Television, Gender, and Labor in the Global City

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Situated within a critical, feminist approach to development communication, this study examines the role of television advertising among unskilled female factory laborers in Bangalore, India. Ethnographic fieldwork spanning the summers of 1997 and 2000 showed that factory labor awards the female worker a degree of autonomy and purchasing power in the short term, but denies her long-term empowerment because her labor is fragmented and made dispensable by the very nature of capitalist discipline. Through a discussion of gender, labor, and television in the global city, the analysis concludes that participatory communication and further ethnographic analyses are essential for long-lasting policy and social action.

In mid-2000, television in India accounted for 36% of the country’s US$1.3 million advertising business. With an estimated growth to US$1.7 million by 2005, which would constitute almost 50% of the country’s total advertising revenue, private television channels, both foreign and domestic, found themselves in stiff competition to garner niche markets. Whereas the 1990s was a decade of frenzied television activity, with the establishment of private regional channels in almost every state of the nation to compete with the regional channels launched by the largely government-controlled Doordarshan national network, the 2000s have started more conservatively with mergers and acquisitions more common than the rise of independent networks. The overt focus on national and women’s development in Doordarshan’s programming has shifted, due in part to the intense competition from private networks, to entertainment and consumerism (McMillin, 2001). Although various analyses of television reception have privileged urban upper, middle,
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and lower income television audiences in Indian cities (Mankekar, 1999; McMillin, 2002a), television responses of rural immigrants to the city have been neglected.

This study is an examination of the role of television in the lives of unskilled female laborers in three ancillary or feeder factories in Bangalore, India. Male employees were included in the sample to provide adequate comparison for working conditions and consumer behavior of the female employees. Three factories were identified for this study: Factory A, which manufactured voltage stabilizers for television sets; Factory B, which manufactured zippers and fasteners for garments; and Factory C, which manufactured electronic components for television sets.¹ These factories serviced larger multinational export industries and were located on the southeast outskirts of Bangalore city for their easy airport, railway, and highway access and the abundant labor supply from the neighboring villages. The factories in this study were also three of four selected for a social marketing Information, Education, Communication (IEC) Project funded by the Thrasher Research Fund, Utah, to increase nutritional awareness among female employees and to encourage healthy eating habits.

Research questions that direct this analysis concern the role of television in the daily lives of unskilled female factory laborers and the dynamics among television, gender, and labor in Third World cities. The study includes a description of the factory environment and of the unique characteristics and contexts of the female laborers that make them a highly desirable workforce.

The analysis is situated within a critical, feminist approach to development communication. Through its ethnographic empiricism and critical framework, it contributes to development communication in four important ways. First, the report of female factory workers’ varied responses to television overturns the liberal-pluralist framework of development communication that presumes the objectivity and value-free position of the researched and deifies facts and figures. Second, the diversity of respondents’ uses of television dismisses the overtly simplistic powerful effects paradigm (Lerner, 1958), which was set up to determine the process of commercial or political persuasion among Third World audiences. In doing so, the analysis shows that production and consumption of media involve contestation, at the heart of which is the shifting boundary between private and public as theorized by such critical scholars as Beltran (1976), Escobar (1995), and Servaes, Jacobson, and White (1996). Third, the study’s careful attention to the social and economic contexts of the respondents is itself a critique of the functionalist paradigm of development communication (Pye, 1963), which examined the function of media in society without taking into adequate consideration the unique contexts within which they operated. The discussion of the uses of television among the respondents situated within its context reveals that even those most oppressed by the political and economic structure of a society, in this case the female laborers, do possess critical agency, and it is this agency that has to be recognized and discussed. Finally, the study advances scholarship in develop-

¹ The names of the factories have been omitted and only the first names of respondents are used to protect privacy.
ment communication by dismantling the trend in empirical development communication research to constitute peripheral populations as passive and lacking critical agency in their own development (Wilkins, 1999). As we shall observe in this analysis, structures of patriarchy provided for the young female worker, a clearly prescribed role that awarded her a degree of autonomy and purchasing power in the short run, but excluded her from possibilities of upward mobility or long-term empowerment because her labor was fragmented and made dispensable by the very nature of capitalist discipline.

Television Reception Analysis and the Critical Feminist Framework

The passage of the powerful effects paradigm of mass communication research was crucial in the deconstruction of media audiences from mass to individual. The recognition of the diversity and complexity of audiences and their corresponding diverse and complex uses of media resulted in the uses and gratifications approach, which asks simply, “Ask not what media do to people, but ask what people do to media” (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985, p. 11). Despite its advancement of our understanding of media reception, this approach—like early development communication research—is still rooted in the social science liberalist pluralist framework that assumes that in a democracy, questions of media access and use are unproblematic (Swanson, 1992). Individuals’ uses of media were assessed quantitatively in the context of their needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974), quest for personal and social identities (Blumler, 1979), and expectancy-values (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985). Much of the study of media audiences under this approach has stemmed from a functionalist perspective and relied on methods of social psychology, which bypasses structural issues of power and access (Livingstone, 1997).

Cultural studies offers mass communication research a constructivist and dialectical theoretical framework to study audiences as active producers of meaning through its culturalist paradigm and, through its structuralist paradigm (Hall, 1994), to study media institutions as ideological apparatuses through which power relations are sustained. The critical feminist approach to development communication draws from cultural studies and recognizes that television reception is influenced by critical differences such as gender, ethnicity, class, and caste (to name a few identities). Such an approach derives from a Marxist structuralist framework as a reaction to the liberal pluralist and functionalist frameworks of development communication that are tied to Western principles of the Enlightenment, such as rationality and linear progress (Escobar, 1995). The structuralist framework leads to two assumptions in the study of gender and labor in the global city. First, development in Third World countries, although drawing women into a more central role in capitalist production than ever before, is more detrimental than beneficial in the long term because of the discriminatory pay, labor, and gender structures in the workplace. Second, the interconnected systems of imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy ensure that female factory laborers sustain their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In a study of Malaysian female factory workers, Ong (1987) wrote,
Placed under continual male supervision, the meaning of work is reduced to repetitive time-motion manipulations, and factory operators have little sense of the entire production process and how the micro components they assemble are fitted into the larger scheme of manufactured things and social relationships. (p. 112)

Ong’s fascinating account of the strategies of resistance through spirit possession is an example of the critical feminist approach that recognizes that subversion of patriarchal and political-economic structures is possible, that the oppressed do possess agency. Critical feminist communication recognizes women as producers of meaning and as participants of change (Riano, 1994); it questions the dichotomy between private and public and acknowledges women’s problems and issues in the public sphere of discussion and policy making (Hartsock, 1993). Development communication scholars, rather than focus on structures of domination only as a critique of development, need to examine the strategies adopted by individuals within a culture that subvert forms of domination through resistance, transformation, or adaptation in their use of mass media. This study fills such a need in its examination of how female factory laborers actively use television to interpret codes of urban behavior. It provides a commentary on how this use embodies strategies with which women resist patriarchal pressure within their households, transform realities through their newly found economic independence, and adapt to their semi-urban environments.

**Applying Theory to Method**

The critical feminist framework of development communication, in its critique of the abstraction of structuralism and of the decentering of poststructuralism, is appropriate for the current ethnography of female factory laborers in Bangalore, India, because it allows the scrutiny of subaltern audiences and their pleasure, acceptance, and resistance of the ideological lessons of television advertising. Rubin and Rubin (1995) wrote that critical social feminist researchers pay particular attention to the problems of dominance and submission as they affect women. . . . They argue that a more open and loosely structured methodology is necessary to learn about women, to capture their words, their concepts, and the importance they place on the events in their world. (pp. 36–37)

The admonitions of critical feminists to let the disempowered speak pose unique challenges for the ethnographer because of the imbalances in power and resources that are inherent in such an endeavor. Lal (1996), in her study of female sweatshop laborers in India, noted that when the Third World researcher goes back to her own country to research her own society, her nativity and position of power over the researched are problematized. Zavella (1996) wrote that the insider ethnographer has the unique limitation of always having to be accountable to the community studied.

As did Lal and Zavella in their ethnographies, I occupied shifting and complex positions as a returning native, Western-educated researcher and feminist scholar. I approached fieldwork with the understanding that the people interviewed also
occupied shifting positions because of their identities as informants and their differences in class, caste, and gender. Whereas ethnography is time consuming and expensive and cannot account for the values, ideas, and beliefs that lie in the unconscious of the respondents, it provides a method to investigate the way particular cultural competencies are organized, distributed, and shared.

Method

Research for this study was conducted from May through August 1997 and June through September 2000 through the four basic components of fieldwork: listening, observing, interviewing, and participating (Briggs, 1986). The method therefore was primarily fieldwork conducted through an ethnographic approach. To understand the community under research in as varied and complex ways as possible, background preparation was conducted through the three major aspects of fieldwork (Finnegan, 1992): (a) theoretical, through policy and textual analyses of the television environment in India; (b) ethnographic, through research of published and unpublished archival documents and video and audio recordings in newspaper and television archives in Bangalore; and (c) linguistic, which was minimal because I am a native speaker of the local language, Kannada.

Fieldwork was divided into two areas: network television stations and the ancillary factories. I interviewed around 30 personnel at global (Star TV, Sony TV, and Zee TV), national (Doordarshan), and private, local (Udaya TV and Raj TV) television stations, and 15 cable operators (from SitiCable, InCable, and UBN networks) to obtain a clear picture of the political and economic structure of television in India in general and Bangalore city in particular. Archival research and field interviews were crucial to piecing together a contemporary picture of the television environment because no clear industry report existed either at the national or regional levels. The ancillary factories, 57 employees were interviewed in all—22 (24% of total employees) from Factory A, 24 (27% of total employees) from Factory B, and 11 (16% of total employees) from Factory C. Of the respondents, 77% were women, a reflection of their overall majority (88%) of total employees from all three factories.

Interviews were semistructured (see Rubin & Rubin, 1995) where the topic was introduced followed by main, probe, and follow-up questions to guide the discus-

The researcher thanks the station director, executive producer, program executive, news executive, audience research officer, and audience research executives at the government-controlled Bangalore Doordarshan; the vice president, general manager, marketing executive, and program producer at the private, regional, Kannada-language Udaya TV; the vice president of sales, senior sales executive (for Channel [V]), and sales executives of the private, transnational Star TV; the regional sales manager and office executive at the private, transnational Zee TV; and the managers and franchisees of the SitiCable, InCable, and UBN cable networks, for their willingness to share their perspectives, programming strategies, and audience research information.

Factory A employed around 90 individuals, of whom 72 were women. Factory B also employed around 90 individuals, of whom 78 were women. Factory C employed around 70 women and no men.
sion. Almost all interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Detailed notes were taken in instances where the interviewee felt uncomfortable with the tape recorder. Questions at the television and cable stations were fairly consistent and pertained to each interviewee’s job, nature of the organization, and the interviewee’s perspective of the television environment in India and of the audience in Bangalore. In 1997, the climate of liberalization and intense competition among television and cable networks to garner the largest audience share resulted in openness among employees at these offices to discuss perspectives on the current television and advertising environment, the nature of urban and semi-urban audiences, and the complexities of organizing fast-growing semi-urban slums into manageable cable jurisdictions.

During continued fieldwork at the factories in 2000, power differentials were more obvious because of the very nature of hierarchical labor. I invariably entered the authority matrix not as a worker equal in standing with the respondents, but with the supervisor or manager who provided access to the worker—a great limitation when the objective was to represent the voice of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. To negotiate structures of power, I conducted extensive participant observation during initial phases of fieldwork. This proved useful to my understanding of the respondents’ metacommunicative contexts (see Briggs, 1986) and their shared cultural arenas (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) where modes of dress, hairstyle, language, and even food gained specific meanings. I then employed certain strategies to circumvent the formal distancing set up by factory managers in their insistence that interviews with employees be conducted in managers’ offices. First, prior to the interviews, I made repeated visits during various times of the day to the work rooms to allow a rapport and familiarity to develop between me and the respondents. Second, visits during lunch and mid-morning tea breaks allowed for casual mingling with the respondents, further breaking down hierarchical barriers between us. Third, my interest in every step of the production process allowed workers to explain the nature of their work and discuss their frustrations with it informally—discussions that were facilitated by the non-threatening space of the sweatshop itself, the noise of the machines, and the absence of the supervisor. Finally, I left myself open to all questions posed by interviewees and willingly answered personal and research-related questions so that interactions were two-way and as much on equal footing as the situation allowed.

Ethnographic data provided a qualitative view into the unique contexts of the factory laborers. Descriptive statistics were computed for an efficient assessment of the level of television ownership, gender, age, experience, salary, and job distribution, to name a few pertinent categories. Credibility of qualitative results was achieved through transparency, consistency coherence, and communicability (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Transparency was maintained through meticulous documentation of date, time, place, and content of all interviews. Consistency coherence was sought through attention to inconsistent responses and to similarity across responses, and communicability or clarity of results was assessed through feedback from reviewers and editors of this report. The combination of the quantitative survey method and the qualitative ethnographic method proved invaluable in that respondents were able to explain their responses on the survey during
focus group and individual interviews. This resulted in data that were rich in depth as well as breadth.

**The Role of Television in the Lives of Factory Women**

Possession of a television set brought great prestige for the respondents in this study. In cases where the respondent’s family did not own a television set, purchase of one was a top priority and the family developed careful savings plans toward that goal. Although 35% of the families possessed a radio and only 14% possessed two-wheelers, 86% of the respondents owned television sets.

Participants in this study lived in slums close to the factories on the outskirts of Bangalore city. Living conditions were cramped, with no basic amenities, such as individual water supply, electricity, garbage disposal, adequate transport, or even tarred roads. All respondents had lived in the semi-urban areas all their lives and were second- or even third-generation factory workers. Houses invariably consisted of two rooms with 5 to 10 houses sharing a toilet. Despite the long hours of work and meager income, of those who possessed television sets, a majority (78%) watched television at least 3 hours a day. Some (22%) watched between 3.5 to 6.5 hours a day. Almost 50% were from joint families, some with as many as 10 members living in cramped two-room quarters. Average combined income of the family of each worker in this study was invariably less than US$1114 a month. These employees contributed around 20% to 30% of the total household income. Average size of the family was five members, each earning approximately US$20 a month. One of three cable distribution systems—the SitiCable network, the InCable Network, and the UBN Network—served the respondents. Head-end operators made use of the services of cable operators who had already established viewing communities in various neighborhoods and recruited them as franchisees in exchange for a monthly fee. A typical cable package included the Star TV and Zee TV channels, two Doordarshan channels (as part of Doordarshan’s must carry rule), and an assortment of private regional channels based on clientele preference. Average cable subscription fee per month was US$3.

**Television as Interpreter of Urban Dress Codes**

The adolescent and young female adults working in the factories in this study stood within the nebulous boundaries of traditionalism and modernity, of rural backwardness and urban progressiveness. As Ong (1987) wrote from a study of such workers in Malaysia:

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\text{[Their] meagre earnings become a means to venture further afield, to explore and acquire a shifting, partial view of the widening social universe. . . . Assertion of individual versus family interests has its source in a new subjectivity constituted as much by educational practice, state agencies, and the media as by the labor process. (p. 196)}
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1 At the time of fieldwork, the exchange rate was Rs. 45 = US$1.
The labor process in this study gave the women a new freedom where control over a portion of their income also meant a certain amount of control over their lives. They were proud to be able to purchase a television set or save toward the purchase of one for the family. As residents of an increasingly urbanized environment, they drew upon television sitcoms (often brash slapsticks) such as Zee TV’s Mrs. Madhuri Dixit and Star TV’s Tu Tu Mein Mein for tips on what to wear and how to dress. All respondents showed a preference for film-based programs such as Doordarshan’s Superbit Muqabala, Zee TV’s Philips Top Ten, and Sony TV’s Boogie Woogie, which consisted of compilations of film songs presented by an anchor. Film-based game shows such as Zee TV’s Close-Up Antakshari and Sun TV’s Pattu Padava were strong favorites. These shows were presented by young, talented, urban video jockeys (VJs) who straddled both Indian and Western cultures and exuded an international character. The churidhar (a North Indian dress commonly worn by urban South Indian women) and jean-clad VJs were often the topic of the respondents’ discussion where the latter critiqued the former’s clothes, accents, and hairstyles.

Although several women complained of the conservatism they faced from their parents and older brothers at home, they said they emulated television models such as the protagonist on Udaya TV’s Ambika (an orphaned girl who becomes independent and successful) to subvert these restrictions. For example, Radha, a 19-year-old at Factory A, said she wore the more traditional half-sari from home and then changed into either a churidhar or midi at work. Rani, an 18-year-old in charge of inspecting capacitors at the same factory, said her mother bought her four sets of clothes a year, and she enjoyed dressing up in the more contemporary churidhars rather than the half-sari or sari more appropriate for her neighborhood. These young women were no longer waiting in the wings to be rescued through marriage; Radha and Rani said half-jokingly that their stories could very well mirror that of the protagonist in Andara, a Telugu-language soap on ETV, which offered upward mobility to a homely boy through his romance with a beautiful girl. Several other assembly line workers chatted animatedly about the newly found freedom that came with their earnings. Mangala, 25, for example, said she paid more attention to how she looked because of the well-dressed, neat, and clean models in television advertisements. Naseemabhi, 30, said she kept almost a quarter of her monthly income for bangles, saris, and churidhars. Uma, 21, said she followed television advertisements closely for their instructions on trendy clothes, colors, nail polish, and hairstyles.

Whereas development programs such as Ghar Babar and Kanooni Salah on Doordarshan in the 1980s and Mindwatch on Doordarshan and Anveshanam on AsiaNet in the mid-1990s failed to move beyond talking-head narrations of women’s problems (see McMillin, 2002b), talk shows in the latter 1990s and early 2000s, such as Zee TV’s The Kiran Joneja Show and The Priya Tendulkar Show, drew high audience ratings for their candid discussions of women’s economic roles, old age, and marital relationships. For the typically uneducated factory worker whose education was usually between the 6th-grade and 10th-grade level and the average age was between 16 and 21 (44% of all employees interviewed fell in this category and 37% were between 22 and 27 years of age), such programs recog-
nized that alternatives such as factory labor were possible even for the unedu-
cated. Many of the younger female workers said factory labor was a way to escape
the stigma attached to their failure to pass the 10th-grade statewide exam. They
were no longer limited to staying at home to take care of the family, work as a
maid outside the home, eventually get married, and continue to toil for the hus-
band, his family, and the children to come. The unmarried women noted in par-
ticular that they could now save for their own dowries. This contributed to their
sense of self-esteem because they saw themselves as no longer burdens to
their parents, but as active participants in their futures, possibly even having
a voice in selecting a husband. As did the strong women in the soaps on
Doordarshan's *Aurat* and Zee TV's *Tara*, they could take pride in possessing
economic value for the family not just for their support in food rations and
utilities, but in luxuries as well.

Disposable income through factory labor also allowed the women to indulge
themselves. Most had well-shaped eyebrows, bleached facial hair, and waxed
arms—a result of their patronage of the numerous beauty parlors that had cropped
up on almost every other street of the neighborhood. The presence of these
salons was indicative of a recognition that the semi-urban female factory worker
had entered a new era of self awareness and assertion. The images of city moder-
nity on television were certainly hers to emulate and appropriate.

*Television as Interpreter of Urban Consumer Behavior*

Most respondents said television advertisements influenced their food purchases
and eating habits. Overall, a majority (77%) spent about 20% of their salary on
luxury items, and 10% spent around 40% and around 12% (all male) spent as
much as 60% on luxury items. Most popular luxury products were soaps and
shampoos5 (33%), trendy clothes (35%), instant foods and snacks such as Maggi
noodles and Fryums (26%), soft drinks, alcohol, and movies (2% each). Most of
the men kept a major portion of their income for personal pleasures (invariably
alcohol and movies), whereas the women gave their salaries in whole to either a
parent or older sibling for household expenses. The women were given a stipend
from this amount for their personal needs.

Maggi (2-minute) noodles were a favorite among almost all the respondents.
The young girls (16–19 years), in particular, said they found Maggi noodles a
welcoming and necessary evening snack. For example, Arul, 17, Jayanthi, 18, and
Malathi, 17, all assembly-line workers from Factory B, said they cooked the noodles
as soon as they got home from work because the instant food was easy and quick
to make, was hot and soupy (similar to the more traditional rice and curry), and
was a perfect snack after a long day's work. The advertisement depicting a tired
working mother producing a hot and delicious meal of Maggi noodles for her
hungry husband and children was a hit with these women. Malathi said:

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5 Soaps and shampoos are considered luxury items here because they pertain to brand name-products
manufactured by multinational corporations and not to their indigenous government-sponsored
versions.
She [the mother] knows what it feels like to be so very tired after work and yet have more work waiting at home. Although my mother does most of the cooking, after one bowl of Maggi noodles, I am ready to help her out with everything.

The women in this study were relieved they could afford the more expensive products that saved them time and energy even though most of their salaries were still used for government-rationed foods and utilities. For example, Naseemabhi, a 30-year-old from Factory C, said she relied on instant food mixes for traditional foods as these lessened her cooking time considerably. Advertisements for these products followed a similar theme as those for Maggi noodles: the tired working mother magically producing delicious, traditional, hot foods that would ordinarily have taken the whole day to prepare. The invariable presence of the approving mother-in-law in the background further sanctioned the use of these products as legitimate and necessary for the modern housewife to maintain a harmonious balance between her private and public lives. Shakila, a 29-year-old from Factory A, proudly noted she gave her baby Farex, an instant baby food, instead of the traditional homemade rice gruel and mashed lentils. These products were far more expensive than the rice, lentils, and bulk spices that could be obtained through government-sanctioned rations. The women reported that their purchase of instant foods and mixes had increased over the past few years and now supplemented their rations regularly.

Respondents’ preference for the more expensive fast foods on the market is ironic in the context of the 6-month Thrasher Fund Information-Education-Communication (IEC) Project of which they were participants. This social marketing campaign was designed to increase factory employees’ (particularly female employees’) awareness of the importance of including foods rich in iron, folic acid, and vitamin C in their diets. Interviews with research associates and doctors associated with this campaign revealed that all female employees had iron deficiency anaemia (IDA), below average body mass index (BMI), chronic leucorrhoea, and intestinal worms. Using the knowledge, attitude, practice (KAP) model to implement behavior change, posters depicting desirable behavior (washing hands before and after meals, wearing slippers at all times, eating green, leafy vegetables, using iron utensils for cooking, etc.) were presented to experimental and control groups in each factory. During the campaign, employees were given a mid-morning snack of fermented steamed rice dumplings (iddlis), lentils, relish, gooseberry juice, and an iron tablet. Surveys were administered before and after the campaign. Although knowledge gains went up as much as 87% in post surveys, follow-up studies 2 and 4 months after the campaign revealed very little had carried over in practice (Tara Consultancies, 2000).

In response to questions about the effectiveness of the campaign, female employees at each factory said the strategies suggested by campaign workers were just too cumbersome to implement. For example, making the iddlys at home involved pregrinding ingredients. Many did not have electric grinders, electricity was in scarce supply, and daily manual grinding of ingredients was daunting after a hard day’s work in the factory. Hot tea was a far more pleasant and familiar
drink than the sour gooseberry juice, and finally, iron tablets were expensive to purchase regularly. The managers and owners reported that providing the nutritious snack at the workplace would cost an additional US$1.60 per month per employee, a price the factory could not afford. The lack of institutional support for better nutrition and the inconvenience of maintaining a healthy diet only heightened the appeal of television advertisements for instant food mixes and snacks for the respondents. Such advertisements did not disapprove of the working woman as one who shirked her familial responsibilities, but recognized that her energy and time were heavily taxed and that she needed to be supported in her efforts to balance public and domestic demands.

A majority of the respondents (68%) stated in preliminary surveys and focus group interviews that television advertisements also played a big role in their purchase of soaps and shampoos. A key reason was that most of these products did not replace traditional ones but were repackaged traditional products. For example, the use of soap nuts (shikakai) to wash hair is widespread among rural and some urban women. Shikakai, now marketed by Samrat, a subsidiary of SRK Products Pvt. Ltd., has become a sweet-smelling paste, shampoo, and conditioner, allowing these new consumers to continue their use of what was considered good, traditional, and wholesome and yet smell modern and sophisticated. Similarly, Medimix, made from medicinal antiseptic neem leaves and other herbs, is now marketed in new, brightly colored packages by the private Chennai-based Cholayil Pharmaceuticals Company and has diversified into shampoos and conditioners.

Female respondents also stated a strong preference for the more expensive international Lux soap, Clinic Plus and Pantene shampoos, Colgate toothpaste, and the local Rexona, Liril, and Sunsilk soaps and shampoos. For example, Sudha, a 25-year-old who worked on the assembly line at Factory A, said she was the sole earning member of her house. Yet she was careful to set aside money so she could go to the local beauty parlor once a month to have her eyebrows shaped and hair trimmed like the Sunsilk model. She said, “Her [the model’s] hair is so nice, so silky. She is always clean and fresh and happy. I want to be like that. I buy Sunsilk.” Rani, 18, and Anitha, 23, assembly-line workers at Factories C and A, respectively, said they purchased Fair and Lovely cream regularly because, as Anitha put it, “It makes me whiter, like a city girl.” For the women working in multinational factories, consumption of Lux soap and Pantene shampoo, to name a few favorites, allowed them passage from traditionalism (i.e., the use of shikakai and neem, the natural herbal and plant shampoo and teeth cleaners, respectively) to modernity, from rural backwardness to urban progressiveness.

The Empowerment or Exploitation Question

Despite the manifest freedoms brought to the female factory workers by their labor, latent structures of patriarchal discipline were all too evident at all three factories. Managers stated that women formed the prime labor force because they were able to withstand long hours of monotonous work, had submissive natures that helped them tolerate close supervision and high productivity demands, were less likely to quit even under harsh conditions, and could accomplish minute tasks efficiently. Unmarried women were particularly compelling as a labor force
because they were less likely to become pregnant, were less experienced, and were not apt to unionize or be influenced by union organizers. According to the candid managers, they were conditioned to accept male superiority from their fathers and brothers at home.

Indeed, although some of the women expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs, they said they would continue to work as long as the factories kept them. Malini, for example, a 17-year-old assembly line worker from Factory C, said both her elder brother and mother worked at factories while her father maintained an erratic job as a painter. She said that, although she knew there was no dearth of factory jobs, unlike her brother, she planned to stay on at the factory as long as she could. Gopamma, a 34-year-old from the same factory, thought she could remain a housewife because her 15-year-old daughter worked for a telephone company and her 18-year-old son worked at a factory, yet her husband’s unstable job as an autorickshaw (three-wheeled taxi) driver prompted her to get a job at the factory to save for her daughter’s dowry. She had no intention of seeking another job until she had saved enough toward her goal. Similarly, Vijayalakshmi, 27, an assembly-line worker from Factory B, worked long hours to supplement her husband’s unreliable income as a tailor. Her young children (aged 11 and 7) lived in her mother’s house. At the beginning of every month, she sent money to her mother to provide for her children. All these women considered their jobs integrally tied to their roles as family caretakers and as a means to stabilize the shaky incomes supplied by their husbands.

With minimal resistance from the women regarding work demands and minimal threat that they would seek other employment, managers at all three factories were quite complacent about the work and safety conditions for their employees and believed they did not need improvement. Participant observation and interviews revealed these conditions were far from satisfactory. Strong chemical fumes were a regular feature in Factory C. The younger women responsible for assembly and chemical cleaning of the capacitors reported they frequently fainted from the strong fumes, and the older women who soldered (most with irons that had gaping wires plugged into makeshift sockets that lacked safety covers or sufficient grounding capability) said they received electric shocks from the poor wiring within the irons and outlets. In Factory A, as well, the women did not wear gloves while dipping capacitors in a tank of chemicals and few wore slippers. Many complained of nausea and stomach ailments. Anitha, a 23-year-old who was responsible at this factory for mixing epoxy chemicals, said on her first day on the job she was told to wear slippers and not touch instruments until they were fully discharged. However, follow-up inspections on whether employees were implementing safety instructions were rare and several did not heed them.

Most employees (98%) worked an average day of 6 to 10 hours with a half-hour break for lunch. Although men and women were comparable in the average number of hours worked, with 92% of the men and 100% of the women falling in this category, men in general were paid more than the women, with 46% making more than US$31 a month while only 9% of the women were in this bracket. Salary ranged from US$14 to US$40 per month, with 44% of all employees interviewed making between US$14 and US$19, 30% between US$20 and US$25, and
9% between US$26 and US$31 per month. A majority of the women (57%) made between US$14 and US$19 a month. Jobs were split in stages, and in all factories, the first stages, usually conducted on the assembly line by women, required lower skill and resulted in less pay than the latter stages. A majority of the respondents (65%, of whom 95% were female) performed assembly line work, while 9% (all female) chemically cleaned the capacitors, and 5% (all female) inspected the cleaned capacitors. Overall, job turnover was high. Only 26% of all participants interviewed had been on the job between 4 and 6 years, 25% had worked at their respective factories for less than 6 months, and a few more (32%) had been on the job for less than 3 years.

The examination of the role of television advertising in the lives of factory laborers revealed that women’s work at the factories was integrally tied to their sense of independence. Far from regarding themselves as exploited or oppressed, most of the women in this study noted that the availability of disposable income, no matter how small in proportion to the income used for daily expenses, provided them with a sense of independence, freedom, and power as consumers. Although on the margins of the global city geographically and economically, they were participants in dominant narratives of globalization and modernity disseminated through television soaps and advertisements. An interesting question then emerges: Are these women really oppressed if they see themselves as empowered in their immediate contexts? Such a question brings us to a discussion of television, gender, and labor in the global city.

**Television, Gender, and Labor in the Global City**

This study, although limited to the case studies described, demonstrates that television in the global city provides spaces for the expression of urban and gendered identities that could be accessed through the economic benefits of factory labor. It broadens narrow conceptualizations of audience reception in international media studies (see Mattelart, Delcourt, & Mattelart, 1984) by pointing to respondents’ preference for local television channels with local cultural contexts and languages. It therefore contradicts broad generalizations of media imperialism (Schiller, 1969) in such theoretical frameworks as the world systems theory (Wallerstein, 1974) and the dominant paradigm in development communication (Lerner, 1958; Pye, 1993) that assume uncritical consumption of Western (particularly U.S.) media by Third World audiences. The analysis expands cultural studies in that it looks not just at how audiences use television within a culture, but also pays attention to the position occupied by the women in the economic structure that defines their realities. Finally, the study identifies the importance of global cities as sites for ethnographic fieldwork to understand the “global” nature of media influence.

Women workers’ use of television for lessons on ways to dress and for the assertion of individual identities can be interpreted as rituals of resistance against patriarchal and capitalist structures that framed their oppression. These laborers achieved critical agency through their economic productivity and could, to a much greater extent than before, define how they dressed, how they wore their hair,
what they ate, how they smelled, where they worked, how much they contributed to household expenditures, and to a certain extent, whom they married. We should not run the risk of negating structure to elevate agency, however. As marginal members of an urban environment, these hard-working, underpaid, and socially devalued factory women could buy urban membership and self-worth by following the lessons of consumerism dictated by television. While being subjected to serious health risks and frequently working overtime in the factories, they believed they controlled their nutritional needs and better managed their time through the purchase of convenience foods, soaps, and shampoos. In setting aside a small portion of their income for luxury items, they gained immediate gratification rather than long-term empowerment that could have been attained through investment in savings schemes. The implications of these contradictions are obvious: The structure feeds itself by sustaining the impoverished positions of its workers.

Television in India has played a crucial ideological role in sustaining these impoverished positions throughout the nation’s postcolonial history. It has facilitated control by the central government over the years, whether by blocking dissent to the Indira Gandhi government in the 1970s, ignoring corrupt election practices of the Rajiv Gandhi government in the 1980s, or glossing over the instability of the National Front and Bharatiya Janata Party governments in the 1990s and 2000s. Whether development- or entertainment-oriented, Doordarshan’s programming upheld the urban, middle and upper middle Hindu classes while relegating caste, class, and religious minorities to the periphery (Mankekar, 1999). In so doing, such programming also depicted a clear rural-urban divide. Low-income and low-caste residents of semi-urban slums, gradually increasing in numbers in the 1990s and 2000s because of the establishment of small-scale industries on the city’s outskirts, found themselves in a netherworld of television entertainment, excluded from Doordarshan’s heavily agriculture-oriented programming for village populations and its urban-centric narratives for city residents. It was only with the implementation of India’s 1991 New Economic Policy (NEP) to foster globalization, liberalization, and structural adjustment (Ramanamma, 1999) that private television networks such as the international STAR TV, Zee TV, and Sony TV, and the regional language Sun TV, Udaya TV, and Gemini TV, provided programming that catered to the needs of such populations (McMillin, 2001).

Drawn to semi-urban slums because of the jobs provided by medium-, large-, and small-scale industries (SSIs), these populations faced exploitive work conditions. Women, in particular, were sought by the SSIs, which provided miserable employment conditions: no minimum wage, long hours with no compensation for overtime, no safety and health training, and no medical benefits. Yet television in the late 1990s and 2000s brought to them the possibility of empowerment—whether in the rags-to-riches story of Ambika on Udaya TV; or Devaru Devaru, on the same channel, where the protagonist sought answers from God on various existential questions affecting the city’s urban and semi-urban residents; or on Veley Yenna, Sun TV’s Tamil-language Wheel of Fortune, on which viewers were implicated in seemingly realistic models of quick success and wealth.

This analysis shows the importance of recognizing the dynamics between struc-
ture and agency. The women’s responses to television cannot be reduced to mere products of false consciousness. They were aware of their oppressed realities and consciously chose lifestyles and products depicted on television that allowed them a sense of hope and empowerment. They assessed payback of short-term benefits in a context of high mortality, low standards and high costs of living, minimal government assistance, and haphazard development initiatives, to far outweigh those of long-term investments.

The analysis points to the necessity for participatory communications. Specifically, women factory workers should be encouraged to participate in their own empowerment through such grassroots communicative processes as focus groups and photostories and in workshops in local languages and cultural contexts that address the importance of safety in the workplace, of nutritional and sanitary practices, and of long-term savings schemes. Television literacy workshops and process video projects at the grassroots level could help women workers understand critically the power of advertisements and their agency as consumers and help them identify problems and solutions as a group.

Further scholarly inquiry into the strategies of audience resistance, specifically, who (television advertisements or audiences themselves) authors the norms of resistance and who reaps the rewards and consequences of such action (that is, market or consumer), will expand much needed theory in this area. Ethnographies in development communication are sorely needed to examine the role of media in interpreting realities for migrant populations. Because of their limited scope, ethnographies receive limited funding, yet they offer holistic and rich insights into how meanings are made at the grassroots level. Such studies can offer compelling evidence for long-lasting policy and social action.

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