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**A Conjectural History of Cultural
Ideas of Women and Work
in Urban South India**

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Abstract

*This article documents the emergent discussion of middle-class women and work outside of the home in India's pre-Independence period through an analysis of articles in the high-profile *Stri Dharma* journal. Prominent themes in the journal's discourse of promoting middle-class working women include the emphasis on women's moral agency and the definition of their work as doing good in a public social space that lies between the familial and the national contexts. To conclude, the author preliminarily gestures towards a further transformation of the discourse of work in the postcolonial era, towards work as both women's rights and personal fulfilment.*

Keywords: Discourses on paid work; employment; middle-class; modernity; morality; social good; *Stri Dharma*; women

Introduction

This Working Paper is a preliminary inquiry into identifying and analysing modern discourses of middle-class women and work in urban south India, especially focusing on the pre-Independence period in the 20th century. In that era, the topic of middle-class women working outside the home began to be publicly discussed in pan-Indian platforms that both engaged and shaped the intersection of nationalism and social reform as they pivoted on delineating the nature and status of women in Indian culture.¹ This inquiry is part of a larger project, in which I engage my past textual research on historical women and the articulation

and decentring of gender norms, as well as my current ethnographic research on women's experiences of work outside the home today, towards developing a conjectural history of perceptions of the nature and conditions of women's work agency in the public sphere.² I call my findings 'conjectural' not only because I am in the midst of my research, but also because the imbrication of past and present does not always lend itself to causal explanation or proof. I use the phrase 'conjectural history' in a postmodern sense, an heir in name to the speculative methodology of the Scottish Enlightenment project, but not tethered to an imagined universal development schema. My approach is more akin to Purnima Mankekar's sense of a 'conjectural ethnography' that locates an ideal, such as 'the family', as positioned interactively 'by local, translocal, and transnational flows of capital, desire, and knowledge' (Mankekar 1999: 47, 102-103). This essay focuses on the middle-class working woman as interactively positioned.

That women have worked outside the home in India for centuries has been documented by studies of types of work they have done, such as that of Vijaya Ramaswamy (2010; see also Ramaswamy 2016), which conclude 'on the threshold of colonialism' (Ramaswamy 2010: 52). I offer a distinctive analysis, one that focuses on early 20th century discourses about work during late colonial times in a prominent journal, *Stri Dharma*, in order to argue that the emerging modernist discourse on work outside the home for urban middle-class women reveals the ambiguity of middle-classness in its tentative deliberations of the suitability or not of working women in the public realm. Situated between the poles of perceived optional work by rich women that was viewed as virtually akin to philanthropy, and the survival necessity of work for poor women, a new, liberal justification of work for middle-class women was shaped as a public social good that was both informed by nationalist reform efforts and mediated through the well-being of others, but that deployed these emerging and traditional views distinctively as a justification for women's paid work outside the home. This modernist discourse serves as a foundation for understanding the growing presence of women working outside the home in contemporary India, and its distinctive contours to the narrative of working women.

Two main motivations concerning audience guide my project. One is that people in the United States have not heard much about the middle-class lifestyle within India: What they hear about most often in mass media is the poor in India, and the rich in India. These poles of discourse are mirrored in the pages of *Stri Dharma*, as elite women discuss issues concerning the working conditions of poor women. This polarity is also somewhat characteristic of scholarship, though there is a burgeoning literature on the middle class in the colonial era (Hatcher 2007; Fuller 2009; Joshi 2010) and today (Jaffrelot and van der Veer 2008; Brosius 2010; Saavala 2012; Donner 2013; Jodhka and Prakash 2016). The mass media polarisation gives a distorted view of India, particularly of urban India. There is much in urban India that people in urban US would recognise and appreciate. Significantly, this recognition cannot be reduced to a supposed ‘fact’ of globalisation and homogenisation. The idea that everyone becomes ‘the same’ due to the forces of globalisation emanating from the West has received much criticism. For example, philosopher Kwame Appiah used his observations of people in Ghana, such as witnessing a collection of people at a ritual who were talking on cell phones while dressed in traditional African ceremonial dress, as well as the popularity of US soap operas on Ghana television, to critique the perspective that such activities dilute the ‘authenticity’ of culture. He says: ‘Talk of authenticity now just amounts to telling other people what they ought to value in their own traditions’, and ‘trying to find some primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion’ (Appiah 2006), because there are so many layers of change in any culture. Based on his discussions with people in Ghana, he instead argues that: ‘. . . cultural consumers . . . can adapt products to suit their own needs, and they can decide for themselves what they do and do not approve of’ (Appiah 2006). In fact ‘globalisation’ can be factually viewed historically as a reverse flow from East to West, as Amartya Sen has argued (2002). My research demonstrates that there was a thoughtful, context-specific discussion of women and work in India in modernity – and it is ongoing in a manner related to globalised discussions of women and work, as I discuss at the conclusion of this essay.

The other motivation is the possibility of transnational feminisms. Notably, the journal *Stri Dharma* itself was informed by a sense of

transnational feminism: It sought to present and debate general issues of concern to women, and it regularly provided news articles that documented movements, victories and setbacks concerning women's status from around the globe as a comparative gesture. As I discuss later in this essay, *Stri Dharma* ran articles offering perspectives on working women in the United Kingdom and the US in its pages. Promoters of transnational feminisms seek shared issues across borders, listen to diverse culturally-contextualised solutions, and desire to de-colonise knowledge perspectives, including feminism itself (Mohanty 2003; Pechilis 2013; Basarudin 2016; Falcón 2016).

By way of illustrating the 'reverse flow' of information theorised by sophisticated discussants of both globalisation and transnational feminism, I will point to an example that was a shocking realisation for me. In a recent article, Nicholas Kristof discussed child marriage today – in the US (2017). Anyone familiar with modernist reform in India will note that for more than 100 years, the practice of child marriage has been much discussed and debated in India by reformers, by women's groups such as the Women's Indian Association (WIA), by religious communities, by the rulers of Indian princely states, and by the colonial and Independent governments of India. The legal trajectory includes the 1891 Age of Consent Act; the 1929 Sarda/Child Marriage Restraint Act, with its amendments in 1940 and 1978; and the 2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (Goswami 2010; Pechilis 2013). The legal age of marriage today is 18 for young women and 21 for young men. The phenomenon is significant in India, where the percentage of child marriage varies by state but the range is widely 25-50 per cent of marriages (Goswami 2010). However, the attention to child marriage in developing nations such as India has astonishingly left unspoken its presence in other nations, including the US. That is, making the issue of child marriage synonymous with India has obscured its global instance. In an eye-opening article, Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times has recently reported that child marriage exists across the US:

You're thinking: "Child marriage? That's what happens in Bangladesh or Tanzania, not America!"

In fact, more than 167,000 young people age 17 and under married in

38 states between 2000 and 2010, according to a search of available marriage license data by a group called Unchained at Last, which aims to ban child marriage. The search turned up cases of 12-year-old girls married in Alaska, Louisiana and South Carolina, while other states simply had categories of “14 and younger.”

Unchained at Last was not able to get data for the other states. But it extrapolated that in the entire country, there were almost 250,000 child marriages between 2000 and 2010. Some backing for that estimate comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, which says that at least 57,800 Americans age 15 to 17 reported being in marriages in 2014. (Kristof 2017)

For me the major shock of reading Kristof’s article is that in most states there is no legal floor for age of marriage: In one of the charts that accompanies Kristof’s article, approximately 25 states, including California, New Jersey and Massachusetts, have not set a youngest age at which marriage is permissible. In dramatic contrast to India, it is an unnoticed, unspoken phenomenon in the US. Transnational feminism itself should supply the shock of recognition: If there is an issue in India, especially a much-debated one, then we should make it a working assumption that it exists elsewhere, get the facts, and initiate public discussion. The value of comparative discussion via global awareness promises both better mutual understanding as well as solutions to shared issues. My contention is that the nature, status and meaning of women’s work outside the home is an issue of global concern today.

An Early Debate in *Stri Dharma*

To achieve public discussion of issues of concern to women was at the heart of the founding of the Women’s Indian Association, India’s first major feminist organisation, which was established in May 1917 in Adyar (in present-day Chennai, Tamil Nadu), the location of the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, and its first president Annie Besant was the president of the Theosophical Society. The founders included a multiethnic group of women, including Margaret Cousins, Muthulakshmi Reddy (also Reddi), Sarojini Naidu, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, among several others. The WIA’s objectives included participation

in the nation through women's political representation (for example, Muthulakshmi Reddy was elected to the Madras Legislative Council in 1928) and gaining the franchise for women, as well as addressing women's education, the age of consent and poverty. In connection with the WIA, the journal *Stri Dharma* was created 'as a political advocacy publication that attempted to create and sustain a community of women activists simultaneously involved in the international and indigenous feminist and Indian nationalist movements' (Tusan 2003: 624).

The journal broached the issue of women and work early on, in the lead article of the December 1920 issue, entitled 'Women in Indian Society' by Babu Bhagavandas. Bhagavandas (also Bhagavan Das) was a Theosophist, a prolific author on philosophy, an educator and a nationalist. The way he framed his broad discussion, which offered brief reflections on education, abolition of purdah, the age of marriage, widow remarriage, and the Patel Bill, was through a discussion of the dignity of labour. He characterised then-current 'educated' discussions of the equality of men and women as a place where '[e]quality is beginning to be interpreted as implying *sameness* for purposes of education and work', and he lamented that such a view ('sameness') gave rise to a dichotomy that pitted 'household drudgery' against 'dignified work', thus promoting what he described as 'false notions of the indignity of manual work'. His analysis of such 'educated' discussions led him to characterise them as follows: In the name of equality, since men worked in 'dignified' jobs outside of the home as 'professors, lawyers, judges, and physicians, or post peons and telegraph clerks – why not the women?' Concomitantly, just as men did not undertake the 'drudgery' of housework, nor should women, or, '[i]f it be necessary that it should be done' then it should be done by both men and women (Bhagavandas 1920: 2).

But this incipient idea of men sharing the housework was not taken up by Bhagavandas. The slippage is that although he mildly rebuked the attitude of superiority of 'such of us as have "succeeded" in life towards such others of us as have to do manual work as a matter of necessity', in his continued discussion he increasingly directed his comments to the 'ladies', assuring them that it is in fact professional work that has an aspect of 'drudgery':

poring over small print or office ledgers and crabbed hand-writing... or perpetual talking in [sic] classroom, in court or on the platform, or listening from year's end to year's end to the tales of the quarrels of others and unending rules of true and false evidence. . .or being shaken out of bed at midnight after hard [sic] day's work to attend a patient suffering from an infectious disease and living in a slum or sitting in shops and offices, hour after hour and day after day, waiting for or attending to customers. (Bhagavandas 1920: 3)

Transforming the terms of the dichotomy of dignified and undignified work away from the dichotomy of professional vs. manual labor, he declared that there was a central principle to defining 'dignified work' that related more to the attitude of the person performing the work rather than the type of work performed: 'Only that work is really devoted which is philanthropic to the extent of involving substantial self-sacrifice and only that work is degrading which is selfish to the extent of being harmful to others.' Although he did not use the term, his references to devotion and self-sacrifice call to mind the concept of *seva*, which Indian culture has a long tradition of defining and practicing; at this juncture in the larger project that I will make an intervention to discuss relevant cultural history, but that is not a focus of this essay. Bhagavandas did not pursue the potential equation of professional and household work as both 'dignified'; instead, he tried to naturalise the caregiving quality of household work to declare it 'far more interesting' and 'natural' because it is 'nearer to the elemental desires', in contrast to professional work and its 'comparatively artificial conditions of what we know as civilization' (Bhagavandas 1920: 3).

Finally, on a comparative note with the West, Bhagavandas assured 'the ladies' that he was 'reliably informed by European and Indian friends' that the drudgery label for household work 'does not prevail in middle class families' in the West, such that the ladies there undertake the work with or without servants (Bhagavandas 1920: 3). With this, he attempted to turn women's attention away from an argument of equality to support their participation in the educated workforce, and towards the 'natural dignity' of housework.

Just one month later, in January 1921, *Stri Dharma* published an important reflection on 'Women Wage-Earners' in the 'Notes and

Comments' section, which was presumably penned by the Editor, who was Margaret Cousins at the time (Cousins 1921). It was something of a rebuttal to Bhagavandas's take on women and work in its presupposition of and counterpoint to negative social attitudes towards women working outside of the home for wages:

Many people in India shrink from the thought that any women members of their family should earn money. It is considered a reflection on the protective power of the men of the family if any of their women should publicly become wage-earners. Many a widow, many a poor relation is kept confined to a narrow sphere of domestic dependence through this false idea of family pride, who is capable of undertaking much larger and more valuable responsibilities of a national kind, such as wardens of girls boarding-schools, posts as teachers, typists, nurses. (Cousins 1921: 24)

The author immediately names the presumed cultural psychology of the family that would serve as an obstacle to a working woman – that the protective role of men or 'family pride' would be challenged by women working for wages in the public sphere. The article labels this perspective a 'false idea' that obscures both a woman's capabilities and the national value of her work. Simultaneously, the author undermines her own progressive argument by framing wage earning as an activity for unfortunate women such as widows and the poor, and she points to the gendered job positions of teachers, typists and nurses. Whether consciously or not, she was echoing Pandita Ramabai's promotion of widows for the teaching profession (Sarasvati 1888; Chakravarti 2005), in contrast to the chorus of male reformers, such as Vidyasagar, who emphasised widow remarriage (Hatcher 2011).

The author regains her astute analysis as she continues her justification for women to work by criticising the idea that the 'modesty' of women would be preserved if the remuneration for their work was a system of 'honorary' payment instead of a salary. Her argument suggests that there were ideas in social circulation that sought to rationalise women and work as long as their labor was separate from a wage; in other words, that middle-class women would be more like the upper-class women in that their work would be understood to be socially useful rather than for personal economic necessity as with lower-class

women. Underscoring a distinctively middle-class morality, the author frames the cultural psychology as one of ‘modesty’, a subject position that strongly implies the need for ‘protection’, and hence her criticism of the latter as well. She counters the argument that the working woman’s status would be validated if her payment were not a wage by a threefold characterisation of such an ‘honorary’ system as: a ‘wrong attitude towards the dignity of labour, towards the worthiness of just financial recompense for valuable labour and towards the necessity for economic independence to an independent soul.’ Furthermore, she argued that the ‘honorary’ system would operate in ‘secrecy’, thereby enabling low payment to women, and thus decreasing their earning power.

Her rationale centralises both economics and self-worth: the dignity of working, pay that is fairly articulated with the value of the work, independent economic activity as a necessary expression of a woman’s ‘independent soul’, and a transparent process of earning power. Women’s agency is to be conceived through standards of the value of agency, and not through the notion of a modesty that requires ‘the protective power of the men of the family’. But what did she mean by the ‘dignity of labour’? Was it the sense of altruism and self-sacrifice expressed by Bhagavandas the month before? If taken that way, the phrase potentially decentres her emphasis on independent earning with a sense of work as for the benefit of others. However, it may be more likely that she seeks to inflect the meaning of the ‘dignity of labour’ with independent earning, such that independent earning is itself a dignified pursuit. Bhagavandas had tried to propose a definition of dignity that was not dependent on the type of work performed, so that the different work of women in the home and men outside of the home could be viewed as dignified, with work inside the home actually more dignified in his view because it is ‘natural’ rather than ‘artificial’; he created a domestic feminine counterpart to the social perception of men’s work outside the home as being dignified, a dichotomy that he claimed resulted from then-current ‘educated’ discussions of equality between men and women. Cousins also steers clear of a direct appeal to ‘equality’ between women and men, linking work to women’s independence and thus eliminating the male standard of ‘equality’ and instead gesturing towards autonomy and self-determination. His argument was basically

that women's traditionally-defined work inside the home should not lose positive status in a modernising world; her argument was basically that women's work outside the home should both be possible and accrue positive status in a modernising world.

The implicit caste and class consciousness of Cousins's view is exposed by the 'Notes and Comments' item on 'Peasant and Coolie Women' that immediately follows in the same issue of the journal. The article begins with a statement that: 'The above paragraph applies to women of higher castes', and observes that in peasant and coolie classes it 'is taken for granted that women should work for pay just as naturally as men do'. Since women working for wages is 'natural' in these 'classes', the author did not have to convince her advantaged readership of the validity of poor women working outside the home. Instead, she spoke against wage discrimination, asserting that women are paid 'little more than half the amount given to [men]'. She urged that the WIA bring a resolution before the 1921 Indian Women's Conference stating that 'wages may be paid according to work and not according to sex'. Revealingly, when women who work was a fact with a determined rationale – economic necessity due to poverty – equality was the stated issue. The controversy was instead around the status of middle-class female workers, who were not perceived to have economic necessity as a rationale, and thus the rationale for their work was not determined: It needed to be created, and this discussion in *Stri Dharma's* Notes and Comments tried to provide that, carefully avoiding equality in its emphasis on dignity, fairness and independence.

The Dignity of Work

Three classifications of female worker were emerging: (1) The postgraduate-educated professional class of upper-class women, largely serving as doctors and lawyers; (2) the 'unfortunates' who were culturally marginalised for being poor and having to work for money or, in the case of widows, marginalised for other reasons that prevented them from working for money to meet their needs; and (3) educated middle-class women who were enjoined by *Stri Dharma* to adopt the perspective of

the 'dignity of work', framed at least in part by conflicting statements on working inside (Bhagavandas) or outside (Cousins) of the home. Defining the 'dignity of work' performed outside of the home for the middle class in a convincing manner was at the heart of creating a discourse on its social acceptability.

The WIA attempted to promote a direct link between education and work for the non-elite groups, distinguished from each other by different tracks. The first All India Women's Conference at Poona University in January 1927, which was spearheaded by Margaret Cousins, who was founder-secretary of the WIA and editor of *Stri Dharma*, viewed discrete education levels as leading to distinctive types of work:

Among the recommendations were: that primary education should include handwork, manual training and domestic science which would later be followed by vocational training, and that the dignity of labour be emphasized; that college courses should include social service, journalism, politics as practical sciences, and women's colleges should become centres of active corporate life. (Kumar 1997: 68)

The education for poorer women was bodily and practically defined, a regime of manual and physical discipline that would add training and thus dignity to their work in factories such as mills. The corporeal focus could then be extended to conditions of factory work: 'the Women's Indian Association was the first women's organization to take up women workers' demands, and the group of moderate nationalists that they were associated with were the first to raise the issue of maternity leave and benefits for women workers' (Kumar 1997: 67). By the 1930s the demands for women working in factories articulated in *Stri Dharma* included maternity benefits, employment of midwives at factories, compulsory provision of crèches and maximum carry weights for women, some of which were developed comparatively in relation to evolving British labour laws.³

It made sense that factory working women would become a focus in this time period, since during the 1920s women increasingly moved into jobs in the mines and the mills (Kumar 1997; Banerjee 2006; Broome 2012: 48-53). However, this left a gap concerning the middle

class since the discourse in *Stri Dharma* was produced by elite women about poor working women.

For the middle classes, there were issues that complicated the possibility of work outside the home. These issues had to do with preserving social standing by protecting the body rather than by disciplining it. One was the participation of the middle classes in education itself. The middle class was viewed as simultaneously a potential vanguard for progressive reform and a conservative block. For example, Padmini Swaminathan notes that the middle class resisted the innovation of co-educational classrooms beyond the lower elementary school level:

While data showed that the districts in which the public had been prepared to accept co-education were the ones which had seen the most advance in girls' education, the Conference of Women Officers, in their discussion on the possibility and desirability of developing co-education in the Madras Presidency resolved that pupils below the age of eight should be taught together by women teachers; as regards pupils above this age, they reached the following conclusion:

that co-education was not objected to by the backward classes or by the educationally advanced but there was a strong feeling against it in the middle classes and that, as it was amongst this class that most rapid progress could be made at present, co-education on any considerable scale could not be introduced effectively now. (Swaminathan 1999: 29, citing Educational G.O. No. 587, 23 March 1929)

And yet the female officers did characterise the middle classes as where the 'most rapid progress could be made at present'.

Another was a persistent popular representation of education as a moral good in and of itself, separate and apart from gainful career. The dignity of education for the middle class was perceived to rely on its separation from having to deploy it for work. Contemporaneously circulating popular literature in Tamil, though it raised the issue of women and work as a potential result of education, came down squarely on the safe side of viewing education for middle-class women as a moral goal in and of itself, set apart from wage earning. In her study of Vedanayakam Pillai's *Pratapa Mudaliyar Charitam*, A. Madhaviah's

Padmavati Charitram as well as his controversial *Savitri Charitram*, and Subramania Bharati's *Chandrikayin Katai*, Sita Anantha S. Raman finds that while these male reformers 'successfully challenged unjust customs, such as girls' illiteracy, child marriages and widow abuse, their paradigms on modern womanhood inhibited the full development of gender equality' (2000: 93). For example, specifically on the subject of work: 'While Madhavia ridiculed male anxiety over the possible promiscuity of learned women, he revealed his own similar doubt. Why educate women if they were never to be allowed to work outside the home? Yet his hero supported education on its own merit' (2000: 106). The hero in his *Padmavati Charitram* states that: 'We must consider that the main benefits from education are a broadened mind, mental detachment, and virtuous conduct. Money and fame are secondary. Only if we accept this can we appreciate the great importance of educating girls' (2000: 106). Raman comments: 'Most of the fictional middle-class women graciously allowed men to sustain the family financially' (2000: 107).

S. Anandhi's analysis of the autobiographies of Muthulakshmi Reddy captures the middle-class concern to keep an educated woman's identity pristine: In 'recovering the educated woman as an unsullied category not inflected by other identities', Muthulakshmi Reddy eschewed discussion of caste and explicitly excluded the figure of the devadasi, eliding controversial aspects of her own autobiography as the daughter of a Brahmin and a devadasi (Anandhi 2008: 13). In the case of middle-class working women, the identity needed to be unsullied by money.

Could the 'dignity of labour' be conceptualised in such a way as to create an 'unsullied' working woman identity? The January 1931 issue of *Stri Dharma* reprinted an article by Muthulakshmi Reddy published the year before entitled, 'A Plea for Women Civic Police'. This article, in which a clearly middle-class job in the public sphere is the topic, is both rare and valuable. Here is her rationale for her call for women to join the police force:

There are in the Statute Book a number of laws for the protection of women and children, e.g., there is the Children's Act, there is the Sarda Act, there is the Act for the closure of brothels and immoral

traffic. I feel that if the help and co-operation of women are to be secured for working the Acts in a humane spirit, we must do something to have women on the police staff. The idea must be a novel one to many of us in this country and may not, perhaps, find popular support. When women entered the medical, nursing and legal professions they were not at first welcomed, but now, when they have made themselves useful to the public, their services are very much appreciated. Therefore, it is very necessary that women should be employed in the police force to deal with juvenile offenders and women prisoners. (Muthulakshmi Reddy 1931: 91)

Here, we see an interesting twist to the ‘protection’ argument in that the idea of protecting women is maintained, but this premise engages rather than precludes women in the workforce. At the centre is the enforcement of legislation ‘for the protection of women and children’ in society. Based on the actions cited by Muthulakshmi Reddy, this legislation presumed to protect women and children from adult male sexual aggression in society. The analogue is that women and children need protection within police custody as well: ‘Even though the poor and the down-trodden need our help, very often we know, and we do realise every minute, it is only the poor and the helpless that are oppressed and molested in the administration of those very laws which are meant to protect them’ (Muthulakshmi Reddy 1931: 92). The people who are described as needing protection are understood to be an underclass of immoral people – women in prostitution, women who break the law, and children who break the law. In contrast, the women who will help these unfortunates by providing protection are humane and helpful, by which they are ‘useful to the public’; these are the qualities Muthulakshmi Reddy points to in support of her idea that women should enter the police force, as well as her appeal to the track record of women in the medical, nursing and legal professions as a precedent. In effect, the argument is that moral women have standing to operate in the public sphere.

Women in the police force would be distinguished from the men on the force not only by their morality, but also their education level and their job focus. Muthulakshmi Reddy intended that the female civic police would be higher in status than the ordinary policeman on the

beat: 'I am not, however, pleading for the employment of women in the constable grade of the Indian Police. We want women of higher educational qualification who should possess some training in welfare work, for example, experienced nurses who are performing the duties of Health Visitors. Women doctors are also necessary in the police force as the ages of young girls have often to be determined and their persons have to be examined for any infection or for cases of rape and other inquiries' (Reddy 1931: 92). The women on the police force would thus have higher educational qualification than men, and in some cases be fully trained for other jobs (nurses, doctors).

Of particular importance is the gender matching of the proposal, that women should help women and by extension children via the presumed theme of motherhood. As Padmini Swaminathan has pointed out, in the three decades leading to 20th century there was an increasingly developed rhetoric that promoted the necessity of female teachers, particularly for younger children (Swaminathan 1999). This is what I term a 'gendered socially useful' perspective on women and work. That is, the middle-class female worker has the greatest chance of social acceptance when her work deals primarily with women and children. The perspective was also inscribed in Muthulakshmi Reddy's own medical practice, since she had worked as house surgeon at the Government Hospital for Women and Children in Chennai prior to her political career, thus presumably experiencing firsthand '[w]hen women entered the medical, nursing and legal professions they were not at first welcomed'. Indeed, Muthulakshmi Reddy's 'autobiographical writings incite women to become part of the public sphere by giving a series of reasons by positioning her own life as an instance' (Anandhi 2008: 10).

Muthulakshmi Reddy's approach can in part be characterised by Sylvia Walby's differentiation between private and public patriarchies in recent British history: 'Within paid work there was a shift from an exclusionary strategy to a segregationist one, which was a movement from attempting to exclude women from paid work to accepting their presence but confining them to jobs which were segregated and graded lower than those of men' (1990: 179). However, I will note two counterpoints. One is that in Muthulakshmi Reddy's proposal, women

are not graded lower than men because they have a higher educational qualification. Second, since I am coming from a US context which has a long history of 'segregation' being equivalent to the violent maintenance of severe public spatial boundaries based on race, I would emphasise that Muthulakshmi Reddy's vision is that women would serve in a visible and collegial manner in the police system. A follow-up article in *Stri Dharma* later in 1931 on 'Duties of Women Police' (Vol. 14, August 1931: 462) listed some 20 actions, including 'taking charge of women and girls who have attempted suicide', 'taking depositions from women and children in cases of criminal or indecent assault', 'searching women prisoners', 'assisting at raids on brothels', conveying, accompanying and attending women to court and investigative observation work.⁴ I prefer to characterise views of women's public participation in this era as 'separated' rather than 'segregated' by gendered assumptions. Women in the police force would be separated from male constables due to their disposition ('humane'), education ('higher qualification' in 'welfare work'), status ('higher'), and focus (women and children), but they would be working alongside them in specific tasks. Together, these characteristics would give women standing in the public sphere as police workers, constituting a new direction that builds generally on work women were already performing in the public sphere, and specifically insofar as established nurses may transition to police work.

The evolving discourse on women and work in the pages of *Stri Dharma*, as represented by Muthulakshmi Reddy's argument for women police, reveals emerging components of the 'dignity of work' for middle-class women. One emphasis is a moral agency for middle-class women who engage in work outside the home, supported by their educational qualifications. In this logic, middle-class women are implicitly defined as those who have made the right moral choices in contrast to those they will help: prostitutes, who have made the wrong moral choices, and children, who do not have the capacity for mature moral reasoning.⁵ Because of the differences in moral standing, middle-class women are perceived to be the best candidates for aspects of police work that demand contact based on a gendered logic. It is on this gendered moral basis, as well as their enhanced educational qualifications, that middle-class women would themselves act to physically protect women

and children whose bodies were regulated by the police enforcement of national legislation that was rationalised by members of society as protecting women and children.

A Public Social Good

The 1921 article on ‘Women Wage Earners’, discussed earlier in this essay, sought to decentre the norm that middle- and upper-class women needed protective confinement in the home by making an appeal to their capacity to take on ‘larger and more valuable responsibilities of a national kind’. In the pre-Independence era, middle-class women and work sat uneasily within the borders of the very traditional ideology that women serve husband and family inside the home, and the new idea that women could participate outside the home in the nationalist reform project. In the pages of *Stri Dharma*, the two poles of domesticity and nationalism were addressed through the prism of women’s rights. Social customs that confined women to the domestic sphere were rejected on the basis that they were oppression of women’s rights under the guise of ‘protection’. In June 1931, when Muthulakshmi Reddy was the editor of the journal, an item on ‘Women’s Indian Associations Views on the Congress Resolutions’ appeared in the ‘Notes and Comments’ section, and one of its topics was on ‘Protection for Women’. This statement argued that such a notion of protection was at the root of the social oppression of women:

The Association is strongly opposed to the use of this phrase because the experience of women in other countries as well as our past history has shown that the so-called ‘protection for women’ has resulted in oppression and exploitation of women and restriction of their rights. For example, the custom of purdah, polygamy, child-marriage, etc., are said to have been introduced at one time for the safety and protection of the women’s person and honour. Have not women of the present day realized in full the evil consequences of such protective measures? (Vol. 14, No. 8 (June 1931): 332)

The goal was to demand and obtain ‘fundamental rights’ for women, such as equal rights of inheritance; rights upon their body, mind

and children; right to employment in all departments of public services; equal rights of citizenship; right to education and adult franchise; and the 'dignity of free labour', as Sri Saraladevi argued in her 1931 Presidential Address.⁶ The way to achieve those rights was by supporting Gandhi's movement: 'The atmosphere of operation [the demand rights] is more favorable in a Swaraj Government than in a bureaucratic one.'⁷ Women were encouraged to be active outside the home in order to help cure those social ills and demand rights in the service of the nationalist project.

Muthulakshmi Reddy's proposal for women police alters this discussion of the polarity between home and nation: she characterises working women as those who have 'made themselves useful to the public'. I think it is significant that she said 'the public' rather than 'the nation'. 'The public' is a social designation that signals unpredictable heterogeneity, and this does characterise for example a police officer's exposure to society. Although we saw that women are separated within the police force in a number of ways, their exposure to the heterogeneity of society also applies. This is different than a national focus, in which a unified focus if not goal is – accurately or inaccurately – presumed. It is also different from the family context, which is known and has limited definition. The social public with which one interacts in a work context stands between the nation and the personal family.

Muthulakshmi Reddy's argument is that women who serve on the police force are doing a public social good. The issue of doing a public social good nuances the three-fold classification of working women mentioned earlier: (1) The postgraduate-educated professional class of upper-class women, largely serving as doctors and lawyers; (2) the 'unfortunates' who were culturally marginalised for being poor and having to work for money or, in the case of widows, marginalised for other reasons that prevented them from working for money to meet their needs; and (3) educated middle-class women who were enjoined by *Stri Dharma* to adopt the perspective of the 'dignity of work'.

The postgraduate-educated professional class of women could largely be presumed to be both upper-class and upper-caste. Muthulakshmi Reddy's own background as the issue of a mixed caste

marriage (Brahmin father and Devadasi mother) from the middle class (father was the principal of Maharaja College) challenges this; however, she herself presented 'the educated woman as an unsullied category not inflected by other identities' (Anandhi 2008: 13). This category of woman represented itself as above such distinctions, instead defined by their work to do good in the world, particularly as reformers: '[Muthulakshmi Reddy] legitimizes the "moral authority" of the few educated women ("only a few educated women of the land can speak, on behalf of our sex") like her, who are supposed to be capable of rational thinking, to speak on behalf of the entire womenfolk. . . .thus effectively represent[ing] the "other" women and their varied negotiations with different aspects of the societal life as in need of reform' (Anandhi 2008: 13). Postgraduate-educated working women represented themselves as primarily focused on doing social good. Because of their social and economic status, that they earned a wage for their work was very much secondary, to the extent of not being discussed.

In contrast, the poorest women were assumed to have to work for a wage in order to survive. They were not perceived to be working for the public social good, but for their own families. Needing the money eclipsed the possibility of defining the work as a social good, in this way of thinking. And so, the wages and other labor conditions of poor women were actively discussed in detail in the pages of *Stri Dharma* as the major issues concerning poor women and work.

The category of middle-class women represented a mediating term, not just by way of caste or class but also in terms of the way their work was discussed. Unlike privileged upper classes, middle-class women arguably had to work because they needed the income to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. As discussed earlier, there was an anxiety about money lest it 'sully' the middle-class working women's identity. Early discussions in *Stri Dharma* concern the 'dignity of work', which had to be asserted for the middle class, whereas postgraduate-educated women brought their dignity of caste and class to the work, while poor women were dignified by training to do work. What analysis of the discourse in *Stri Dharma* shows is that it needed to be argued that middle-class women could bring a unique dignity to paid work by their own moral

status. When she describes women in the police force, Muthulakshmi Reddy emphasises their moral standing and not their wage:

For social purity and rescue work women-workers are absolutely necessary. The Act for the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic and for the rescue of minor girls gives extensive powers to the police to enter and search brothels for the rescue of minor girls. Any officer of the Sub-Inspector grade may be authorized by the Commissioner of Police or the District Magistrate to enter any house of ill-fame. It is highly desirable that during their entry and investigation they should be accompanied by either paid or honorary woman social purity worker. (Muthalakshmi Reddy 1931: 93)⁸

The ‘social good’/‘social purity’ patina of women’s work is here being extended from the professional working woman category (the ‘honorary’ worker) to the middle-class working woman category (the ‘paid’ category).

As the idea that women *generally* needed protection came under scrutiny, the argument that women were empowered to work in the public sphere based on their moral agency, as well as their educational qualifications, revealed the disabling assumptions behind ‘protection’ for all women, precipitating a discussion of which women needed protection and how more advantaged women could do social good by providing that protection through work in the public social sphere outside of the home. As part of its internationalist view, *Stri Dharma* reprinted articles authored by women in other countries. An article by Helen Elizabeth Brown, President of the Business and Professional Women’s Council of Maryland, USA, on the topic of the ‘so-called protective legislation for women’ added to the discussion of defining areas of protection for women. This article asserted that employment was not an arena in which women needed special protections:

This organization believes that labour legislation should be enacted for all workers, based on the nature of work instead of the sex of the worker. ‘Protective’ legislation that applies to women, but exempts me, handicaps women’s economic welfare. It limits the woman worker’s scope of activity and increases that of the man by barring her from certain occupations, by excluding her from employment at night, and by ‘protecting’ her to such an extent as to render her ineffective as a competitor.

Furthermore, to restrict the conditions of women's work and not those of men fortifies the harmful assumption that to labour for pay is primarily the prerogative of the male and that women are a class apart, who are only allowed to engage in paid work at special hours, under special supervision, and subject to special government regulations. (*Stri Dharma* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Nov. 1931): 33-34).

An article on 'The Right of Married Women to Earn' by British women's rights activist Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence that describes a demonstration in Central Hall, Westminster, echoes Cousins's assertion of the 'necessity for economic independence to an independent soul' as well as Sri Saraladevi's emphasis on rights and equality:

This old enemy [masculine domination] has to bring his strategy up-to-date, and that is the reason why he fastens to-day on the widespread grievance of unemployment. First let this attack be concentrated upon the professional and industrial status of married women. If that is successful, it will pave the way to a further attack upon the right of all women to earn their own livelihood, except as servants or in the lowest paid industries. And then women will be back again where they were before they won their emancipation! (*Stri Dharma* Vol. 17, No. 4 (Feb. 1934): 172-173; reprinted from *The Vote*)

The decade of the 1920s into the 1930s reveals that women were increasingly cognisant of, and responsive to, retrogressive arguments made against their working in the public sphere. The elite women who edited *Stri Dharma* had an investment in the way women and work was perceived, because any characterisation of it reflected on their own labour in the public sphere, since society tended to group women as a 'class' unto itself. What we can see from the discourses in *Stri Dharma* is the effort to carve out distinctive meanings of the 'dignity of work' to support women's work outside the home in a modernising society. These discourses, inflected by caste and class, built on both the growing widespread acceptance of education for girls and women, and in the case of middle-class working women, emphasised the moral public good of such works. In essence, the 'dignity' of their labor was constructed by their education and their morality, and it would serve as an intervention that would in turn dignify the public sphere. Through encouraging internationally-informed discussion within India, *Stri Dharma* produced

distinctive, yet supportive, discourses to advocate for the contested possibility of women's work outside the home.

Concluding Thoughts

The discourse on middle-class working women in the pages of *Stri Dharma*, much as it achieved, only hinted at other justifications that became more prominent in the ensuing years and served to decentre the primacy of *Stri Dharma's* moralising emphasis. My conjectural suggestions are that work as a right and work as personal self-fulfilment for middle-class women largely displaced the 'work as public social good' notion, and even transferred that idea to become a characterisation of poor women's work today. The major connecting thread I see between then and now is the anxiety over money that consistently characterised *Stri Dharma's* discourses of middle-class working women.

The language and consciousness of rights, which had been explicitly promoted in the pages of *Stri Dharma* by 1931, became increasingly emphasised in both India and its international context. In India, rights were a cornerstone of the Constitution that was adopted in 1950, and work was very much included: 'The Fundamental Rights incorporated in the Indian constitution include equality under the law for men and women (Article 14), equal accessibility to the public spaces (Article 15), equal opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16), equal pay for equal work (Article 39)' (Gangoli 2007: 2; see Pechilis 2013). In my further research, I will study the co-existence of doing good and rights, as well as their transformation, as they inform discourses on working women into the postcolonial age, especially feminist discourses.

Today especially there is an emerging discourse on women's work as personal fulfilment. In the pages of *Stri Dharma* this was foreshadowed by Cousins's (1921) emphasis on the 'necessity for economic independence to an independent soul', as well as a 1925 *Stri Dharma* editorial's insistence on young women's ability to choose public service as a (temporary) alternative to marriage: 'It is not fair that the money factor [of marriage] should unnecessarily limit the full emotional life of thousands of the young women' ("Married Women in Public Service,"

Vol. 9, No. 1 (Nov. 1925): 2). Intriguingly, in addition during colonial times there was an emerging discourse on women's desire that circulated via discussion of the status of Hindu widows (Sreenivas 2003, 2008). Such a new space for the consideration of the desires women have for themselves has been viewed as foundational to a modern subjectivity (Sreenivas 2003: 72; Chakrabarty 2000: 129-30).

Today's view locates work as a bringing out of that which is inside; work as the expression of a woman's own desires and aspirations in place of, or at least alongside of, the idea of doing social good. The *Stri Dharma* rationale that women's work is a social good may actually now be more prominent in schemes directed towards poor women rather than middle-class women. In such schemes, poor women are given leadership roles at the local level to organise women, such as supervising microcredit loans, calling group meetings, etc.; the status of 'being important' to do good in the local community is greater than any pay that may (or may not) be received for the work.⁹

What I am hearing in some of my interviews with middle-class working women in Chennai is an emphasis on personal fulfilment, and I also note that this view informs a current pan-Indian women's periodical as well.

Example: A financial director, 36, married and with a son, who works at a multinational motor company – corporate: 'I came from a family in which my mother and my grandmother both worked. My mother was a teacher. So that is there. But I knew that for myself I had to work [outside the home] in order to feel fulfilled. I just knew that I had to work.'

Example: An architect, 45, married with two daughters who owns her own firm – entrepreneurial: 'I am an architect, and I have been in this profession for the last twenty-five years. I've always dreamed of being an architect, even since I was 11 [years old].'

Example: The lead article in the monthly magazine, *Woman's Era*, June 2017 is entitled, 'Do You Want to Change for the Better? Who Doesn't?' and it is written by a twenty-something-year-old woman who recounts her impressions of a forty-something-year-old woman whom she met at what was for both of them their first job, at an IT company. The younger woman, Madhuparna Dasgupta, describes

that at first the older woman ‘had a dried-up look, would wear only saris and wore no make-up. Her appearance clearly spoke of the hard life she had just come out of’ which was a bad marriage, divorce and return to her parents’ home. Three years later and at different jobs, they crossed paths again: ‘Gone was that dried-up look and also the saris. [S]he was dressed in a smart *sahwar* suit, her glowing skin and with the right touch of make-up’ (Dasgupta 2017: 7). Dasgupta describes further the professionalised transformations of the older woman, and the overall point of the story is that as per the younger woman’s eyewitness, work brought health, vigour and style to the older woman.

Personal fulfilment is part of an internationalised discourse on women and work; it is framed as ‘empowerment’ in popular discourse and prominently discussed by scholars who promote the capabilities approach to human development (such as Nussbaum 2000). Many view ‘work as personal fulfillment’ to be a very recent development, such as in the following reflection by a 30-something US writer: ‘Unlike my grandmother and my mother, I grew up with a steady whisper of “follow your dreams” in the background of my educational and career choices — the idea that a job was for both financial security and personal happiness’ (Fillipovic 2017). This may be the new conception of the ‘dignity of work’ for the postmodern age. What it contributes to work is the potentially stabilising power of the positivity a woman feels about herself, even in spite of society’s ambivalence. Yet, consistent with past discourses of working women, it elides the factor of money and the complexities it brings to social understandings of both work and womanhood.

Notes

- ¹ See the discussion and extensive bibliography in Pechilis, ‘Feminism’ (2013).
- ² My current ethnographic research is supported by a Fulbright-Nehru fellowship, during which I was academically affiliated with the Madras Institute of Development Studies. I express gratitude to both of these institutions.
- ³ The All India Women’s Conference held a special session on ‘labour questions’ at their 1930 conference in Gwalior, and they passed ‘Resolutions on Labour’ at their 1931 conference in Lahore (Kumar 1997: 69), which detailed these

provisions. See also 'Women and the Royal Commission Report on Labour', written for WIA by Mrs. Hilda Wood on the British situation, *Stri Dharma* Vol. 14, No. 12 (Oct 1931): 550-552; and 'Memorandum Presented by the All-India Women's Conference on Educational and Social Reform', Vol. 16, No. 11 (Sept. 1934): 467-471.

- ⁴ 'Duties of Women Police', *Stri Dharma* Vol. 14 (August 1931): 462, no author.
- ⁵ There are economic, social, political and religious factors of course; here, I am dealing with a specific argument and I am not claiming that the argument in and of itself explains the phenomenon of prostitution.
- ⁶ 'Tamil Nad Women's Conference, Erode.' *Stri Dharma* Vol. 14, No. 12 (Oct. 1931): 562-563. This is followed by an article on 'How to Attain Them', which urges participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement in order to achieve the described 'fundamental rights' (p. 563).
- ⁷ List of rights is from Sri Saraladevi's Presidential Address, 'Tamil Nad Women's Conference, Erode'. *Stri Dharma* Vol. 14, No. 12 (Oct. 1931): 562-563; the quote is from an article on 'How to Attain Them', which urges participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement in order to achieve the described 'fundamental rights' (p. 563).
- ⁸ The slippage between the two is repeated at the conclusion of her article, where she speaks of 'paid and trained workers. . .employed by Government' as well as a 'band of honorary women, women engaged in social welfare work, as Civic Police', p. 94.
- ⁹ The importance of local leadership roles to women is what I heard poor women working within the Working Women's Forum (Chennai) express when the WWF staff took me to speak directly with such women in Spring 2015. With that said, WWF as an organisation promotes women's economic independence.

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