:

“So she couldn’t fathom that I would maybe also just want to be you know sexually active with somebody without feeling the need to get married. She thought I’d get heartbroken.”

Some had found ways of negotiating this with the workers. Noor said she was initially nervous to leave cigarette butts and beer bottles around the house, as well as nervous about the maid seeing her and her flatmate have boys over for the night. However, Noor says she “trusts” the current domestic worker after talking with and coming to a mutually good place with her.

Dharini, who runs an openly queer household, found her current maid with the help of another queer friend: “[S]he’s worked for other queer friends, so in that sense nothing really surprises her”, “I can walk around in a towel and it’s not a problem, and she can come into the house and find me sleeping here with a guy and it’s not a problem”. Dharini’s parents know enough about her life for her not to have to worry about their disapproval, and her concerns are more about the relation with the maid and regressive Delhi society around them.

Thus, if and how to maintain ‘respectability’ in front of the maid is a question that needed to be answered for the smoothness of practical life. While these were the most pronounced in the four women living on their own, similar sentiments were seen among others too.

Following up on this, I asked my participants whether they felt there was a class difference in what was socially acceptable. The answers largely focused on the lack of “backlash”. As Vinaya put it:

“I have the liberty to do that because I’m from a class that is sort of immune to any social backlash – I can do anything I want and will not be hurt in any way, or there will be no reprisal, not even social boycott or anything, because it doesn’t matter.”

Aditi argued that the movements of all women are “in principle equally confined” but that some people have better chances of tactically bending the rules:

“[S]o if we were rich or poor we’re not expected to go out at night, we’re expected not to be too free in the company

of men, we're not expected to have multiple relationship or be interested in men other than the ones that we're – or even look at other men than the ones we're committed to. There are all those same rules. It's just that we have more freedom to flout them without being noticed, in a sense.”

This again correlates with Skeggs' argument of gender as a dimension and not a polarity. The legitimacy offered by class was explicitly felt to protect my participants.

Looking at old anxieties and new, we see two conflicting pictures of maids. The first one is the classic one that stands in opposition to what a 'good' middle class woman is supposed to be – the worker as dangerous, scheming, and sexually loose. Such ideas were mainly said to be held by participants' parents, grandparents and other conservative groups. The other picture comes from a segment of the middle class that has personally moved past hyper-conservative notions of sexual morality. Now the maid was conversely portrayed as morally uptight and potentially 'exposing' you to the regressive society around you. Unless a trustworthy maid was found, she was feared to gossip about ones 'looseness'. Class is here again performed in two oppositional ways – for certain parents or society at large as conservative 'respectability', but through individual (e.g. sexual) choice and liberty within the peer group. The domestic worker, once again, can scarcely do anything right. Yet, my participants also showed that these anxieties could be negotiated and stereotypes dismantled.

### **Can class boundaries be overcome?**

This far in this thesis I have only talked of differences and making distance. We shall now, through three types of examples, look closer at what was seen to bring participants and workers together.

Most felt they had or had had important, personal relationships with some of their domestic workers. Some relationships had grown during a number of years, while others had lasted only moments. While, it was said, women in earlier generations were bound to extended families and through them completely assimilated regressive maid-related practices, my participants expressed an ability to form their own, private, relationships with the workers.

Three participants used the term “like family” when referring to long-term maids, although one did so somewhat ironically. As mentioned, Lalita grew up with a maid only nine years older than herself. In her story, their childhoods were happy together. As children they would play together and stand up for each other. The parents of the maid “happily sent her with [Lalita’s] Mama”. The family tried to get the girl to go to school, but according to Lalita she just didn’t want to and ran away repeatedly. Thinking of how true the ‘family’-like relationship really was, Lalita pondered what the situation might have been like if it was she herself who did not want to go to school. In her speech, the maid oscillated between the roles of sister and servant:

“[H]er only work – I won’t say work or whatever – her only thing was to be with me. I’d been with her for seven years, so for seven years I’ve been with her only. And she had no other work. Or, my mother used to cook back then so helping her a little bit and looking after me, and when I started going to school my uniform and all those things. I was very attached to her.”

Lalita spoke about the childhood relationship in a deeply romanticized way, while at the same time making it somewhat unconsciously clear that it was a relation of service. The multiply compound disadvantages faced by the child-worker made class boundaries extremely hard to overcome, even with good intentions. A very different ‘family’ relationship was reported by Vinaya:

“I just think I know her very well and she knows me. I think before I used to be not so open, but when you’ve known someone for a long period of time and quite intimately and you know you’ve been through things together in life. We’ve been through things in her family, she’s been through things – obviously seen me in bad places, I’ve seen her in bad places – then there’s a level of comfort that kind of transcends the cultural stuff. I trust her, she trusts me. It doesn’t matter if our cultures are different. She’s on my side always and like I’m on her side always, so that’s different.”

Vinaya did not have to hide her sexuality or alcohol use from her parents. She lives with them and has previously had a long-term foreign boyfriend living with her in her room. While the parents had no objections to this, Vinaya said they were initially worried about how the maid

would react to it. For Vinaya, this was a chance to overcome boundaries even while the lifestyle differences discussed above remained:

“They said that ‘What will [the domestic] think, it will upset her’. Not that she would gossip in the neighborhood, but that she would not be okay with something like that. So asked her ‘Are you okay with this, what’s going to happen?’ And then she was okay with it. Like for a while I think she was quite uncomfortable but then she was fine.”

“[S]he’s very emancipated in her own spirit and her own way. But she wouldn’t think of meeting someone and being with them, even physically. And I suppose I would.”

These stories were offered as a kind of proof by Vinaya, who seemed to feel challenged by my inquiries as to whether a maid can really be seen as ‘family’. For her, personal stories of overcoming boundaries in specific supportive settings were more telling than categorical judgements.

A handful of employer-maid relationships grew from a political awakening and a subsequent desire to do what one could to help. According to almost every participant, their current or former workers had at some point suffered from domestic abuse, alcoholized and neglective husbands, and the burdens of childcare<sup>38</sup>. Interviewees had at some point invested their time in trying to help the workers, often spending time in their homes, getting to know their families and supporting their side in conflicts about labor, law and rights.

Many spoke of the ethical problems related to trying to do so. Especially in issues around family violence and sexual rights, the workers themselves were said to resist. “You cannot force empowerment”, “I cannot possibly understand [what it is like for her]”, “I can’t just pomp into her life one day and be like ‘This is wrong! [...]’” were typical expressions. Often things became emotional, and frustration arose out of not being able to help. One party would also eventually move on – meaning emotional partings. Nalini says her relationships with the maids had therefore now become less personal:

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<sup>38</sup> While there is no reason to doubt the truth in these statements, Dharini argued that many upper class people have a stereotype of domestic violence among working classes. Similar sentiments were expressed in Ray and Qayum (2009).

“I invest so much, and so does the maid. And when they leave it’s kind of like very painful. So I don’t know, even my relationship has become very functional.”

Noor raised a concern related to treating the worker as a subject of research:

“I started talking to her because I was studying all of that, I was studying about inequality, about how it’s difficult to be poor in the country. I think one thing is, you know Otso, it wasn’t a very equal relationship that we also shared because I got to know more about her than she got to know about me. [...] Somehow at that point I hadn’t realized that it’s also important for me to share my life or like, you know. I was asking most of the questions.”

This, although coming from a desire to help, echoes an “asymmetry” of power (Mattila 2011: 147) identified earlier, wherein the employers felt they knew (and had the right to know) about their workers, whereas workers should only know what they were allowed to know. Again, participants were highly self-critical of even their ‘good’ practices. Personal voices were used to discuss the topic on several analytic and emotional levels.

The final type I highlight here is illustrated in two anecdotes that struck me as different from the rest of what was said. Both in their own way implied a momentary role reversal – one where the worker, for a second, became a real and equal person. Both were told with tenderness and humor, something that cannot be adequately reproduced here.

The first one came from Maya, the woman with the least experience of maids in my group. After moving to Delhi, Maya lived with her then girlfriend in the latter’s parents’ house. The family employed a domestic worker:

“I would rarely interact with the maid, except on Sundays when the whole family would go to church and it was just me and her in the house. Even then we wouldn’t interact much except like her hair was pretty and I would compliment her, really I had a tiny crush on her [laughs].”

While this comment could in a different context have been creepy at best, Maya – who later spoke at length about the issue of maids being sexually harassed by employers – said it in

passing and with natural coyness. Remembering Skeggs words (2005) on the embodiment of social standing as well as the taboos regarding workers sexualities, who we can and cannot be attracted to is also coded in terms of class<sup>39</sup>. The fact that the worker was perceived as a woman that a woman higher up in the hierarchy could have a secret crush on – not just a sex object or a stereotype – is then a radical move. This does of course nothing for any material part of exploitation, but has implications for the overcoming of distance.

The second anecdote comes from Dharini, who says her maid usually works for much richer people and only works in her house because she knows her friend. Dharini, the college teacher, and her freelancer flatmate had asked the maid if she could do laundry for them, which the latter declined:

“So when *R* told us she couldn’t wash clothes for us she tried to convince us to buy a washing machine – which we eventually did – but at the time we were like ‘Hahaha don’t be silly, we don’t have that kind of money!’ And she was like ‘Come on how much does a washing machine cost? Like 10 000 rs? I’ll give you 10 000 rs!’ And we’re like ‘Fuck, we don’t have savings!’ [laughs] And then...Yeah so she was quite horrified when she learned what [flatmate] and I did for a living...I suppose it’s not, sort of [laughs heartily]... Like she was like ‘*Oh my god you guys are doing really badly!*’ And then [flatmate] told her what he does and she was like ‘It’s okay, it’ll get better soon.’ [laughs more]. So she’s like ‘Oh god you poor things, I will give you money until you get your next salary check.’”

By offering to lend her employers money, even as a joke, the maid creates a temporary and – as was obvious in Dharini’s hearty laughter – very intimate and warm role reversal. Dharini makes fun of the bad pay she and her flatmate receive, not in a way which implies hilarity because *even the maid* thinks it’s bad money but because, as she later specifies, she and her flatmate are “not really in [the maid’s] league”.

If we look at class as perpetual performance, moments like these appear as cracks in the system. We see a change from the anxious focus on creating distance to a security (or potentially lesser importance) of class, which allows for trying to now move in the opposite direction. Of course one act of non-conformism does neither create nor undermine anything. It’s important to remember the very temporary nature of these reversals, and that the stories in this thesis always only reflect one side of them. Many participants were often also quick to add that

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<sup>39</sup> Also cf. Thapan (1995) on the classed female body as ‘proof’ of sexual ‘worth’.

moments of solidarity do not actually mean very much. According to Nalini, whatever solidarity could exist is severely hampered by class. Aditi brought the discussion back to women's complicity:

“At the same time, I know that older women for example are the number one reason for moral policing or general like verbal violence towards women who work in houses. So I wouldn't say that this [solidarity] extends very far.”

### **Different from the ‘average’ employer?**

Despite the criticism expressed throughout, eight out of ten participants still felt that their families at least in some ways treated their maids relatively well. All participants agreed that “most of the time” most people “treat domestic workers like crap”, as one of them put it. Their families were seen as in some way different from most others, at least outside their social circle.

What constituted ‘good treatment’ was measured in things such as giving days off, not overworking the maids or obsessing about the quality of work, not being “cruel”, paying for medical bills, paying for the schooling of the maids' children, etc. Among the eight Lalita and Vinaya were the most positive ones: “[M]y parents have never treated the people who worked with them poorly. They're not...they're very fair people in that way. Or they try to be”, was the latter's verdict. Several of the others expressed thoughts similar to Noor's, who approved of certain tendencies in her mother but was visibly annoyed by what she called her mother's “selective goodwill”:

“I was like ‘Can't we just go all out? Do we need to be so selective about the equality we want to give them?’ Because it's almost like – you still want to be on top, and you want to seem magnanimous to the person who's not on top, but you don't want them to come up completely.”

Since most participants had quite strong leftist leanings, they criticized the fact that whatever goodwill happened was always *goodwill*, i.e. dependent on the employers' whims and not guaranteed.

Participants can be argued to have been trying to create an in-group when describing people ‘like themselves’, who are less bad than other employers. Yet, like Ananya, many were

critical even while comparing themselves positively to others:

“I believe we are nice to our maids – then again all of us who employ maids will say that.”

Many felt inadequate, that they could do much more than they were. The four women who lived on their own felt they had better possibilities of affecting how the maids were treated, since they were the primary employers.

I also wanted to know if my participants felt it was ideologically ‘okay’ to employ domestic workers. This is an important question because it sheds light on how ideology and practice are better seen as fluid and situational than two rigid and therefore morally exclusive fields. Personally, I fully believe in the moral sincerity of the participant who both condemns a practice and still lives it.

On this point, my participants can be divided into three: Those who were categorically opposed to the practice of maids; those who felt having maids was okay since in itself a neutral practice that can be good or bad depending on how you do it; and those who do not have a clear opinion on the subject. In reality, the two latter categories leaked into each other as the interviews went on. As was seen, a maid working part time in many households would in some cases not be considered be a ‘real’ maid – and she would be payed better, be more independent and less exploited. Participants largely saw live-in maids as a highly exploitative and unnecessary practice, yet it was not necessarily criticized in one’s own (family) setting. It is important to note that some participants also disagreed with the use of the word ‘maid’ and scolded me somewhat for using it.

Three were opposed to the whole practice and saw it as counterproductive in a struggle against patriarchal attitudes:

“It is [wrong], of course of it is. *It’s wrong to have maids*, it’s not just about the treatment – of course if you have a maid you treat her right – but otherwise I see it as totally wrong to have someone to work for you.” – Nalini

“I think the aim should be to make people do their own work. [...] [T]he aim should be to abolish this practice.” – Maya

“It’s not dismantling the patriarchy, or it’s not making a dent because women who have means, who have money are not doing [housework], but women who *don’t* have means *they* are doing it. I’m just giving my job to someone else.” – Noor

Noor advocated unionization of workers and social recognition of the work *as work*. Nalini and Maya agreed that the practice of maids was about “dumping” one’s work on another class and that the workers were almost completely invisible. They were, however, more sceptical than Noor towards focusing on better conditions for workers and stated that Indian women should instead fight for something like wages for housework.

Two out of the three currently live in households with maids, leading to a deep sense of moral confusion and conflict. When asked about how she sees her future, Nalini said there anyhow “most likely” will be a maid, then seemed genuinely saddened and confused before continuing:

“Or I...I dunno, I hope I don’t end up with someone like that but...Or I’d have a very small place where there wouldn’t be work required. I’d probably manage on my own – I’d try to, I don’t know how it...[trailing off]”

While Maya does not currently employ anyone, she says this might be different if her financial and work-related situation would be different:

“I can’t say that if I was working like my roommate does, six days a week nine to seven, I don’t know if I would have a maid then. I know it’s wrong, but if I was earning that much and working that kind of hours I really...it’s like I ask myself this question also “Would I?”. I don’t know, I really don’t know.”

A common counter-argument, also alluded to in earlier literature, was that being employed as a maid could for some women be the lesser evil. Noor expressed harsh criticism against the idea of ‘benevolent’ employers:

“[M]y mother tried to tell me that ‘You’re providing employment for someone’ – that’s shit! That’s stupid. I don’t want to think of it that way, that’s twisted logic. You’re getting your work done, you’re not giving them money for free. You’re not just giving them money and hence you should feel good – what is this crap ‘You’re providing

employment’?”

Similarly, Nalini criticized the practice of giving old clothes to maids or their children – mentioned by other participants as a good practice – saying that what you’re actually doing is just discarding what you consider “dirt, unwanted stuff” and feeling that you’ve “done such good work”. This echoes Mattila (2011: 150-) who says workers were often highly critical of the gift-giving practices of employers, while the employers overstate the value of the gifts they give.

Others disagreed. Lalita felt that it was utopian to think the maids would find better employment. Note the use of the word “respectable”, which hints at residual approval of the stigma associated with being a maid:

“It’s not just easy to say that we don’t want them to work for us because it’s morally incorrect. You also have to answer the question of what they would do. Like if you’d stop giving them employment, they’d suddenly be employed in some firm or some work that *you* think is respectable.”

The ‘okayness’ of employing someone was for these women qualified through discussions of how one would treat the worker. Aditi, thinking of her future, says she could help a lot but also doubts the ethics of it:

“Just based on where I am socially, I can help a lot. You know, I can just...sort of like you would say patronage. Just having the support of someone who’s from a different class is immensely helpful for them. I could extend financial support, I could extend social or emotional support. [...] At the same time, it’s patronage and it’s condescending so it’s...it’s a very difficult relationship to think about beforehand. I think about it and I’m very confused.”

Thus Aditi stands on both sides of the noblesse oblige-argument.

The rest of the women had less clear views, although they expected to have have maids in the future. Some of the women were more concerned than others. Clearly and importantly, there was no one ‘feminist thing to do’. While some participants answers hinted at seeing liberation from housework as desirable, others argued for everyone’s moral duty to take care of one’s own dirt.

In general, all participants emphasized the practicality of having a maid. While discussions about parents and grandparents would feature talk about symbolic class distinction, my participants expressed their own desires in terms of an easier life. In the case of the women living on their own, maids were said to often come and go with their own keys when the employers were not at home; they were rarely physically around as status symbols. Freedom from cleaning remained an important class marker, but the expressed focus was more on the actual cleaning and less on the symbolic. This partly agrees with what was in Ray and Qayum (2009) said about younger women preferring contractual/functional relationships with maids, and partly speaks of my participants' desire to distance themselves from classist ideas considered unethical. For my participants, housework was essentially *a lot of work* that could easily be outsourced to someone else. As Gothoskar 2013) argued, a shift towards 'professionalism' can on one hand can lead to less talk of 'servants', less false sentimentalism about how maids are 'part of the family' and perhaps more recognition of the work as work. At the same time, putting an unequal relationship into terms of capitalist procedural fairness can further mask the exploitation.

### **Participant ideas on possible change**

Talk of generational evolution within the family figured throughout my interviews. Instead of a clear-cut process, it was seen as a slow and layered. While my participants could practice whatever they wanted in their own homes or when parents were away, they often felt unable or unwilling to change their families. Sometimes, participants expressed a desire not to cause troubles by interfering with what they saw as ultimately other people's decisions. And while rarely condoning of things, some felt that they themselves were not in the position to judge older family members because they didn't know what it was like to really be the employer in charge. Others judged, but without impact.

I wanted to know whether participants felt friends shared their views on domestic workers. I also asked whether or not they thought it possible to find a male partner who would share the

housework.

Opinions on whether younger people in general saw the treatment of domestic workers as a problem varied. Some said none of the young people they know would have ideas like those of the parents described in this thesis. Others, like Ananya, were highly pessimistic:

“No, nobody gives a shit. Everyone is just...she’s invisible, she’s not really a part of our daily...[trailing off]”

Several made a distinction between political and other friends, again creating an in-group. Maya saw herself as a part of a set of like-minded people working towards changing the situation of domestic workers. Her old college friends, however, are very different, “not ready”:

“The other set, when I interact with them, they do...like I have been asked “What’s the point of this?” Like once I raised an issue of housework [...] I was simply asked like ‘What do you want? You want that wives should start getting money, that’s ridiculous!’ I really didn’t know what to say to that.”

Any political commonality was still seen as fragile by critics. Noor was unconvinced of the merits of progressive circles:

“But you know what Otso, I think even in activist circles – I know people who...they don’t get it. They don’t get it. They might think that they’re treating people with respect, but sometimes it isn’t.”

Opinions on whether or not the younger generation of men was any different from their fathers when it came to housework were also divided. For people like Vinaya, Dharini and Maya – whose takes on relationships do not fall into traditional heterosexual monogamy – the division of labor was not felt to be much of an issue. They implied they could always get out of the relationship in case it turned out to be undesirable. Others recounted previous relationships that according to them had been various stages of good, and were therefore hopeful.

For the rest, it was going to be a fight. Ananya laughed and looked at me incredulously when I asked her if younger men contribute: “Do housework? Not at all. Not at all.” According to her, she could mostly hope to find someone who doesn’t expect her to do “everything”. Nalini was equally pessimistic. She recounts a previous relationship with a man who was “very

conscious of all these kinds of things”. Although she thought things would be different “because [she’s] a feminist”, it “turned out to be a total replica of marriage”. When asked what her duties would be if her parents plans to get her married would go through: “If I get married? *Everything*. I will be responsible for almost everything – and housework, there’s no end to it.”

Even while doubting whether or not it was really possible, all women were vocal about expecting a partner to share to workload, and trying to stay far away from living with in-laws. There was an emphasis on dating and preferably living with the other person before taking any decision, to “rather be shocked right now, [when] I can say goodbye, instead of saying that some two years down the line when I’m deep down in shit”, as one participant expressed it.

Aditi, whose parents are also currently trying to get her married, saw that the discussion about young men had to be taken up with the family too, since their ideas of men were very different from hers.

“I was trying to tell them that I want to share housework, and that this is a priority for me, or that I would want the guy to be comfortable with moving with me if I had a better job opportunity. And they said 'What boy would do that??' and I said 'Lots of boys!' [laughs], 'Update yourself.'”

Still Aditi also wondered if she had an “extremely unusual set of male friends”.

Interestingly, to achieve peace of mind, older generations had to sometimes be tactically shielded from younger generations’ ideas. Aditi told of her brother-in-law, who according to her is much more “normal” (i.e. non-patriarchal) than her parents know. As this recalls Belliappa (2013: 163), who says that because relationships are “enacted in the gaze of the family and community [...] women might ‘choose’ to recreate more traditional gender relations [...] and may disguise evidence of egalitarianism”. Again, both feminist and anti-classist change in the family could sometimes be more efficiently achieved through covert means.

Here too, many any expressed criticism of certain supposedly progressive men. Lalita, said the men at her university talk a lot and “at least pretend” to be equal but that things might be very different when you actually marry them. Nalini was less diplomatic about the men in her circle:

“I think they’re all pretty much the same. As much as they talk about gender, but no-one wants to work at home.”,  
“I’ve never heard of such a thing [housework equality]. I really haven’t.”

For Dharini, this had a name:

“It’s what my friends and I call the ‘progressive douchebag syndrome’, which is these like super feminist, super leftist, super progressive guys who are just like – why can’t you just keep things clean! – who are really feminist and really support the movement but who have no idea how to cook themselves a meal.”

Finally, I asked my participants how they felt about participating. Many said that the whole situation must look strange for me, coming from the outside, and that it would look strange for them too if they wouldn’t have grown up with it. Some explicitly felt challenged by being asked to participate, but that the initial annoyance turned into a learning experience. Participants can be said to be aware of the historical labor (Bourdieu 1993; Wacquant 2013) that has gone into creating the current class divisions. As Weininger (2005: 107) expresses it: “as a result of immersion (especially during primary socialization) in a world that was previously divided, the existing structures of social classification were necessarily impressed upon their habitus”. ‘Necessarily’ is for me a key word here. For unlike for Bourdieu (Adams 2006: 514; something Jenkins (1992) criticizes), my participants were not nearly always ‘unconscious’ about the class-based categories of division they embody. And unlike for Bourdieu’s critics, my participants showed both “conscious deliberation and awareness” (ibid. 77) about their reflexivity within the field and habitus. In the interview situation participants were often very critically analytic, even while recognizing that they had not really thought of the things before. Still, my participants’ answers also show a divided relationship to misrecognition and symbolic violence. While their conscious part recognizes power as power and not legitimate worth, some participants language still slip into the classist language games of the people they are quoting (cf Capeheart and Milovanovic 2007: 126). However, some of the participants did not ‘slip’ at all.

## CONCLUSION

I have in this thesis argued for both continuity and change in my participants' relationship to domestic workers and domestic work. Most expected to employ maids, even when political convictions dictated otherwise. Judging by participants' answers, a culture of servitude definitely exists in both current and previous environments. Raised in a society which normalizes the use of maids, and born into class positions enabling them to easily do so, my interviewees were aware of everything speaking for their continued use of domestic workers. Yet, things were never simple. Participants were often highly aware and critical of their class privilege, both in relation to domestic workers and Indian society at large, and used sociological and feminist language to analyse themselves. While only a few were *categorically* against employing maids, all felt that the socially prevalent ways and notions are wrong – and a expressed a moral imperative to change. In cases where it did not seriously threaten their social relations, this translated to a desire for action. Thus, there were instances of (momentary) change or at least an opening up of new spaces, as well as sadness arising from the frustration of not being able to sustainably overcome boundaries. Moreover, the desire to 'help' was meta-analysed by many participants who feared patronizing the workers.

Participants were well versed in the fears, stigmas and techniques of 'management' documented in previous studies. Still, these were mostly referred to as practices of *others*. In speech, third and first person were used to both show an intimate knowledge of the stereotypical maid-related discourses and to present themselves in opposition to it. Two different in-groups were created: one's family against the rest, and oneself against one's family. Participants also exhibited self-criticism and sincere distress when not being able to live up to their ideals. A number of cases of merging of discourses were, however, seen among some participants. It is important not to overemphasize the changes happening, and to recognize that my study only looks at participants' *ideas* of themselves (which may be further shaped by the interaction with me).

This dialogue between a continued culture of servitude and the challenging of the class-based gendered labor and the institution of maids within family settings, has been the

central theme. A strong emphasis on generational change was combined with an analysis of examples of participants' tactical disagreements with family members. While answering my sub-questions I identified a number of further themes arising from the specific situations of my participants'. Mothers were seen as both main agents of patriarchy and potential facilitators of feminist change. Young men were seen as offering both potential hope and strong disillusionment. I also pointed out a distinction along the line of different symbolic capitals existing in 'progressive' and 'conservative' families respectively. The maids were – in contrast to earlier generations' conceptualizations – presented as morally disapproving, potential threats to single women's modern lifestyles. I also recorded moments of overcoming boundaries. Taken together, my interviews broaden the idea of the employer-maid relationship being a reciprocal albeit highly unequal one presented by Ray and Qayum and others.

Class anxiety is another point of both continuity with and potential change from earlier literature. My participants expressed less worry or fear of the 'common' than stipulated in the class theories discussed in this thesis. Most participants showed security in their class status, even while currently living in liminal situations. Various class positions experienced in different daily settings contrasted with little perception of any *actual* risk of permanently falling down the class ladder. The middle-to-upper classes were felt to be securely "shielded" for hardship. This, in its own way in combination with the cultural capital of a political awakening, might have contributed to their possibility of challenging the institution of maids. Bourdieu (Adams 2006: 515) argued that reflexivity is itself "a required constituent" of certain fields, such as those arising from academic training or any type of "crisis". Following Skeggs (2004), I argue that class status supports the ability to 'play' with class. Still, not all my participants were as settled in other ways. While it was obvious that some were able to never really have to worry about money, employment or career choices, others considered themselves lucky because their parents "allowed" them to continue on the paths they wanted, in a way similar to Belliappa's words on female emotional allegiance to parents.

This thesis has also been a feminist exercise in showing how the women involved never submit passively to structural confinements, but "make sense" of cultural discourses, accepting

discarding and modifying elements of the discourses to create a self-identity that is presented via a narrative of self” (Belliappa 2013: 136). Both when it came to gendered assumptions and to the use of maids, my participants could tactically submit to and subvert social pressures. In the cases they felt unable to opt out – from e.g. marriage – this was never done without a fight. While discourses of loyalty towards parents were prevalent and largely resigned to, participants could criticize and laugh at families in the private interviews with me. The women positioned themselves in the vanguard, while conservative tendencies in their own generation were criticized and ridiculed.

Moreover, these women resist any simple definitions of what young ‘Indian womanhood’ is like. Their responses challenge nationalist mythologies of “India Shining”. My participants are part of a group that has benefitted the most from the new economy, yet they are by no means an all-approving part of contemporary India. Here, I join Fadaee (2014) – who (somewhat over-enthusiastically) talks about the “critical activist milieu” in India – in pointing out that there are more than one type of post-liberalization politics. My thesis of course only provides a tiny sample of what could be said to constitute a very loose group.

From my participants thoughts on maids, we can also see how they in their politics combine individual and collective modes of action. Belliappa (2013) argued that many late capitalist Indian women approach things through individual solutions to structural problems. I’ve shown that this both can and cannot be the case among feminist women, and that there is thus not one ‘feminist’ solution to the question of Indian maids.

It is important to note that even new acquaintances spoke openly and reflectively about sensitive issues such as sexual abuse, family troubles, mistreatment of maids, romantic relationships, alcohol use, etc. This shows both comfort in the interview situation and a high level of confidence, supporting Belliappa’s definition of class given in the introduction. The interview recordings also reveal a significant amount of shared laughter between my participants and myself. Observations like these imply a level of mutually experienced kinship and shared references. If I have been able to show that our relationships – my participants’ and mine – are more than just those of a ‘white man’ interviewing ‘brown women’ I shall consider this project a success.

I have argued that full moral or logical consistency is not necessary for strong belief and agency. My participants all in their ways expressed struggles with living up to one's ideals in thought while in practice being less conflicted. Inability to change practices even when explicitly desired may be a result of both individual and structural inconsistencies. As Adams (2006: 522) writes, “[r]eflexive awareness does simply not equate with the ability to transform one’s situation in every context”. More than ‘ability’, ‘practical desire’ is equally important. Convictions of class and gender can be fractured but not therefore necessarily problematic for our sense of self. Using my participants as an example I argue that the need for logical or moral coherence is much less *lived* than theoretically assumed.

Thus, when looking at the apparent conflicts between my participants’ politics and their practices, I argue that both positions can be equally authentic/inauthentic at the same time. While it is of course impossible for me to say *really* how ‘true’ my participants’ statements are, I have no real reason to doubt their sincerity. Taking agency and inconsistency together I want to show, like Belliappa (2013: 36) “that winning and losing are not water-tight categories but points on a continuum where individuals are positioned based on the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity and geography” (2013: 36). I have here extended this “winning and losing” to the sense of personal moral correctness.

## **APPENDIX: Participant profiles**

**Aditi**, 24 years old. New friend. MA in sociology from well-known Delhi university. Works with political research center/NGO. Identifies as very upper class. Grew up in an extended family, with two live-in domestics. Sees herself as economically leftist and feminist in opposition to her family. Says she wants to get married (although not now) and that this is “a pretty controversial decision to take in certain liberal circles”. Expects any man to participate and thinks it possible to find one who does. Lives with flatmate in up-and-coming neighborhood; feels family would not approve of the area. Is very critical of the way domestic workers are treated, but is not categorically against the practice. No current domestic help.

**Ananya**, 27 years old. Old friend. Chef. Used to work at NGO for women’s rights. Master in gender studies from a European university. Self-identifies as vocal feminist. Says it isn’t an easy thing to be, both because of social pressure and because emotionally because of the stories you face. Calls herself upper-middle class. Grew up mostly in a hybrid family; feels it can still be judgemental and controlling in other ways. Openly critical about her father’s lack of involvement in housework. Was “brought up” by maids and a grandmother. Close relationship with earlier live-in maids. Feels that maids in general are often “basically slaves”, yet feels that she and women of her class are incapable of doing things on their own. Highly doubtful that any future husband would do anything. Lives with parents in posh upper-middle class neighborhood; lived in Delhi most of her life.

**Dharini**, 28 years old. Old friend. Lecturer in philosophy at a Delhi college. Feminist and queer activist. Says her father was initially “extremely anxious” about her queerness, but that she’s been very lucky to “land” in a feminist space in her teens. Identifies as middle-upper middle class. Stays with flatmate (and boyfriend) in a middle–upper-middle class neighborhood. Employs part-time maid who was chosen because she was accepting of a queer household; close relationship with her. Sees the term “maid” and the whole practice as problematic. Says it’s not only about the morality of employing domestic worker or your treatment of them, but a

complex labor issue. Does not seem worried about things like marriage or living up to family expectations.

**Ishana**, 24 years old. New acquaintance. Research scholar in cinema studies at well-known Delhi university. Identifies as feminist and left-of-center. Says many people are scared or intimidated by the “f-word”. Says family talks of itself as “middle class”, but sees this as a construct and her family as actually much better off than they would admit. Lives with extended family in the house she grew up in, in a very upmarket area. Her family does not want to employ full-time workers because they feel it is too much of a burden. Expects to employ domestic workers, part time, in a future independent home. Says it’s non-negotiable that any partner would have to share housework with her.

**Lalita**, 22 years old. New acquaintance. Political science student at a well-known Delhi university. Wants to work in government. Self-identifies as upper middle class but says she hasn’t thought about it a lot. Feels India has changed on the surface towards equality, but that this rarely materializes in practice. Grew up in a smaller town with an extended family and a long history of servant families reaching back several generations. Sees that housework tasks were highly gendered in family home. Brought up with child maid, “who was like a sister”. Feels that people should look after their maids, and that maids are slowly becoming more assertive. Is very critical towards certain practices, feels maids should be treated equally to family members, but is not categorically against the practice. Doubts that a future husband would actually share housework. Lives on campus.

**Maya**, 24 years old. Old friend. MPhil scholar in gender studies at a well-known Delhi university. Self-identifies as a leftist radical feminist. Feels family is somewhat scared that she will get into trouble because of this. Calls herself middle class. Looks primarily at her current situation when describing her class, but says she received a privileged education. Feels social mobility in India is very slow. Grew up in all-female household with a single mother. Sees this as having impacted her feminist leanings. Limited exposure to maids. Feels having maids is

categorically wrong, but expresses certain anxieties as to whether she will always be able to live up to this. Identifies as bisexual and questions marriage; says housework has to be shared. Lives with flatmate in a up-and-coming middle class neighborhood.

**Nalini**, 26 years old. Recent friend. PhD scholar in gender studies, working on issues related to domestic workers, at a well-known Delhi university. Self-identifies as leftist and feminist. Says there is support in the public sphere for this but that things with the family can be difficult. Sees herself as upper-middle class; uses Marxist terms liberally. Feels there is mobility for some (the better off) while not for others. Grew up in hybrid family around North India. Critical of gendered housework in her family. Engaged in the cause of maids and very critical of the practice: sees it as categorically wrong. Lives with family that has always employed maids and with a clearly gendered division of labor. Sees her current relationship with her family's part-time maids as mostly functional, because previous relationships had been emotionally draining. Doubts that any future husband would really do much and therefore tries to resist marriage. Stays in a gated NCR community.

**Noor**, 24 years old. New acquaintance. Works at research center for social justice issues. Master's in gender studies from well-known Mumbai university. Grew up in various family settings, largely with mother. Says her mother once told her that they "shouldn't have sent [her] out to study, because by doing that [she] seem[s] to have gotten a lot of ideas", which hurt her a lot. Now lived in Delhi for some years. Stays with flatmate-friend in middle class neighborhood. Currently employs a part-time maid after trying not to for years. Says maids uphold patriarchy and that it is wrong to "dump" ones work on a lower class. Is upset that she recently "gave in" to social pressure. Resists family's attempts to get her married, and says she could never live with a man who doesn't do his share.

**Riddhi**, 24 years old. New acquaintance. MA in Peace and conflict studies from well-known Delhi university. Works at classic feminist NGO; wants to work with women and dissent in conflict zones. Feels there is support in her peer group; says her parents think Delhi is very

dangerous. Identifies as upper-middle class. Feels there is social mobility in cities. Grew up with highly gendered housework-related practices and several maids. Now lives with flatmate in upper-middle class locality. Employs a part-time domestic worker. Feels she has, through her studies and work, “evolved” and now treats her maid better than she used to. Is still very apologetic and feels many things are very “unfair”. Not categorically against the practice. Says men today do more but that they still get to cherry-pick the tasks.

**Vinaya**, 25 years old. Recent friend. Social and gender rights activist. MA in human rights from a European university. Identifies as very upper class. Lives with hybrid family in an upper class locality. Sees her family as exceptionally supportive and pro-women, for several generations already, although “not as leftists as they could be”. Sees the treatment of maids as a problem, and has worked on their labor rights, but does not see the institution itself as necessarily wrong in case you treat the worker well. Sees current live-in maid as “family”. Questions marriage and expects any future partner to share in housework equally; does not really worry about this or much else.

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