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Infrastructure(s) of Intimacy: Class, Gender and Social Reproduction in Urban Karachi

Abstract

My dissertation examines new kinds of social relations and intimacies between working-class women in urban Pakistan. By conducting an ethnography of the lives of female beauty and factory workers in Karachi, I analyze how labor practices interact with discourses of class and gender to enable, and constrain, such relations. Contemporary restructuring of urban life has led to the decline of previously important modes of urban sociality, including those based on kin networks and neighborhood life. However, novel employment options for women in Pakistan have come to serve as new spaces of urban sociality. What types of non-kinship relations do working-class women cultivate in order to survive the exigencies of the labor market and the ongoing demands of social reproduction? How do labor practices in sites of intimate labor (the beauty salon) and industrial labor (the factory) differentially influence the contours of these urban intimacies? This project argues that non-kinship intimacies between women are vital to economic and emotional survival in the city. However, women frequently dissociate themselves from such relations and present themselves as family-oriented in an attempt to gain respectability, and hence, class status. Non-kinship intimacies, though shaped by hegemonic discourses of class and gender, also reconfigure these discourses. My analysis shows how labor power is reproduced in the margins of traditional structures of family and kinship, and when and how these new intimacies undermine or reinforce these structures.