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# The real life of working girls in India's fashion industry

Mannequin: Working Women in India's Glamour Industry, written by Manjima Bhattacharjya and published by Zubaan

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**This new book tackles the social assumptions around the fashion sector. It explores the informality of the sector, based on detailed interviews with the models, many of whom are women from small towns that have used the social mobility that the industry allows.**

**New Delhi:** Wearing glittery clothes and bright make up, and heels that add the right amount of shimmy to the walk, models sashay down the ramp. As long as the lights are on, they look perfect, and their lives presumed to be as glamorous off the stage as on it.

But behind the glistening faces sparkling under the spotlight, there is an industry with no working rules; with struggles similar to other professions, and yet those in it are not considered to be "working".

A book *Mannequin - Working Women in India's Glamour Industry*, by Manjima Bhattacharjya released last week reveals the story from inside the industry. But instead of swinging between the black and white, the book reveals the greys of the industry. Growing at 9% in 2016, India leads emerging markets as the fastest growing country for fashion, according to The State of Fashion report by McKinsey.

"You would think the economies of glamour would be organized, structured with well built systems, but a closer look showed in it characteristics of the informal sector - unskilled, with a floating labour population, relative ease of entry, operating on informal transactions, with no minimum remuneration, a chain of third parties facilitating work between two parties and absence of any institutionalized body to oversee or regulate matters arising from conflict," writes Bhattacharjya in the book published by Zubaan books.

Having spent years in the profession, even now Tina's father doesn't consider her work seriously. Even now he says "oh you should start working now". The story of Tina, a model from Delhi, which forms a part of the book talks about the daily struggles of a model, the odd timings at the job, the sacrifices that come with it. And yet, she struggles with the question of how to tell her father that what she is doing is real work. She isn't the only one being asked this question.

This book, through stories of women from small town India, to the metros in the country, talks about how working in this industry has brought with it some success and visibility for many in it and has helped some to "step across class and caste boundaries", offering social mobility in the new India that had not been possible for women before. That, however, isn't the full picture if viewed from behind the curtain.

The dark side of the industry has on and off come into focus in the country through extreme incidents. It was in 2010 when model Viveka Babajee committed suicide. It was in 2004 when actress-model Nafisa Joseph was found hanging in her Mumbai apartment. The former Miss India was 25 years old. In 2006, another actress-model, 30-year-old Kuljeet Randhawa committed suicide, soon after she had shot for her first film. It was said she was unable to cope with the pressures of the industry.

A deeper look into the industry, as revealed by Bhattacharjya's book shows how different their real lives are from the glossy images they are a part of. Even the 30 in-depth interviews that she conducted showed a range of those working in it. While one was from a smart, suburban apartment with walls she had painted herself, another lived in a dingy PG accommodation without windows, with space only for mattress that became the woman's bed at night.

And sexual harassment, which of course cuts across occupations, is in this industry as well, even though the outside assumes in fashion, everything is accepted.

In one case, a model received a call from the office of the owner of a famous fashion magazine in Delhi, asking her if she wished to be on the magazine cover. They meet in a five-star hotel, and he insists on meeting in the bar. As the woman showed him her file full of photographs, and began talking about money, he asked her: what else she could do? When she asked him straight whether he was talking about sexual favours, he responded: You are smart enough, I think.

There is an economic value to the profession, if you crack it, but as the book says, "it lacks social value."

"People ask how much money you make in modeling always with a suspicion. They can't imagine you could make this kind of money without sleeping around," one of the respondents told the author.

In an interview to *GQIndia* in April, 2016, a veteran model talked about what goes on behind the runway. She narrated an incident when a really well-established Delhi designer promised to pay the model after the show. "The amount wasn't much back then, but he still refused to pay eventually. Whenever I cross paths with him at events today, he looks right through me and pretends as if nothing ever happened."

All of this continues to happen because as Bhattacharjya says, "Because we don't identify modeling with labour, we don't understand it when models organize for their rights or when there are calls for fair labour standards."

There have been some small scale attempts at regularizing the work. One of the respondents Josy was 28 when she met the author and that was when she had spent a good 10 years in the profession. She talked about her attempt at starting a union for models. Why? "A union would represent a body of voices talking together not one against a hostile jungle. It would protect girls with feeble voices," she said. Within a few months, over a 100 women joined Models United mostly from Mumbai. And soon they drafted a set of rules and a list of do's and don'ts, regarding late payment, bouncing cheques, cancellation of shows, hours of work, and sexual harassment. Within no time, the initiative collapsed. "The union crumbled under the weight of members' personal relationships with choreographers and designers who were the ones wielding power and resisting the demands made by the union," the author writes.

From different hierarchies within the system, to gender bias against male models, to discrimination against dark skin, to the ongoing fight between feminism and fashion, this book tries to deal with each of the subjects.

But in all this, the author asks whether these women at the centre of the glamour economy, who are often marginal, voiceless, and rarely calling the shots, can be called the representatives of the country, even if they are crowned Miss Indias?

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