

ROUNDTABLE

Dignity in the Time of Precarity

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“Money is both everything and nothing,” said Bahman, a recycling picker in Lorestan, Iran. “Money is wealth, but it’s not reputation. Money is credit, but it’s not character. Money is good, it’s not bad. But it’s not everything.”

As Iran’s socioeconomic climate has steadily deteriorated over the past year as a result of mounting international tensions and crippling US-led smart sanctions, comments like these infuse daily conversations and discourses. The spiraling devaluation of the Iranian rial, delayed wages for those lucky enough to have a formal job, and flagrant inflation have meant that precarity has become a way of life for many ordinary Iranians, particularly those located at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In this short reflective essay, I would like to consider what happens when hardship becomes the new status quo and economic success is increasingly seen as a pipe dream. How do marginalized, disparaged groups make claims to belonging in settings marked by the normalization of economic suffering? Although much can be gleaned about the nature of contemporary citizenship and the social order through intimate understanding of how the sidelined respond to affronts to their livelihoods and dignity, systematic research into the everyday lives and beliefs of the Iranian working poor has been sparse. The anecdotal evidence that we have—informed by inconsistent media coverage of the country—largely reinforces a narrative of despair and lost hope that can then presumably be channeled into rebellion. But surely there is more to the story. Those utterly disabused of hope would not start their own ventures, highlight the social value of their work, or believe they are living a good life.

Since 2017, I have been studying the lives of the stigmatized working poor in various provinces across Iran: street sweepers, domestic workers, janitors, waste pickers, and nursing home aides. Despite being relegated to the sidelines of popular consciousness, they are necessary to the functioning of day-to-day public and private life in the Islamic Republic. And yet, their “dirty” work, work that is according to Everett Hughes, “physically disgusting,” “a symbol of degradation,” or “something that wounds one’s dignity,” sets them apart as inferior, backward others, people who have, in the words of an elite resident of northern Iran, “no culture.”¹

Recent research demonstrates that such stigmatization serves to exacerbate conditions of economic marginalization, leading to, among other things, criminality, depression, and self-perceptions of failure.² Accordingly, we would expect that degradation coupled with economic hardship would similarly function to limit the stigmatized working poor’s attempts at cultural membership in the Islamic Republic. However, in practice, I have found that this group relies on a narrative of achievement based on individual virtue sustained through work to create uplift and present themselves as worthy, modern citizens. The Iranian case is exemplary, not because of its inherent uniqueness—indeed, disenfranchised groups in other contexts have expressed similar sentiments—but because it is reflective of the various strategies that people deploy when faced with rapidly growing social inequality to fit in.³ To explain, I highlight below four examples excerpted from my interviews and observations.

¹Everett Hughes, *Men and Their Work* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), 49.

²See, for instance, Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Catherine DeCarlo Santiago, Martha Wadsworth, and Jessica Stump, “Socioeconomic Status, Neighborhood Disadvantage, and Poverty-Related Stress: Prospective Effects on Psychological Syndromes among Diverse Low-Income Families,” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2011): 218–30; and Victor Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

³When examining women’s online activism in the Middle East, Anabelle Sreberny similarly emphasizes that the Middle East, as a whole, is a critical site for demonstrating the range of issues that affect and are affected by various groups. See Anabelle

The first is Mehri, a forty-year-old nursing home aide in the northern province of Semnan, located near the capital city of Tehran. A tall, articulate woman, Mehri works twenty-four-hour shifts every other day, caring for the needs of those placed under her supervision. Feedings, cleanings, and the changing of incontinence briefs constitute the major part of her working days, activities that hold little public esteem but are vital for the well-being and survival of those placed under her care. As Mehri puts it,

My work is different compared to other jobs. Maybe other jobs in factories or in other places, the work is with equipment, but my work deals with a living being. That means that in terms of emotions, in terms of anger, in terms of everything, I have to be able to control myself and also be able to help others. I love my job. I get sad when they're sad. You may not believe it, but when they die, I get upset for a week. I'm like their family. There's no difference for me [between them and my own family].

Despite the intense emotional and physical labor that she invests in her job on a daily basis, Mehri's compensation is on the order of 800,000 tumans (around \$70)/month, well below the minimum wage of 1,500,000 tumans (around \$131)/month. Nevertheless, it is not the money (or the lack thereof) that motivates Mehri to continue in the job:

All parts of my work are valuable. Like, can the work of any class, from a teacher all the way to the lower class, can their work be invaluable? They're working hard in their jobs. All the way to the municipal street sweeper. Their work—sweeping, cleaning the city—is valuable. The way we view teachers, we don't have the same view towards street sweepers. Do you agree? But the work of the municipal street sweeper may be *a lot* more valuable. It's the same way for us.

Mehri's emphasis on the socially valuable nature of her work enables her to find self-worth in caregiving, a stigmatized occupation.⁴ Indeed, she derives pride in work that is not “viewed the same” as other jobs by the public, but that has direct bearing on the quality of life of an elderly individual. Directly questioning public perceptions of service work like street sweeping and care labor as inherently less worthy than presumably more prestigious occupations like teaching, Mehri relies on a narrative of heroism that distinguishes her care work from those whose jobs do not require them to deal with life and death on a regular basis. Sociologist Michèle Lamont advances the concept of boundary work to highlight the ways in which people distinguish themselves from others to manage and give meaning to their own identities.⁵ In the process of describing her own honorable work, Mehri similarly sets herself apart from those who also are engaged in service work (e.g., teachers), but whose jobs, she believes, do not have individual lives at stake. An example of boundary work in action, Mehri's framing is illustrative of how she defines herself not by her economic success, but by her “badges of ability.”⁶ Underscoring her skills of forbearance both with the elderly and in her own life, Mehri ultimately told me she feels that she is like other successful people who “live a good life” and have “been able to overcome hardship with [their] abilities. I'm one hundred percent successful,” she said with a smile, “because I've been able to make my life go round with what I have.”

Highlighting difference is not the only way that the stigmatized working poor attempt to cast themselves as virtuous citizens. Take forty-four-year-old Hadi, a street sweeper in a subdivision in Mazandaran province, situated near the Caspian Sea:

Some travelers come here and throw trash on the street. They don't have culture. They don't have a culture of cleanliness. . . . Residents here hold a special respect for us, especially towards sweepers,

Sreberny, “Women's Digital Activism in a Changing Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 2 (2015): 357–61.

⁴For a discussion of how home care workers in the United States similarly find dignity in their “dirty” work, see Clare Stacey, “Finding Dignity in Dirty Work: The Constraints and Rewards of Low-Wage Home Care Labour,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 27, no. 6 (2005): 831–54.

⁵Lamont, *Working Men*.

⁶Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

they really respect us. Some people call us doctors. Because they know that we're a hardworking class, because they know that if it weren't for us, the streets wouldn't be clean. One time, someone made a speech and said "you guys are doctors, you're really doctors." Can you believe it?! We laughed and said, "Doctors? We're *ḥammāl* [porters] here!" And he said, "No, don't say that! This is not the right thing to say, you're doctors!" Take Babol [a city in northern Iran] for instance. One of the sweepers there didn't work for a month and all the streets were filled with trash.⁷

As he lambasts those who do not take care of their surroundings, Hadi's emphasis on the social responsibility of the street sweeper's hard work, visible in the clean streets that this provides to neighborhoods, underscores his own sense of legitimacy, not as a passive agent working simply to meet expenses and make his "life go round," but as an active participant in the collective welfare of the nation. Without the street sweeper, Hadi argues, the environment, like the patients whom doctors are tasked to care for, would suffer. A rhetoric of public service serves as a tool that Hadi utilizes to counter his own prior assumptions of his worth ("We're *ḥammāl*") and draw similarities between his work and that of physicians, thereby claiming his rightful place alongside high-status professionals.⁸ Likewise, Amin, a waste picker in the western province of Lorestan, told me how his job makes him feel like he is "doing a service. You're doing a service to your country, to your nation. Economically, these recyclables really help [the country] and spiritually, too, it's really good because you're not wasting God's gifts." The responses of Hadi and Amin illustrate how individuals sometimes turn "pure suffering" on its head to claim their rightful place as virtuous, productive citizens.⁹

Finally, individual responses to marginalization also provide insight into how those cast to the peripheries attempt to conform to esteemed middle-class norms to extend status claims. The perceptions of Sima, a thirty-five-year-old domestic worker in Mazandaran, are illustrative:

Let me tell you, I've been married for thirteen years, I've only not worked for three years. To say I was at home from morning until night, and my only work was taking care of the house and my husband. No! Now, I have a nice carpet in my house, a nice couch . . . at my level, at my level. Meaning, I don't have less than others around me. Ever since I went into wealthy society, I saw them. I saw that they had a successful life, they worked hard for their life. This may be funny to you, my sisters-in-law don't have a microwave, but I have a microwave in my house. Why? Because, when I went to work for Mrs. Gul ten years ago and saw that she had a microwave in her house, I said to myself, look how nicely it warms bread. Look at how nicely it defrosts chicken. I tried, I worked hard, I saved, and I bought a microwave. I always try to be progressing. I [try to] learn from the wealthy class.

Informal domestic work for Sima is not a perpetual "risk-fraught system of . . . underemployment."¹⁰ In fact, as she went on to emphasize in the interview, "I'm doing halal work, I'm not stealing, am I? My work isn't hard. I go to the homes of good people, of dignified people. They respect me." Rather, as Sima's latter comments reveal, domestic work is a "site of resiliency" that offers her, and similar others, the prospect of a better life built on cultural mimicry of the dignified individuals she considers her learning models.¹¹ Relief, rather than risk, characterizes Sima's "wageless life"; this further reveals the tensions between

⁷See also the discussion in Manata Hashemi, "Tarnished Work: Dignity and Labour in Iran," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (December 2018), doi:10.1080/13530194.2018.1552116.

⁸For a discussion of how talk of public service enables garbage workers to affirm masculine identities in an entirely different context (the United Kingdom), see Robert McMurray, Peter Hamilton, and Tom Redman, "Lower than a Snake's Belly: Discursive Constructions of Dignity and Heroism in Low-Status Garbage Work," *Journal of Business Ethics* 156, no. 4 (2019): 889–901. Janitors in the United States have similarly equated their work with that of doctors. See, for instance, Ray Gold, "Janitors versus Tenants: A Status-Income Dilemma," *American Journal of Sociology* 57, no. 5 (1952): 486–93.

⁹Kathleen Millar, "The Precarious Present: Wageless Labor and Disrupted Life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (2014): 32–53.

¹⁰Ulrich Beck as cited by Michael Denning in "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 85.

¹¹Yasser Payne, "A Gangster and a Gentleman: How Street Life-Oriented U.S.-Born African Men Negotiate Issues of Survival in Relation to Their Masculinity," *Men and Masculinity* 8, no. 3 (2006): 288–97.

our postulations of precarious work and the ways that people engaged in such work actually experience it.¹² Like Sima, many of the workers I have met see little shame in their labor. It is *not* working, not having any means to pursue the kind of life that is advertised on a daily basis around them, that brings them fear. Not simply reflective of how the broader development drive of the state is internalized at the micro level, Sima's perceptions of her job as a means to gaining status and upward mobility also reveal the profound paradox inherent in seemingly dirty, dead-end work.¹³

But narratives of dignity and inclusion also are punctuated with moments of fragility. When the possibility of a brighter economic future becomes increasingly uncertain, as it is in Iran today, people sometimes tend to inhabit spaces "between hopefulness and disillusionment."¹⁴ Waste picking allows Amin to feel as if he is serving his nation despite the constant harassment of customers and residents who, as he told me, make fun of him. Nevertheless, as he also described in the interview:

When you go to the park or someplace and you see someone with his family, you feel like you're lower than that person in all regards. His family is happy, in terms of money, in terms of appearances, in terms of how they take care of themselves. But it's like your family feels shame. They can't show themselves. It's like they hide themselves from people. Those times, you feel really inferior. There's a lot of pressure on you. It's like your family feels a sense of lack, and it's all your fault because the father of the family has to take care of the family.

In articulating the moments of inferiority and guilt that overwhelm him, Amin's narrative is illustrative of how certain cultural scripts that the stigmatized poor use to infuse their work with meaning ("I'm doing a service") can coexist with other scripts ("the father has to take care of the family") and create a sense of frustration when one's efforts go unrewarded.

As our interview came to an end, I asked Amin what one can do in these times to get ahead. "You can't give up," he said. "Regardless of whether your financial situation is good or not, you have to give it your all." Work, no matter how unstable, tainted, or low-paying, enables Amin and others I have come to know to hold out, to find the spaces of possibility that exist within the limits of constraint. Their insistence that some good may ultimately come out of all the hardship they are suffering now disrupts our sensibilities about what it means to live with precarity. Simultaneously, it points to the need to understand what people do from within their positions in this world not to simply live, but to live lives of dignity.

¹²Michael Denning, "Wageless Life."

¹³See also Hashemi, "Tarnished Work."

¹⁴Amira Mittermaier, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 21.