

# Masculinities & Paid Domestic-Care Labour in India

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# Masculinities & Paid Domestic-Care Labour in India<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Chambers<sup>2</sup> & Shalini Grover<sup>3</sup> (Working Paper)

## Abstract

This article focuses on male domestic-care workers (MDCWs) in India. It explores how constructed notions of masculinity interplay with labour market structures, enable forms of labour discipline and shape labour subjectivities. The article details performative and embodied gendered practices engaged in by MDCWs, illuminates the interplay of spatial and temporal aspects of paid domestic-care work with gendered skill sets and labour roles, and connects the differentiated masculinities performed by MDCWs to the broader political economy of domestic-care labour. It also highlights how MDCWs utilise their gender to express degrees of agency vis-à-vis employers and others. The article argues that MDCWs perform masculinities in variegated ways in the face of stigma, marginalisation, and relations of servitude. These performances are not devoid of agency, but are commoditised within the political economy of the domestic-care sector and are framed within patriarchal gender norms as 'protective care' or as work requiring other masculine attributes.

**Keywords:** *Paid Domestic Labour, Care Work, Gender, Masculinities, India*

## Introduction

This article focuses on male domestic-care workers (MDCWs) in India. We explore how constructed notions of masculinity interplay with labour market structures, enable forms of labour discipline and shape labour subjectivities. We make four primary contributions: Firstly, we detail the discursive, performative and embodied practices of masculinity engaged in by MDCWs. Secondly, we illuminate the interplay of spatial and temporal aspects of paid

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domestic-care work with gendered skill sets labour roles. Thirdly, we connect the differentiated masculinities performed by MDCWs to the broader political economy of domestic-care labour. Finally, we illuminate how MDCWs utilise their gender identity and other tactics to express degrees of agency vis-à-vis employers and others. In drawing these areas together we argue that MDCWs perform masculinities in variegated ways to navigate work that often includes forms of labour seen as feminised and stigmatised. However, we also contend that these performances are often commoditised within the political economy of the domestic-care sector.

Our article utilises data from fieldwork conducted in Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. This comprised a mixed-method, qualitative study incorporating participant observation, interviews with workers, agents and employers, and textual analysis of websites and advertising material. The primary focus, however, was on ethnographic modes of analysis that included 'hanging out', socialising, sharing places of residence and spending time with MDCWs. We centre the article's narrative on one man, Rishi, and use this to build into the experiences of other interlocutors. The article is structured around four sections. The first, details our classificatory categories. The second, contextualises debates surrounding Indian masculinities. The third draws on a range of material, and our own research, to provide a historicized account of MDCWs in India today. Finally, the primary empirical section details the stories of Rishi and others to draw out the article's primary arguments.

### **Framing 'Domestic-Care' Labour**

Globally, there are an estimated 75.6 million paid domestic workers (ILO, 2021:xviii). For many, daily labour often incorporates personal care-based responsibilities (e.g. childcare, eldercare, and other 'care work'). Worldwide, the sector is highly feminised, with around 75%

of workers being women (ILO, 2021:xiii). However, men are involved, with estimates suggesting there are 18 million globally (ILO, 2021:xii). Despite this, little attention has been given to MDCWs, reproducing perceptions that domestic-care work 'is women's work' (Yeates, 2012). Estimates of Indian domestic workers vary wildly (ILO, 2013:11), an ambiguity that is symptomatic of labour informality, imprecise definitions and limited research. The ILO (2021:273) estimates that there are 4.7 million domestic workers in the country, of which 2.8 million are female and 1.9 million male. Many more are not captured in official data. Estimates for care workers, in domestic settings, are more ambiguous as data focuses on institutional contexts or blurs into the 'domestic worker' category (Agarwala & Saha, 2018).

In order to conceptualise the interlocking complexities of the labour market, we utilise a framework centred on 'domestic-care labour'. This incorporates men (full, part time and agency) who work 'for' and 'in' private households (drivers, gardeners, residential guards, cooks, cleaners, home care workers etc.) but excludes those working in institutional settings (e.g. hospital workers, care home workers, taxi drivers etc.). This situates our framework outside mainstream classifications in India which separate work 'for' private households from work 'in' private households (Neetha, 2021). However, the use of the hyphenated category of paid domestic-care work allows us to better capture the multifaceted, overlapping and blurred roles experienced by many MDCWs (cf. Gallo & Scrinzi, 2019), as detailed in later empirical sections of this article.

### **Indian Masculinities & Domestic Care Labour**

Reflecting on the history of masculinities in India, Mrinalini Sinha (1999) details the dominance of a pre-colonial elite Indian masculinity. This vision of manhood emphasised male prowess and naturalised the position of the sub-continent's pre-colonial ruling classes.

Similarly, colonial-era constructions of masculinity, embodied a 'cult of manliness' (Sinha, 1999). Legitimate manhood was framed in racialised terms that situated British imperial masculinity as contrasted with the passivity and effeminacy of the 'orient' (Said, 1994:138). Although some Indian elites adopted a colonial interpretation of masculinity, others sought to construct alternative visions, such as those centred on ideals of a masculine Hinduism (Banerjee, 2005). The hegemonic masculinity, cultivated among colonial elites, subscribed to a binary rendition of gender, leading not only to particularised constructs of 'men' and 'women', but to the criminalisation of non-binary gender identities, such as India's *hijras* (Hinchy, 2014).

In India – as elsewhere – gender has intersected with a variety of other identity markers. Associations of South Asian men with effeminacy, in colonial discourse, was pervasive but not universal. Sikh men, for example, were seen as strong, manly and obedient. Muslims, as strong and virile, but dangerous (in part tied to their association with the 1847 uprising). Hindus, meanwhile, were more often portrayed as effeminate (Sinha, 1999; Kasim, 2020). Constructed divisions were shaped by British bureaucratic categorisations of 'martial' and 'non-martial' races. This led to ethnic hierarchies of 'manliness' being established (Sinha, 1999). Men from the Punjab were, for example, seen as a 'fine martial race' (Dimeo, 2002)<sup>4</sup>. Other groups who were heavily recruited into the British Army, such as Nepali Gurkhas, were imagined in a similar way (Streets, 2017). Men from other regions, however, were conceptualised in less virile terms:

'It was argued that southern 'races' had become soft, lazy, weak and diseased in the subtropical heat. As Thomas Babington Macaulay, a member of the Governor-General's

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<sup>4</sup> Citing British army officer, Sir J.J.H. Gordon

Supreme Council, argued in the 1830s: 'The physical organisation of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid'.

(Dimeo, 2002: 79)

Whilst some colonial categorisations have persisted, others have transformed. The rise of Hindu nationalism, for example, has foregrounded notions of masculinity that situate Hindu men as rightful defenders of the chastity of the nation, of Hindu women and of Hinduism itself (Chambers, 2022; Kaur, 2020). The rise of muscular politics has been paralleled by the fetishization of the muscular male body in Bollywood and other culture industries. The proliferation of gyms (and easily available steroids) has brought this aesthetic to the masses, as young men seek to emulate their heroes (Baas, 2020; Chambers, 2020). Simultaneously, however, film and popular culture also portrays more nuanced images of Indian men that depict care-based ideals of fatherhood, elderhood and duty to family (Roy & Ayalon, 2022).

Even within dominant discourses, notions of strength and virility are tempered by expectations of obligation to family as fathers, sons, husbands and brothers. This may embody notions of care or respect but also extends to fulfilling roles as breadwinner, provider and protector (Vera-Sanso, 2016). Whilst remaining rooted in patriarchal relations, the everyday practices of Indian masculinities place particularised pressures on men to perform gender within a relatively constrained framework (Osella & Osella, 2006). Where this is disrupted – for example, amongst the male spouses of transnationally migrating nurses who become dependents of their wives (either in India or within migration regimes elsewhere) – the experience can be highly disorientating. This may lead men to seek masculine validity in

other spaces (e.g. church or home) or, at times, to a collapse in mental wellbeing and/or a descent into alcoholism (Osella & Osella, 2006; Banerjee, 2022).

A variety of studies on India, and elsewhere, have illustrated how masculinity is not only shaped in comparison with its supposed 'other'; femininity. Contributors have emphasised the role of homosocial relations, and interactions with those who do not embody dominant notions of sexuality or gender, in shaping masculinities (Osella & Osella, 2006; Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2014; cf. Connell, 1995). Radhika Chopra (2007), for example, has illustrated how social inequalities and multiple drivers of social and personal transformation impact the subjectivities and masculinities of young men. Ethnographic studies have nuanced our understanding further: Writing on migrant agricultural labourers in Maharashtra, Pronoy Rai (2020) identifies 'protest masculinities', where workers subvert claims on their body and labor by elite men' (p. 261). In his account of leprosy colonies in north India, James Staples (2011) describes how leprosy impacted men reclaimed hegemonic masculine positionalities – despite bodily damage that undermined their manhood within mainstream society – by recreating normative gender relations towards women in the colony. Craig Jeffery (2010), has detailed how young college-graduate men struggled to make transitions to a full adult 'provider masculinity' in the absence of employment opportunities. However, he also shows how they forged a 'street masculinity' founded on improvisation and adaptability encompassed in the vernacular of '*jugaad*'.

Drawing on Niall Hanlon's (2012) earlier work – Karla Elliot (2016) foregrounds 'caring masculinities' to capture shifts in gender performances (cf. Shah, 2022). Caring masculinities, Elliot argues, embody a ...'rejection of domination from masculine identities and the incorporation instead of values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and



relationality' (p.256). As detailed in our empirical data, caring masculinities were performed by MDCWs. However, this was shaped in a distinctly unequal context. Much like 'care' more generally (Yeates, 2012; Parreñas, 2015), performances of caring masculinities become a marketplace commodity, more akin to emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979), than a sign of gender inequality.

This not to dismiss Elliot's concept, the context is different. Nor is it intended to evidence a broader absence of caring masculinities in South Asia, although evidence suggests that societal norms do limit possibilities (Shah, 2022). Rather, underlying structural factors - embedded in the political economy of domestic-care work - shape everyday practices and performance of masculinities among MDCWs. Although MDCWs may draw some advantage from their gendered positionalities, relations of servitude and class difference remain dominant (cf. Grover, 2022). As argued by Rohit Dasgupta and Moti Gokulsing (2014) – drawing on Raewyn Connell (1995) – masculinities in India can be both 'hegemonic and marginalised' (p.7). The masculinities performed by the MDCWs featured in this article, and by others with whom we interacted during fieldwork, embodied many hegemonic and patriarchal elements which, to degrees, enabled expressions of agency and fed into a gendered structuring of the domestic-care economy. However, MDCW masculinities were also shaped in a distinctly marginalised context. This led, not only to high levels of inequality, but also to structural factors having a strong influence over every day gender performances.

### **Male Domestic-Care Labour in India**

Underemployment, a growing youth population, degrees of de-industrialisation, and migration out of the agrarian sector due to technological development, land reforms and climate change have contributed to expansions of domestic-care work in India. A feminised

domain since the late colonial period, the workforce composition is shifting, with larger numbers of men entering. This runs counter to previous trajectories in the sector. Early colonial-era British households were often dependent on male staff. Gradually, however, male workers became ridiculed and the presence of non-white male bodies in private space became constructed as a threat to white femininity (Chakraborty, 2019). Contrastively, female ayahs (lady's maids) were sentimentalised for their sacrificial qualities and usefulness (Blunt, 1999; Chakraborty, 2019). This triggered a process of feminization that commenced in the 1930s and consolidated by the 1960s (Sinha & Varma, 2019). Whilst not a sole force, colonialism impacted paid domestic labour by introducing contract relations and producing dynamics that continue to shape labour relations, policy and regulation today (Haskins & Sen, 2022).

In contemporary India, representations of domesticity remain dominated by multigenerational, patrilineal families where caregiving is associated with women (Samanta, 2019; Uberoi, 2006). However, middle-class transformations have affected family demographics, gendered expectations and intensified demand for domestic-care services. To degrees, outsourcing domestic-care labour resolves tensions in middle-class families stemming from women seeking careers and men resisting taking on domestic-care work (cf. Lundström, 2013). Consequently, the sector continues expanding, inculcating female and male workers (Neetha, 2021). For women, this runs counter to patterns of decreasing labour force participation in other sectors (Sarkar et al, 2019). For men, industrial decline, increasing demand for male workers, and potential for salaried income, have drawn increasing numbers in (Bartolomei, 2010).

Transformations in the sector have not, however, been linear. COVID-19, for example, resulted in lost jobs, changed working practices and viral exposure. While paid domestic-care work is long associated with 'pollution' (often rooted in caste prejudice) the pandemic exacerbated stigmatised imaginaries, resulting in intensified spatial demarcation and embodied transformations (mask-wearing, distancing etc.). Our research suggests consequences were also gendered. Men were more likely to retain live-in posts due to perceived ability to run outside errands but often had to do more diverse chores and were unable to return home, amplifying familial distance. Familial distance, pre, during and post Covid, also conflicted with some of the ideals outlined in the previous section, that centred on a 'caring masculinity' rooted in fatherhood, elderhood and duty to ageing relatives.

When negotiating norms of masculinity, MDCWs (in India and beyond) often experience 'unmanning' (Sarti & Scrinzi, 2010) where employers envisage them as childlike, effeminate, docile and asexual (cf. Dávalos, 2020; Chopra, 2012; Qayum & Ray, 2010). Nepali MDCWs in India are, for instance, almost always referred to as 'boys' in public and media discourse (Sharma, 2008). Additionally, caste-based intersections and rural origins of many MDCWs, enable employers to construct servitude as 'natural', create stereotypes of MDCWs as not being 'real men' and facilitate characterizations of 'backwardness'. (Bartolomei, 2010; Singha, 2019). Some employers, however, prefer male hires due to assumptions of strength, skill and less 'gossipiness' (Bartolomei, 2010). Men are seen as having broader competences and as requiring skilled work to remain satisfied, while women are assumed to be content with unskilled labour (Ray, 2000). Our research verified that MDCWs can, at times, use masculine privilege to demarcate tasks or evade paid social reproduction work. Female workers tended to occupy more diverse roles in homes but MDCWs were often used more versatily outside.

Likewise, male workers sometimes found themselves inculcated in elder care – even when not the initial role – by dint of being seen as capable of supporting those with limited mobility. These labour divisions exist between independent workers but also within spousal teams working for private households (Grover, 2018).

Men, as with women, have also become incorporated into Global Care Chains (GCCs) that connect the Indian national setting to other parts of the world (Grover et al, 2018). Here, too, MDCWs experiences are highly gendered. European migration regimes have, for example, situated domestic-care labour as a legitimate route of entry. Consequently, men from South Asia and elsewhere have joined the sector to fulfil migration aspirations but often have to perform a masculinity that meets employers' ethnic stereotypes of an effeminate, asexual and unthreatening Asian male body (Näre, 2010; Kilkey, 2010). Despite the transnationalization of domestic-care work, and other changes in the sector, for the majority of India's MDCWs the materialities of everyday work are dominated by informality and remain embedded in more localised forms of domestic migration.

Much is still to be understood. However, it is clear that men, as with women (Chambers, 2018), experience blurred employment boundaries covering roles from cooks and drivers to child-minders and elder-attendants. Relationships with employers' families may be built on trust and intimacy or segregation. MDCWs may be embroiled in familial politics, 'deep act' emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979: 33), develop close bonds with employers' children or be discursively situated as 'part of the family'. Often, relations of affection and control co-exist ambivalently, disciplining employees by cementing loyalty and subservience. Simultaneously, representations of MDCWs as compliant and docile, gives little sense of agency and perpetuates passive stereotypes (cf. Yeates, 2009). Challenging these representations - while

maintaining an awareness of structural constraints and social/cultural forces - forms the basis of the following empirical section that utilises thick description to draw the article's narrative into the experiences of Rishi and other MDCWs.

### ***'Mei Kya Hoon?'* (what am I?): Being an MDCW in India**

In the summer of 2022, I (Chambers) moved into a room in the working-class neighbourhood of Kapashera Border. The area was dominated by informal housing and informal labour. The busy border comprised a 'Welcome to Delhi' sign, a checkpoint and busy intersections crowded with buses, autos and other vehicles. It was surrounded by an array of street vendors selling numerous commodities. Commuters had to change buses and cross the border on foot, presenting a captive crowd for hawkers who shouted out their rates in a monotonous tone. Some distance across the border, on the Haryana side, was a gated development comprising a series of high-rise blocks in grey concrete. This neighbourhood, known as Sundar City, stood out as an island of affluence amongst the sprawl of informality that often drew the ire of its middle-class residents. When the colony had been built in the late 1990s, the surroundings were largely agricultural. The location was marketed as one of the first gated communities, but as neighbouring Gurgaon – Delhi's satellite city – expanded, so migrant labour began to arrive and local landowners built low rise blocks in which they rented rooms to workers and their families. Although residents of Sundar City saw these changes as a source of frustration, the same localities provided accommodation for most of their household labour.

It was in one of the informal low-rise workers' blocks that I rented a room. The block was situated around a courtyard and each accommodation comprised either a one or two room set. Some were occupied by married couples and their children. Others were rented by lone

male workers, some of whom were bachelors and others who had family and children in villages elsewhere. On the ground floor of my block, in a one-room set, lived Rishi. Rishi was a jovial man in his 50s. He had a wife, a daughter and a son, who used to live with him in Kapashera, but had returned to their village some years earlier. Rishi had arrived in the area not long after Sundar City was completed. He initially found work in a factory in Gurgaon. The factory work, he said, was hard but there was a good camaraderie and it felt like 'real work'. By 2010, however, the factory began to struggle as deindustrialisation encroached and Gurgaon's economy oriented toward service sector and IT work.

It was a Wednesday in July 2013 when Rishi arrived for work to find that the gates had been locked. The sudden closing of the plant meant that he was unable to obtain a letter of recommendation and hence struggled to find similar employment. A few months later, his *chāchā* (uncle/father's younger brother) asked him if he could drive an acquaintance to Meerut as the usual driver was unavailable. Rishi agreed. His clients were an elderly couple who took a liking to Rishi and started asking him to do other jobs. Gradually he moved from an odd job man cum driver to a full-time employee. His role became one of 'caretaker' or 'multipurpose *aadmi*' (multipurpose man).

'The lady and man [employers] are 74 and 86. Their daughter and son are living overseas, their son is in the USA. They need a multipurpose man so that there is one man who can do all the work. If they need groceries or want to go somewhere, then I take them. I also deal with the telephone and electricity bills [...] the groceries, vegetables and ration. On the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> of each month I collect their pension. [...] My job is 24/7. If they need anything, even in the middle of the night, they call. I am always in my room or nearby [...] I care for them 24hrs a day'.

The couple had some other staff – a female maid and a cleaner – who worked part-time. Although not involved in tasks like cooking and cleaning (tasks which he saw as lower in status), Rishi's remit covered a huge array of domestic-care work from driving to assisting with tasks around the home. He would run errands and assist in case of medical or health issues. He helped them with dressing and mobility. He would also take them back and forth for hospital visits and, on occasions when one had to be admitted, would stay sleeping on the floor next to the bed.

From a role that began as an occasional driver, Rishi's employment diversified into various forms of 'intimate labour' (Boris & Parreñas, 2010). Rishi's story was not unusual. Other MDCWs also described how their work could involve various activities. For many MDCWs, the imagined public/private boundary that segregates work 'for' private households from work 'in' private households, within regulatory frameworks, was, in practice, highly blurred. Rishi's own articulations of his work were complex and he recognised degrees of de-masculinisation. In reflecting on his previous position as a factory worker, Rishi detailed:

'Factory work is better. This job is too private [in the private sphere]. [...] I am a technical man. In factories we get to know about the new technologies, get to work with different people and make many friends. If we work for 4-5 years as an operator we can be promoted and become an inspector or supervisor, but in this job I just stay in the same position'.

To recover a sense of masculine labour, the narratives of Rishi and many other MDCWs focused on technical aspects of daily work, requirements to undertake chores in public spaces and the degrees of physicality needed to complete tasks.

As with many long-term domestic-care workers, Rishi's relationship with his employers had become deeply intimate and involved intermingled notions of trust, obligation, duty and care. His employers referred to him as '*beta*' (term of endearment/son/daughter/child). While the term invokes a degree of infantilization, and reinforces hierarchies bound up in age and generational distinctions, it is widely used beyond relations of servitude or labour and inculcates anyone junior in age with whom there is a close relationship. Its connotations with notions of care, love and respect, were materialised in various aspects of the relationship the couple had with Rishi. Rishi's wife had undergone an operation a few years prior for a benign tumour. The couple provided some of the funds needed for her treatment and were always accommodating of his trips back to the village (not the case for all employers).

Care, obligation and duty, however, cut both ways and weighed heavily on Rishi. Although he described the boredom and frustration of a job that did not match his self-cultivated image as a 'technical man', he also felt a deep sense of responsibility for the ageing couple that echoed ideals of eldercare within discourses around the Indian family (Ahlin & Sen, 2020). 'What sort of *man* would I be', he declared, 'if I abandoned them'. He continued, '...they are elderly and cannot look after themselves, their children are all abroad. They need me, so I must stay with them until they expire [pass away]'. Although his domestic-care labour was commoditised, his relationship with his employers could not be framed as dis-embedded from social, emotive and affective considerations.

A care-orientated masculinity was not only limited to Rishi's articulations regarding his employers. It also extended to his framing of participation in paid domestic-care work as conducive to duties of fatherhood and familial responsibilities. Factory work, he explained, required eight hour days and leave was limited. With his current job, however, he had more



flexibility as his employer would give him time off if needed to return to his village. This was not a universal attribute of work in the sector. Many MDCWs detailed long periods of familial absence. During an interview with an employer from another gated colony on the opposite side of Gurgaon, the female upper-middle class respondent framed her generosity as an employer through willingness to let her full time, live in MDCW return to his village once a year for two weeks.

Although this pattern of work was not repeated for all MDCWs, in Rishi's case it had allowed him to juggle expectations of care and support toward kin and others, with his status as a migrant worker:

'When my wife and children were here [in Delhi] with me then it was not a problem. Now they are in the village so staying in this work is better [than a factory] as I can go home when I need to. I just have to make sure that any pending work is done before I go. There is also another driver [working for a neighbouring household] who can help if there is any emergency. Now my children are almost grown up. Before, they needed me to come back more often. They also missed me, so they would ask me to come. Now, I am thinking about my daughter's marriage and my son is trying for the police exam, so there will be duties for me in this'.

The negotiation of masculine norms undertaken by MDCWs became particularly visibilized in moments of transformation. Such shifts could be gradual, such as Rishi's integration into more care-orientated work. At times, they could be more rapid. During Covid-19, Rishi was among those MDCWs who retained their posts. He continued to live outside of the couple's home in his nearby room, but his ability to return to his village was curtailed throughout the main periods of lockdown. In part, this was a result of more general restrictions, but it was

also requested by his employers to reduce the chance of infection. On a daily basis, Rishi made the thirty minute walk to the couple's gated community. Occasionally, other residents would complain about his coming and going, as most domestic staff had been banned from entering. However, the age and care needs of his employers enabled him to continue, although Rishi admitted a sense of fear and trepidation for his own wellbeing. With the couple's maids no longer able to service the apartment, Rishi found himself engaged in tasks that would not have previously been within his remit. One relatively small, but significant, change that persisted beyond the covid period involved the fetching of the morning milk. 'Before Corona', Rishi recalled, 'the maid used to bring the milk but during the lockdown no other worker could go inside. I was the only one able to go in because the old couple needed someone. So from that time I started bringing the milk in the morning'.

By the time I (Chambers) started shadowing Rishi in summer of 2022, despite the subsidence of Covid, milk collection had become a part of his job. Our mornings started at 5am. Rishi liked to rise early to practise half an hour of yoga. After a brief breakfast, we would set off to the colony where his employer's lived. Close to the gate, we would sit on an unused *rehri* (four wheeled cart) and wait for a milk delivery to arrive. Once in receipt of a couple of bags of milk, Rishi and I would head into the colony. At the base of their tower, we would separate as he headed up to help his employers with their morning routine. This part of his work, given its private nature, was not accessible to me. During my wait, usually around two hours, my main companions were car washers. Most of these men were employed as domestic workers by households in the colony. Some were cooks, others drivers. Many, like Rishi, undertook a variety of domestic-care work that went beyond their original role. Car washing was an

additional job. The men took on contracts with various households, usually earning about 200 rupees per month per car.

After he completed his morning chores, Rishi would return to the carpark and together we would walk back through the growing crowds to the block where our rooms were located. During one of these trips, I asked him about the continuation of milk duties – as a previously feminised role – and his feelings about it. He was circumspect in his response, declaring that it was out of his duty of care to the couple that he had taken this on. After a little more thought, he continued... ‘actually, it is beneficial for me too, as the morning walk is good exercise and healthy for my body’. Rishi’s articulated recovery – via his emphasis on bodily benefits – of a masculine positionality was not singular. Many of the men who rose early to wash cars emphasised a degree of value in the physical aspects of their work. It also allowed them to have contact – in some cases – with high-end prestige cars, that they talked about with a degree of pride. In practice, of course, the driving factor was a need to supplement an income that barely provided a sustainable livelihood.

Amongst the car washers was Vijay. Vijay worked for a single *malik* (boss) but, alongside his morning car-washing contracts, he also worked for various households as an occasional cleaner. This role was illustrative of some of the subtle ways in which gendered divisions of labour could play out within the domestic-care economy. All of the households he worked for had female maids who undertook the majority of daily cleaning duties. In most cases, Vijay visited each household once a month. Maids were not seen as being able to undertake cleaning that involved higher-level work (e.g. anything that required standing on a stool or ladder). Hence, Vijay’s duties primarily revolved around cleaning fans, pictures, curtain rails and other items above head height. Vijay’s relationship with his main employer was also

revealing. Having served as a mess cook in the army, he had obtained the job with the employer via his wife who already worked in the household as a maid. Although starting as a cook in the home, as time passed, his employer paid for him to learn to drive (not something that would be seen as appropriate for female staff) so as to diversify the skillset he could provide to the household. While this offered a degree of progression, and slightly improved pay enabled by his gendered positionality, there were also more ambiguous consequences. For many of the employers and workers (both women and men) that we spoke to, there was a clear articulation of ownership of time. When one pays a worker, so the narrative goes, one owns their time. Chambers (2018) has articulated this elsewhere when female factory workers were taken from the production floor to work in the employer's home during fallow periods. For men this tended to work in reverse. Vijay's employer was an exporter and owned a small warehouse in central Delhi. After Vijay started driving his employer to the warehouse, the employer began asking Vijay to join in with the packing work, rather than waiting around with the vehicle. His male positionality, and the associated capacity to move across public and private spaces, saw him co-opted into forms of labour that superseded the original purpose of his employment.

Whilst Vijay's story emphasises the high degree of control exercised by employers over the time, bodies and labour of MDCWs, workers were not without agentic capacity. Much of the literature with which this article opened, emphasises - amongst other issues - degrees of infantilization perpetuated by employers in their engagements with, and representations of, MDCWs. Whilst Rishi was conscious of a degree of infantilization within the attitude of his employers towards him, he also emphasised how he flipped this narrative. Rishi's articulations of care work not only included intimate labour involving '...bodily upkeep [...],

and health and hygiene maintenance' (Boris & Parreñas's, 2010; p.5) but also incorporated, what he framed as, more paternal responsibilities that - at times - included disciplining his employers in order to 'keep them safe'. This allowed Rishi to invert notions of infantilization by situating his employers as being childlike and in need of supervision. They were, he suggested, 'like small children, they don't understand things easily. Just like small children, they want their wishes to be fulfilled immediately'. He continued by explaining that if they wanted to do things that he saw as potentially risky or inappropriate then he would use various tactics to 'adjust them'. Whilst this included a variety of small manipulations, his primary fall back was to threaten to resign, a rebuke which usually resulted in the couple backing down.

There were many stories he told in this regard. One detailed an occasion when the elderly man wanted to visit his sister who had only just recovered from Covid. Concerned about potential for infection, Rishi stepped in:

'I said "uncle ji, I won't let you go out". Angrily, uncle ji told me "I am your master, how can you order me"?! I grabbed his waist and did not let him go. He was very angry but I said "I am resigning my job". He at once agreed and cancelled the visit. Sometimes I don't feel like their assistant. I have to use some strong action to get them to agree with my point of view.

On another occasion, *uncle ji* had been told not to drink cold water by the doctor due to a throat problem, but demanded a drink upon return home. Whilst Rishi refused his request, the ability to do so was not similarly reflected with other household staff, a distinction that marked out both differences in gendered positionalities and the particularities of Rishi's relationship with the couple:

'...after half an hour, Manju [the cook] came and uncle ji asked her to bring a glass of water. I saw her giving him the glass but I stopped her and scolded her. She said "It's my duty to obey his order". So this is the difference. Maids and other workers just carry out orders but I do what is good for them. I care for them. Uncle ji needs to be cared for like a small child. I manage their work but I also manage uncle ji'.

Rishi's male positionality allowed him to rearticulate previously feminised aspects of paid labour within the employer's household in terms that preserved a modicum of masculine value. Others also utilised narratives of 'protective care' to reframe their work. Vinod, a driver, for example, discussed his undertaking of childcare during school runs as a duty that primarily involved 'protecting' the children rather than minding or caring for them. Self-representing in these ways enabled MDCWs to situate their work within patriarchal norms that position male care duties, not only as breadwinner, but also as a protector of women and children (c.f. Ansari & Chambers, 2022).

Yet, the role of protector could also be highly ambiguous and was not always recoverable. In aesthetic terms, perhaps, the MDCW occupation that most embodies notions of protection is the security guard or *chowkidar* (gatekeeper/watchman). In Sundar City, this comprised two groups. The security guards on the main gate, who usually had some kind of military background, and the *chowkidars* who kept watch at the bottom of each tower block. While those on the gate were keen to emphasise their masculine positionalities and protective roles (and were usually of reasonable fitness), the *chowkidars* were often either elderly or had infirmities that excluded them from other work. Although not incorporated into the nationally recognised category of domestic labour and - in the context of colony-level employment - not paid directly by private householders, the *chowkidars* were clear that

residents treated them as extensions of their domestic staff. Alongside car washers, *chowkidars* were another group that I (Chambers) hung around with while waiting on Rishi to complete his morning duties.

Amongst the individuals I got to know was Sandeep. Around 60 years of age, Sandeep's body was suffering from a lifetime of work. A severe limp, resulting from an agricultural injury in his village, and his advancing age meant that he was now consigned to a labour role which he saw as demeaning and stigmatising. "I am not a man now", Sandeep declared with tears rolling down his face. "...all I do is sit here" I apologised, hugged him and asked if he wanted to stop. '...No, no', he continued,

... 'No one has ever asked me about my life before, I want to tell my story. [...] I came to Delhi 30 years ago and worked in a factory. About twelve years ago I had an accident when I fell from the trailer of a tractor. Since then I have not been able to do any heavy work and so this work is all I am good for. My children have abandoned me and my wife is dead, so sitting here is all I have left. I sit from 8am to 8pm and take the phone numbers and names of any visitors. The owners often call me if they have any problem in their house, like no electricity or some issue with water. My life is over now, this is all I am good for'.

Even for Rishi, the ambiguity of his labour threw up issues of identity both as a man and as a worker. Towards the end of my time with him, we sat and shared a meal that I had prepared. Reflecting on the multifaceted and blurred roles that constituted his working life, Rishi told a story about him and the *aunty* having to convince *uncle ji* to put trousers and a shirt on when guests came to call. In hot weather, he had a fondness for appearing in his underwear in the lounge. As with several of his other tales, Rishi detailed how he 'adjusted' his employer

through persuasion and threats to leave the job. Reflecting on his story, he commented '*mai kya hūn*' (what am I)? 'Sometimes I feel like I am an assistant, sometimes a domestic worker and sometimes a caretaker. Now if you (Chambers) come and ask me what I do, what should I say? Should I say that I am an underwear cover inspector also? This is why I don't always understand my job, my job is way too personal'.

The everyday performances of masculinities amongst MDCWs were variegated. In some cases, individuals found ways to incorporate normative masculine ideals within forms of self-representation through an emphasis of technical skills, enhanced responsibilities, engagements with public space and workplace differentiations vis-à-vis female staff. In others, preserving a sense of masculine legitimacy proved far more challenging. To conclude this article, however, we return to a focus on structural considerations that have interplayed across the stories outlined above.

### **Conclusion: Structure & the Domestic-Care Economy**

A key facet of the domestic-care economy is that it reveals the embeddedness of political economy within domestic space. This blurring of production and reproduction has long been argued – by Marxist feminists and others – as central to capitalist exploitation, gender inequality and the colonisation of space by the commodity form. The focus on men, in this article, further emphasises the collapse of spheres of productive and reproductive labour. MDCWs – more so than their female counterparts, who tend to be primarily drawn into paid reproductive labour – often worked across these blurred boundaries. The rendering of the domestic space as a site of paid work has long been an issue in regulating the sector. Campaigns for rights of domestic workers have focused on classifying private homes as



worksites, with some success in areas of Latin America (Poblete, 2018). Despite these and others attempts to organise the sector, informality remains the primary structuring process.

Yet the labour of men such as Rishi, is also incorporated into broader patterns of global inequality at the transnational level. With his employer's children working overseas, Rishi's labour not only attended to the care needs of the couple but also plugged a care deficit (in terms of eldercare) that was triggered by more elite-level forms of transnational labour migration. A 'caring masculinity' was identifiable in the performances of intimate labour engaged in by MDCWs, but is better framed as a form of deep acting – to borrow Arlie Hochschild's (1979) term – than as a socially transformative shift in normative masculinities. The masculine performances of all the MDCWs we connected with during fieldwork, however framed, often became a commodified expression of identity that fitted the needs of the labour market and the expectations of employers. Yet, gendered dimensions of male domestic-care labour did not fit easily within notions of 'hegemonic masculinity', but instead formed a complex tapestry within which masculinities are performed in a variety of ways. Spatial and temporal factors played a significant part in shaping the roles in which men worked, the skills they were expected to have, and the ways in which masculinities were performed. Despite all of this, though, there remained moments of agentic expression which, although cultivated within a habituated context (Bourdieu, 2003[1977]), allowed MDCWs to reframe their own modes of self-identification and labour engagements in more positive ways.

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