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The Right to Have “Society in the Bones”: The Skill and Bodies of Male Workers in Qatar

Natasha N. Iskander

Abstract: Scholars of gender and work have considered the gendered interpretation of embodied skill, and have shown how discourses about gender inform the visibility of skill and the value attributed to it. In their focus on discourse, they have overlooked the impact of institutional structures in shaping how skill is valued. This essay considers the situation of male workers in Qatar’s construction industry to argue that gender analyses of work should pay attention to the legal and institutional constraints placed on workers. These structures abet understandings of gender that enable employers to erase the embodied skill of workers and their contribution to the production process, even as they limit the ability of workers to perform their gender identity in a way that assigns value to their expertise.

Keywords: skill, migrant workers, Qatar, construction, tacit knowledge

“How do I decide which men to recruit? It’s easy. I tell them to pick up a sack of rice and run. The men who can make it half a kilometer without collapsing, those are the ones I take.” This is how Anand Suparat described recruiting workers from his native Thailand to build skyscrapers in Doha, Qatar.¹ Suparat was the director of a building contractor that specialized in masonry and concrete. Business in 2014, with the World Cup less than a decade away and Qatar flush with oil money, was booming. His company had won multimillion-dollar contracts for high-rise apartments, museums and cultural centers, and infrastructure upgrades. To complete the projects, his company recruited hundreds of workers from countries around the world.

“How heavy are these sacks?” I asked, as we sat in his air-conditioned office in a nondescript office building in one of the more run-down parts

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of central Doha. The walls of his office were covered in dark wood paneling, the same hue of the mahogany of the round table at which we sat, sipping green tea from crystal glasses and eating dates. The shades were pulled down low even on that February afternoon to keep out the harsh sun. “How heavy? You know, they are normal sacks. Maybe 80 kg? I sometimes like to see if they can carry two. Those are the quality workers.”

Two of Suparat’s chief engineers joined us for the interview. Later, one of them, Khan, an engineer from Pakistan who had worked in Qatar for close to a decade, took me back to his cubicle to tell me more about the technical capacities that his firm had developed. “We know how to work with concrete in the heat. We are specialists in the slow cure.”

Qatar’s extreme heat, with temperatures that routinely broke 120 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer, made the process of laying down concrete technically challenging. All Portland concrete changes volume as it dries, Khan explained, but in Qatar, concrete that dried too fast in the furnace of Qatar’s summers was vulnerable to drying shrinkage, a process in which the water in the cement mixture evaporated before the concrete was fully set. This produced an increase in tensile stress—cracks and warps to the layperson—that jeopardized the structural integrity of load-bearing walls. “A slow cure is even more critical with foundations,” he specified. “The water table in Doha is very high, and if there are cracks in the foundation, the building may flood, and, in any case, the water will definitely erode the foundation. A slow cure can be challenging, but I tell you, impermeability is one of the most difficult technical problems we face.” He went on about concrete slumping, admixtures, placing, and moisture management. The lesson expanded to include the design of the rebar cages that reinforced the concrete, the relentless race against both the heat that often warped steel rods and the deadlines demanded by clients, and the constant problem-solving required to translate the fantastical designs imagined by star architects into sound buildings.

To help me understand the techniques he was describing, he pulled out his battered laptop from under a stack of architectural plans. He showed me a series of YouTube clips: a video of a concrete boom, a sort of hose that pumped out concrete from a mixer; a tutorial on the chemical mixtures for concrete; an animated illustration of how to apply liquid-membrane covers on hardening concrete. The last video he showed me was a short documentary on the construction process of Burj Khalifa, the dizzyingly high skyscraper in Dubai, a project his company had not been involved

with. As we watched the time-lapse video of the high-pressure pump pouring concrete mixed with ice to hold together the precast concrete walls lifted by cranes, he pointed out each technical feat. In the final frames of the video, when the building was complete, the soundtrack switched from narration to soaring orchestral music. Khan remarked excitedly, “It’s like a symphony. All the pieces come together, and it’s like our imagination has come to life.” He insisted on loading the video onto a thumb drive so that I could take it with me.

At the end of his explanation, I circled back to my earlier question about recruitment, and I asked Khan how his company selected workers and whether the technical challenges involved in construction in any way informed their criteria. Did they try to verify whether the workers had any construction skill? Did they trade test them? Khan answered, somewhat impatiently, “Yes, of course, but we covered that issue already. We want good workers. We want workers who are strong.” I pressed, “Does ‘strong’ refer in any way to the skill that workers have, or can develop on site?” Khan repeated, “Yes, yes, of course.” He continued, “We want good quality workers. Egyptians, for example, are good quality. They are very strong and very good in the heat. Sometimes a bit sloppy, it’s true, but they are strong. Nepali workers are not very strong, they are sometimes small, but we bring them because they are not very expensive.” Khan’s sentiment was shared by the many labor recruiters and employers I spoke with in Qatar; they also classified workers by national origin and attributed qualities to them—such as strength, agility, and size—based on where they came from.

The contrast between the sophisticated technical skills that Khan described and his characterization of the workers that were recruited for the work was jarring and perplexing. Why did Khan, along with his boss Suparat, seem to value strength above all else, and why did they seem to dismiss the skills that workers had to possess, or needed to develop, to execute the tasks required to achieve a slow cure?

During my fieldwork in Qatar over seven months in 2014, I visited close to a dozen construction sites, and observed the building process at several of them for weeks at a time. Workers on these sites used skill similar to the expertise featured in the videos that Khan showed to me. Workers generally developed their skill on the job, and their competence remained tacit and embodied. Although the soaring high-rises, the sports stadiums, and the metro tunnels they worked on could not have been completed without

their skill, the men I interviewed had a difficult time describing what they knew and how they contributed to the structures they built. They had no certificate to indicate their skill, no labor organization or guild to vouch for their competence, and often no industry vocabulary to describe the depth of their expertise. Meanwhile, employers and supervisors, on jobsite and after jobsite, assessed their workers in much the same way as Khan and Suparat. Good workers were those who were strong.

This conflation of technical skill and bodily strength was perplexing to me. Why was it that engineers and supervisors could wax lyrical about technical challenges and the skill required to resolve them in the abstract, but seemed unwilling or unable to recognize those same skills in their workers? Why was brawn, understood as the physical strength, size, and hardiness associated with particular male bodies, a stand-in for technical competence?

The question of what makes a “good quality worker,” as both Suparat and Khan put it, has always been fraught, and the basic concepts of work and skill that undergird the managers’ phrase have been contested on the bodies of workers. As a long tradition in the sociology of work has shown, work and its value are always implicitly measured in relation to the body. From Marx, who argued that men remade their bodies by laboring to provide for their own subsistence in capitalist systems that took no account of their physical vulnerability (Marx 2012), through Foucault, who claimed that bodies were managed through technologies of surveillance and turned into docile subjects (Foucault 1997), scholars in this vein have maintained that the power inequality of labor relationships—between capital and labor, manager and employee—is defined and reinforced through the needs and fragility of the body. “Capital circulates, as it were, through the body of the laborer,” notes David Harvey (2006, 156).

Feminist scholars have sharpened this analysis by drawing attention to the gendered interpretation of the working body. They have shown that when the laboring body is viewed as female or feminized, the work the person performs and the competence she expresses is systematically erased (Reskin 1988; Ridgeway 1997). Moreover, they have contended that the gendering of working bodies has often been used to erase the contribution that women workers make in production (Padavic and Reskin 2002; England 1992). Women’s bodies conceal women’s skill: work, along with the expertise on which it depends, is rendered invisible as it is made corporal in the female body (Hatton 2017).

Folded into the feminine or feminized body, skill is reduced to the natural, and naturalized, expression of embodied femininity. The sewing expertise of garment workers is attributed to women's small and nimble fingers rather than their experience (Elson and Pearson 1981; Poster 2001; Collins 2009); the skill involved in health or childcare work is represented as an expression of women's caring instinct (Gimlin 2007); the work of maintaining organizations becomes an extension of women's assumed tendency for homebuilding (Casey 1999; Allen 2014). The gendered interpretation of the body becomes an instrument to enforce the power dynamics of economic production (McNay 2013). The competence and effort associated with women becomes hidden or private, occurring outside of public spaces explicitly defined as productive worksites (Daniels 1987). Similarly, relational work, in the jobs that are deemed women's work or in jobs that are somehow feminized, is also rendered invisible (Bulan, Erickson, and Wharton 1997).

When the expertise of men is made corporal, held in bodies explicitly and often aggressively designated as masculine, skill is not erased (Freeman 1993; Meyer 1999; Acker 1990). Instead, male physicality becomes a vehicle to put embodied ability on display and to endow that ability with value (Rotella 2002). Even more than communicating expertise, however, the male body also showcases male agency. A man transforms his body in the endeavor of acquiring expertise. Unlike feminized bodies whose productive traits—nimble fingers or caring instincts—are innate and immutable, male workers craft their bodies through their own initiative, intelligence, and effort (Datta and Brickell 2009). This does not mean that male bodies are not subjugated and disciplined in processes of production, nor does it diminish the significance of the Cartesian hierarchy in the way that skills are assessed economically, with “cognitive” skills seen as separate and superior to “manual” skills. But it does mean that male or masculinized bodies become a medium through which male agency and ability are communicated (Wolkowitz 2006; Ramirez 2010). Their calluses, their muscles, their stoops and limps all become proof of their agency in learning and of their effort in mastering technical skill.

Moreover, as these studies argue, the bodies of men do not just convey their individual expertise; they also convey the social relationships through which their skill was developed (Ramirez 2010). Unlike the emotional labor that is rendered invisible when carried out by the feminized body, the relational work of men becomes a kind of cultural capital that is

visible in the body (Morgan 1992). As Rotella writes in his monograph on blue-collar workers in the United States, “[A] good pair of hands’ implied a thick tangle of connections to the world”; it implied “skill, characters, and a way of life,” a man’s place in his social world, one that expands connections beyond the workplace to include family and social spaces (2002, 18). Thus, male bodies signify the value of men to their workplace and to their community. In their musculature and their dexterity, their social status and autonomy are literally and symbolically made flesh.

The bodies of male workers in Qatar were also used to judge their value. Khan and Suparat stressed the importance of physical strength as a criterion for recruitment. But, in the employers’ mind, the strength of the migrant workers was not shorthand for the expertise they possessed before they migrated or for the skill they would develop while on site completing technically difficult tasks. Neither was their strength a proxy for masculine agency in the way the phrase “a good pair of hands” has often been interpreted.

The skill of workers in Qatar was also not subsumed or erased in some sort of feminized way. It was not that their skill was a naturalized feature of their bodies, their strong backs substituting for nimble fingers. Rather, it seemed as if employers and managers were disembodiment worker expertise. They pulled the creativity, problem-solving abilities, and the capacity to learn out of workers’ bodies and left them with raw muscle and sinew. The workers’ competence, once excised from their physical gestures and actions, was transposed onto construction documents and building tools. In management narratives, buildings rose from the desert thanks to engineers like Khan who translated state-of-the-art architectural designs into legible construction documents, and to the state-of-the-art concrete boom pumps he brought in for the job—and not to the Thai, Nepali, or Egyptian workers who labored in the sun and exercised considerable effort and skill to make sure that the concrete cured slowly despite the unfathomable heat.

Analyses that consider work and skill through the lens of gender have focused on narratives like those articulated by the managers in Qatar. They have been centrally concerned with the way that discourses about the body, folded as they are into everyday interactions, identities, and affective relationships, have made the devaluation of skill palatable, and they have traced the discursive effort dedicated to making the erasure and devaluing of skill seem reasonable, even prosocial. And they have drawn attention to

the power of discourse to naturalize the inequities that are produced when the skills expressed through certain bodies are minimized or obscured altogether.

But in Qatar, discourse was a secondary tool. Skill was devalued through the much blunter instrument of labor law, and discourse was simply the gloss that made the bondage and exploitation of workers seem legitimate. During the time I conducted my fieldwork in 2013 through 2015, migrant workers had to sign binding contracts with their employers before they even boarded planes to Doha. According to the terms of the contracts, mandated by Qatar's law, workers had to forfeit their right to quit their jobs unilaterally, for any reason, including nonpayment of wages, violations of safety procedures, and labor abuses such as forced overtime. Moreover, workers required the permission of their employers to leave the country; they could not cross a border out of Qatar without an exit visa granted with the assent of their employers.² These regulations meant that workers had no legal standing to control the use of their bodies for production. They did not have an autonomous right to withhold their labor. Their bodies, for some contractual period, were legally not their own, neither to dispose of nor to interpret.

In addition to the legal requirements on workers' use of their bodies for production, additional laws and norms have reduced workers to mere physical bodies. Regardless of marital or family status, manual workers were all classified as "bachelors." Through the application of an administrative term unrelated to actual civil status—many so-called bachelors were married and had children—they were denied the social relationships and identities through which workers interpret their gendered bodies and imbue their embodied skill with value. In Doha, public spaces, including malls, parks, and indeed entire neighborhoods, were divided into those that are reserved for families and those where "bachelors" could be present. In this way, male workers were symbolically cut off from the possibility of forging broader social ties that could endow their skill and their contribution with worth.

This legal framework gave employers full authorship over what gender in the body of their workers meant. Workers were not viewed as men with agency; they were assessed commodities, as bodies reduced to instruments for production and branded by national origin (e.g., Egyptians are strong and good in the heat; Nepalis are small but cheap). They were shucked of the autonomy associated with personhood in liberal legal tra-

ditions, and though their bodies were gendered—the workers were clearly men—they were denied the access to the institutions and discourses through which their masculinity was defined and their capacity as skilled men was celebrated. They were men, but their masculinity was stripped, by the blade of the employment system, of anything but brawn, and their gender identity was shrunk down to a concept that came close to being a cognate for biological sex.

Body scholars have argued that workers have to reclaim their bodies, their right to use them, and their right to interpret them in order to resist ideologies and norms that elicit worker compliance and that support gendered assessments of skill. The strategies enumerated have included everything from the slowdown of work on production lines (Burawoy 1979), to statements through personal adornment like tattoos and hairdos (Wolkowitz 2006), to expressions that revalue the skill on the job through artistic production or sporting achievements (Rotella 2002). Most of the tactics are public and social, but scholars have also observed that they rest on an internal process of reappropriating the body and reestablishing intimacy with one’s physicality through, as Foucault puts it, “practices of the self” (1997, 291). The body is no longer an object separate from oneself, subject to the control and discipline of systems of production, but rather is an expression of one’s authentic being. Some gender scholars, from Judith Butler onward, have pressed for a personal and societal exploration of the ways in which we perform gender in the body as a means of interrogating how we identify and appraise the tacit skill held in the bodies that we gender (Butler 2011). The call is to use gender analysis as a crowbar to pry off the discourses that devalue work and erase competence.

To some extent, however, these exhortations presume freedom of contract. With a few caveats, they basically assume that workers have property rights over their own bodies and their own labor, and contribute their labor to a production system voluntarily, even if that decision is made under economic duress. But in Qatar, workers could not assert full rights over their own bodies. As a result, the latitude available to them to reclaim their bodies was narrowed far past the point contemplated in gender analyses of skill and work, regardless of whether those analyses focus on male or female workers.

If the basis of the challenge to gendered devaluations of the skill is the reclaiming of the body and the enactment of transgressive bodily and gendered performances, then what can one do when the law gives the em-

ployer ownership over the body of the worker? What kind of resistance is possible when the state actively severs and snuffs out the kinds of social interactions through which people assess the meaning of their work and affirm the value of their competence? How does the construction of gender identities at work occur when employers, backed by a legal system, deny laborers the personhood that gender implies? Butler argues that the body simultaneously produces and is produced by social meaning, and that the transformation of social meaning occurs in an iterative way through the enactment or performance of difference in gender expression. But the situation of workers in Qatar suggests that we must also investigate the space available to perform varied and provocative gender expressions. To what extent does an employment system garrote workers' capacity to perform their skill as an expression of their manhood and of their personhood?

These are not trivial questions. Increasingly, global production is edging toward systems in which the rights of workers to determine how to use their bodies for production, and more pointedly to determine whether their bodies will be used in production to begin with, are being curtailed. This is especially true for migrants. Qatar, along with countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council, might be viewed by some as an extreme manifestation of this trend, but in point of fact, there are many visa arrangements throughout the world that echo the system in place in Qatar today. And these restrictive frameworks are only becoming more so as countries around the globe lurch violently toward populist nationalism.

Carol Wolkowitz, in her elegant study of the interplay between notions of work, gender, and power, calls for an attention to "society in the bones" (2006, 18). She exhorts us to consider the ways in which the body, and our interpretation of the body, captures the power dynamics that flow from employment relationships and the ways in which they are legitimated by gendered discourses. But when the political economy in the body also includes struggles over whether the body can be separate from personhood, then the appropriate focus may not be "society in the bones" or the gendered interpretation of embodied skill. Instead, the more helpful target of analysis may be the governance structures that seek to divest society from the bones of some, and the economic systems that establish some people as mere bodies, reducing their gender to sex, and divesting them of competence, and of agency. Perhaps it is time to turn our attention squarely to the right of having "society in the bones" to begin with.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The law has since been amended mildly. Workers may now switch jobs after a year of service with their initial employer, and permission to leave the country is now granted through the government, if their employer has no objection.

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