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Rohit Varman
Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK

Ismael Al-Amoudi (contact author)
Grenoble Ecole de Management, France
Cardiff Business School, UK

Per Skålén
Karlstad Business School, Service Research Center, Karlstad University, Sweden

Abstract

This study of domestic workers and employers in Kolkata (India) examines the significance of workplace humiliation as an important yet neglected concept for organization studies. It identifies practices of symbolic, sexual, and physical workplace humiliation that shape corporeality and subjectivity in such a way that workers feel inferior, fearful, and docile. Practices of workplace humiliation serve the purpose of social reproduction by stabilizing the existing skewed power relations between workers and employers, and making workers comply inexpensively with the harsh requirements of highly exploitative workplaces. In foregrounding humiliation as a key organizational mechanism, this study furthers understanding of workplace humiliation, oppression, caste, and exploitation in organization studies.

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The organization of domestic work in paid and unpaid forms is foundational to social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012). Employing vast numbers of women worldwide, domestic work witnesses high levels of oppression and exploitation as well as appalling working conditions that include rampant physical and sexual violence (Anderson, 2000; International Labour Organization, 2021; Neetha, 2013a, 2013b). In most cases, domestic work (e.g., cleaning, cooking, and childcaring) is exceedingly demanding, and workers have to put up with long working hours. The wages are low and barely sufficient for survival. While work relations vary greatly between households, they remain largely informal with little state protection in terms of payment of the minimum wage and workday regulation (Dickey, 2016; Neetha, 2013b). Domestic workers fulfil an important ideological role in reproducing a culture of servitude that normalizes social relations of domination and helps employers to maintain their privileged identities (Ray & Qayum, 2009). Moreover, employers mask poor working conditions by using gestures like gifts of clothes or food and the rhetoric of the family (Ray & Qayum, 2009), and frequently adopt maternalistic attitudes that emphasize relationships and emotions to control workers by reducing them to child-like figures (Rollins, 1985).

Domestic work is a site where class-based exploitation intersects with gender, race, and caste-based oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017; Hopkins, 2017). In our study, exploitation denotes an unfair economic relation in which employers unjustly extract surplus value from workers without adequate compensation. More specifically, the degree of exploitation is the ratio between surplus labour (or the labour time from which employers make their surplus value) and necessary labour (or the labour time necessary for the subsistence of a worker) (Marx, 1990). Several scholars have observed a high degree of exploitation of workers in terms of insufficient wages, exceedingly long hours, and arduous tasks (e.g., Preiss, 2014; Snyder, 2010). While some business ethicists have justified exploitation as morally

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acceptable because it provides employment to the poor (e.g., Powell & Zwolinski, 2012), others have found it unethical and immoral (e.g., Arnold & Bowie, 2003; Arnold & Hartman, 2006).

Although oppression and exploitation are frequently co-constitutive, the two concepts should not be confused. Indeed, oppression denotes an unjust and/or malignant exercise of power by a social group (gender, race, or caste) over another social group and takes the form of denial of dignity or social prestige (Bhattacharya, 2017). Martí and Fernández (2013, pp. 1198–1199) insightfully observe that 'oppression is not an isolated action, nor is it an exceptional or discrete event. Rather, oppression is sustained, routinized, and enacted in the form of practices, rules, devices and discourses.' Accordingly, oppression is perpetrated through practices, norms, and miscellaneous institutional arrangements upon one or more social groups by others. The oppressed are dehumanized (Al-Amoudi, 2019), deprived of autonomy and subjectivity (Mahalingam, Jagannathan, & Selvaraj, 2019; Nussbaum, 1999), and robbed of their capacity to act (Chrispal, Bapuji, & Zietsma, 2021; Sayer, 2007).

While past research offers valuable insights on exploitation and oppression, it provides a limited understanding of how oppression translates into exploitation. We address this shortcoming by examining domestic work in Kolkata (India). We find that domestic work in this context is organized in such a way that women workers regularly face humiliations that deepen their oppression and intensify their exploitation.

Humiliation and its link to oppression and exploitation is a theme that past organization studies have under-examined. The essence of humiliation 'is to grind the face of the victim into the dirt—and leave them there, helpless' (Smith, 2001, p. 542). As organizational theorists, we attend to practices of workplace humiliation which are organized reoccurring activities (Nicolini, 2011) of social degradation based on institutions through which a person is made to feel inferior and demeaned in the workplace (Lindner, 2007).

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Humiliation is widely prevalent and is gaining increased attention in social sciences (Frevert, 2020; Lindner, 2007), but there is little explicit research on the social and organizational mechanisms through which humiliation is practiced and its effects on exploitation and workers' subjectivities (for exceptions, see Jounin, 2008; Smith, 2001). In addressing this lacuna, we ask: *how are practices of workplace humiliation used to organize the exploitation of domestic workers?*

Our in-depth inquiry into the lived experiences of domestic workers in Kolkata focuses on practices of humiliation as they were recounted by workers and employers. Our findings show how humiliation is a key step in the formation of corporeality and subjectivity that makes workers feel inferior, fearful, and sufficiently docile to comply inexpensively with the harsh requirements of highly exploitative workplaces. Our study further shows that the influence of humiliation on subjects' sense of self is not a mere epiphenomenon. Rather, it is a key organizational mechanism of social reproduction that disrupts checks and balances, and fosters exceedingly exploitative workplaces. In foregrounding humiliation as a key organizational mechanism, this study furthers understanding of workplace humiliation, oppression, caste, and exploitation in organization studies.

Theoretical considerations

Humiliation is the degradation of a person's identity to the point where it becomes difficult for them to retain a social position from which they can claim their rights (Lawson, 2022). We consider humiliation as ontologically distinct from the feelings, relations and wounded identities it may generate. Typically, humiliation generates among the humiliated complex and powerful feelings of shame and outrage, but also of helplessness and inhibition (Parekh, 2009). As we shall further argue, humiliation may also bear on workplace relationships by intensifying exploitation (see also Mahalingam et al., 2019).

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As for any social process (Lawson, 2022), humiliation never happens in a structural void but contributes to wider social processes in which it is nested. Although members of privileged groups can in principle be humiliated by members of equally or less privileged groups (Smith, 2001), the risks of retribution are such that routine humiliations are usually imposed by privileged persons on members of oppressed groups (Frevert, 2020).

Historical and sociological studies of humiliation

The word 'humiliation' is derived from the Latin *humus* (earth) and literally means social degradation. According to Miller (1993, p. 175) in 1757 the verb to humiliate parted from the positive signification of 'to humble', and acquired the negative meaning of 'to violate the dignity or self-respect of someone.' It is well established that to humiliate somebody is to disempower that person and to render vivid to her that she has been disempowered by gloating over it (Schick, 1997).

Humiliation leads to a degraded identity when a person is ridiculed, scorned, or disparaged (Klein, 1991). Goffman's (1961) influential description of mortification processes in total institutions provides a rich account of how humiliation creates a 'non-person'. Humiliations dehumanize and make victims into 'things, tools, animals, subhumans, or inferior humans' (Margalit, 1998, p. 121). Hence, to be humiliated is to be turned into an inferior being in a deliberate and destructive manner (Palshikar, 2009).

Humiliation is central to oppression and involves disrespecting and demeaning the victim, damaging their self-respect, and causing them hurt and pain (Parekh, 2009). Scholars warn that humiliation should not be understood as merely a subjective emotion or individual act of aberration but also as a violent feature of the prevailing social order and institutions through which oppression is furthered (Frevert, 2020; Lindner, 2001). Indeed, we often

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witness 'ascriptive humiliation' in which statuses are pre-assigned to people and degradations become normal and natural (Lukes, 1997).

Pre-assigned identities can further institutionalize humiliations that rely on ideology, oppression, and violence for maintenance (Parekh, 2009). For example, Lindner (2010) provides a detailed account of how gender relations encode institutionalized humiliation of women. In addition, several feminist scholars have, over the years, pointed to how patriarchy and male domination are based on routine humiliations of women (Mendible, 2005; Taylor, 2019). Often such humiliations are organized on the basis of social institutions that routinely embody disrespect, systematically violate the dignity of some individuals or groups (Parekh, 2009) and legitimize humiliating practices (Lindner, 2007). In a similar vein, scholars have pointed to ascriptive and institutionalized humiliations in the caste system in India in which lower/out-castes are pre-assigned degraded identities (Ambedkar, 2014; Jodhka, 2016, 2018; Judge, 2012). Through institutionalized and routine humiliation, a person may be reminded that she 'is not merely an irreconcilable other but a negative being,' that is, she 'exists as the refuse' (Geetha, 2009, p. 103). Such negative existence is deemed to be dependent and parasitic on the oppressor's positive existence (Guru, 2009). These institutionalized humiliations need not be extraordinary events and can be encoded in banal everyday actions (Lindner, 2010).

The clear boundary that institutionalized humiliations require between the oppressor and the oppressed needs to be guarded and enforced through violence and by punishing transgressions (Parekh, 2009). Moreover, social hierarchies enforced through humiliation tend to foster a moral climate in which physical violence becomes possible and justifiable. For example, Glover (2012) documents how ritual humiliation in colonial India furthered physical violence. Humiliation does more than degrade individuals and social relations, it also undermines the possibility of justice and democracy. Honneth (2004) emphasizes that

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social recognition is central to social justice. Accordingly, recognition, love, equal treatment in law, and social esteem are necessary conditions for a just social order. While the absence of humiliation is insufficient to guarantee social justice, its presence always contributes to injustice. Thus, decent societies do not allow the vulnerable to be humiliated and silenced (Margalit, 1998) because humiliation is always violence (Hartling, Lindner, Spalthoff, & Britton, 2013) and contributes to oppression (Klein, 1991).

Humiliation also has a paradoxical relationship with justice. Although victims of humiliation internalize their devaluation and degradation, they continue to see these as unjust (Lindner, 2010; Martí & Fernández, 2013). Moreover, Parekh (2009, p. 25) insightfully notes, 'when individuals have been subjected to long periods of humiliation, they develop all kinds of defence mechanisms… the fact that they do not feel hurt or complain does not mean that they do not feel humiliated.' Thus, the *silence of victims or lack of articulation about humiliating experiences should not be constructed as its absence*. As Lindner (2010, p. 19) adds, 'Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of humiliation as a process is that the victim is forced into passivity, acted on, and made helpless.' Examining the impact of humiliation, Hartling and Luchetta (1999) highlight the role of fear it creates among people. Accordingly, even those who are not direct victims may develop a fear of humiliation that influences their behavior to an equal or greater degree as those who actually incur humiliation.

Indeed, fear of humiliation can also compel an individual to risk death to avoid degradation (Klein, 1991). This means that although humiliation aims, and usually succeeds, at imposing compliance, it also breeds the germs of outrage and resistance (Fanon, 2021). At any rate, the question of whether humiliation breeds compliance or resistance is likely to be subtle (Thomas & Hardy, 2001) and highly context-sensitive.

Overall, we can learn from broad historical and sociological studies that humiliations 'have the aim of stabilizing existing power relations or establishing new ones by showing the

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powerlessness of others' (Frevert, 2020, p. 9). Our literature review shows how humiliation degrades people while intensifying oppression, fear, violence, and injustice. However, we still know little about the specific dynamics of humiliation in the context of workplaces. To the scarce research on this, we now turn.

Humiliation in management and organization studies

In a rare attempt at theorizing humiliation in organization studies, Smith (2001) suggests four types of humiliation mechanisms: conquest-humiliation, relegation-humiliation, expulsion-humiliation, and reinforcement-humiliation. Conquest humiliation occurs when a rival deprives others of their freedom and becomes supreme. As a result, those who are subordinated must pay tribute to their new master. Similarly, in relegation-humiliation, people are forcefully demoted to an inferior group and thus to a lower status. In expulsion-humiliation, individuals or groups can be cast aside or banished from a group to which they belonged as a form of degradation. Finally, in reinforcement-humiliation, existing hierarchies are reinforced through everyday enactments of degrading practices.

Our literature review suggests a paucity in organization studies of explicit work on humiliation. This neglect is perhaps because humiliation becomes a 'standardized organizational product' that is 'taken for granted in an organizational context' (Czarniawska, 2008, p. 104). Scholars have shown, however, that humiliation becomes a way of controlling and exploiting under-classes because the fear of humiliation can demobilize groups (Klein, 1991) and can create docility (Ginges & Atran, 2008). Organizational researchers have also shown that humiliations leave workers dehumanized, devalued, stigmatized, and deprived of their dignity, which makes it hard for them to offer resistance (van Amsterdam, van Eck, & Kjær, 2022; Czarniawska, 2008; Garcia-Lorenzo, Sell-Trujillo, & Donnelly, 2022; Mahalingam et al., 2019). In addition, organizational researchers have corroborated that

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humiliation is made possible through the intersection of class, gender, and race/caste (Chrispal et al., 2021; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Mendonca, D'Cruz, & Noronha, 2022; Zulfiqar, 2019). For example, Mahalingam et al. (2019) report exclusion, untouchability, and humiliation experienced by Dalit janitors in India because of their caste and the dirty work performed by them. Moreover, organizational scholars have alluded to different types of humiliating practices. Practices of humiliation can be symbolic or ritualistic, with workers being treated as untouchables and having to do dirty work (Chrispal et al., 2021; Mahalingam et al., 2019). Practices of humiliation can also be sexual in nature with women workers being the victim of sexual harassment by their male colleagues and having to perform sexual acts for upper-caste men (Chrispal et al., 2021). Physical abuse (Zulfiqar, 2019; Noronha, Chakraborty, & D'Cruz, 2020) and workplace bullying (D'Cruz, 2012) can involve humiliation.

In summary, our literature review indicates that humiliation creates degradation that has the potential to further control the humiliated. But whether and how practices of humiliation are at play will also depend on a context, and so will the question of whether and how workplace humiliation actually furthers control. For these reasons, we need, in addition to existing historical and sociological studies, fine-grained empirical studies of how practices of humiliation are organized in specific workplaces, how humiliation intensifies exploitation, and of how the humiliated sometimes find respite from relentless degradation. Specifically, there is a key question that requires further research: how are practices of workplace humiliation used to organize exploitative work? To answer this question, we turn to our empirical context of domestic work in Kolkata.

Research context and methodology

Research context

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We conducted this study on workplace humiliation and the organization of domestic work in Kolkata in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. In India and Kolkata, the exploitation of domestic workers unfolds with little legal protection by the State (Ghosh & Godley, 2020; Lahiri, 2017; Ray & Qayum, 2009). Moreover, unlike Bernardino-Costas' (2014) and Jiang and Korczynski's (2016) studies of domestic workers in Brazil and London, our participants do not organize collectively to enforce their rights through unions although attempts to organise domestic workers have been made in Kolkata (Sengupta & Sen, 2013) and in other parts of India (Neetha, 2013a).

Domestic work constitutes the final refuge of the female working class in India, especially for uneducated women (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2013; Dickey, 2000; Unni, 2001). Raghuram (2001, p. 608) suggests that women work as domestic workers because the work 'resonates with aspects of caring conforming to oppressive notions of femininity and with the ideology of "woman as wife".' Indeed, scholars have highlighted the intersectional influence of gender, class, and caste in the perpetuation of domestic work in India (Dickey, 2000; Gothoskar, 2013; Ray & Qayum, 2009; Unni, 2001). The exploitation of domestic workers forms a continuum, with live-in workers usually exploited far more than live-out ones (Anderson, 2000). Moreover, domestic workers have little control over the money they earn because men in their households usually control it. Therefore, they face double marginalization in both their places of work and in their homes (Lahiri, 2017; Ray & Qayum, 2009).

In India, domestic work is also organized through caste-based relationships (Dicky, 2000; Tellis-Nayak, 1983; Varman, Skålén, Belk, & Chowdhury, 2021). For instance, upper-caste workers are often reluctant to do cleaning work and confine themselves to cooking (Sharma, 2016). Caste, which means pure or chaste, is a system of stratification of Indian society that originated thousands of years ago and continues to shape contemporary socio-

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economic relations (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020; Teltumbde, 2010). Although the caste system is dynamic and changing (Jodhka, 2018) and involves horizontal divisions, the central idea of the system is to have a hierarchy of privileges (Ambedkar, 2014). In this hierarchy, Brahmins are at the top, followed by Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. These upper castes are followed by Shudras or low castes and at the bottom of the hierarchy are *Dalits* or outcastes, who are still considered untouchables by many members of the upper castes. Lower castes are considered impure (Teltumbde, 2010; Yengde, 2019) and, as Douglas (1966, p. 114) observes, 'a polluting person is always in the wrong.' Chrispal et al. (2021) further notes that the caste system in India reduces the bodies of lower-caste women to commodities that can be used to perform the work of slaves, making it a system of humiliation that produces injustice and inequity as pointed out earlier (Ambedkar, 2014; Guru, 2009; Jodhka, 2018). Moreover, violence against lower castes by upper castes was considered legitimate in certain Hindu texts and in the dominant Brahmanical ideology (Ambedkar, 2014; Illaiah, 2002). Various forms of violence against the low caste continue in contemporary India and atrocities are committed to ensure they live lives of humiliation and exclusion from the upper castes (Judge, 2012; Noronha, 2021; Teltumbde, 2010; Waghmore, 2013; Yengde, 2019).

Methodology

Consistent with the research objectives, we produced a dataset of long interviews (McCracken, 1988) with 24 domestic workers and 10 employers that were all women (Tables 1 and 2 present our participants' profiles). As a team of researchers comprised exclusively of men, we hired female research assistants to conduct the interviews in order for the participants to feel more comfortable sharing their lived experiences. These research assistants were briefed about the research objectives and were given a broad set of research

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questions to guide them when conducting the interviews. They were also coached by us in between interviews.

We recruited domestic workers and employers using snowballing. We used personal acquaintances to recruit the initial set of participants. We subsequently asked the initial participants for further references and then contacted them for interviews. Recruiting domestic workers and employers was not difficult as there was a large population of domestic workers and employers in Kolkata. Our worker participants (upper and lower/out-castes and tribal) perform a range of domestic work that includes cleaning, washing clothes and dishes, cooking, babysitting, and taking care of the elderly.

Our initial purpose in conducting this study was to understand the experiences of female domestic workers and employers. We primarily asked workers to describe their general experiences with domestic work. While doing that, most of them told us stories about the violence, oppression, and exploitation they had faced. In these instances, we probed deeper into their experiences. They also narrated several humiliating features of their work life. Our reflexive stance towards the data made us engage in what Timmermans and Tavory (2012) call *abduction*, centered on producing new knowledge based on surprising research evidence in the light of prior theory. In doing so, we found that humiliation had been under-examined in prior organizational research, although it was a central feature of domestic work.

In our interviews with employers, we asked them general questions about their experiences regarding workers and the work done by them, the salaries they paid, and whether or not they provided workers with any other support. When answering our general questions (e.g., how do they serve food to workers?), we found that employers commonly perceived domestic workers as inferior and narrated humiliating actions towards them.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

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The interviews were recorded and lasted 45–90 minutes. They were conducted in Bengali and later translated into English. To secure the participants' anonymity, we used pseudonyms. Approaching domestic work both from the vantage point of employers and workers helped us triangulate our findings and made our study trustworthy (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Our data analysis, overviewed in Figure 1, was informed by the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), abductive procedures (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), and by intersectionality (Choo & Marx Ferree, 2010). Our approach involved continuously moving between transcripts and the understandings emerging from the entire dataset. Our open coding focused on identifying codes in the form of simple descriptive concepts or phrases appearing in the interview data. The open coding was redone several times following the abductive research strategy of revisiting the collected data in light of the emergent understanding of prior theory. Open coding was followed by axial coding, which grouped the codes into different categories and themes pertaining to exploitation, workplace humiliation, and respites from humiliation. Importantly, our emphasis was on illuminating the practices of humiliation. Examples of codes and our key categories and themes are showcased in Figure 1. The idea of intersectionality informed our axial coding and made us attentive to how the registers of gender, class, and caste combined. The abductive research strategy further informed our axial coding of defamiliarizing the data to ensure that we did not ignore any aspects of exploitation and humiliation. Finally, through theoretical coding, we integrated our themes with previous research on humiliation, exploitation, and domestic work.

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Findings

In this section, we present different practices of workplace humiliation that organize oppression in domestic work. We show how within the structural context of the material conditions of poverty and class relations, humiliation intensifies exploitation. Finally, we present accounts in which workplace humiliation and exploitation are restricted.

Practices of Workplace Humiliation

In this section, we show how the practices of symbolic, sexual, and physical humiliations are key to organizing domestic work at the intersection of caste, class, and gender in a way that naturalizes oppression.

Symbolic Humiliations. In line with prior research (Chrispal et al., 2021; Mahalingam et al., 2019), we found that domestic work is a site of several practices of caste-based symbolic humiliation that have morphed to degrade upper-caste domestic workers as well. These practices entail ascriptive humiliation (Lukes, 1997) by attributing degrading features to workers and representing them as lesser beings and polluted entities (see also Ambedkar, 2014; Chrispal et al., 2021; Jodhka, 2018). Consider what Bratati, an upper-caste and middle-class employer, shared:

> We don't serve food to the (domestic) worker in the same dishes that we use. We are Brahmins. My husband is very discriminating in these matters. Usually, she (the domestic worker) doesn't eat anything in our house. She only drinks tea in a steel glass, which is kept separately.

Another employer, Anindita added,

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> She (domestic worker) has a separate cup for drinking tea…. She handles various kinds of waste materials from different houses; that is why we feel she might be unhygienic. After all, while sipping a cup of tea, the cup comes into contact with the saliva in her mouth. How can we have tea from the same cup again?

Bratati and Anindita refer to several aspects of humiliating disavowal that are caste-based. These are, as Parekh (2009) notes, examples of institutionalized humiliation. While some of the caste-based norms have changed in urban settings, employers regularly enact humiliating caste-based norms of purity and pollution (Douglas, 1966; Guru, 2009; Yengde, 2019). Bratati further told us, 'If she (domestic worker) sits on the sofa wearing dirty clothes, I cannot accept that. My husband does *puja*. The place will become impure with her touch…. She has tea sitting on the floor.' Such notions of dirt are commonly invoked by employers, and Trina added, 'we cannot imagine drinking water from her (domestic worker) glass ever in our lives. Yes, you can say that there is a concept of her being 'unhygienic' that is fixed in our minds.' This resonates closely with Thorat, Mahamallik, and Sadana (2010), who point to various market-based discriminatory practices that include not touching the hands when handing over money to untouchables. As Honneth (2004) suggests, such acts are forms of denial of equal recognition and contribute to injustice and oppression.

In recent years, caste-based political mobilizations have problematized the symbolic power of caste-based domination (Teltumbde, 2010). As a result, domestic workers consider untouchability as humiliating. Banti, a domestic worker, reported the following:

> I see my cup or my plate kept separate from others in all the houses where I work. In one of these houses, they have even separated my water bottle from theirs, and they keep my bottle under the basin. They don't give me a glass. I am never allowed to sit on a sofa in any of the houses. I always sit on the floor. Whenever they serve food, they place the plate on the floor. *I feel bad then, but I have to do my work. For this*

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> *reason, I try not to eat in these houses. If they force me, I ask them to give me the food in a packet, and I take it home.*

Banti is a Muslim who hides her religion and presents herself as a Hindu to get a job because Muslims as 'others' are not hired by some Hindus (Basnet & Sandhya, 2020). However, her employer takes for granted that she is polluted and treats her like an untouchable. Banti resents practices of disavowal and feels degraded. Despite her state of poverty and lack of food, she is fearful of the humiliations with which her employer laces the food and tries not to eat it. However, most domestic workers simply have to put up with symbolic humiliation from their upper-class employers. Such humiliations are so entrenched that they extend beyond the caste boundaries and affect the upper-caste workers as well. In such cases, their class relations overwhelm caste identities. Ritu, an upper-caste worker, bemoaned, 'employers give me stale food. Sometimes they give me leavings from their plates.' Malati, another upper-caste worker, shared,

> There is a wealthy family where I only clean dishes. They don't like to get close to me. Their attitude is, do your job and leave… they ask me to sit in a separate place to have food. They never allow me to sit in the dining area where they have food sitting around a dining table. They maintain distance.

Workers take notice of humiliating practices, deeply resent them, and feel ontologically wounded (Guru, 2009). However, they put up with degrading practices because they have limited sources of livelihood. Consider Kalpana's experience, 'They give me tea in a separate cup and also separated my plates. Yes, I feel bad about it. They could do this to me because I work as a domestic worker.' Despite being upper-castes, Malati and Kalpana are treated by employers as untouchables. Employers draw upon caste-based scripts to treat these lower-class workers as polluted and dirty (Dickey, 2000). Such practices are so widespread that if they are not followed, employers may face social sanctions. For instance, Amita, who never

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allows her worker to use the family's dishes or sit on chairs, told us, 'If our relatives ever see that the servant uses the same utensils that we use, they will not even drink water in our house.' Thus, workers, irrespective of their castes, are untouchable, and come to represent dirt and danger (Zulfiqar, 2019). Confirming such humiliations, Tushi, a domestic worker, lamented, 'everybody looks down upon us.'

In such practices of untouchability that have morphed to become class-based practices, we find expulsion, relegation, and reinforcement humiliations (Smith, 2001). These acts of humiliating disavowal help employers construct their pure and clean identities by socially distancing themselves from dirty workers while simultaneously excluding them and showing that they are lesser beings, thus stabilizing existing power relations (Frevert, 2020; Geetha, 2009; Goffman, 1961). However, these humiliated subjects are never completely excluded since they are still needed to perform work. Karabi, an employer who used to treat her worker as an untouchable, has recently been forced to allow her to cook because of her old age and loss of family support. In Karabi's narrative, the worker has been repositioned from an untouchable into a 'family member'. This usage of 'family' chimes with Ray and Qayum's (2009) observation that employers instrumentally use the rhetoric of love, or what Sengupta and Sen (2013, p. 59) call 'pragmatic intimacy' to disguise their dependence on domestic workers. In these tactical moves, through which workers are 'assimilated' into an employer's family, there is a double erasure of the polluted. On the one hand, workers who rarely claim to be part of an employer's family have no say or participation in these claims, while on the other hand, the actual families of workers outside of their employers' homes are of little consequence during these gestures. It is on the basis of an asymmetrical position of privilege that employers decide when to invoke employer-employee relations or when to suspend and replace them with familial ties (Zulfiqar, 2019). Hence, the maternalism of

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employers (Rollins, 1985) naturalizes oppressive relations between domestic workers and employers (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016).

Sexual Humiliations. Patriarchy provides the basis for men to humiliate women (Rollins, 1985). In line with the earlier documented experiences (Anderson, 2000; Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Dickey, 2016; Neetha, 2013a, 2013b; Zulfiqar, 2019), some workers shared with us how their male employers had groped them, and when they objected to these acts of sexual violence, they were demeaned by threats or offered money as compensation. Women-workers are sexually humiliated in these acts of violence as they are reduced from human subjects to sexual objects and denied autonomy (Nussbaum, 1999). Rakhi shared the following:

> Employers had a daughter, who got married when I was 11…. The groom used to give me the creeps…. One evening, he suddenly hugged me and touched my breasts. I was stunned. Before I could come to my senses, he said that if I told anybody about the incident, he would tell them that I had stolen his money. He said that he was a son-in-law of the family, while I was just a maid servant…. God! I was so afraid. I could not eat that night {shudders}. I could not sleep.

It was telling that Rakhi was not only sexually violated as an 11-year-old child, but when she protested, she was further humiliated by threats to label her as a thief and was reminded of her degraded status as a 'maid servant'. Past research has pointed to serious shortcomings in the Indian legal framework in protecting domestic workers (e.g., Gothoskar, 2013). As Hopkins (2017) points out, live-in domestic work is constantly fraught with danger, oppression, and slave-like conditions. Moreover, because humiliation breeds fear of further humiliations (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999), Rakhi lived in great fear of further degrading encounters. The humiliation and the resulting fear render Rakhi silent, and as a result, she did not protest to her employers and chose not to tell her family about it.

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While Rakhi recounted a terrifying episode of groping and blackmailing, others encounter more extreme humiliating sexual violence. Consider the case of Rina, who told us how her employer's adult son repeatedly raped her as a minor:

> I was very ill until the age of 7 or 8. As we were poor, we did not get proper food…. I started working as a domestic worker. There was an unmarried Dada (literally, this means 'elder brother') in that house…. Whenever he got the chance, he touched my body. I would freeze. He would touch me everywhere. I tried to tell the others in that house about this, but I never succeeded. It started when I was 11 or 12. I remember that, at that time, I did not even start to menstruate…. There was such a strange sense of fear that I was never able to tell this to my parents. I thought that no one would believe me. After that, when I was 14 or 15, he raped me.

Rina is now a married 25-year-old and has left the household where she was repeatedly raped. She had tears in her eyes when she narrated this experience. She was both a minor and completely dependent on her employers for survival. The employer's son understood this state of vulnerability, as well as his own privileged position as a male, and used it to sexually violate her. Repeated acts of sexual humiliation and objectification preceded the rape. A key feature in Rina's narrative is her acknowledgment of how fear immobilized her and robbed her of the capacity to resist (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Klein, 1991). Rina's experience is not unique, and as Kurane and Topno (2006) have documented, sexual violence against tribal domestic worker is rampant because of their extreme poverty and precarity. In a telling and humiliating follow-up to these instances of rape, Rina, in anger, asked her employer to go to a sex worker:

> I told Dada, 'There are many women who do this for money. Don't do this to me again. You have a lot of money. Go outside to do this.' He gloated, 'When I get a

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> chance in my home, why should I go out to do this?' I felt bad then. But I was not able to do anything. After that, he had sex with me on many occasions.

In line with Smith's (2001) understanding of conquest humiliation, the perpetrator, after committing sexual violence, gloats about it, grinds her face into the dirt, and leaves her there, helpless. As Schick (1997, p. 138) notes, 'A person's being gloated over is central to his being humiliated.' It is these acts of humiliation that make gender oppression particularly debilitating, as the woman victim is left in a state of silence and passivity, without the capacity to speak out about the violence she has faced (Ginges & Atran, 2008). Rina's humiliation was further exacerbated when she shared her predicament with the perpetrator's cousin, 'The first time that happened, I told his elder cousin. But she did not believe me. She said to me, 'Why are you always trying to seduce him?' As Ray and Qayum (2009) have reported, employers act on the widespread myth that women domestic workers lure male household members into sex in an attempt to destabilize employers' households. Hence, practices of humiliation serve both the purpose of stabilizing the existing gender-based oppression and to distinguish between the in- and the out-group by showing that the latter lacks worth (Frevert, 2020). Moreover, when Rina decided to leave the job because of sexual humiliation and violence, the following ensued:

> When Jethima (employer and mother of the perpetrator) asked me why I left the job, I told her that her son's character was not good. Jethima said, 'Are you trying to defame my son?' She then spread the word in the neighbourhood that I was of bad character…. There is no dignity in this work…. If someone uses bad language, I am not able to protest. If somebody behaves badly with me, I tolerate it.

Jethima, with whom Rina shared her agony, not only refused to understand her plight but also defamed her, which was particularly humiliating. As a result, Rina became a silent object who could not even tell her own parents about the sexual violence. As Honneth (2004, p.

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354), reminds us, 'identity formation generally takes place through stages of internalization of socially standardized recognition.' These acts of sexual humiliation leave workers with ontological wounds, fear, and limited abilities of assertion (Lindner, 2010; Parekh, 2009). The silence resulting from humiliation furthers oppression, as workers are unable to effectively protest.

Physical Humiliations. We found, in line with prior research (Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Frevert, 2020; Lindner, 2001; Noronha et al., 2020; Zulfiqar, 2019) that workers face physical violence that is laced with humiliations. For instance, Parul shared,

> When I mopped the floor, the employer would stand in front of me and put her feet on the wet floor to make it dirty so that I would have to bend even further to clean again. She (the employer) would pull my hair if she thought I was cleaning the dishes too slowly.

Parul is a Dalit who lives in abject poverty. She not only faces violence but also the humiliation of her employer making her bend further on the floor and having her hair pulled for not being quick with her work.

Sometimes domestic workers face physical humiliations that result in serious injuries. Consider Sushma's experience:

> I remember the day when (my employer's) elder daughter (at that time, she was six) fell while she was playing with me. She hurt her leg, and the wound was bleeding. Then, Boudi (the employer and the child's mother) came rushing in and grabbed me by my hair really hard. She started beating me, and she hit my hand with something. Immediately I screamed in pain. Intense pain in my left hand kept me awake that night.

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Sushma was a live-in domestic worker and was therefore living in the same house as her employer's child. As Raghuram (2001) and Zulfiqar (2019) have argued, while the employer's house evokes care and a good life, it can also be an enclosed space of oppression. Sushma was not only badly beaten by her employer; she was also humiliated,

> The next morning, I told her (the employer) that my hand was in pain. But she said, 'It's a good thing. Next time you go out to play, this will be a reminder for you.' I was made to wash a lot of dishes with that hand.

Sushma discovered that violence is followed by the humiliation of having her injury gloated over, which is degrading (Schick, 1997). The employer did not display any remorse for injuring Sushma. Instead, she saw it as an opportunity to teach Sushma a lesson to be more responsible in the future. Sushma further shared:

> In the afternoon, I was lying down on my bed. I had no strength to get up. The elder daughter of the Boudi touched my forehead and told her mother, 'I think she has a fever.' After returning home, the husband of the Boudi took me to a doctor. *The doctor examined me, and I was told that my hand was broken.* When the doctor asked how my hand got broken, the employer said, 'She fell while playing.' I was so stupid not to reveal the truth to that doctor.... As they paid the doctor on my behalf, they deducted the sum from my salary for that month. I remember that I did all my work, except cleaning the dishes, with my hand in a cast. They often beat me or scolded me. If I got up late in the morning, they poured water on my face.

Following Martí and Fernández (2013) and Hartling et al. (2013) we understand that the fear created by physical violence and the degradation generated by humiliation impeded Sushma from telling the physician about the cause of her injury. This casual, silent, and fleeting interaction regarding a serious assault and injury unfolded as normal. Sushma played the role of an ideal servant, who is expected to remain silent and invisible (Rollins, 1985).

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Symbolic, sexual and physical humiliations ontologically injure domestic workers as they feel degraded not only in the sphere of their work but also in the social context outside their work (Geetha, 2009; Guru, 2009). Reflecting on this state of being, young Rani shared with us, 'there is no dignity in this work. My neighbors do not see this work as dignified. Since I started working, my neighbors do not allow their daughters to mix with me. They say, "she is a maid. Don't hang out with her".' This contributes to the discrimination experienced by stigmatized workers outside their spheres of work. Consider Tushi's experience, 'people obviously see my work as degrading. There is an airconditioned parlor in our neighborhood. Once I went there for my haircut. They told me on my face that they could not cut my hair because there could be lice in my hair.' In a similar vein, Chameli told us, 'I feel degraded being in this profession.' Fearful of further humiliations, Chameli shared how she tries to hide her profession from others. Hence, the culture of servitude theorized by Ray and Qayum (2009), in which oppression is premised on humiliation by employers, ensures that workers are belittled and work in fear of further degradation (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). Malati, an upper-caste worker bemoaned,

> I don't tell anyone about my job as housemaid. Instead, I talk about my job as a cook. My daughter is married. *It will be a shameful thing if her in-laws come to know about this. After all, this is a degrading job.* The profession as a cook is somewhat dignified. I cannot publicly state my profession as a housemaid.

Although past research has shown that upper-caste workers are reluctant to do cleaning work because it is considered dirty (Sharma, 2016), Malati is forced to do such work because of her poverty. However, she does not disclose it to others to avoid further degradation. Savitri, another upper-caste worker, further lamented, 'In our caste group, no one works as a domestic worker. No one in my family knows about my work, I have kept it a secret. It's a shame for my family.' It is also telling that despite the intergenerational transfer of this

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profession, domestic workers do not want their daughters to experience the degradation associated with domestic work and want them to have some other occupation. As a result, work that is vital for people's material well-being and social reproduction, is considered degrading by those who perform it as they live under the constant fear of further humiliations.

The Exploitation of the Humiliated

In this section, we show how the practices of workplace humiliation described above contribute to workers' exploitation. We focus on three features of exploitation—low wages, denial of basic necessities, and imposition of degrading work.

Low wages. Domestic workers get abysmally low wages as a key feature of their exploitation. Confirming this feature, Asima described how 30 years back, when she started working,

> There were five members in that family where I was engaged as a domestic worker. They paid me 40 rupees per month as salary. They pressed me to do all the household work…. At first they gave salary at the starting of the month. After four-five months, they stopped paying my salary. If I wanted my salary, they told me, "You are a glutton… we spend a lot of money on your food, feeding you four times in a day. There is a problem in this month. You will get your salary next month."

Asima currently earns around INR 2,500 a month. When she started working 30 years back as a live-in worker, her monthly salary for nearly 15-16 hours per day and seven days of work was INR 40. There were months when even this small wage was not paid to her. In addition, the extraction of the economic surplus was laced with the humiliation of being called a 'glutton', given leftover food that was served in a separate plate, and of being made to sit on the floor to eat. Such humiliations damage the self-respect of workers and limit their

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abilities to resist exploitation (Lindner, 2010; Parekh, 2009). Savitri, an upper-caste worker, confirmed this feature of domestic work,

> They (employers) give me INR 450 a month. I know that this is not enough for such workload. But what can I do. Who will listen to us? They are a five-member family. Such a big workload, can you imagine how many utensils I have to wash daily twice…. Sometimes they abuse me…. Because I'm a domestic worker, I have to tolerate their insults with silence.

Despite realizing that she is exploited by her employers who refuse to pay appropriate wages, Savitri is unable to resist because of her material constraints and humiliations that leave her degraded. The situation of exploitation that is accompanied with humiliation is even worse for live-in workers. Consider Alpana's experience as a child-worker:

> They (the employers) put me to work like a dog all day long! After I woke up in the morning, I had to sweep the entire house. Then, I had to clean the (soiled) nappies and the child's clothes. They served me two rotis or parathas with some leftover curry as breakfast. After that, I had to look after the child for the whole day. When the child fell asleep at midday, they would ask me to clean the house.

Alpana adds an important facet to understanding of exploitation (Preiss, 2014; Snyder, 2010). As outlined in the previous section, Alpana is a target of regular symbolic humiliations and is treated as an untouchable. Such practices degrade workers and leave them in fear of further oppression. Treated as, to quote Alpana, 'a dog,' the humiliation a domestic worker faces dehumanizes her and makes her employers expect *silent compliance* to *their commands*. As a result, most live-in domestic workers are not paid any overtime for the extra hours or weekend work. It is not surprising that after two decades of domestic work, Alpana still lives in abject poverty with a family income of INR 3,200 per month. Thus, humiliations create

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workers with limited abilities to resist exploitation because they are robbed of their sense of worth (Lindner, 2001).

Denial of basic necessities. The exploitation of domestic workers is so extreme that they are denied basic necessities of life that should normally be provided by employers (Varman et al., 2021). For instance, in a city where temperatures can exceed 40 degrees Celsius, Banti testified as follows:

> Presently, I am working in a house; they always switch off the fan in the summers when I am alone in the room. They don't see any need for a fan for me, even when the summer is at its peak. Sometimes, I have to bring my younger daughter with me. If I switch on the fan, they quickly turn it off whenever it comes to their attention. One day, my daughter was crying, and I switched on the fan. Then, Bhabhi (the employer) rebuked me, 'Are you going to pay the bill for this?'

Despite such humiliating rebukes and exploitation, Banti continues to work silently. These degrading encounters are routine for her, as we explained in the section on symbolic humiliations. Like many domestic workers, Banti must perform a second shift by taking care of her family and household chores in addition to her employer's (Federici, 2012). In this system of *double exploitation*, Banti's employer is extracting value from her worker with as little expenditure as possible. Karabi, an employer, further told us that she had not even provided a fan in the room where her live-in domestic worker sleeps. Karabi dismissingly said, 'They are rural people; they don't require fans.' In this denial of a basic necessity, 'rural people' are posited as degraded human beings who are able, somewhat willingly and naturally destined to work in ruthless conditions of exploitation (Hartling et al., 2013; Lindner, 2007).

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Indeed, exploitation can get crueller than the denial of cool air, as Banti reported regarding her pregnancy:

> Even in my pregnancy, every day, I had to carry a bucket full of water and wash dishes. I also mopped the floors. They asked me to clean the frames of the windows as well. They paid me INR 400 per month. Due to this hard labor, I gave birth to the baby before reaching the hospital in a rickshaw. I was back at work within just ten days of my daughter's birth. My employer deducted seven days' wages.

Banti's description of her workplace and the deduction from her salary point to the exploitation that domestic workers have to face regularly. Her unwritten service contract demanded that she work throughout the year, with ten days of maternity leave being denied in this exchange. As Raghuram (2001) has noted, the employer does not need to think about the consequences of this denial because the degraded worker has limited avenues of protest or justice. Thus, employers exploit their broken and humiliated domestic workers through petty savings on basic necessities.

Imposing degrading work. Workplace humiliation converges with exploitation whenever employers impose degrading work they would never perform themselves (Varman et al., 2021). Consider the case of Kajari,

> Every day, she (the employer's daughter) returned from the toilet without flushing it, and Dida (the employer; literally, it means 'grandmother') would ask me to clean the toilet. One day, I had just finished taking my bath. I was having lunch, and Dida asked me to clean the toilet as her younger daughter had soiled it. I got very angry then. I told her, 'Your daughter dirtied it, so it is your duty to clean it. I can't do that again. You didn't hire me for such work.' She replied, 'How dare you speak like that? Go back home tomorrow morning…. If you cannot adjust, you can leave'.

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Kajari had just taken a bath, and yet she was ordered to perform a dirty job. We interpret her anger as a form of resistance, an issue that we will discuss in the next section, but also as a response to her employer's lack of concern about and malignant negation of her right to cleanliness and purity. Kajari's story is unexceptional in the context of dirty work (Anderson, 2000; Mahalingan et al., 2019; Mendonca et al., 2022). For her employer, within the prevailing logic of exploitation, Kajari is expected to work no matter how degrading and demeaning that work is. Employers rarely do dirty work themselves, which helps them to exalt their positions of purity and superiority in relation to the polluted positions of their workers (Douglas, 1966). Moreover, exploited workers do not get any additional compensation for such dirty work. Kajari was not complaining that she was asked to clean up faeces or not additionally paid for it, since she had already 'adjusted' to such conditions of exploitation. Instead, she felt particularly humiliated by the timing of this degrading work over which she was not allowed to have any control. This denial of freedom resonates closely with the observations of Anderson (2000) and Mahalingan et al. (2019) that workers' inability to put limits on their work reinforces their exploitation and their role as the doers of dirty work. Her employer wanted Kajari to be ready to 'adjust' to this exploitation or face expulsion (Smith, 2001).

Respite from Workplace Humiliations

Although workplace humiliations are widespread among domestic workers, we found several accounts of employers' benevolence. In such instances, employers were considered kind and less humiliating, and offered relatively more freedom to workers (Smith, 2001). Consider the case of Sabita, a domestic worker whose house burned down in an accident,

> Employers gave me INR 1,000, seven sarees, two sets of trousers, one *lungi* and an assortment of other (used) clothing. Apart from this, they also gave two mosquito

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> nets, three or four sweaters, three shawls and even an old blanket. On top of that, they also told me that the old bricks that they had at their house were mine for re-constructing my house.

It is notable that Sabita considers hand-me-downs of old and discarded clothing as kindness. Such an interpretation is best understood against the backdrop of her experience that relationships between workers and employers are normally highly exploitative. Sabita further told us that her employer had helped her on another occasion when her son-in-law had died due to illness. According to Sabita, 'I did not have to ask them; they simply increased my salary by INR 200 when they heard what had happened.' Sabita also told us that her employer had helped her financially when her daughter got married. Such moments of benevolence, as a form of 'pragmatic intimacy' (Sengupta & Sen, 2013, p. 59), do mean that there is some respite from humiliations and exploitation. In the interim, workers make some material gains and enjoy limited but prized recognition from their employers (Honneth, 2004).

Workers also punctuate humiliations with minor and hidden acts of resistance that help them to gain some self-esteem and freedom. These tactics of resistance resonate with the findings of Barua, Haukanes, and Waldrop (2016) who show that domestic workers' contestations are partial and ambiguous because of the precarity of their positions. Consider Asima's act of resistance:

> There is an old woman in one house where I work now. She always shouts at me. This irritates me. Often, I quite deliberately touch her feet with a dirty mop. Then she goes away, grumbling to wash her feet.

These actions are meant to pollute the employer as a form of revenge for symbolic humiliation. Workers also resist by sometimes spoiling food, not cooking properly, breaking dishes, or working slowly. However, these infra-political acts (Scott, 1985) remain hidden

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and do not overtly destabilize ongoing employment relationships. Much of the resistance by workers is silent and takes the forms of 'flight… sabotage, betrayal, and so on,' as Jounin (2008, p. 39) has also noted.

We also came across instances when domestic workers, such as Kajari (see the previous section), got angry and shouted back at their employers when they found their behaviors unacceptable. Koyal, an employer, further shared with us,

> Guddi (worker) never bothered to listen to whatever she was asked to do. She would intentionally do those things on a regular basis which we used to prohibit her from doing…. I used to get very angry, but we never scolded her much. That's because she was a foul-mouthed girl.

By disobeying and answering back, Guddi could carve out a space of relative freedom for herself. Koyal labeled her as 'arrogant' and was scared of her domestic worker insulting her. Older workers and those who were living-out had greater freedom to assert themselves in this manner to restrict humiliation.

Another form of resistance to oppression and exploitation is in joining informal networks of domestic workers who share their experiences. Garcia-Lorenzo et al. (2022) have recently shown that getting organized and acting collectively are important to escape the stigma and humiliation associated with long-term unemployment. In our context, employers are afraid of informal networks refusing to offer a replacement if a fired worker spreads the word that she was unfairly dismissed. However, in most cases, we found that the impacts of these networks were limited, and employers invariably found replacements because of the large supply of workers.

In summary, we foreground links between workplace humiliation on the one hand and exploitation on the other. Exploitation takes the form of abysmally low wages, denial of basic necessities, and imposition of degrading work. Workers put up with these practices because

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their material conditions of poverty combined with symbolic, sexual, and physical humiliations. Although there is resistance by domestic workers and some employers show kindness, when practices of workplace humiliation are not kept in check they contribute to the deterioration of employment relations and to exploitation.

Discussion

We have identified three organized practices of workplace humiliation: symbolic, physical, and sexual. These three practices constitute what Frevert (2020) calls politics of humiliation, serving the purpose of social reproduction by stabilizing the existing power relations and by furthering the powerlessness of domestic workers. Although several organizational scholars have pointed to similar practices (e.g., Chrispal et al., 2021; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Noronha et al., 2020; Zulfiqar, 2019), the core focus of their work has not been on offering explicit insights into workplace humiliation. In this section, we explain how our findings contribute to the understanding of workplace humiliation and to organizational studies on oppression, caste, and exploitation.

The most comprehensive conceptualization of humiliation in organization studies is offered by Smith (2001). Like Frevert (2020), Smith approaches humiliations from a macroscopic structural vantage point. By examining humiliations in everyday workplace interactions, we foreground corporal degradation, ontological wounds, cultivation of fear, and their role in organizing, that Smith (2001) under-examines. Importantly, our study does not support Smith's reading (inspired by Norbert Elias) that humiliations become less common, as we move from hierarchical forms of organizing in absolutist societies to network forms of organizing in democratic societies. On the contrary, our study suggests that despite living in a democratic society with well-accepted norms of human rights and laws that do not formally discriminate between individuals, domestic workers are at the receiving end of several

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practices of humiliation. For instance, in the symbolic humiliation of refusing to allow workers to drink water from the same glass as employers, we see elements of expulsion, relegation, and reinforcement humiliations, which are types of humiliations discussed by Smith (2001). In physical and sexual humiliations, we witness conquest humiliation, an additional element discussed by Smith (2001). These humiliations create ontological wounds and fear that rob workers of their abilities to assert themselves as equal human beings, which further limit their abilities to resist the might of employers in a society that claims nonetheless to safeguard human rights (Klein, 1991).

In complementing Smith's (2001) emphasis on the macro structures of *de jure* slavery or human rights in locating humiliations and categorizing organizations, we also contribute by pointing to how organizing is shaped by micro-practices of humiliation. In doing so, we insist on focusing on practices of workplace humiliation to decipher how varying relations of domination coexist in the same context. For instance, in similar settings, we found that unrestricted prevalence of humiliation can make a workplace into an absolutist order but also that resistance to humiliation by workers or benevolence of employers can ensure higher degrees of freedom. Therefore, we argue that the separation between an absolutist hierarchy and an emancipated network is not just based on the macrostructural context in which an organization or a workplace is located (e.g., plantations in ante-bellum American South or societies that recognize human rights), but also on the prevalence of micro-practices of symbolic, sexual, and physical humiliations. Hence, our study contributes by illuminating the role of humiliation in organizing work.

In addition, prior organization studies have primarily emphasized symbolic humiliations (e.g., van Amsterdam et al., 2022; Chrispal et al., 2021; Mahalingam et al., 2019). However, we move the compass to show how workplace humiliation is also corporal by foregrounding sexual and physical humiliations. A comprehensive reading of workplace

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humiliation with emphases on both symbolic and corporal aspects is necessary to understand how humiliations create ontological wounds and fear that become leitmotifs of control. Such a reading adds, for example, to Zulfiqar's (2019) analysis that alludes to physical violence but primarily focuses on how dirt and foreignness are employed symbolically to control workers to enforce a novel wage model. We show that the control derived from different practices of humiliation is not merely a form of disciplining by employers to perform a particular work task or impose a wage model but also aims to exalt oppressors' status by annihilating workers' corporeality and subjectivity. Humiliation, if not resisted, can destroy a worker's sense of self with a loss of bodily integrity and render her completely at the mercy of employers. Therefore, in attending to symbolic, sexual and corporal humiliations in organizing, we offer a much-needed correction to the oversight of how degraded workers are controlled through workplace oppression.

Some organizational studies have alluded to the link between humiliation and oppression. For example, Chrispal et al. (2021) and Mahalingam et al. (2019) show how the intersectional influence of caste and gender is dehumanizing and creates humiliation. Others, such as Martí and Fernández (2013, p. 1196) ask whether '…the use of humiliating phenomena such as insults… maintain oppressive structures.' While Martí and Fernández (2013) draw attention to authorization, routinization, and the use of euphemistic or 'camouflage' language in furthering distance and oppression, we focus on how the distancing is associated with practices of humiliation that foster ontologically wounded identities, polluted beings, and entities robbed of their bodily integrity. These practices (re)produce exalted positions of purity for employers while confining workers to socially distant positions of degradation. Moreover, the social distance that we identify is impelled by a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, workers are cast aside as polluted entities that are considered impure and dirty. On the other hand, through the instrumental deployment of the

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family (Ray & Qayum, 2009), maternalism (Rollins, 1985), or what Sengupta and Sen (2013, p. 59) call 'pragmatic intimacy,' workers are integrated into the lives of employers as child-like figures who can only be included as unequal and dependent entities. Thus, we contribute to organization studies by showing that the dialectical social distance that (re)produces oppression in workplaces is premised on concrete practices of humiliation.

Recent scholarship has pointed to the significance of caste in organization studies (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020; Chrispal et al., 2021; Mendonca et al., 2022). We concur with these scholars that caste practices should be closely examined because they continue to get reanimated within neoliberal capitalism. However, we add another important aspect to their understanding. We show that the humiliating practices of untouchability that were meant for outcastes are also deployed against upper-castes to further their exploitation. In a capitalist society, class is foundational to the organization of work, and caste practices have to be understood by paying attention to how humiliation and degradation recirculate through class relations. While upper and lower castes can negotiate the stigma of dirty work differently, as Mendonca et al. (2022) have insightfully shown, for employers, these negotiations may not be of much consequence. This feature becomes particularly clear when we see that employers do not show greater mercy for upper-caste workers, and humiliate and exploit them as relentlessly as lower-castes. Because of their workplace humiliations, both upper and lower caste workers find it difficult to resist their exploitation. Hence, the routine humiliation of domestic workers is doubly beneficial for upper class/caste employers. By humiliating domestic workers, employers reproduce their upper-class material conditions quite inexpensively: their houses are cleaned, their food is prepared, and their children and elders are looked after at low costs. Humiliation of domestic workers also bears positive effects for the reproduction of employers' superior caste identities. Therefore, in theorizing the under-

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examined issue of workplace humiliation in social reproduction, we offer to organization studies a richer understanding of caste practices and class relations in the workplace.

Finally, several recent writings have foregrounded the economic exploitation of workers (Snyder, 2010; Varman et al., 2021). However, these studies overlook the role of humiliation in exploitation. We contribute by showing how the oppression created by practices of humiliation enables relations of economic exploitation that allow low wages, long work hours, cruel working and living conditions, and authoritarian imposition of dirty and degrading work to prevail. By doing so, we also offer implications for the debate about the morality of exploitation in organization studies. While some researchers find exploitation morally permissible by claiming that in the absence of economic opportunities, workers are likely to be worse off (e.g., Powell & Zwolinski, 2012), others have pointed to exploitation as an immoral offence by employers against vulnerable workers who have limited choice (e.g., Arnold & Bowie, 2003; Arnold & Hartman, 2006). Our analysis of the effects of humiliations in furthering exploitation questions the moral permissibility argument by pointing to how the extraction of surplus from domestic workers is premised upon corporal degradation, ontological wounds, and the cultivation of fear. Against those who are ready to condone economic exploitation, we respond that the current organization of domestic work is unfairly exploitative, if anything, because it relies on routine humiliations of workers that impedes social recognition (Honneth, 2004). More generally, our study also indicates that situations of intense exploitation are likely to rely on practices of humiliation that are barely visible to outsiders. Therefore, it would be ethically imprudent to justify exploitation as morally permissible without inquiring into possible practices of workplace humiliation.

Conclusions

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By attending to different practices of humiliation, we delineate how humiliation is instrumental in informally organizing highly exploitative workplaces. Humiliation in domestic work helps employers to socially reproduce and entrench their superior status. Conversely, they leave domestic workers with ontological wounds, fear, and in situations where they can hardly care for themselves and their families.

While our study is limited to domestic work in Kolkata, the conclusions about exploitation based on workplace humiliation are relevant for other geographies and other sectors of the global economy. For instance, our study informs studies on the organization of other forms of exploitative work, such as sweatshop labor, sites of modern slavery, sex work and child labor by showing how freedom of workers is restricted through humiliation. In addition, our research may inform future studies of humiliation in the sectors of the global economy where oppressive structures continue to prevail despite workers having formal rights and legal protection (e.g., institutional racism in the Global North). The scars of humiliation run deep and foster conditions of exploitation and oppression throughout the Globe.

Although there is no easy cure for these ills, we hope to stimulate organized practices and theorization that break the cycle of social reproduction and capitalist exploitation through workplace humiliation. To reduce their exploitation, domestic workers need to organize themselves and form unions, through which they can collectively bargain for dignity, equity, humane working conditions and better wages. In recent years, there have been attempts, by unions and civil society organisations, to organise domestic workers in different parts of India, and there have also been collective protests and strike actions (Neetha, 2013a). In Kolkata, All India Democratic Women's Associations (AIDWA) founded in 2011 a union of domestic workers, called Paschimbanga Grihasahayika Mahila Samiti (Sengupta & Sen, 2013). In a similar vein, studies on the unionisation of domestic workers in Kerala (George,

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2013) and Pune (Moghe, 2013), show that attempts are being made, in different parts of the country, to organize domestic workers.

Collective actions, however, are not easy tasks (Neetha, 2013a) and will require richer theorization to support workers in their struggles. To contribute to that end, organizational scholars should document and understand different facets of workplace humiliation and resistance. As we have foregrounded the inherent limitations of individual resistance, we call for organizational research that identifies effective collective ways of resisting humiliation, oppression, and exploitation. Any such search for justice, equality and dignity in workplaces will also have to pay close attention to strategies of redistribution of wealth and dignity that transform the exploitative structures of class relations. Organization studies can play the important role of uncovering, documenting, and imagining collective actions that can empower workers in their class-based struggles against capitalist oppression, humiliation and exploitation.

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Table 1: List of Domestic Workers

Name	Age (approx.)	Education	Caste	Experience as Domestic Worker (years)
Kalpana	37	Some schooling	Upper caste	30
Anita	40	Some schooling	Dalit	25
Asima	48	No schooling	Dalit	30
Banti	25	No schooling	Not recorded	12
Sabita	60	Some schooling	Low caste	30
Ahana	36	Some schooling	Dalit	25
Alpana	36	No schooling	Dalit	26
Malati	46	Some schooling	Upper caste	30
Parul	44	Some schooling	Dalit	25
Savitri	40	Some schooling	Upper caste	15
Rina	25	Some schooling	Tribal	12
Rani	16	Some schooling	Tribal	1
Chameli	35	Some schooling	Not recorded	6
Kajari	45	Some schooling	Dalit	13
Sushma	32	No schooling	Low caste	15
Tushi	22	No schooling	Not recorded	10
Rakhi	Not recorded	Some schooling	Not recorded	20
Laxmi	42	Some schooling	Dalit	30
Putun	40	Some schooling	Dalit	20
Aditi	52	Some schooling	Low caste	25
Rinki	46	Some schooling	Not recorded	1
Lata	40	Some schooling	Upper caste	20
Saloni	50	No schooling	Dalit	30
Ritu	50	Some schooling	Upper caste	18

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Table 2: List of Employers

Name	Age (approx.)	Education	Caste	Profession
Mona	35	Undergraduate	Upper caste	Homemaker
Sumita	38	Undergraduate	Upper caste	Working
Bratati	42	Undergraduate	Upper caste	Homemaker
Amita	35	Secondary	Upper caste	Homemaker
Chaya	56	Undergraduate	Upper caste	Homemaker
Koyal	57	Undergraduate	Upper caste	Homemaker
Anindita	63	Undergraduate (incomplete)	Upper caste	Homemaker
Sumana	33	Undergraduate	Upper caste	Homemaker
Trina	50	Undergraduate	Upper Caste	Homemaker
Karabi	72	Some schooling	Upper caste	Homemaker

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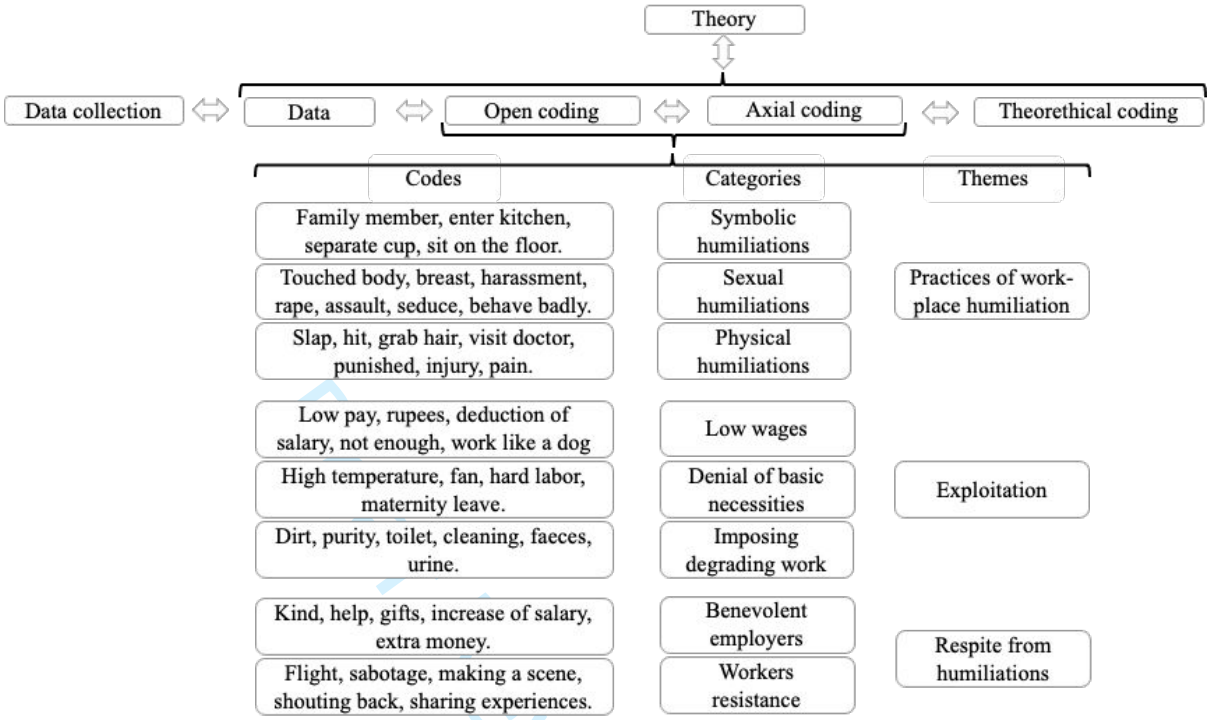
Figure 1: Data analysis



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Authors' Biography

Rohit Varman is Professor of Marketing and Consumption at Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK. He uses interpretive methodologies and his current inter-disciplinary research focuses on corporate violence, exploitation, and slavery. He has published his research in several outlets that include the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Service Research, Organization Science*, *Human Relations, Journal of Business Ethics, and Marketing Theory*.

Ismael Al-Amoudi is Professor at Grenoble Ecole de Management (France), Chaire Numérique. He also serves as Honorary Senior Research Fellow at Cardiff Business School; Director of the Centre for Social Ontology (www.socialontology.org); Academic Advisory Board Member of the Independent Social Research Foundation; Associate Editor for *Organization* and Editorial Review Board Member for *Organization Studies*. He has published his research through academic books and journal articles in economics, management, organizational studies, philosophy and sociology. Current topics include colonization, de/humanization, relationality, social ontology, violence and post-human technologies.

Per Skålén is a Professor of Business Administration based at the Service Research Center, Karlstad University, Sweden. Per is currently working within the domains of service research, critical marketing and organization research, and with applying practice theory, strategic action field theory and other sociological theories to marketing and organization research. His work has appeared in several journals including: *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Service Research, Marketing Theory*, *Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, Organization*, and *Public Management Research*.

Corresponding author: Ismael Al-Amoudi, Grenoble Ecole de Management, 12 rue Pierre Sémard. 38000 Grenoble, France.
Email: Ismael.al-amoudi@grenoble-em.com

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