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The funds from the AIPS summer grant enabled me to do preliminary fieldwork for my dissertation proposal. My dissertation explores working-class women's workplaces as "in-between" public spaces which serve as rare sites of incipient, non-familial relations between women. Beauty salons, an increasingly popular option of work for working-class women in Karachi, are an example of such workplaces. Women from a diverse range of age groups and ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds interact on a regular basis in beauty salons. During this exploratory phase of my research, I mapped the field of beauty work in the city and conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with beauty workers and women in other working-class jobs. Broadly, my project sheds light on the way intimate relations thrive alongside processes of commodification and how that shapes contemporary urban life.

My fieldwork consisted of three components. First, I visited beauty salons in various areas of Karachi. These ranged from small, neighborhood salons to big, high-end salons. The diversity in the types of salons extends to the type of labor regimes adopted, physical space of the salon, embodied labor of beauty workers, and client base. I focused on the spatial ordering of the salons and their location in the city, paying attention to how and why they differed from each other. In addition to these visits, I frequently visited Meena Bazaar, which is an all-female marketplace of beauty salons and undergarments shops. I interviewed beauty workers in these salons and asked them questions pertaining to why they chose this line of work, what their experiences of beauty work have been, what their relations with other workers are, and what types of changes have occurred in this sector in the last couple of decades.

Second, I enrolled in a beautician training course at a local vocational training center close to Meena Bazaar. At the center I met young women who were not yet beauty workers but were drawn to this profession. This allowed me to understand the aspirations of women hoping to become beauty workers. During this course, I also analyzed how vocational teachers taught young women the skill of performing this intimate labor.

Third, I interviewed a few women who were not beauty workers, such as factory workers, restaurant workers, and domestic workers. Interviewing workers who were outside this field gave me an important perspective on why they had not chosen to be beauty workers, the impediments to this career choice, and how beauty work stands in relation to other working-class jobs in Karachi.

This preliminary fieldwork helped me to choose Meena Bazaar as one of the primary sites for ethnographic fieldwork for my larger dissertation project. Interacting with shopkeepers at the undergarments shops in Meena Bazaar also kindled an interest in studying retail spaces and retail workers, thereby introducing a comparative dimension to my project. I presented the findings of my preliminary fieldwork in a paper at the Annual South Asia Conference in Madison in 2017 titled "Intimacy in the Respectability Economy."