

Rethinking employment opportunities on the periphery: Employment opportunities of Mizrahi women in low status positions in a southern Israeli development town

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ABSTRACT

The neo-liberal global economy has dramatically changed the ways in which workers are employed. Research in Israel and throughout the world has revealed the exploitative elements inherent in the new forms of employment, and has shown that the main victims of non-standard employment are women.

In the current article, I seek to demonstrate how women without formal education and trapped in peripheral space derive meaning from their work, notwithstanding the exploitative elements inherent in their non-standard employment. The article is based on interviews I conducted with nine¹ second-generation Mizrahi women in Israel, women with little formal education and no occupational skills; they are employed in cleaning, caretaking, manufacturing and minor clerical duties, without employment or social security, in a southern development town.

The analysis reveals that the devaluation of women's work, which in previous research has been shown to be a way of extracting more unpaid work, enables women with initiative but without formal credentials to enlarge the sphere of their work responsibilities, and to experience the empowerment of autonomy, influence and contribution to their local communities.

In consequence, I suggest some preliminary thoughts that challenge existing research on the intersecting categories of gender, work and identity in peripheral space.

Introduction

The expansion of the neo-liberal capitalist economy and the processes of privatisation have generated forms of nonstandard employment: part-time jobs, special contracts, hiring through subcontractors and more. These positions pay low salaries and offer no social or employment security. Combined with the State's shirking of its responsibility to provide social rights and tend to the welfare of its citizens, these new forms of employment have doomed entire populations, particularly women, to lives of poverty and deprivation (Benjamin, 2012). Feminist geographers who have examined the relationship between space, gender and employment have noted that the employment and economic conditions of populations living on the periphery, especially women, have deteriorated; the adoption of a global neo-liberal economic policy has made these women more likely to become a labour force trapped in exploitative occupations (MacDonald, 2009).

Feminist researchers have revealed that in the new job market that arose as a result of globalisation, employers succeed in extorting additional work from women without payment, by devaluing the value of women's work and as a consequence of women's fear of losing their jobs. In studies on women working in low-status and low-income jobs employed in non-standard employment in Israel and elsewhere in the world, women expressed negative feelings and reported tension, anxiety, and feelings of exploitation and humiliation. Women have employed a number of strategies in order to cope with the hard work, the exploitative system, uncertainty about the future, and in order to create self-value. In many studies, we find that the main resource employed by women in dealing with their hardships and create self-value was motherhood (Skeggs, 1997). For example, Louise Ryan (Ryan, 2004), who studied lower-class Irish women who immigrated to Great Britain and were employed in "women's work" - nannies, cooks, cleaners – found that they often spoke positively and with great pride of their paid mothering work. Miriam Glucksmann (Glucksmann, 2004), who studied working women in Yorkshire, England, also claimed that the descriptions of women reveal a blurring of boundaries between home and work, paid work and unpaid work, care for their own children and work outside the household – a confusion of the lines between the private and the public.

Patricia Pessar's work (Pessar, 1995) takes us one step further, showing that mothering may be a strategy of survival not only in "women's work", but also on the assembly line. In her study of lower class Dominican-American women immigrants, Pessar found that factory workers who worked in exploitative and exhausting low status jobs, subordinate to discipline and obedience to public patriarchy, dealt with this reality by interpreting their work experience as an expansion of their maternal responsibility.

Orly Benjamin (2012), who surveyed feminist literature on women's work in intensely neo-liberal venues, showed that economic policy with respect to caretaking work continues to be based on the cultural expectation that women will work for free out of love. Among the studies she surveyed, she found that both the State and companies employing women make cynical and exploitative use of a women's sense of obligation and responsibility, especially in jobs involving the provision of care to children or invalids.

The following article, based on a multi-dimensional analysis of work, gender, space and identity, does not contest the alienating and exploitative nature of the new job market, but also recognises the possibilities and opportunities available to enterprising women in poorly remunerated jobs in non-standard forms of employment.

I will begin by describing the importance of work for these women, as revealed through their insistence on being interviewed at their workplaces. I then analyse the stories of their work lives in the light of other studies of women in similar work situations in Israel and elsewhere. I will explain the uniqueness of the peripheral space and its importance for understanding women's employment, and sketch the complexities of life in a southern Israeli development town. Finally, I will examine the claim that women without formal education and skills working in such positions can fashion a sense of autonomy, strength and contribution to the local community. In short, women may be exploited in the limited local job market (and be aware of this), but still deriving meaning, self-empowerment and influence over members of their community through their jobs.

“Come to school tomorrow and we'll talk there” – interviews with women at their workplace

During a telephone conversation, and in response to my question as to where we would meet to conduct the interview, Israella – an aide for a child with special needs in a local high school – said to me: *“Come to school tomorrow and we'll talk there”*.

This was the first time that an interviewee had asked me to interview her at her work place. In spite of my concerns, I agreed, since one of the ways suggested in feminist methodological literature for reducing the power gap inherent in the research encounter is through situating the interview in a space in which the interviewee feels comfortable².

Of the twenty-three women whom I met in the course of my research on the life stories of Mizrahi women in a southern development town, five asked to be interviewed at their workplaces. In my analysis, it turned out that these five were the ones who failed to break out of the circle of marginality: they were employed at jobs that required no formal education or skills, with poor salaries in non-standard employment at the secondary

labour market. Women who worked in the standard primary market as teachers or principals, by contrast, invited me to their homes to be interviewed.

Thus, the life stories of five of the nine low-income, non-standard job women were collected at their workplace, in in-depth interviews that lasted for several hours (the shortest interview was two hours long and the longest – four and a half hours). Arlette and Orly, cleaning workers, were interviewed in the institutions where they worked, whilst Israella was interviewed in a school classroom. Mimi, a school secretary, was interviewed in the principal's office while the principal was out. Brigitte, a postal worker, was interviewed in one of the offices of the post office. Two other women – Hagit, a factory worker in the daytime and a cosmetician and masseuse who worked at her home at night, and Maggie, a manicurist and nail designer – were interviewed at their homes. At the end of the interview, both insisted that I see the respective rooms that had been transformed into a working place where they received their clients.

“How can you conduct an interview in the workplace, especially if the status of the worker is so fragile and vulnerable?” This question preoccupied me before conducting the interviews. After conducting the interviews, the question that concerned me was “Why was it important for these women to be interviewed at their workplaces?”. The answer to these two questions is central for understanding the importance of work and the opportunities it offers for women, and led me to suggest new ways of thinking about the relations between gender, work, space and identity.

Before conducting the interviews, I worried that the workers' supervisors might not permit me to conduct the interview or limit the time reserved for the interview, preventing the women from telling their entire life story at ease. I shared my concerns with the women, and they dismissed them, saying that no one would disturb us and that at work they had more quiet and time to devote to the interview than in their homes. Indeed, my fears proved to be groundless, and the workplace turned out to be their “territory”. There were practically no interruptions in the course of the interviews, and if someone did disturb – they were rebuked. It may be that the women invited me to their workplaces on days on which they knew that the boss was away, or when very few activities would take place.

After analysing the interviews, I understood the centrality of work in the lives of the women, and I presume that one of the reasons for their request to be interviewed at their work place was to demonstrate this³. The workplace turned out to be – both in their stories and in the reality I observed while conducting the interview – a space where they are active, take the initiative, and enjoy autonomy and authority; it is a space which they control and can dictate its content. Their choice to be interviewed there links up with the way they speak of the workplace as a sphere of action and autonomy and an empowering space, in spite of the exploitative aspect of their employment, of which they were well aware.

“Just like a teacher in every way, even if I am not a teacher”

The day after the telephone conversation with Israella, we met at the school where she worked – in the 12th grade of the high school, where she serves as an accompanying aide for a pupil with special needs. The job involves physically accompanying the pupil in the course of his studies and helping him with his physical needs. The job of the accompanying aide is defined as one that requires no education or training. It is usually performed by women with full or partial high school education.

I arrived at 8:30 a.m. in the class where Israella works. The class is in a small building at a distance from the main school building, and also serves as the school library. In the class, which took place in the corner of the library, the pupil Israella regularly accompanies was present along with another student whom Israella took under her wing. Both students received pages of exercises from Israella and commenced work, while Israella and I found a corner in the large room and began the interview. I remained with Israella and the children in the class until 12:00 noon. Throughout the period, no teacher was present in the class. The interview was interrupted several times when students approached Israella for clarifications or an additional assignment.

Israella was born in 1960 in Israel to parents who emigrated from Tunisia directly to Ofakim. She did not complete her high school education, was married at age 17, and gave birth to three children. Her husband has been employed for many years in agriculture in the moshav (agricultural cooperative) in the surrounding area, and she worked at various temporary jobs over the years, jobs which required no formal skills. Over the last five years, she has been employed as an accompanying aide to children with special needs through a subcontractor contracted to the local municipal council. Israella is fired every year in June, then re-employed at the beginning of the following school year. I asked Israella, as I did with all the other women, to tell her life story. She chose to open with several sentences about her family and then focused on her job. The interview began as follows:

“Ok, I was born here, and grew up here, and my family lives here, a wonderful family. We have eight brothers and all of them were born here and raised in Ofakim. And each one, really, thank God, is of great stature. Now, in principle, I have been working in the area of special education for eight years now”.

She narrated at length her job history over the last eight years. Her first job was as a kindergarten aide for a paralysed child in a wheelchair, a boy with 100% disability. She describes the special relationship that developed between them, beyond work hours.

“It turned out not to be just in the kindergarten. In the afternoons, my home became a kindergarten too. All the time, the boy cried to his mother: “I want to

be with Israella”. He wanted to be with me. And really, I did this without pay, because I really enjoyed the work, because special education was very, very... I do the work, how do you say, with heart and soul”.

She continued to describe her relation with the first child she took care of, then went on to describe her current work. She emphasises that the topic she most wants to talk about is her work, even though I made it clear at the outset that I was interested in hearing her life story (and not specifically her job).

“In principle, what I want most to talk about is the issue of being an aide. Now, I accompany these students, Dana and Oz. I am Oz’s steady accompanying aide for medical reasons since eighth grade. Dana was in Oz’s class throughout the years. They were first here with other students, who have left over the years, but Dana and Oz have been together since seventh grade, and I said I would take her on as a project. Although I don’t get paid for this, not that anyone cares, never mind, I took this girl on - I’ll accompany her and I’ll see to it that she finish 12th grade, even though the coordinator of special education said they weren’t suited and must be moved to another framework. The mother said “absolutely no way”. She fought and succeeded. She fought on her part with the institutions and I fought here in school, to accompany him all the way. And praise the Lord, thank God, this year he’s in 12th grade, this year he’ll graduate – and I succeeded. That’s what’s so... the beauty of it. Beyond the connection between us... If there’s a problem with a certain teacher, a problem in class – I’m the address. It doesn’t matter that I’m not supposed to be his teacher. All told, I’m the companion for medical reasons. But for him, I’m everything. One more thing I wanted to say. On a day when I’m running a little late, I think that if I’m late, Oz too he’s... he’s helpless. He has no one to be with, it’s just me. (...) This year was a very difficult one. They put him in a [class for] gifted students. And how do you say, we shouldn’t make fun of ourselves, because it really wasn’t for him. The kid couldn’t make head or tails of it. Neither him nor me either. Because the material is very difficult, and he is at a very low level. And I said, that’s not right. And they said ‘try’. We tried. The teachers too said, ‘listen, Israella, it won’t go...’. I asked of them - ‘let’s try to help him’. That they take him privately. No teacher was ready to do it. They said: ‘it’ll be very hard, we have enough students to deal with and we’re not willing to take him on privately’. I said, ‘I’ll take this on. Give me the material and I’ll teach him’. That didn’t work either. I said, if not me, whom then? I went, I would do homework evenings. Prepare material for him. Prepare all sorts of books more or less on his level, in all the subjects. I would come in the morning prepared. I’d sit with him. Teach him, give him homework. Like a teacher in all respects, even if I’m not a teacher. According to the job definition, I’m not a teacher; I’m Oz’s

accompanying aide. But what? I decided that I'll do everything for him, until the end, and he'll finish 12th grade. And that's how it is now."

Israella chooses to focus her life story interview on her work, repeating that even though she's not a teacher, she performs a teacher's work for a pupil that the Ministry of Education was not able to handle. She remarks that the teachers were unwilling to give him the private lessons he needs, and that she was more dedicated and spent evenings preparing materials appropriate to his level. Her descriptions demonstrate her maternal sense of care towards the boy, far beyond what is expected of an "accompanying aide" performing temporary work for hourly wages through a subcontractor.

The previous case could be interpreted as supporting the claim that the job market extorts extra unpaid work from women, as found by Grimshaw and Rubery (2007), and Buxbaum, Dagan, Diab and Abramowitz (2008). I claim, however, that this would be a flat and shallow reading of Israella's text. I suggest that her response indicates personal empowerment, and opens the possibility of establishing a sense of self-worth through the opportunity of serving as a teacher. This could be the case even if she lacks the formal qualifications for the job. Thus, the systemic neglect which results from the neo-liberal economic policy and the devaluation of women's professions (especially care jobs) enables women without recognised skills and professional diplomas, but with motivation and initiative, to experience empowerment in their work places. This remains true even if their accomplishments will not open possibilities for economic and professional mobility. I also wish to emphasise the importance of the spatial context - the limited local job market and the local community in which the women are based - in understanding the meaning of work in the lives of uneducated women living on the periphery of Israeli society.

This study follows the lead of Vicki Smith (2001), who, in her book *Crossing the Great Divide*, examined the responses of workers in various jobs, organisations and geographical areas to their non-standard employment. She showed that temporary workers react differently to exploitative conditions, depending on their personal data, their work conditions and the employment opportunities in their geographical area. We might compare the reaction of Israella and other women I interviewed with Smith's study of temporary workers at Reproce, a company which provides photocopy services for the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Workers who were employed in jobs classified as requiring few skills were dedicated to the company, optimistic and cooperative, in spite of employment insecurity and low pay. Their reactions become evident when examining their personal and work situations and job alternatives: as people of colour with no possibility of obtaining education beyond high school. The white-collar work, in which they had a high degree of freedom and autonomy, was considered a good job

notwithstanding the poor job security. The workers appreciated the encouragement to work independently, especially in light of the existing alternatives.

In the current article, I will show how Mizrahi women with no formal education or professional diplomas succeed in utilising a fault line in the credential society, when the skills they needed for work were devalued; they succeeded in expanding the areas of their responsibility and fulfilled tasks for which they did not possess the minimal formal skills. The performance of professional tasks gave them an empowering sense of identity, even if they received no financial recompense for it.

In the next section, I will detail the changes in the employment world that resulted from the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies and their influence on the lives and identities of workers, especially female workers with no job security. I then expand my view by showing how the addition of the spatial dimension facilitates a more complex understanding of the experience of women engaged in “exploitative labour”.

Work and gender in a neo-liberal economic world

Globalisation has expanded the domination of the neo-liberal capitalist economy and weakened the ability of the nation-state to protect local economies and their workers. In addition, the adoption of neo-liberal world-views by leaders and by the core of public administration has led to the shrinking of the responsibility of the state in protecting social rights and their diminishing authority towards weaker populations. As a consequence, the job market has undergone dramatic changes. In the pre-global age, most workers were formally and contractually engaged: workers had fixed jobs, were paid directly by the companies they worked for, received fair salaries and had their social rights protected. Today, a large portion of workers are employed in unstable jobs with no security - in positions that Leah Vosko, Martha MacDonald and Ian Campbell (2009) term “precarious employment”. Such employment takes on various novel forms: part-time jobs, work through subcontracting agencies, temporary contracts, hourly work, etc. Research shows that the main victims of the changes in the labour market and the shrinkage of state responsibility towards its citizens are women (Benjamin, 2006).

Since the 1990s, and especially since the beginning of the 21st century, many studies have documented the life and work experiences of women on the margins of society. Postcolonial and feminist scholars of colour (see Hill-Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984) have made major contributions by turning a spotlight on the lives of poor workers; they provided a critical corrective to the liberal feminist focus on the “glass ceiling”, which was mainly relevant to educated white, upper-middle class women. Ehrenreich and Fuentes (1983) performed a pioneering study of the influence of globalisation on women who did not belong to privileged groups. In their book *Women in the Global*

Factory, they documented the lives of women working in multinational corporation in free-trade zones in the Third World, demonstrating how the rich (sponsored by Western governments, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation [UNIDO]) exploit women's work and damage their health, quality of life and their rights as human beings.

By now, many studies have been published documenting the lives of male and female workers employed in exploitative jobs in the First World as well. Studies from all over the world, like those documented by Vosko, MacDonald and Campbell (2009) demonstrate the link between gender and exploitative employment. In many places, employers are prepared to sacrifice the requirement of necessary skills in order to pay workers less. Grimshaw, Demina and Runery (2007) showed how employers devalue women's work, refused to recognise the skills it requires, and extract skilled labour from women without paying for it.

Beyond documentation of the means of exploitative employment, the responses of workers to unstable employment are of great importance. That is, we need to understand how the employment conditions of women in low-status, low-salaried work without employment security influences their feelings at work, about their jobs and about themselves.

Labour, gender and identity – the employment experience of women working in unstable work arrangements

In previous studies of such women throughout the world, women describe their work environment as alienating and humiliating. The stigma placed on service jobs and care work influences the ways in which women experience themselves (Ehrenreich, 2002). Beverly Skeggs (1997), who researched working class women in England, found that the women assumed that they were judged by their professions, and thus reported feelings of bitterness, rage, uncertainty and doubt, even as they strove for respectability, and recognition as valued subjects.

A study of the Israeli situation by Buxbaum et al. (2008) found similar results. The authors documented the experience of women in low-status and low-prestige and insecure jobs. The women reported that their employers imposed upon them tasks that went beyond the specification of their jobs in order to save costs and manpower. Thus, for example, secretaries were also expected to undertake cleaning work in the office. The authors claimed that the blurring of positions had a clearly gendered aspect: women were expected to fulfil "female" tasks without recompense, sometimes in their own time, just as we find with expectations of women in the household. The women report feelings of exploitation, humiliation, overload and helplessness. An additional study conducted by Sarit Sambol and Orly Benjamin (2007), interviewed Mizrahi women

who lived in a deprived neighbourhood in one of the large towns in the centre of Israel, and who were employed in what the researchers called “bad jobs” like cleaning and nursing. The women described their work experience as difficult and embarrassing.

How then, do women in such jobs construct positive self-value?

Studies in Israel and elsewhere show that one way for women to cope with feelings of shame, loneliness, and anxiety about the future (Pessar, 1995; Skeggs, 1997; Glucksmann, 2000; Ryan, 2004) is through their motherhood. For example, the Israeli women employed in “bad jobs” who were interviewed by Sambol and Benjamin (2006), claimed they were good mothers, who took care of their children and maintained close relations with them.

In a later study, Orly Benjamin, Devorah Bernstein and Pnina Motzafi-Haller (2010) examine how women coped with the shame and negative stigma of cleaning work. They found differences in coping mechanisms among different ethnic groups and in different areas of residence: Arab women from the North emphasised their contribution to supporting the family, women from the former Soviet Union (FSU) living in the Central Region of the country emphasised the humiliating and exploitative elements of the job, while Mizrahi women from development towns in the South, who tend to work outside the town where they live, emphasised their pleasure in leaving their homes and meeting other women.

The work of Benjamin et al. (2010) reveals the importance of understanding women’s work experience at the intersection of ethnicity and space. Unlike in Benjamin, Bernstein and Motzafi-Haller’s research, in which second generation Mizrahi women in Yeruham found cleaning work outside the town, the women in this study work in the development town where they live. The place of work is an essential factor. Motzafi-Haller (2012) notes that women are not interested in working in cleaning jobs at organisations in their home municipality offices, as people in the municipality building – family members, friends, neighbours and acquaintances – can see them as they work cleaning.

The fact that the women in this study are employed in the town where they live changes how they experience their work, as we will see from the interview with Orly.

The experience of low-status work in the township

Orly is the daughter of Moroccans immigrants, who were transported straight from the disembarkation harbour to Ofakim. Orly was born in Israel in 1963, and at an early age was removed from her abusive and neglectful family and placed

in various institutions out of town. After completing 12 years of high school without a certificate of matriculation, she got married and returned to live in the town. Orly's husband is a prison warder, and the couple has four children. Orly worked for many years as a cleaning woman in one of the municipal institutions. Her work began at 12 pm and lasted until the evening hours. Orly, like Israella, invited me to interview her in the morning hours in the institution where she works as a cleaning lady; the interview with her lasted for four hours. In the interview, Orly found it important to tell me of a period of several months, during which she volunteered to do office work in the institution where she cleans. She would arrive at 8 in the morning and volunteer to work as a secretary until 12 pm, and only then begin her paid work as cleaner. She stopped volunteering only after she was explicitly told by the principal that she was no longer interested in Orly's working as a volunteer in her office and that she should concentrate on her cleaning work. Although several years passed between the events she described and the interview, Orly found it important to speak of this, and was still hurt by her removal from the desired position (even if it was performed as a volunteer). Orly recounts:

"I have been working for the municipality for fourteen years. At the request of the municipality, I began working as a cleaner in all sorts of institutions (...). Ten years ago, they proposed that I work here in the technology department. I came here and started working (...) I really liked this place. I devoted myself, I gave my soul. (...) I volunteered until 12 to work for free, without money. (From eight) to twelve... I volunteered to work, (and then) I did my work, which was now my paid work. I served (the principal) really well, and I did everything and learned the work really quickly and well. I also learned how to type really quickly. And this really disturbed her; she (the principal) didn't believe that I could learn so quickly, and so well (...) And suddenly I was in the secretary's office and I received every inquiry with a smile and answered every question. And the principal didn't know what to do, she didn't like it. I wanted to serve her personally. That's it, it didn't work. And she applied a lot of pressure so that I go back up to my floor and so that I would only be a cleaning woman. (...) and I felt really bad, I felt really bad, because I, I do my work. I'm here during my hours. All the time I try to help".

In studies about employees with no employment security, we find that they are willing to work as volunteers, to display dedication and to try to prove themselves in order to be accepted in a standard job, when one should become available.

In her research, Vicki Smith (2001) found that the group of temporary workers at CompTech, a company dealing in hardware and software in Northern California, displayed great dedication to their workplace in spite of their non-standard

employment. Interviews with temporary workers – women and men, whites and people of colour – show that they were prepared to do any work in order to “get (their) foot in the door”. The workers believed that if they worked hard and impress their supervisors, they could prove their reliability and receive a permanent job when a standard position opens up, even though they were explicitly informed, at the beginning of their employment, that the company has no obligation to do so. Smith summarises:

“These factors – the pressure for mistake-free performance coupled with the belief that such performance increased their chances of obtaining a permanent job – act as a powerful tool of control over temporary workers and served to cement their acceptance of marginalised labour market status. Their desire for a ‘real’ job led them to engage in strict self-discipline that well served a production system based on individual initiative, decision making, and responsibility.” (2009:112)

In the current study, the situation is different, as the women knew that there was no chance that they might become permanent workers. This was the case because they lacked the education and training necessary to officially fill the jobs that they performed unofficially. Thus, their motivation and initiative at work cannot be understood as an attempt to enter the primary labour market. Unlike the temporary workers at CompTech – who had the necessary education for work at the company and could hope to advance – Orly knew otherwise. She knew that typing and providing a friendly service to clients was insufficient, and that she would need to complete her high school education, earn a matriculation diploma and get professional training. Thus, we must understand her initiative to expand her work responsibilities as part of her effort to bolster her personal identity through informal work.

I claim that it was important for Orly to refer to the period during which she did office work – even if it was several years previously and as a volunteer – because this enabled her to imagine herself as the working woman she could have been, had she the opportunity to complete her high school studies and acquire formal employment skills: not as a cleaner, but as a secretary in an office. This is also true for Israella, who in practice works as a high school teacher, even though she had not completed high school herself.

In our attempt to explain the commitment, motivations and initiative of these women, we must consider the facts of their education and the employment opportunities available to them in the geographical area where they live. In the following section, I will outline the importance of the geographical dimension for the discussion.

Space, labour and gender

In the geographic urban space, the job market is characterised by segregation and fragmentation: certain occupations are found primarily in certain geographical areas of the city. Studies show that there is a link between non-standard occupations and neighbourhoods, with unstable occupations concentrated in areas where immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities live (MacDonald, 2009).

The work of feminist geographers Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt (1995) made a significant contribution to the understanding of how inequalities in the labour market are reproduced through space and place. In their study on Worcester, Massachusetts, they pointed out the spatial limitations that applied to white women as opposed to white men. They claim that because of the need to be close to their children's day care centres and schools, women were limited in the time they could spend commuting to work. Consequently, their work possibilities were limited. Kim England (1993), who investigated the influence of space on women employed in white collar jobs, contested the widely accepted "spatial entrapment" thesis, in which distance from work was cited as an obstacle for women that adversely affected their economic security. Additional support for the critique of the "spatial entrapment" theory was raised by Melissa Gilbert (1998), who claimed that mobility in space was not a sufficient guarantor of power. She based her claim on studies that showed that black women travel longer distances to their work place than their white colleagues. But the fact that they travel longer distances to their workplace does not improve their income or enable them to achieve higher positions. Thus, in order to escape the binary discussion of the question of whether space and mobility empower or restrict women, and in order to provide a more nuanced account, we need to examine how gender, space and the local labour market influence the life experience of women.

Labour, gender and space in Israel

Sylvia Fogel-Bijaoui examined the influence of Israel's integration into the global economy over the past two decades on women in the Israeli labour market. She showed that global capitalism reproduces, and even increases the inequalities between various groups of women. The main benefactors of the new economy are Jewish women of European or American origin, while the mainly Mizrahi women living on the periphery and Arab Muslim women are in the main marginalised from the labour market. The profile of women who immigrated to Israel from the FSU, comes over time to resemble that of women of European or American origin, particularly if they live in the centre rather than on the periphery; Ethiopian women continue to be on the margins of the labour market, as most live on the periphery – in the development

towns and in marginal neighbourhoods in the large cities (Fogel-Bijaoui 2005). Fogel-Bijaoui's analysis shows the importance of geographical space, characterised by a substantial measure of ethnic homogeneity, especially on the periphery. I now turn to the spatial context of the development town in which the women of this study work and live.

The development town as a blocked space and deficiency

The development town of Ofakim in the Negev, the residence of the women interviewed in this study, is a town characterised by lack: lack of infrastructure (educational and physical), of opportunity (mainly for employment), of capital (most inhabitants are lower class), of power and of social status. Researchers of the periphery in various disciplines provide a variety of explanations for the lack of development of the periphery⁴.

Shlomo Swirski and Etty Konnor-Attias (2005) examined statistics of education, participation in the work force, and the employment of women in the South. They found that the percentage of uneducated women in the southern district is greater than anywhere else in Israel, among all religious and ethnic groups. The relatively poor functioning of the Ministry of Education harmed all residents of the South, but the damage was unevenly spread among the various ethnic groups: Whereas the number of college graduates among Israeli-born second generation Ashkenazi immigrants was 21.2%, this was double the rate for Mizrahi women – 10.3%. The participation of second generation immigrant Mizrahi women in the work force is 67.3%. The number of Jewish women working in blue collar jobs in the South is twice what it is in the rest of Israel: 22.1%, as opposed to 11.4%. The percentage of women working in unskilled labour and in secretarial or clerical jobs in southern development towns is 71.2%, as opposed to 28.8% for college graduates, managers and members of free trades. In Ofakim, the median number of months worked by women is 8.8 months, and only 44.8% of women are employed 12 months a year. The median salary paid to women in 2009 was 3,815 shekels, as compared with a nation-wide median salary of 7,386 shekels, according to statistics of the National Insurance Institute (City Profiles, 2010).

The figures of the Central Bureau of Statistics for 2006 – the year in which the interviews with the women were conducted – show that the town is located in the 4th class out of 10, and that the median per capita income was 1,908 shekels. 43.75% of 18-year olds were entitled to matriculation certificates in 2010, but only 31.1% achieved the minimum requirements for admission to the university. The job market in Ofakim is extremely limited. In the 1950s, two industrial plants (diamonds and textiles) were opened in the city, and workers were employed by the factories as well as

in agriculture in the surrounding agricultural cooperatives (*moshavim*). The adoption of the neo-liberal economy from the 1980s and especially since the 1990s led to the closing of the local industrial plants and a rise in the rate of local unemployment.

The data concerning the local work force, on the education of the local population and particularly of women, are essential for an understanding of women's experience of work. The women I interviewed, who had no formal education or occupation, worked in a limited local market. The market was characterised by high unemployment, which grew steadily worse over the years as a result of increased globalisation, limited offerings in manufacturing or in low-income and low-status services, and unstable employment. Martha MacDonald (2009) claims that an unstable, exploitative employment is not strictly a function of particular job's character, but is linked to the geographical context in which such labour takes place. Thus, for example, the lack of spatial mobility imprisons them in unstable forms of employment. In a survey conducted by MacDonald on the links between space and unstable employment, she found that geographic areas with high unemployment usually have a significant percentage of unstable jobs.

The women interviewed in the study were aware of the limitations of their education (the lack of professional training) and the limitations of the local labour market, yet chose to invest in their jobs nonetheless. I argue that this is not a case of false consciousness, a lack of understanding of the exploitative system or an illusion that they would one day get a standard job at their workplace (as in the case of the temporary workers at CompTech in the study performed by Smith, 2001). Rather, the exploited local labour market may also be a source of opportunity for self-empowerment and an identity resource for women who suffer from multiple marginality. By performing functions beyond what their training and education entitles them to, they expand their professional and personal identities.

In the next section, I will demonstrate, through a reading of Mimi's life story, the possibilities of finding identity resources from work in peripheral space:

The development town as a space of opportunities

Mimi was born in Morocco in 1963 and arrived in Israel when she was a year old, the youngest daughter among seven children. Her mother was a housewife and her father worked as a factory worker in the local textile plant. After twelve years of study in the religious school in town, she was drafted into the army. Upon demobilisation at 20, she married her high school sweetheart. Mimi has four children and has worked intermittently at various jobs. Over the past few years, she worked as a secretary in a school. The interview with her also took place in her work place, at her request, during the course of the school day. Mimi asked another secretary to substitute for her in the

task of responding to phone calls and had us enter the office of the school principal, who was absent from school, during the three and a half hours of the interview. Mimi, like Israella and Orly, spent a good deal of the interview time telling me about her work. In the following segment, she tells of a time, several years before the interview took place, when she did pedagogical work with students who were on the verge of dropping out:

“There was a change of principals. The new principal Yossi came, he saw my relations with the pupils. He told me: ‘I want you to take on Project Ometz (courage)’. Project Ometz is to take pupils who are likely to drop out between 9th and 10th grade or between 8th and 9th; that’s where there’s the greatest number of dropouts in the entire school. To take ten kids who don’t believe in themselves and they’re here because that’s what everyone does – to come to school and be here until 1p.m. and disturb and not do anything and disturb others. Above all, I saw this as a challenge, and I always saw myself as connected to those kids. I took twenty kids, each with ten failing grades. When I say ‘I took’, what I mean is: from eight in the morning to ten at night to be around them. That means home visits, to share things with their parents. It’s called “circles”. Down to the circle closest to the kids, which is their parents. From the kids to the parents. To call all the time, to keep pestering. Lessons – you take the best teachers, you don’t compromise. Now these kids used to come on and off, one day yes, one day no; one week yes, one week no. These kids in Project Ometz didn’t dare come late to school. The minute I took it on, they didn’t dare. They got a lot of love; finally someone believed in them, someone respected them, someone listened to them in this well-oiled system here. And these kids finally finished with matriculation certificates (...) I worked kid by kid, around the clock, crazy, but with a lot of faith. I dealt with each of these kids like they were my own.(...) I wanted these kids to get the best (...) You understand? And it was a tremendous success. Along with this came the ‘daytime dormitories’, that I did. What else did they give me there? ‘Axiom’, that I did. (...) How did it end? I finished with them. Some finished twelfth grade, did matriculation exams, some very successfully. ‘Passed’. It’s all in writing, all the letters- all that, I kept(...) And how did it all end? Because of a lack of budget. the budget ran out. There was no budget”.

Mimi, a school secretary, became the coordinator of educational projects for a limited period. The projects she was responsible for were designed to help poorly performing students to complete high school and pass their matriculation exams successfully. This job was usually assigned to someone on the pedagogical team, a teacher or school advisor, paid a supplementary salary from the organisation or fund that runs the program through a personal contract limited to the time span of the project. Such

projects are an expression of the privatisation of educational services. As Mimi said, when the project budget ran out, it was closed and she returned to her work as a secretary.

In this case, responsibility for ensuring the success of weak students was given to the secretary, who had no more than twelve years of education. The school principal identifies the potential inherent in her ties with the pupils, and mobilises her to a job for which she does not possess the necessary formal qualifications. According to her, she succeeds in bringing pupils on the verge of dropping out of school to succeeding in their matriculation exams. She sees to it that they receive the best teachers, the best conditions for learning, listens to their problems and pushes them to succeed. In her words, the main satisfaction that she derives from her work is the pupils' success, as attested to by the letters of appreciation that she keeps.

We could present Mimi's story as an expression of the privatisation of the educational system, and of the cynical and exploitative use that employers make of women's sense of maternal responsibility. Her story could also be presented as an example of the devaluation of the skills necessary for pedagogical work. I prefer, however, to focus on the potential for self-empowerment in the exploitative labour market, a potential that research tends to ignore. Mimi is able to fulfil the job of the educational coordinator, even if she lacks the necessary formal qualifications. She can thus influence the students' lives and change their future in the peripheral town, and thus help improve the community she lives in.

Rethinking the categories of gender, labour, space and identity

The feminist geographer Melissa Gilbert (1998), who researched the "spatial entrapment" thesis, refutes the proposal that women's tendency to find work close to their homes does limit their possibilities. Rather, she claims that their rootedness in place offers many women, both black and white, recompense and personal satisfaction as well as possibilities for social life.

The local labour market, she shows, is important for black women. At the workplace, black and white women meet and integrate, while women engage the help of their co-workers in many areas of life - for example, through information on day care centres, housing opportunities and finding better jobs. Black women utilise the networks they form with white women in order to receive recommendations and advance or change their jobs, or obtain recommendations to landlords who will agree to rent apartments to black women. Finally, the personal relationships formed with co-workers provide emotional and sometimes concrete support (financial help or help with babysitting). Thus, the local workspace is seen as a source of potential strength and not just as a place of exploitation and difficulties for multiply-marginal women.

A thematic analysis of the life stories of Mizrahi women in development towns reveals how their work, even if exploitative, is a central element in their lives. Beyond the narrow definition of their jobs, work provides them with a place for personal initiative, creativity and autonomy. In the internal space of work, they have the opportunity to experience jobs that surpass the formal definitions, jobs that require certifications they do not possess. These experiences enable them to experience empowerment, even if they know that the possibilities for mobility will remain closed to them.

The insight that work and the workplace are central in the lives of marginal women is also demonstrated in the work of the anthropologist Pnina Motzafi-Haller (2012). In her book “In the Cement Boxes”, she presents the stories of five women from Yeruham, four of them with no formal education, who are employed intermittently in low-paying, low-status jobs. In spite of the difficult physical labour, job insecurity and the sense of being exploited, the workplace turns out to be the centre of a meaningful social life and strength. It provides financial independence (even if insufficient), a sense of self-worth and strategies for survival. Motzafi-Haller’s work demonstrates that we cannot understand the meaning of such work for these women by relying purely on financial logic – the fact that one can no longer maintain a family with a single salary. Furthermore, we cannot interpret work solely as an expression of the liberty and freedom of the working woman, in accordance with the feminist-liberal discourse. Women’s work must be seen as part of a wider network of local restrictions: the local educational system which provides no real possibilities for breaking through the cycle of marginality, and the local labour market which is limited in the number of workers it can absorb and the types of employment it can offer.

As I demonstrated, the educational system and the labour force in the development town where the women work is highly deficient. The current study shows that the paucity of local resources and the tendency of the existing frameworks to exploit their workers enable women to broaden the boundaries of their jobs and perform jobs for which they were not trained. These women’s successes undermine the assumptions upon which the modern “credential society” is based, as specified by the sociologist Randall Collins: a society in which people are evaluated according to the diplomas they possess rather than their talents or capabilities. The knowledge that one is capable of fulfilling a more meaningful and higher status position is empowering.

Beyond self-empowerment, the activity and initiative of these women gives them meaning within the community in which they live: Israella, who is transformed from an “accompanying aide” into a teacher who enables the special needs boy to complete the 12th grade; Mimi, who takes on responsibility for the lives of pupils on the verge of dropping out and changes the course of their lives, and Orly, who seeks to become a secretary who provides cheerful

service - all become meaningful members of their communities.

bell hooks, the Afro-American intellectual who criticised the liberal feminist call to women to establish careers, wrote the following with respect to women joining the workforce:

“The positive benefits masses of women have gained by entering the workforce have more to do with increased self-esteem and positive participation in community (...) While most workers do not feel secure at work, whether they are male or female, they do feel part of something larger than themselves.” (hooks 2000:50)

Through the life stories of these Mizrahi women, I showed how the alienating and exploitative workplace is experienced by women not only as such, but also as a site that enables personal identity empowerment.

The work of Grimshaw and Ribery (2007) reveals how, through the diminution of the value of women's work, employers extort skilled work from them without paying for it, while Buxbaum et al. (2008) reveal how such exploitation is experienced by women. The current study suggests that, in order to understand how a job is experienced, we must engage in a multidimensional analysis taking into account the combined influence of the workers' characteristics, the nature of the labour market, and the local space. This analysis shows that, notwithstanding their awareness of their economic exploitation, on the personal identity level women derive meaning from their jobs and even succeed in contributing to the advancement of the local community.

NOTE

- 1 This article is based on a broader study, involving interviews with twenty-three women living in a southern Israeli development town. As the article is focused on the experience of uneducated women employed in non-standard employment, I focus here solely on the women belonging to this sector.
- 2 My experience in adopting various strategies designed to minimise the power relations between the interviewer and the interviewee led me (with Pnina Motzafi-Haller) to critique this position, note its limitations and propose other alternatives (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011).
- 3 This does not, of course, negate the women's own explanation, that they had more time and peace of mind at work than in their homes

- 4 Because of limitations of space, I do not cite the various explanations for this, but merely summarise the three approaches suggested by Erez Tzfadia and Haim Yacobi (Tzfadia & Yacobi, 2011): The first approach, that of the functionalist school, explains the backwardness of the periphery and especially the development towns, as resulting from human resources and market forces. The Mizrahi population living on the periphery was not modern to begin with, and did not succeed in absorbing the characteristics of modernity and adapt to life in a modern, industrial and advanced society. The second explanation is based on a neo-Marxist outlook and suggests that the inferiority of the periphery is the direct result of conscious exploitation by the hegemonic centre, for the benefit of the capitalists living in the centre. The third explanation is based on the post-colonial approach, suggesting that the inferiority of the periphery results from policies based on ethno-national logic and the logic of capital. With this approach, we find a multiplicity of peripheries, created through the intersection of ethnicity, class position and geographic location.

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