

ARTICLE



Tarnished work: dignity and labour in Iran

Manata Hashemi

University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

ABSTRACT

Constituting a growing portion of Iran's labour force, the working poor shoulder the burden of Iran's recent economic predicaments. However, little work has examined how working poor men and women employed in stigmatized service jobs cope with the status degradation associated with their work. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 12 service workers, this article examines how working in socially tarnished jobs contributes to these individuals' moral understandings of themselves and others. By equating personal worth with hard work and responsibility, service workers draw distinctions among themselves, those who do not work, and the 'ungenerous' elite. These conceptual boundaries create and legitimate microsystems of ethical worth among them that facilitates workers' claims to dignity, while simultaneously reproducing cycles of inequality. Hard work becomes a form of symbolic capital that the working poor use to legitimate their entry into middle-class society. As such, this study differs from earlier research by demonstrating that a life lived in economic precarity does not always result in attraction to alternative subcultures, but rather conformism to mainstream ideals and norms in an effort to maintain dignity.

The world of the working poor is central to understanding how dignity is constructed and maintained by the economically marginalized.¹ How does working in low-paying, low status jobs contribute to the 'mental maps'² that workers construct of the world around them and their position within it? How do workers evaluate their self-worth when their working lives revolve around visibly stigmatized labour? Does tarnished work buttress aspirations and engagement with the mainstream or does it undercut them?

These questions become even more critical in contexts where the working classes constitute a backbone of society. In contemporary Iran, where a minimum wage of \$244.70/month becomes the living wage for millions of working class families,³ it is crucial

CONTACT Manata Hashemi  Hashemi@ou.edu  University of Oklahoma, Department of International and Area Studies, 729 Elm Avenue, Farzaneh Hall, Norman, OK, 73019

¹I use Hodson's (2001) definition of dignity as the 'ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to enjoy the respect of others' (3). See Randy Hodson, *Dignity at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 220.

³Financial Tribune, 'Workers' Minimum Wage to Rise by 14.5%', [financialtribune.com](https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/61564/workers-minimum-wage-to-rise-by-145), <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/61564/workers-minimum-wage-to-rise-by-145> (last updated 16 March 2017).

While there is no official poverty line in Iran, in 2017, the Supreme Labor Council determined that the living wage for a family of 3.5 members is \$661/month. However, it is important to note that cash transfers and social welfare assistance by the government have helped to ameliorate the more deleterious effects of poverty. See Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

to understand how these workers make ends meet and attempt to carve a life of dignity in the midst of circumscribed mobility. And yet, ethnographic research into their lives has not been on par with the enormous importance these workers wield in shedding light on processes of social stratification and disadvantage. Indeed, while Iran's current economic predicaments have relegated even more of the country's working classes to precarious unskilled service jobs, the voices of these low-income service workers have been strangely muted in contemporary understandings of Iranian society.⁴ Ethnographic work, particularly, has been so focused on state institutions, upper-class elite culture and the ways in which the latter constitutes a site of resistance to the former that it has neglected how for the bulk of Iran's population, concerns with making ends meet while retaining dignity comprise the bread and butter of their day-to-day lives.⁵ The primary struggle for these individuals is to carve meaning out of economic precarity – to maintain self-worth when economic success eludes them – rather than to subvert state norms. How they attempt to make these claims to dignity is the question which this article addresses.

Working poor in Iran

The study of socially tarnished work in Iran is significant not only because it lends insight into how a select group of Iranians construct their sense of self in the current global moment. An analysis of stigmatized labour in Iran is also crucial because the low-income service workplace is the main point of contact between the upper and middle classes and the working poor.⁶ Much ethnographic work in the global North and South has emphasized the poor's rejection of mainstream behaviours and embrace of alternative subcultures. In this perspective, the poor turn to deviancy – reified in their participation in gangs, theft, illicit drug use, and religious radicalism – as a means with which to reclaim their self-worth in the face of socioeconomic marginalization.⁷ However, more recent research has revealed that work – even low-income, stigmatized work – cultivates mainstream, middle-class aspirations and practices while undermining the more deleterious effects of poverty by providing workers with an avenue – albeit limited – with which to meet household expenses, take care of family members and engage in mainstream consumption practices.⁸ In this view, it is conformism to social norms, rather than resistance, that becomes the defining characteristic

⁴For information on workers' political involvement in pre-Revolutionary Iran and the immediate years after the Revolution, see Farhad Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1980) as well as Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁵For ethnographies in this vein, see, for instance, Shahrām Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), and Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). For recent ethnographic challenges to this literature, see Manata Hashemi, 'Waithood and Face: Morality and Mobility among Lower-Class Youth in Iran', *Qualitative Sociology* 38 (2015): 261–283 and Zuzanna Olszewska, *Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

⁶See Katherine Newman, 'No Shame: The View from the Left Bank', *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (2002): 1577–1599.

⁷See, for instance, Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963); Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Albert Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (New York: The Free Press, 1955); and David Smilde, *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007).

⁸See Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morals and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000); Katherine Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Vintage and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999); Newman, 'No Shame'; and Jennifer Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality and Family in Rural America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

of the economically downtrodden. Regular interactions with the middle class in the workplace thus only operate to reaffirm workers' adherence to mainstream models for success.

In contemporary Iran, an economic recession deeper than any experienced except during the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war has resulted in rapidly rising inflation, escalating prices, and a decrease in stable formal sector employment.⁹ This economic downturn is reflected in the upsurge in both low-paid informal sector service work as well as in minimum wage formal sector service work, where workers are hired on short-term, renewable contracts. Most of these workers are rural-urban migrants who live in the peripheries of large cities and commute to the city centres to work as domestic maids, street cleaners, and day labourers. The presence of these workers in private and public spaces typically reserved for the city's elites has led to the proliferation of derogatory phrases that perpetuates class-based status hierarchies. Terms used by middle-class urban residents to describe these workers such as *amaleh* (low-paid worker), *hammāl* (poor/uneducated worker), and *kolfat* (maid, typically unrefined woman) demarcate service workers as 'backward' and lacking in taste, thereby encapsulating the stigma associated with service work.¹⁰ The corollary to this stigmatization is the notion that these service workers have their own unique culture that is starkly juxtaposed to that which defines the modernity and *bā kelāsi* (classiness) of the middle class and elite. Class distinctions thus become concretized in imagined social distinctions that place the low-income service worker on a lower moral and behavioural plane than those who hold a higher working status.

The positive correlation between 'classiness' and wealth that can be found in Iran today seemingly stands in contrast to the Islamic regime's valorization of the poor. To be sure, the Islamic Republic was founded on a platform of social justice for the poor and an egalitarian social order. Years of post-revolutionary social welfare policies targeted towards the lower echelons of Iranian society fostered aspirations for upward mobility among these very same social classes.¹¹ The founding and expansion of Islamic Azad Universities brought the possibility of higher education to practically every city in Iran. Poverty-alleviation organizations, namely the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, provided aid and resources to the elderly, refugees, families of martyrs, veterans, and single mothers.¹² Healthcare expanded to rural areas thanks to the state's Primary Health Care System and associated rural health houses.¹³ The establishment of the Basiij militia created an additional channel for Iran's poor to receive financial benefits including stipends, preferred admission to universities, and jobs.¹⁴ Social and economic mobility – however small and incremental – thus became not only a possibility, but a reality for many of Iran's previously disenfranchised groups.

⁹Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, 'Sanctions Lifted but Economic Challenges Remain for Iran', Lobe Log, <https://lobelog.com/sanctions-lifted-but-economic-challenges-remain-for-iran/> (19 January 2016). With the reimposition of sanctions in 2018, inflation rates and prices have only increased in Iran.

¹⁰Rasmus Christian Elling and Khodadad Rezakhani, 'Talking Class in Tehroon', *Middle East Report* 277 (2015): 6–9.

¹¹These welfare policies continue to the present day. However, with rising inflation and the decline of Iran's rial against the dollar as a result of the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, they no longer provide the same financial safety net they once did.

¹²Harris, *A Social Revolution*.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Zuzanna Olszewska, 'Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspirations and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran', *Iranian Studies* 46 (2013): 841–862.

However, the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini pushed the regime's elite to embark on an intense developmental drive in an effort to legitimize the regime and preserve Iran's revolutionary state.¹⁵ While the state's social welfare policies continued, from the 1990s onward, Iran's war-beleaguered economy led the state, in spite of itself, to simultaneously begin an economic (neo) liberalization strategy that encouraged investment and capitalist relations of production.¹⁶ Billboards, commercials, and storefronts displaying the latest brand-name commodities and global fashions promoted consumerism as an antidote to war weariness and depression. For the lower classes in Iran, the upward mobility that they once (rightly) believed was within their reach slowly became more difficult to grasp. Indeed, class inequality increased as intense market competition led to the rise of the nouveau riche and a growing middle class. In this new developmental state, wealth became the benchmark of one's social standing. Class divisions – today most visible in the stigmatization of the working poor by those with means – can therefore be located within this historically constituted narrative of Iran's march towards national economic growth.

It is in this context which we must locate the subjective experiences of those who have been inadvertently marginalized by Iran's developmental state. How do those who labour in demeaning informal service jobs and stigmatized formal, short-term contract service work define their positionality? As their standard of living has experienced an overall decline in recent years, do they see social success as an elusive goal?¹⁷ Given their continuous interactions with urban elites in the workplace, have these service workers internalized the stigma of their jobs, or do they use differential moral criteria to distinguish themselves as higher than others and legitimize their entry into middle class society?

Claims to dignity

I argue that service workers who engage in stigmatized or 'dirty work'¹⁸ by necessity of circumstance, and choose to remain in these jobs, make claims to dignity by locating their self-worth in their ability to sacrifice and work hard in tarnished occupations in order to provide for themselves and their families.¹⁹ This equation of personal worth with hard work and responsibility cuts across gender lines and provides a means with which workers not only cope with the status degradation inherent in their work, but also rise above it by drawing moral boundaries between themselves and others who are not like them. In doing so, workers create an alternative benchmark for success that revolves around their morality rather than their economic background.²⁰ Emphasis on their ability to provide and to work hard enables workers to situate themselves above the 'lazy' poor and/or 'misguided' elite, and reflect dominant religious discourses in Iran which emphasize the importance of the 'social being'.²¹

¹⁵See note 12.

¹⁶See also Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006). The state's economic liberalization occurred despite sanctions and a rhetoric of national autonomy.

¹⁷See Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*.

¹⁸Everett Hughes, *Men and Their Work* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958).

¹⁹This is similar to Lamont's findings among working class men in America and France. See Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Fariba Adelhah, *Being Modern in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Propagated since the 1960s by prominent Islamic thinkers including Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Shariati and Mahmoud Taleghani, the concept of the 'social being' places weight on the critical importance of being responsible towards others and upright in one's actions – in short, being a *javānmard* or a man of integrity.²² The *javānmardi* ethic, highly prized in Iranian culture, is concerned with the giving of oneself to others through hard work and self-sacrifice. The service workers I spoke with – both men and women – while not explicitly referencing *javānmardi* by name, nevertheless consistently highlighted the importance of working to provide for others, being selfless in one's actions, and not stretching one's hands out for help – in short, being a person of integrity. For workers, the embodiment of these character traits was equated with being 'successful'.

Simultaneously, however, workers knew that the monetary rewards – albeit small – that came with their labour was their best option for moving up the socioeconomic ladder. They utilized the money they made to emulate the lifestyles of those whom they considered dignified – often employers and middle-upper class others. In doing so, they situated themselves as 'middle class' in opposition to their 'poor' neighbours, thereby reaffirming the social hierarchies and power differentials found in broader Iranian society and reinforced by the state's developmental drive.

Methodology

In 2017, I conducted 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four female and eight male low-income service workers in the cities of Sari and Babolsar in Mazandaran province. Workers ranged in age from 21 to 58 years. Three of the women worked as informal domestic workers while one was formally employed as a member of the cleaning staff for an upscale restaurant. Six of the men were formally employed as street sweepers in Luxury Town, an elite subdivision in Babolsar.²³ One man was formally employed as a waiter in a relatively upscale restaurant in a working-class neighbourhood. Another was an informal labourer who hauled goods for customers in a local bazaar, while the last was a retired janitor for an elite firm. To ensure validity of the findings, I supplemented the data obtained from interviews with participant observation of low-income service workers in their places of work. The small sample size of this study does not qualify any definitive conclusions about the nature of stigmatized work in Iran. However, continuous patterns in the data reveal that while workers are very much aware of the low status of their jobs, they deploy moral standards revolving around the importance of hard work to reclaim their dignity and make sense of their labour. Subsequently, workers see stigmatized work as the best means with which they can represent themselves as 'middle class', corresponding to what they perceive as visible markers of respectability.²⁴ Participant observation I conducted between the years 2010–2016 among young people from low-income families in Sari reaffirm the significance of the quest for social status and conformity to middle-class norms as a response to broader economic constraints among the region's marginalized.

²²ibid.

²³I use pseudonyms for people and places throughout this article in order to protect informant confidentiality.

²⁴Moruzzi (2008) similarly found that the pursuit of social status determines different forms of hijab worn by young women in Iran. See Norma Claire Moruzzi, 'Trying to Look Different: *Hijab* as Self-Presentation of Social Distinction', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28 (2008): 225–234.

The guiding theoretical framework for these ethnographic findings is based on Michèle Lamont's concept of boundary work, wherein individuals draw lines that differentiate between 'people like them' and 'others'.²⁵ Among working class groups, these distinctions serve to disentangle 'socioeconomic status from moral worth',²⁶ enabling them to redefine conventional markers of success, which are often centred on one's economic status. In equating success with one's moral integrity and ability to conform to mainstream moral norms,²⁷ individuals locate themselves both above their socioeconomic peers as well as their upper-class counterparts whom they feel are lacking in the moral standards they themselves value. Lamont, elucidating the symbolic hierarchies of worth constructed by the American and French working classes, argues how working-class culture in these societies is shaped by the tendencies of workers to draw strong, context-dependent intergroup boundaries that define working class consciousness. However, from Lamont's study, it is unclear how visible work in low-paying, socially tarnished occupations can act as a mediating factor in reifying social memberships and a shared sense of collective identity. This is especially important in national contexts such as Iran, where status recognition remains an embedded component of everyday discourse and behaviour.²⁸ How individuals who lose status by virtue of their labour come to defend their dignity and gain social standing becomes an important line of inquiry in understanding the contours of boundary work in the Islamic Republic.

Worthy and responsible

In Iran, among those who are not college educated, who come from poor families, and who are unemployed or who work in jobs that pay too little, there are two employment options available. The most valued route is securing a job – any job – as a formally contracted wage worker often working for minimum wage. These jobs provide numerous incentives – hence their desirability – including pension, individual and family health insurance coverage, disability benefits, as well as housing and child benefits. Part of the Islamic regime's push to expand the nation's social safety net,²⁹ these incentives comprise the social insurance offered to formal workers by Iran's Social Security Organization. However, formally contracted jobs are difficult to come by and often require an inside connection – either an acquaintance, family member or friend – who works for the public or private-sector establishment and can vouch for the applicant.

For those without such an 'in', informal sector work comprises the next recourse. Informal work, that is, work that remains untaxed and unregulated by the state, comprises approximately half of all work in Iran.³⁰ These jobs include work for small family enterprises, petty street vending, domestic work, and freelance manual labour. While the informal sector provides workers with the ability to have a flexible work schedule –

²⁵Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men* and Michèle Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²⁶Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*, 3.

²⁷Jennifer Sherman, 'Coping with Rural Poverty: Economic Survival and Moral Capital in Rural America', *Social Forces* 58 (2006): 891–913.

²⁸Olszewska, 'Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals'.

²⁹See note 12.

³⁰International Labor Organization, *ILO World Social Security Report 2010–2011* (Geneva: International Labor Organization, 2010).

especially important for female workers who are often the primary caregivers of the household – pay is often precarious, contingent on factors beyond one's control including changes in weather and customer whims. Furthermore, without the added pension and disability compensation that accompanies formal wage labour, the pay from informal sector work stops the moment that workers are unable to continue in the job.³¹

Among the service workers I interviewed, all worked as either informal workers or formally contracted labourers who secured their jobs through family members and friends who worked for the hiring enterprise or who knew the employers. Occupying the lowest, most stigmatized entry level tier in both types of sectors, these service workers often felt a sense of disgrace, at least early on, for their 'dirty work'. Hamid, a street cleaner in Luxury Town, described how hard it was for him when others saw him sweeping the streets, a job that he has held for the past 10 years:

I was embarrassed [of my work]. [I was embarrassed] wearing these boots. You know how it is. I thought that these kids who come here think to themselves: 'my dad gives me money every month, and this guy is getting money working for us.' It was hard for me.

Nevertheless, like Hamid, many of the street cleaners I interviewed left their relatively higher status informal sector jobs to work as formally contracted street cleaners when the opportunity arose, valuing a steady income and social insurance over the status connotation of their jobs. 'I used to do mechanical work', said Mohsen, Hamid's colleague. 'I would fix tractors in my neighbourhood. But people didn't pay on time. And I realized that I couldn't earn an income doing that'. Similarly, 28-year-old Mohammad, who has been working in Luxury Town only since the past year, used to work as a respected freelance carpenter, but 'left because of the insurance'. While he felt ashamed of the job in the beginning, thinking that 'in the eyes of others, [he] was a *bichāreh* (poor thing)', Mohammad now feels differently:

I have retirement, social security. I think about these things. In my previous job, I worked for one month and was without work for two. It's hard with a wife and children. But making a steady one million *tomāns* a month,³² I can plan [for my family].

Even when faced with the option of working in more prestigious formally contracted jobs, street cleaners choose to remain in these stigmatized occupations. Located close to their neighbourhoods, these jobs reduce commuting times and enable workers to live close to their families. Said Mohammad, 'my cousin is a general manager in a water company and tells me that he'll get me a job there. But I'm more comfortable here. I don't want to be away from my family, it's too hard'. By the same token, most of the informal workers I interviewed often highlighted the ease they felt on their jobs, encapsulated in the close relationships they had forged with colleagues and clients. For instance, 48-year-old Maryam, a domestic worker who has been working for the same two families for the past 16 years, expressed, 'I'm comfortable here...everyone here is good and I'm really comfortable with them'. An awareness of the impossibility of securing a formally contracted position because of their lack of education and

³¹However, they are able to receive government welfare assistance through welfare organizations such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. See Harris, *A Social Revolution*.

³²*Tomān* refers to the superunit of currency in Iran. While the rial is the official currency, most Iranians use the term *tomān*. 1 *tomān* = 10 rials.

connections serve as another mediating factor for informal workers like Maryam, mollifying their desires to leave their jobs. Homa, a domestic worker, explained her reluctance to leave her current job in this way:

I wanted to work in a hospital, somewhere where I could get a steady wage. A stable job. But you have to have a connection. Without it, nothing happens. Employers will say, 'there are so many high school graduates who are applying to work here, why should I hire her [someone with only a fifth-grade education]?'

Faced with few suitable employment alternatives then, low-level service workers find dignity in their dirty work by emphasizing their ability to work hard and provide for their families. In this view, stigmatized work provides them with a means to assume responsibility for the collective well-being of their households. Any disillusionments they may have about the job dissipate when they realize the higher purpose of their sacrifices. As Bahram, a street cleaner in Luxury Town, explained:

Last year, one of the residents [here in the subdivision] interacted badly with me and said that you're just a sweeper. Some think that because you sweep, you're without dignity. I told her, 'just because I sweep and wear these clothes doesn't mean I'm without dignity... Most people here, though, don't feel the way she does. When they see me, they'll mention how hard I'm working. But foremost, I think about my wife and children. Now [when I think about this], I don't care about people seeing me working here. I have insurance and a stable income.

Like Bahram, service workers often point out that their jobs provide them with the ability to support their families, thereby enabling them to hold their heads up high in their neighbourhoods. 'People [in my neighbourhood] say "you're not a *bikār* [someone without work, often used pejoratively]"', Bahram stated. 'They have a positive opinion of my work. It's *āberu* [saving face]'. Even though some like Bahram face derision for their line of work by elites and close others, most service workers take pride in the fact that they are seen by those around them as responsible, hard-working members of the community. As Ashok, a 42-year-old father of one and Luxury Town street sweeper who has spent almost his entire adult life working in the subdivision, recalled, 'some even call us doctors because they know that if it weren't for us, the streets wouldn't be clean!'

Thus, while service workers recognize that there may be some who view their jobs with disdain and, as a result, often hesitate to fully disclose the full nature of their dirty work to others, they do not themselves internalize the stigma of their jobs. Alternatively, they locate their self-worth in their jobs, creating 'collective pretensions – to give their work, and consequently themselves, value in the eyes of each other and of outsiders'.³³ The main mechanism by which service workers confer value onto their work and themselves is by highlighting the extent to which their jobs have enabled them to be responsible care-takers. Morteza, a 24-year-old street cleaner in Luxury Town, described how proud he feels that by virtue of his steady income, he has become the provider in his family:

I help my dad with household expenses. Like every two months, I'll spend 150,000 *tomans* and buy chicken for them or buy them breakfast... I lend money to my uncle,

³³Everett Hughes, *The Sociological Eye: Selected Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1984): 340.

I lend money to my dad.... I'm proud that I'm working. I'm not dependent on anyone: my hands aren't in my dad's pockets. The fact that I have my own house that my uncle and cousins can come to gives me a good feeling. My grandma came the other day and kissed the walls of my house and said that I'm a hard worker. This made me proud. I've become someone for myself. I'm the only grandchild she's proud of.

Morteza is rare among service workers in conveying such pride in his role as a family provider. Nevertheless, almost all workers take pleasure in knowing that by virtue of their stigmatized work, they are able to protect the reputation of their families. Sheyda, a 35-year-old domestic worker, for example, has worked for various families for the past seven years, helping to supplement her husband's income from truck driving. For Sheyda, her dirty work has enabled her and her family to 'advance':

I don't want to provide less than I can for my husband and children. I really worked hard for the life I have. I realized that in our life, one hand can't make enough noise [i.e. one income isn't enough]. I want to advance, to not be content with little. I want to advance so I can secure my children's future. I don't want them to suffer like I did. I always tell my children to be grateful for what they have. I tell my daughter that at least she has a room. I look at the people around me and some don't even have a bed. I tell her that people don't have a closet or a computer like you do. [I tell her] for the level you're at, you're successful. I buy nice shoes and clothes for my daughter.

Rather than internalize the shame of their figurative and literal 'dirty' work, service workers like Morteza and Sheyda view their labour as the means to personal and familial dignity. In securing a standard of living that they consider 'successful' relative to those around them, workers like Sheyda view their jobs as a stepping stone to a better, more financially stable life. Despite its' seeming economic unfeasibility, Morteza, for example, believed that in a short amount of time, he would be able to become part of the middle-upper class. As he stated emphatically, 'I think in a few years, I'll be in the middle-upper class because of everything I'm doing now'. Rather than an unawareness of the capital required to become part of the upper echelons of Iranian society from the bottom of the working class, Morteza's comment more likely reveals a misidentification of class stratifications, whereby 'middle-upper' is simply considered to be two class levels above. Nevertheless, considering that many members of the general public in Iran view street sweeping and domestic work as jobs that have limited growth potential,³⁴ it is significant that to service workers themselves, these socially tarnished jobs are construed in terms of the social mobility they can bring. Any initial misgivings service workers may have about their jobs disappear when they realize the rewards – financial autonomy, conspicuous consumption, and status gains – that their work confers.

Boundary work

Low-level service workers not only find a sense of self-worth through their ability to be responsible and hard-working care-takers. They also rise above the stigma of their jobs by differentiating themselves from two groups of 'others': those who do not work and those who hesitate to share their wealth with those less fortunate. In this way, service

³⁴See also Clare Stacey, 'Finding Dignity in Dirty Work: The Constraints and Rewards of Low-Wage Home Care Labour', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 27 (2005): 831–854 as well as Newman, 'No Shame.'

workers engage in boundary work, whereby they construct their own identity and moral worth in relation to what they are not: lazy and parsimonious. In positioning themselves higher than those who display these qualities, workers reify social hierarchies in an attempt to safeguard their dignity and lay claim to the respect of others.³⁵

In evaluating less fortunate neighbours and acquaintances, service workers are quick to emphasize that these individuals' poverty stems from their reluctance to work. Some workers describe them as 'lazy', while others go so far as denigrating panhandlers and others who 'stretch their hands out for help'. According to Mohammad, 'I don't feel sorry for them [panhandlers]. They can work like us. If we wanted to, we could also wear torn clothes and beg'. Homa expressed a similar sentiment: 'If they're healthy and can work, I want them [panhandlers] to work. Like the work I do. If they can make 50–60 *tomāns*, why stretch your hand for help?' There was a general consensus among service workers that in order to get ahead in life, one has to start somewhere and work hard. Maryam, a domestic worker who is her family's primary breadwinner questioned rhetorically, 'If you don't work, how will you become wealthy? No job exists where you don't work hard'. As Lamont (2000) emphasizes, the working conditions of men and women like Mohammad, Homa and Maryam 'reinforce the importance they attach to being hardworking'.³⁶ Like low-level service workers in other parts of the world, the work these individuals engage in is physically laborious and offers little respite. Many are covered in dirt, grime and sweat by the day's end and their continuous subjection to public scrutiny does not serve to instil a sense of complete ease or privacy on the job. And yet, workers feel that being able to persist under these less than desirable circumstances is their only chance at achieving the semblance of a financially stable life for themselves and especially, for their children.³⁷ 'You make all this effort so that your child can have a better future', said Ashok. 'You endure all the problems and hardships because of your children'.

While emphasizing the instrumental function of their dirty work in securing elements of upward mobility, workers do not overlook the moral and symbolic aspects of their jobs.³⁸ Indeed, service workers are proud of their jobs and locate their self-worth in their positionality as working men and women.³⁹ In doing so, they reject those who have the physical ability to work and yet shun work altogether, opting instead for the 'easy' way out: accepting charity and assistance from others. 'We have two neighbors', Morteza recounted, 'and those guys don't work! And people say, "have pity on them. We should help them". But if they went to work and did the same work I'm doing, it's better than if people help them, right? If they work, they can get married. Their wives can cook for them instead of getting food from their neighbours. And they can have a good life'. In this perspective, those who refuse to 'exchange their bodily labor for wages' simply cannot attain the sort of 'good life' that service workers themselves have been able to realize, at least in part.⁴⁰ This view allows service workers to place themselves above the

³⁵Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷See note 35.

³⁸Thiel found a similar pattern among male building workers in London. These men located their self-worth in their identity as working men and in their physical masculinity. See Darren Thiel, 'Class in Construction: London Building Workers, Dirty Work and Physical Cultures', *The British Journal of Sociology* 58 (2007): 227–251.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 242.

non-working poor, helping them to find meaning in their low status as domestic aids, janitors, and street sweepers.

Attributing the work failures of these 'others' to their criminality is another mechanism by which service workers assert their own superiority. Those who fail to abide by the moral code of hard work are often perceived to have gone down the 'wrong' path in life. Many service workers – particularly men – mentioned that they avoid those who are drug addicts and engage in crime, using 'hierarchical symbolism'⁴¹ to distinguish 'good' from 'bad'. Mohammad, for instance, expressed his intense dislike for those who engaged in crime in this manner:

I avoid those who are into drugs, into tattoos, into smoking. Those who get a sense of confidence through crime. Someone who does drugs, who does crime, I think they aren't good people. Those who are physically healthy and instead of working, do crime instead, who become an addict, they did it [i.e. poverty] to themselves. Those who can't work because they're physically unable, I feel sorry for them and want to help them.

In this sense, degrading those who are poor by virtue of their moral failures serves as a coping mechanism, enabling service workers to find meaning in their own stigmatized labour. As Mohammad went on to state, 'those who want their dignity will work'. For service workers like Mohammad, it is perfectly acceptable to feel antipathy towards demonized others who 'do not care' about their dignity. By virtue of their moral failures, these 'bad' individuals deserve neither sympathy nor assistance. In demarcating these others as 'bad' and thereby deflecting the stigma they receive onto those whom they believe are on a lower moral plane, service workers are made to feel good about themselves.⁴²

Not only do workers privilege hard work buttressed by a commitment to moral integrity, they also believe in the importance of helping those who are 'deserving', as indicated by Mohammad's comment above. Indeed, they frequently locate one of their aspirations in being able to 'have enough money to ... give to those whose hands are empty' (in the words of Mohsen, a street cleaner). They are especially apt to condemn employers and wealthy individuals who do not share their wealth. As Mohammad explained:

There are people who, with just a little corner of their money, can help [people like] us, but they don't. They can help a lot of people, but they don't because they haven't seen hardship themselves. Those who've seen hardship, who've worked, they'll help the needy. The wealthy don't. They can't understand those circumstances.

In helping those less fortunate than themselves, service workers make claims to moral authority, particularly vis-à-vis the wealthy. While workers like Mohammad realize that they too are located towards the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy, they nevertheless highlight the importance of camaraderie and a collective sense of generosity – qualities which they feel that those who have not experienced hardship lack.⁴³ When

⁴¹Ibid., 244.

⁴²See Jack Douglas, 'Deviance and Respectability: The Social Construction of Moral Meanings', *Deviance and Respectability: The Social Construction of Moral Meanings*, edited by Jack Douglas (New York: Basic Books, 1970) and Thiel, 'Class in Construction'.

⁴³The working class African Americans that Lamont (2000) interviewed similarly believed in the importance of collective generosity and using their wealth to help others. See Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*.

asked about their opinion of poverty, both men and women pointed out the small acts of charity that they engaged in to help the 'deserving' poor in their neighbourhoods, acts that ranged from buying food to re-gifting decorative household items that they received from employers. As Mahmood, a 45-year-old street cleaner, explained: 'I feel sorry for her [an ill neighbor he helps on a regular basis]. Her hands are empty. My hands are a little fuller, thank God. Even though I don't have [that much], I still help people'. Workers' condemnation of those who lack this sense of solidarity with others enables them to draw value and even a sense of superiority from their demeaning work, knowing that it provides them with a means to care for their communities – a characteristic that distinguishes them from not only the non-working poor, but also from the rich.

The weight that service workers attach to this collective aspect of morality – on 'being useful for society' (in the words of Ashok) – further reflects their concern with finding a higher sense of purpose in their work. Being able to employ, in part, the material product of their labour to help those who 'at night, don't have bread to keep their bellies full' (in the words of Amir, a retired janitor) constitutes a purposive action that facilitates workers' 'sense of effectiveness' for society.⁴⁴ Engaging in charitable activities that occur outside their 'institutionally scripted' roles enables workers to gain a semblance of control over their labour and thereby attain meaning in their dirty work.⁴⁵ Service workers' overall satisfaction with their jobs – reflected in descriptors such as 'content', 'comfortable' and 'good' – highlights the extent to which their sense of personal dignity correlates with their ability to use their labour to be effective members of their communities – in short, men and women of integrity. In stressing the moral failures of the rich in this regard, workers place morality at the centre of their definition of success. Ashok even went so far as to distinguish his status on the social hierarchy in relation to his ability to interact well with others: 'Financially, I'm part of the weak class... socially, I'm up there'. Thus, in critiquing members of Iran's wealthy for their lack of a collective sense of generosity, for their inability to be true 'social beings', workers separate moral integrity from financial standing, thereby enabling them to locate themselves 'up there', even above those located higher up on the proverbial ladder.⁴⁶

Emulation and conformism

Service workers do not simply employ moral boundaries to make sense of their work. Emulating the norms, lifestyles and mannerisms of those whom they consider dignified is also critical to their perceptions of self-worth. The dignified are often employers and clients whom service workers encounter on a daily basis in the workplace. Regular interactions with these middle and upper-class 'others' reinforce, rather than undermine, aspirations for social mobility and as Newman (2002) argues, adherence to mainstream mores and conventions.⁴⁷ Most of the service workers I spoke with work 8–12 h a day, 6 days a week. Long hours on the job coupled with the taxing intensity of their labour leaves little room for these workers to spend time with their families, much less 'hang

⁴⁴Hodson, *Dignity at Work*, 16.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶See note 35.

⁴⁷Newman, 'No Shame'.

out' with nonworking, 'miscreant' neighbours.⁴⁸ In this manner, the workplace and those whom service workers regularly interact with become the organizing force in their lives, keeping workers tethered to workplace norms while simultaneously shaping their expectations and aspirations for a better life.

In describing their home lives, many service workers cited the presence of undesirable neighbours and friends. Depicted by workers as lazy, nonworking, criminals, and/or drug addicts, these 'others' were to be eschewed if one were to remain, in the words of Morteza, 'in control of one's life'. For workers, the best way to avoid these individuals or to avoid becoming like them was to maintain a strong work ethic. As Morteza said to me:

Since coming here [to Luxury Town], I don't hang out with my friends. Our paths have separated. I went to a wedding with my friends once and they told me to drink and I did. And then they told me to smoke a cigarette. I smoked and then went home. It was my first time drinking and my face was really red. And my mom said to me, 'aren't you ashamed of yourself?' And I realized that being friends with them wasn't good for me. Most of my friends are loiterers. They have a cigarette in their hands and they hit their fathers. If you go out with them, you have to eat or smoke something.

Mohammad, in explaining his satisfaction on the job, similarly pointed out how working in Luxury Town has allowed him to conform to mainstream norms, by enabling him to 'become one with the crowd'. As he detailed: 'The fact that I'm not feeling pulled to go into crime, to steal, to have eyes for another person's property, that's enough for me. I'll come to terms with this small income'. In explaining the weight they attach to normative morality, workers like Mohammad and Morteza are also expressing a deep belief in the power of work – even in the most menial of jobs – to instil a sense of order in their lives and some respite from the emotional strain that accompanies a life of economic hardship.

In addition to the moral capital that the workplace confers, the workplace also functions as a 'social space'⁴⁹ where workers feel that they can emulate certain valuable behaviours and lifestyles from their employers, gaining cultural capital in the process. For instance, Maryam, the domestic worker, pointed out that her role models were her employers, emphasizing the social skills she gained from being in close proximity to them:

I used to not know anything. At nights, when I used to stay over, I would learn so much from them. [Everything] from talking to knowing how to show respect to others. Like where I live, in our own women's study group, if you say something, they get offended. But not in the study groups that Ms. Sara and Ms. Golnaz have. It's really nice. You can just say to someone, 'no you're reading it wrong.'... They're at a higher level than me so [their advice] is really valuable to me. They're really intellectual people.

Similarly, Sheyda emphasized that since entering the world of the upper class, she has been able to appropriate modes of cultural consumption that distinguish her from near others:

I have a rug in my house, a sofa that are nice for what I can afford. Meaning I don't have less than people around me, than my sisters-in-law. I have a television in my house, a computer. I bought my daughter a computer. This year, I bought a refrigerator. I bought a washing

⁴⁸ibid.

⁴⁹ibid., 1579.

machine this year. A microwave. Ever since I went into high class society, I was able to see them and I saw how they're successful in life, how they worked hard for their life. My sisters-in-law don't have a microwave, but I do. Why? Because, ten years ago when I went to Ms. Sheyla's house to work, I saw a microwave in her house. And I saw how nicely it warms bread and chicken. I toiled and saved and bought a microwave. Or like, I saw she had a sandwich maker. How nicely with two pieces of bread, two slices of cheese and two slices of meat, how nicely it becomes a sandwich maker. I always want to be advancing.

Comments such as these peppered service workers' discourses and reflect the extent to which their dirty work serves to amplify – rather than temper – their aspirations for the good life. In this regard, workers' references to their admiration of dignified people – people that they can 'learn from and use their experiences' (in the view of Ashok) – and their active attempts to emulate those located above them on the social hierarchy, serve to legitimize aspects of the culture of the middle class.⁵⁰ Indeed, almost all of the workers I interviewed identified themselves as part of the middle class, distinguishing themselves from 'poor' neighbours and acquaintances who rely on others to meet basic needs.

However, workers' active emulation of those above them does not imply that the latter have completely succeeded in acculturating the former.⁵¹ People ascribe multiple meanings to their acts of cultural reception.⁵² As detailed above, workers themselves held critiques of elite culture – critiques centred around the wealthy's lack of generosity and sense of superiority to others. These negative evaluations function to limit workers from completely investing in middle class culture and constitute a form of quiet resistance to the culture of the dominant classes,⁵³ thereby challenging perspectives of cultural legitimacy.⁵⁴ For service workers then, one can only achieve the good life if he remains humble and uses his wealth to help others. As Ashok emphasized, 'Wealth isn't everything. Friendship and morals and proper upbringing and humanity are'. In this perspective, those who are able to possess both economic and moral capital are the ones who have truly succeeded in getting ahead in life.

Conclusion

As unemployment increases in Iran,⁵⁵ the working poor become progressively relegated to low-level service work in both the formal and informal realms. Faced with the harsh realities of their jobs – low pay, precarity, physical strain and stigmatization – workers must devise coping strategies to find meaning in their working lives. However, little is known about how service workers maintain a sense of self-worth and dignity in their 'dirty' work.

⁵⁰Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁵¹Bernard Lahire, 'The Limits of the Field: Elements for A Theory of the Social Differentiation of Activities', in *Bourdieu's Theory of Social Fields: Concepts and Applications*, ed. Mathieu Hilgers and Eric Mangez (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 62–102.

⁵²See, for instance, Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985).

⁵³Lahire, 'The Limits of the Field'. For more on the concept of quiet resistance of the lower classes, see Bayat, *Street Politics*.

⁵⁴See, for instance, Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

⁵⁵In 2015, the unemployment rate in Iran increased to 11.3%. In 2016, the unemployment rate increased to 12.7%, reflecting an increase in the labour force participation rate (40.4%). See World Bank, 'Iran Overview', [worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview), <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview> (last updated 1 April 2017) and World Bank, 'Iran's Economic Outlook-October 2016', [worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/publication/economic-outlook-fall-2016), <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/publication/economic-outlook-fall-2016> (accessed 5 October 2017).

I suggest here that while service workers are aware of the low status of their labour, they do not internalize the stigma of their jobs. Rather, they make claims to dignity by constructing their identity in relation to their ability to espouse the *javānmardi* ethic: working hard and being responsible care-takers of their families and communities. Workers then use these moral benchmarks to position themselves above the nonworking, 'misguided' poor as well as above members of the elite who lack this collective sense of responsibility. The workplace thus functions as an organizing force in workers' lives, enabling workers to gain moral capital by conforming to mainstream norms. As a social space, the workplace further facilitates workers' access to cultural capital through their emulation of certain valuable behaviours and cultural modes of consumption of more well-off others. In this manner, socially tarnished work paradoxically enables workers to perceive their stigmatized labour in terms of the social status and mobility it confers, challenging public assumptions of low-level, low-paying jobs as 'dead-end' work.

These findings corroborate recent research in other contexts that demonstrates how individuals who work in stigmatized jobs nevertheless make claims to dignity by employing moral criteria to draw boundaries between themselves and those who they perceive to lack moral capital.⁵⁶ As Stacey (2005) argues, this defence of workplace dignity is strongly correlated with workers' job satisfaction.⁵⁷ It further functions as a mediating force, blunting any slights workers may receive on the job. Simultaneously, however, by defining themselves against who they are not, service workers also reify broader social inequalities by creating micro-systems of stratification in their communities that serve to solidify difference.⁵⁸ Indeed, while the contours of boundary work create a mechanism for some in the lower classes to gain status, they also render it increasingly difficult for others who are perceived to be deficient in certain moral norms to make claims to dignity.⁵⁹ Thus, in carving meaning out of conditions of socioeconomic hardship, service workers also create 'strong intergroup boundaries' that function to keep 'undesirable' others at arm's length.⁶⁰

The cultural processes of boundary work and conformism on display among the service workers I interviewed are reflective of broader historical and social contingencies. Since the early 1990s, the Islamic Republic has embarked on a developmental drive, which has led to a rise in middle-class aspirations and lifestyles among wide swaths of the population. As Harris points out, this developmental push has 'equalized aspirations across the country for upward mobility and a higher standard of living'.⁶¹ As such, the aspirations of service workers like Sheyda, Ashok and Maryam to 'learn from' and emulate those whom they consider 'dignified' should be understood within this broader context. It is not yet obvious whether socially tarnished service work simply functions as a survival strategy for these individuals or whether it can serve as a sustainable means for them to objectively fulfil their aspirations for the type of good life they imagine.

What is important, however, is that workers perceive and experience their 'dirty' work as deeply meaningful; tarnished work enables them to accrue incremental gains that are strategically valuable to them. In this way, service workers are engaged in creative

⁵⁶Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*; Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't*; Gretchen Purser, 'The Dignity of Job-Seeking Men: Boundary Work among Immigrant Day Laborers', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38 (2009).

⁵⁷Stacey, 'Finding Dignity in Dirty Work'.

⁵⁸See Hashemi, 'Waithood and Face'.

⁵⁹See note 35.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Harris, *A Social Revolution*, 143.

redefinitions of what it means to be 'successful' in Iran today. 'Those who understand will say "what a good person who's working and toiling in this heat"', Mohammad noted wistfully. 'It's enough for me that our heads are low, that we're doing our own work, and no one doubts us or bothers us. I thank God for this'. For workers like Mohammad then, while material wealth is good, it is not the sole definition of a satisfied life. As long as they are able, in Mohammad's words, 'to be an *ensān* [human] who doesn't lie, who doesn't steal, and who doesn't bother those who are weaker', then they will have become 'successful'. Attaining upward economic mobility, promoted by the state's drive towards development, thus becomes meaningless if one does not have the *javānmardi* ethic associated with being a person of integrity who is 'kind, compassionate, and giving to the weak' (in Mohammad's words).

Workers' sense of collective responsibility towards the 'deserving' weak reveals the extent to which the regime's developmental project and attempts to redistribute wealth have been internalized from below in Iran's provinces by stigmatized residents who are often overlooked in contemporary accounts of Iranian society and politics. While workers draw boundaries between themselves and 'deficient' others in an attempt to lay claim to dignity, the solidarity that they display towards some members of the poor is indicative of a broader struggle to help those whom they feel are in many ways similar to themselves, but have been dealt a bad hand. This promotion of 'universalism'⁶² – which is reflective of the regime's own push to transform Iran into a homogeneous, modern, 'middle-class republic'⁶³ demonstrates how, as Lamont (2000) argues, the drawing of boundaries sometimes occurs hand in hand with the building of bridges.⁶⁴ The creation and use of hierarchical discourses is not mutually exclusive from the valorization of camaraderie and community. In providing service workers with the possibility to ameliorate both their conditions and those of similar others, tarnished work lends insight into how disadvantage can not only be reproduced, but also challenged in the Islamic Republic today.

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⁶²See note 35.

⁶³Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 133.

⁶⁴See note 35.