Beyond Exploitation and Empowerment: Aspirational Labor among Iranian Women on Instagram

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ever-increasing inclination among Instagram female users in Iran towards generating revenue online. For many Iranian women, online career has successfully brought micro-celebrity status and financial prosperity. For many others, whom I call aspiring micro-celebrities, an online career is only an aspiration. They have aspired to raise an income but have not achieved it yet. In my thesis, I review the social, political, and economic context within which Iranian women feel the need to promote a business on Instagram. Based on this, I will answer the question of why Iranian aspiring micro-celebrities are convinced to do free and precarious labor in the hope of achieving economic prosperity in the future. As researchers suggest, social media content producers start to do free labor to build a bridge from their existing experiences to their future aspirations. What Brooke Duffy has called aspirational labor is more meaningful in a neoliberal context, in which subjects see themselves responsible for the conditions they live in. Although this form of labor can be found everywhere in the world, it does not happen in a vacuum, nor is it a mere reflection of a neoliberal system. Along with a focus on neoliberalism, I will pay attention to what has marked the context of my study in recent years. To conceptualize these peculiarities, I will theorize women's aspirational labor as a form of highly gendered digital labor that fills many socio-economic gaps in Iran, mainly by appropriating women's assumed expertise in caring and communicative abilities. My thesis attempts at theorizing both economic and non-economic values of women's aspirational labor on Instagram. I will draw on Kylie Jarret's theorization of digital labor as a form of reproductive labor to indicate Iranian women's aspirational labor role in sustaining the sexual division of labor.

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Table of contents

Chapter One: Introduction and the context

"It was the only thing I could do". This was my research's starting point. Mina, a 30-year-old woman living in Kerman city in Iran could start an all-online business for herself without any need to go out of her house. While she had a small kid and a husband to take care of, and needed to have a source of income, she decided to buy baby clothes from well-known brands that did not have any store in Iran and sell them on Instagram. The idea was based on an unofficial business that can be run without paying any taxes to the government. The business seemed very small and far from being successful at first, but Mina's aspirations were large and became larger. During the interview, she repeatedly told me she always wanted to have a store full of baby clothes, implying that what she is doing right now is the most enjoyable thing for her. She now manages a page on Instagram and sell the clothes to her followers. What seems difficult to Mina was running a business, while doing diverse types of online activities, including a presentation of everyday life. After finding thousands of followers and hundreds of customers, she is now dreaming of expanding her business, employing three people to do her job, and having some free time for herself and her family. With this aspiration, Mina works day and night, taking care of a combination of online and offline activities. The job that she loved one day seems a bit more precarious now: "I didn't want to do blogging, but because of Instagram algorithms, I needed to change my mind". Recognizing the fact that her competitors are doing a presentation of themselves and their personal life, Mina sees blogging while trading and selling as the only path towards what she has aspired for. Mina's conceptualization of her activity on Instagram seems to be less empowering, forcing her to change not just her business but her life.

Mina and other women who helped me understand the possibilities and challenges faced by Instagram small-scale business owners are telling stories of their success and failure in a way

that seem less precarious and more enjoyable. These women tolerate their precarious working condition though their aspirations, whether to have a chain of online shops, export products to neighboring companies, have an office for themselves, become a well-known chef and similar things. My research aims at investigating these aspirations and their social and economic implications. As these users come from different ages, education, and class backgrounds, it was impossible to narrow down the scope of my research. I managed to interview women with different business ideas who are aspiring for very different things. Some of them saw their success in increasing the performance of their page; some others were ambitious enough to aspire for something beyond Instagram, to become an entrepreneur. It was also difficult for me to focus on certain group of women based on what they are doing on Instagram. Although many female users work for a living through self-presentation of everyday life, many others have started a home-based business and use Instagram for promoting their products along with presenting everyday life. In my research, I try to understand the social, political, and economic context within which Iranian women choose to promote a business (either a self-presentation or a product-promotion business) on Instagram. This will be essential for analyzing the growth of aspirational labor among Iranian female users of Instagram in recent years. My thesis, therefore, will start with an appraisal of women's inclusion and exclusion in and from the labor market after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. I then continue with doing a digital ethnography and interviewing Iranian female content creators who have aspired for achieving financial prosperity.

Iranian women after the Islamic Revolution: empowered but deprived

To understand the situation of Iranian women today, I found it worthwhile to review the state's determination to create a religious middle-class in Iran after the revolution. Based on the

existing literature and with the help of Kevan Harris's critique of Iranian government social welfare policies (2017), I would argue that state's investment in increasing women's level of education in the first decade of the revolution increased women's expectations and desires for empowerment. The state then went through a massive failure to provide educated women with enough job opportunities. The only job opportunities that educated women could find in the third decade of revolution were offered by informal sector; a problem that has lasted until today.

The second post-revolutionary decade in Iran was marked by the death of Iranian charismatic leader, the end of Iran-Iraq war, and the rise of a developmental state. Various groups of elites realized the need to focus on economic growth and expert knowledge to "legitimate the revolution in the eyes not only of the believers but also of the world" (Harris, p 236). This turn to technocracy resulted in an expansion of a new professional middle-class and linked many other Iranian individuals to the "possibility of a perceived middle-class lifestyle" (Harris, p 222). These expectations did not materialize afterwards. The cultural capital gained by individuals through educational attainment was perceived to be useless. Only a certain group of people could manage to benefit from the exclusive social welfare policies. People from marginalized and poor backgrounds who saw new opportunities available for them immediately after the revolution, became deprived of basic economic and social benefits. Millions of people who have been promised to become the new religious middle class were the losers of the revolution in some scholar's view (Nomani & Behdad, 2006), who suffered from a declining living standard after the revolution. This in fact had an influence on the formation of what I call an aspirational middle class in Iran. Those people whose economic and educational efforts were blocked by the state and failed to achieve what they had been promised. For decades, Iranian aspirational middle class feels to be trapped in a condition that has been theorized by Shahram Khosravi as 'waithood,' mainly because they were not able to transform their education into a well-paid job (Khosravi, 2017). With all the efforts, still over

3

35 percent of university graduates are unemployed (Salehi-Isfahani, 2011). Many of these people are forced to work in an informal sector which is characterized by short contract jobs, dismissal without notice, and low wages (Khosravi, 2017, p 76).

The post-revolutionary government played a significant role in promoting women's education, which resulted in an increase in their expectations. Bahramitash and Kazemipour suggest that the Iranian government's investment in female literacy and education in the first decade of the revolution had a major influence in increasing the marriage age among Iranian women (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006). With the support of the new state, women's education and employment became acceptable to socially conservative families who could not trust the previous regime (Povey, 2016). Nevertheless, educational attainment for Iranian women did not mean that they could have an equal access to various job opportunities. Statistics from 1980 to 1990 show that women's rising employment was confined to certain sectors that were highly gendered, such as healthcare and education sectors (Nomani & Behdad, 2006). Consequently, Iranian women were forced to enter the informal sector and do under-paid jobs. In her study in Tehran city, Azade Kian (2014) found that many Iranian housewives seek to establish a small source of income from invisible activities like hairdressing and petty trading (Kian 2014). In the same period, Iranian women have had to deal with the state's contradictory policies. The post-revolutionary state needed women to play an active role in the production process, particularly after war. Due to death of hundreds of men during the war and lack of labor force, Iranian women's participation in the labor market increased (Bahramitash, 2013). This growth, however, substituted by a high rate of unemployment in the coming decades, because of the government and the economy's failure to provide women with decent jobs. Despite an increase in the age of marriage, lower fertility rates, increasing educational attainment, and high rates of enrollment in the higher education, women are still economically disadvantaged (Moghadam, 2004, p 11).

The impact of Neoliberal Restructuring on Iranian Women's Employment

Marginalization of women in Iran's economy after the revolution was fueled by neoliberal restructuring that happened after the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988. Iranian government after revolution did not have any economic plan until the post-war era. The regime's first economic plan was dedicated to "reconstruction," described by Nomani and Behdad as an era of economic "liberalization," (Nomani & Behdad, 2006, p 47). Although Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, was against borrowing from other countries in the first decade of the revolution and believed borders must not be open to capitalism, the government was forced to turn to foreign investment after war. To finance economic growth, the Islamic Republic's first Economic Plan (1989 –93) was dedicated to encouraging foreign capital and privatization of the economy. This was a turning point for the regime. Key features of this era have been the privatization of the economy, freeing prices for consumer goods, opening of the economy for foreign investment, and economic restructuring promoted by the IMF and the World Bank. This program which has been then described as 'Neoliberal Restructuring' was initially successful and the economy grew at 7.1 percent per year during 1988-93, however, after 1994 the rate of economic growth started to fall (Coville quoted in Salehi-Isfahani, 1996).

In the case of Iranian government, neoliberal economic policies strengthened the authoritarian features of the state and the liberalization of the economy gradually transformed into a form of "authoritarian neoliberalism" (Jessop, 2019). Unsuccessful in privatization of the economy, Iranian Neoliberal restructuring required what Bob Jessop calls "surveillance and policing" to protect new policies (Jessop, 2019). As Tara Povey (2019) has suggested in her article, neoliberalization in Iran resulted in the militarization of the society. Instead of focusing

on the role of the private sector, the state started to support the expansion of the security sector to control the process and guarantee its own well-being.

In addition, the restructuring of the economy in the post-war period reinforced the regime's exclusivist political discourse (Povey, 2019) towards people. The security sector, known as Revolutionary Guard, not only became the main beneficiary of economic reforms after the war, but also gained some responsibility to govern the distribution of political power and economic resources as well. All individuals and groups needed to work together with this certain group to have access to resources. Even the small Iranian bourgeoise was forced to form an alliance with the state and the Revolutionary Guard to achieve a share of the economy. In his article "Impasse in Iran: Workers Versus Authoritarian Neoliberalism," Peyman Jafari suggests that the new capitalist class in post-revolutionary Iran relies on the state for protection against both foreign competition and domestic labor protests. Hence Iran's capitalists have aligned with the authoritarian state at crucial moments (Jafari, 2021).

The outcome for Iranian middle-class was rising unemployment, poverty, a more exclusionary social-welfare policy, and the militarization of society. Besides, the security-military-business alliance made it difficult for the new middle class to have a secure source of income. Of course, in such a society deprivation continues to impact various groups of people, particularly women. In search of the consequences of living under the control of a "national security state," Tara Povey did an ethnographic survey in Tehran city. Interviewing women, she found that they feel economically disadvantaged, since the Revolutionary Guard now controls most important economic activities in the country (Povey, 2016). The power of the Revolutionary Guard has not been confined to financial resources. Like what has happened in Hungary in recent years (Geva, 2021), the Iranian authoritarian regime, or better to say the Revolutionary Guard, has taken over the universities, culture sectors, and the media, to intensify a nationalist solidarity based on religion.

Iranian women, Internet, and the promise of empowerment

The failure of Iranian women to join the labor force after the revolution is theorized by the existing literature as being a consequence of both cultural and economic problems. In the context of my country, the economic inequality and cultural hierarchy are fused together, which, as discussed by Nancy Fraser, will result in maldistribution of the resources, and leads to misrecognition (Fraser, 2000). Severely affected by discriminatory laws after the revolution and rising poverty, Iranian women saw internet as a great tool for pushing against the state. In a study of Iranian female bloggers in 2012, Farid Shirazi found that women's digital activities are an effective means for them to speak out against authorities and participate in women's struggle for a just and fair society (Shirazi, 2012). Similar to the Internet, social media platforms have allegedly been rewarding for Iranian women. According to the existing literature, being active on social media is a way for some Iranian women to present an identity that suits them (Einifar, 2019; Bicheranloo et al., 2019). As the Iranian scholars have argued, through social media, these women believe they presented an identity that does not conform the social and religious norms. None of these articles worked on Iranian women who started a business on Instagram. As I will show in my thesis, these women produce and reproduce a subjectivity that sustains gender norm.

What has remained understudied in the existing literature is the social media's affordances for generating income. By doing numerous forms of online activities, including self-presentation, lifestyle presentation, and promoting a home-based business on social media platforms, Iranian women are promised to achieve fame, social status, and financial independence. According to a survey conducted by Beta research center, the annual income of 600 influencers (macro-celebrities) from advertising is equal to the annual income of Iran's

national radio and television organization (IRIB). Recognizing micro-celebrity as a well-paid job, Iran's parliament has decided to pass a bill according to which users with more than 500 thousand followers should pay tax. In this context, women's active presence on social media as bloggers, influencers, entrepreneurs is a means for them to not only get a better share of economic resources, but also achieve the social status and cultural recognition they have been deprived of during the last 40 years.

By the recent transformation of social media platforms to a suitable place for not only self-presentation but also revenue generation, Instagram is now introducing its users with various working opportunities. Currently, hundreds of female users on Instagram have allegedly found their passionate jobs and transformed into micro-celebrity in Iran. As idols of self-empowerment and financial independence, these so-called micro-celebrities encourage other female users to build their own online careers either based on self-presentation or promotion of a product. Having a job on Instagram seems rewarding, mainly because it provides women with an opportunity to overcome socio-economic restrictions of the real world, including high rates of unemployment. In an economy marked by high rates of gender gap1 (ranked 140 out of 144 countries) and low rates of women participation in the economy (only 16%), online micro-celebrity seems attractive to those women who do not have access to other forms of employment.

Labor on Instagram: not getting paid but remaining motivated

Although well-established micro-celebrities in Iran seem to be thriving, most users, whom I call "aspiring micro-celebrities" in my research, may not have an equal access to scarce sources of social and economic capital online. Being forced to do precarious activities like constant monitoring of online presence, always being on, dealing with algorithms, and promoting their

self or products, these women are required to seriously work on a well-curated online presence, without having any clear view of the future of their online career. As suggested by the existing literature, aspiring users of social media are active participants of an online sharing economy (Hearn, 2017). Their autonomous but precarious online activity has been described as a form of immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996), because it produces a valuable commodity (in the form of content). This type of labor remains unpaid for a while, regardless of its great value for capital owners (Duffy, 2015). In this term, digital labor needs to be understood in a neoliberal context. From a Foucauldian point of view, neoliberalism is a form of power that spreads market values to all spheres of life, through forming autonomous and self-reliant subjects (Larner, 2006). In a neoliberal context, subjects see themselves responsible for the conditions they live in (Ashman et al, 2018). However, neoliberalism is not fixed and its operationalization in Iran was different. In fact, the conceptual framework of neoliberalism cannot be directly transferred to the context of Iran without paying attention to decades of correlation between state centrism, political Islam, and neoliberal ideology (Abazari & Zakeri, 2019).

Therefore, the specific precarities Iranian aspiring micro-celebrities are facing and the ways they deal with it worth studying.

This thesis is shaped around this idea that Iranian women's aspirational labor not only has an economic value in both international and local scale, but it also has a hidden non-economic value. I attempt in this thesis to show the active role aspiring micro-celebrities play in reproducing subjectivities, gender norms, and social relations that sustain the existing social order. In this way, I challenge the existing understanding of social media as a great tool for women to reintroducing a new identity.

My second chapter is focused on Iranian women's aspirational labor as a mechanism for securing a future in an insecure time. By describing the nature of women's labor on Instagram, I will indicate the ways digital labor has enabled women to reconcile their own needs and

family requirements with the society's expectations from women in general. Although this might seem empowering to women, I argue in this chapter that working as owner of home-based businesses isolates women at home, where they cannot have any type of protection by trade unions. This chapter will also elaborate more on the requirements of working on Instagram for Iranian aspiring micro-celebrities. This section sheds light on the entrepreneurial and risky aspects of Iranian women's labor on Instagram.

The third chapter deals with social implication of Iranian women's aspirational labor on Instagram. Drawing on Kylie Jarret's critique of digital labor as a form of reproductive labor, I will explain the non-fiscal value of women's digital labor in Iran's society. My main argument in this chapter is that by their aspirational labor on Instagram, women reproduce a certain social and economic order and subjectivities that might be considered as a reproduction of gender norms.

Methodology

This thesis is based on semi-structured interviews with ten individuals, three bloggers and seven business owners. I supplemented my research by doing three sessions of participant observations in April and May 2021, first one in a woman's house in the time of doing photography for her products, second one in a café with a woman while she was selecting archived videos for editing and posting them on Instagram, and the third one with a group of aspiring micro-celebrities in an event called "Blogging Trip" in a village close to Tehran city. I also conducted a non-participant observation in a photography equipment store in Tehran city, watching people talking about their online careers and the requirements of success on Instagram.

Regarding the interviews, I used two highly followed pages on Instagram to find aspiring micro-celebrities: two pages owned by two highly followed business consultants on Instagram.

The first one was owned by Elmira Nekou, a business consultant who started her activities by supporting women who wanted to start their business on Instagram. The second one is owned by Ali Hajmohammadi one of the most famous people in Iran who teaches people to improve the performance of their page on Instagram. I found three women by following these two pages. I found the rest of my respondents drawing on my informal networks and by posting a few stories on my own page on Instagram. Two interviews were conducted and recorded online, and the rest were done in cafes in Tehran city.

In interviews, I explored the nature of labor, precarities and chance of empowerment. The questions were structured around five main themes: women's level of education and their previous experiences in the labor market, women's experiences on social media platforms, the challenges, and possibilities of running a business on Instagram, the requirements of working on Instagram, the way they craft their posts, stories, pictures, videos, and captions, and the way they describe their activities on Instagram.

Women that I interviewed were quite different in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds. In terms of age, the youngest women I interviewed was 25 and the oldest was 42. More than similarity in age and socio-economic background, it was particularly important for me to make sure that these women run a home-based business. Six of my interviewees were business owners for a range of products: handmade soaps, crochet basket knitting, handmade accessories, cosmetic products, handmade dolls, and pastries. One of the women I talked to was an SEO[1] expert who was promoting her career on Instagram, from her room at her parent's house. Three of my informants were food blogger, lifestyle blogger, and skincare blogger. None of the women I interviewed during my fieldwork had more than 20 followers on their Instagram page. This was chosen arbitrary not scientific, just to make sure people whom I talk to are not in the category of macro entrepreneurs.

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[1] Search engine optimization

Although I proposed to do digital ethnography prior to my fieldwork, I was not capable of observing people's interactions on Instagram or participating in online conversations. What I did online was more a supplementary part of my research. I followed all my participants on Instagram and saved screenshots of posts and stories that were related to the main themes of my research. Whenever I had difficulties in understanding the ambiguities of an interview, I went to different pages that I followed during the last year for my thesis to find suitable clarifications. Nevertheless, the largest part of my digital data comes from an ethnographic assignment I have done during the winter semester on Elmira Nekou's page on Instagram, to identify the mythologies that are surrounding women's labor on Instagram.

One of the challenges were faced by this research was to find a proper place for doing a participant observation, mainly because aspiring micro-celebrities seem atomized when they are online. At first, I wanted to join the workshops and conferences for training Instagram but after entering the field I found out that all the tutorials are in the form of pre-recorded videos. However, the last participant observation I attended was a major source of data. People accepted me as an autonomous researcher. The fact that I am studying in a foreign university also helped me be welcome to ask any question and record different conversations. Because of the same reason, I did not become an insider in the event. However, I had a great chance of talking to people with different aspirations, which was a major help to my research.

It should also be noted that to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, the respondents' names are pseudonyms.

Chapter Two: The nature of women's labor on Instagram

Trying and trying without knowing the results

When I entered the field, I already knew that blogging and running a business on Instagram is not as easy as some social media experts would show. Doing online labor is regarded by many of these experts as the easiest way to earn a substantial amount of money while sitting at home "in front of the flow of an air cooler." As I expected, the picture in the field was different from this mythologized image of labor on Instagram. In one sentence, working on Instagram for my interlocuters was equal to trying and trying without knowing the results. Talking to aspiring micro-celebrities and doing participant observations, I realized that these women need to do the job of a team, similar to entrepreneurs who are "a company of one" (Lane, 2011). They spend a lot of time fabricating their products, which are most of the time artworks and handicrafts. On the other hand, they need to take care of the sales and marketing, which means performing the role of a branding expert. In order to be able to see the difficulties and challenges ahead of these women, we need to review the range of requirements that running a business on Instagram might have as it has been mentioned in interviews or during the participant observation, from skills that are related to marketing and storytelling to an obligatory form of emotional labor.

In the first section of this chapter, I will elaborate more on the requirements of working on Instagram for Iranian aspiring micro-celebrities. As my informants told me during the interviews, to be successful on Instagram, they need to become an expert in various skills,

13

including content creation and storytelling, promotion of the Instagram page, and dealing with the algorithms. Overall, the picture I will describe in this section is focused on exploitation of women's labor on Instagram. As I argue, my informants are doing what has been described as entrepreneurial labor in the existing literature.

In the second section, I will continue by aspects of women's digital labor that seem less exploitative, such as flexibility, creativity, and the ability to raise money from home. Based on my ethnographic findings, I argue in this section that working from home isolates women at home, where they cannot have any type of protection by trade unions. I also elaborate more on the fiscal and non-fiscal value of women's digital labor for society.

I am an advertising agency and I love my customers

Perhaps, the most obvious requirement for running a successful page is knowing how to advertise your product and business on other pages. This also includes a general knowledge of marketing on Instagram. Since there are various types of advertisement available on Instagram, aspiring micro-celebrities need to spend a lot of time picking the right marketing strategy to improve the performance of their page. Throughout the interview with Zahra, she mentioned a few times that cooperating with other bloggers was vital and needed a lot of experience:

> *Another important skill is to know how to contact bloggers. They are busy and cannot answer all the direct messages; therefore, you need to know how to talk to influencers and bloggers to get their confirmation for advertisement.*

There are other people on Instagram that aspiring micro-celebrities need to look at. To be sure that they are doing the right thing, they need to be careful about other business owners on Instagram. This also might mean following the trends in their specific field to have a grasp of what other people are doing. During my first participant observation in Nasim's house, when

14

she and her daughter were taking pictures and videos of their cosmetic products, I occasionally identified words that I have heard before from one of most followed beauty bloggers on Instagram. Curious to find out where Nasim's knowledge and information about cosmetics come from, I asked if she has anyone to learn from? She answered, "Because of algorithms, I need to follow pages that are related to my page. I don't copy their content, but I get inspiration from them." In practice, this meant being aware of what is going on in the online market and being able to compete.

On the other hand, when Zahra was explaining her way of creating content, she mentioned how important it was for her to tell a story for every product, "Your content should not be just about your goods, it should also be fun and entertaining." This is supposed to differentiate you from others, and for many women, being entertaining means to include details of their personal life.

To get a better understanding of the nature of work on Instagram, we must pay attention to the details of creating posts and stories. Thanks to my own experience on social media, I knew that selling a product on Instagram is not equal to simply taking photographs and recording videos and posting them. "If you do so, you won't be able to increase the number of followers." As far as I understood in the field, posts should be either fun or informative. Entertaining followers is a strategy for bloggers. "It will burst your page," Mr. Peyvand told the bloggers on the blogging trip. He explains,

> *Use titles that are "yellow" (referring to yellow or pulp magazines in Iran). They are really entertaining for users. I know it might feel bad but it's the only thing you can do to bring your page up. Once I told one of my students who couldn't improve his page to present his wife to his followers, and it really worked.*

For this reason, most of my interlocutors repeatedly expressed their annoyance of the need to spend a lot of time looking for entertaining ideas that will appeal to their followers. I was

15

reassured of the significance of this idea when I visited Nasim's house. I bought her some flowers on my way. When I arrived, she took the flowers and, while saying thank you, took a picture of them. I asked why. "I need to create content, sister," she answered, adding that she posted a few stories of me coming to her home.

The need to entertain followers all the time and tell stories is mostly understood as taking good care of followers. Aspiring micro-celebrities need to spend a lot of time on building trust and this requires them to care for their followers. "Seize any opportunity to tell your followers that you love them," contemplated Arshia during the interview. She was quoting her mentor when saying "Love your followers, and they will love you back." When I was doing a digital ethnography of Elmira Nekou's Instagram-page, I observed something similar. As a business consultant and Instagram coach, she recommended aspiring micro-celebrities to present a likable persona and encourage followers to engage with the content by liking, saving, and sharing posts, which is necessary for improving their online performance. From her posts and teaching materials, I also got the impression that women entrepreneurs are required to stay positive all the time and love their customers as if they were friends. Speaking of emotions towards customers reminded me of Arlie Hochschild definition of emotional labor as a type of work that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7).

The mandatory emotional labor that I encountered in the field did not come as a surprise to me. On the contrary, it is a familiar global pattern, especially among people who work in the technology sector. What surprised me was the instrumental nature of it (Duffy, 2015). For some of my interlocutors, it was enough if they posted a "good morning" *Story* to their followers. When I was doing a participant observation of Mina's interactions with her customers, I found it striking to find out that her WhatsApp chat was filled with friendly stickers (heart, kisses, and so on) and funny memes from the customers. "Are these people your friends?" I asked.

16

"No, they are customers, I found them on Instagram and now we are friends." She explained afterwards: "I am friends with customers who pay a lot of money and order frequently."

These types of social communications happen most of the time with an economic aim, and they have been criticized as "platformed sociality" (Dijck, 2013). For some media scholars, digital labor is a highly gendered form of labor that is based on women's assumed expertise in certain skills. In this sense feminine aspects of women's lives, such as emotionality, or willingness to give care, are promoted and exploited on social media.

Dealing with algorithms: I hate Zuckerberg

Working on Instagram is not confined to mandatory emotional labor. To have a successful page on Instagram and being able to raise an income, aspiring micro-celebrities need to deal with ever changing Instagram algorithms. In the middle of the interview, Arshia, the knitter, told me about how irritating she finds Instagram algorithms:

> *I hate Zuckerberg, he always adds some new features to Instagram. Although he wants to make it simple, at the end, with every update, he makes it more complex.*

What aspiring micro-celebrities find the most puzzling on Instagram was their limited knowledge of algorithms. In an interview with Zahra, who is now the owner of a successful business on Instagram, she told me about the amount of money and time that she spends figuring out how Instagram algorithms work.

She and Arshia believe in the authority of algorithms and their influence on everything on the platform. For this reason, they feel the need to get help from Instagram experts every now and then. In the interview, Zahra mentioned, "I follow a lot of Instagram experts to see what significant changes have happened in Instagram regulations recently." She also told me that

17

she found some friends in online courses and seminars and they help each other with hints about algorithms.

She also spends a lot of money to be aware of all the tricks for dealing with algorithms:

> *It's not just about regulations, we cannot even upload Reels videos[3] on Instagram, because in Iran we are banned from doing so. I spend a lot of money to learn how to upload Reels videos because they are very effective on improving my page performance.*

A second point that needs to be considered is that not all aspiring bloggers are sure about methods for dealing with algorithms. It was less obvious, thus, for some of my informants to follow what their followers want or what the algorithms may prefer. Saying that algorithms are not as important as the quality of the content, Shole refused to admit the influence of algorithms on her activities, but later when I asked "When did you decide to add some blogging stuff to your Instagram page" she confessed,

> *Of course, I am not a blogger, but I need to always be there. I need to have this circle of Stories active for my followers all the time. In this case, I am following the algorithms. If I don't create content incessantly my page will sleep.*

So, she had her own worries about Instagram algorithms. When I interviewed Tanaz, I also heard of Instagram algorithms reducing a page's view (the level of visibility) when a recognizable number of the people who are following that page do not engage with the page in the form of liking, sharing, or saving the content. According to them, these are "*ghost*" or "*dead*" followers. In this case, Instagram would identify these ghost users as fake ones. This might reduce the visibility of a page. The solution to the problem is to beg your followers to be more active. But the weirdest solution was mentioned in my interview with Tanaz. She has been told to delete her page and start over again.

I know what my problems are, I know what I should do, I must create a new page and deactivate the current one. My posts can be shown to millions of people then, even if I have just 3000 followers.

Having 22,000 followers is apparently an achievement for Tanaz, because less than 50% of her followers visit her page and engage with her content. Although deleting this page and starting all over again seems a lot to her, she is considering it because she believes "having more followers does not mean anything; for me it is more important to have a lot of audiences." She then continued by explaining the importance of *Instagram Views* instead of the number of followers, "Once one of my friends posted a picture with a nice Iranian carpet at her background; more than 50 thousand people saw the post, and this resulted in a very good advertisement offer from a carpet company." She was referring to an Instagram algorithm that puts the most relevant and most viewed posts on top of every user's feed.

Instead of conforming to algorithms, other users might try to push back. The insecurity of their situation forces aspiring micro-celebrities to become members of certain groups for increasing users' engagement. These groups are online communities that agree to mutually like, comment on, share, or save each other's posts; basically, this is an efficient method for cheating the algorithms. Victoria O'Meara (2019) sees these groups as a form of resistance and indicates the way algorithms control the labor process online.

In general, dealing with algorithms makes the condition of labor too insecure and uncertain for aspiring micro-celebrities. The main concern does not come from a fear of losing a lot of money, instead it comes from a fragile position in the field that reminds me of an employee who wants her monthly salary from Instagram. The feeling of income insecurity (Bishop, 2019; Duffy et al., 2021) is the thing that made Arshia confess,

19

> *I am spending my time on something that I don't know if it would be successful or not. I want to have an income and sometimes I ask myself "Isn't it better to have a simple online shop and forget about what I like?"*

In fact, if social media workers fail to fit their content to the platform's algorithms, they might lose their viewers and consequently their income. This precarity of visibility makes digital labor highly uncertain (Duffy et al., 2021). To save their wage and conform to algorithmic rules, users should perpetually guess which content has a better chance of being viewed and monetized. The precarity of digital labor can also be seen in unilateral changes to organizational policies on social media platforms, such as Instagram's shadowbanning in which content remains unpublished for unrevealed reasons. No matter how uncertain and precarious, working on Instagram and having a page seem to be still very popular among Iranian women. In the next section, I will problematize the advantages of working online for women that might seem less exploitative at first glance.

At least I am not a fossil

As I mentioned earlier, having a job on Instagram seems rewarding, mainly because it provides women with an opportunity to overcome socio-economic restrictions of the real world, including high rates of unemployment. However, as I will explain in this section, the promise of flexibility remains at the center of digital labor to win women's consent and convince them to join the labor force. Apart from that, flexibility is most of the time associated with working overtime and doing unpaid labor, which leads to a form of self-exploitation.

When I asked my interlocutors about the differences between working on Instagram and working as a full-time employee, I was referred to the flexibility and a control over labor. Zahra gave me a good deal of reasons why she prefers her work on Instagram to working full-time in another organization:

Being an employee is not my type of personality. It is really nice that I can decide about my time as I wish… When you have a job in an organization, you go to work from 8 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon and no matter what you do, you just empower your boss. Especially people who cannot do a routine job and want to change the system are not good for employees. I worked really hard as an employee and one time I thought to myself I could do all these things for myself not for someone else.

This was also the case with Mahi (a woman that makes dolls) who told me "I earn less than my previous job, but at least I know that I am benefitting myself not my boss." When it comes to the requirements of the job, aspiring micro-celebrities would also insist that the job requires them to update their knowledge all the time. "In my previous job, they didn't care about our knowledge and skills, they just wanted us to be there and stay there for a specific time, nothing more," Shole explained when she was comparing her work on Instagram with her previous job experiences. Thanks to Instagram, she now has a job that requires her to learn new things and update her knowledge day by day, which she seems to enjoy. She expressed this by saying that "well, at least, I am not a fossil now."

This tendency towards not becoming fossilized in what Iranians would call "organizational jobs" is also one of the most common themes in Instagram experts' pages. In my digital ethnography of *Elmira Nekou* page, I also observed a tendency towards encouraging followers to quit their job and become an entrepreneur. According to her, owning a business can bring women valuable things: one is to have an "infinite" income, second is being flexible in terms of time, and third is to be in contact with a lot of people (customers in particular). In the same post, she called regular jobs as a "comfort zone" that women need to come out of, if they are not happy with their life. But this has a cost for women: as Foucault elaborated before, a person who becomes an entrepreneur in a neoliberal context is "an entrepreneur of himself…being for himself his producer, being for himself his own capital" (Smith, 2015, p. 52).

21

The exact nature of this tendency towards having a "dynamic working condition" might differ from person to person, but it points to a labor market that is shifting to flexible jobs and blending boundaries of labor and leisure. No matter how rewarding this type of work might be, it has an important requirement that should not be overlooked: *it should be done from home*. As I will argue in the next section, this is particularly important for women who need to take care of their domestic responsibilities while they are making money. I elaborate more on the idea of home as a workplace, in order to show the ways women's digital labor becomes a source of both fiscal and non-fiscal value for the economy.

Home is the center of labor

Apart from leading women to work overtime without being compensated, starting a business on Instagram has a requirement for women I talked to: "staying at home". As I was mentioned by my interlocutors, home is their workplace, from there they can raise and at the same time take care of their domestic duties. Based on my ethnographic findings, I argue in this section that working from home isolates women at home, where they cannot have any type of protection by trade unions. I also elaborate more on the fiscal and non-fiscal value of a labor that is done from home for society.

As Jo Littler observes in the case of mothers who have online businesses, digital micro-businesses offer women a job that is undertaken in domestic settings, enabling them to link their nurturing role to economic agency (Orgad, 2019, p 184). I deliberately included this in my questions when I was interviewing aspiring micro-celebrities, "Why do you think women constitute the majority of those who start a business on Instagram?" Zahra responded,

> *Corona pandemic made a major impact on Iranian women starting a business on Instagram. When kindergarten and schools were closed, women needed to stay at home,*

work and take care of their children. They also needed to learn a certain skill or kind of art to be able to earn money. A lot of people who are in search of learning how to create handmade soaps from me want to have some money for themselves to help the family. Because of inflation and other economic problems, a lot of women now need to help their men in earning money.

For a lot of reasons, Instagram fits the economic condition of the country very well. When I asked Arshia about the possibilities that Instagram have offered to users in general, she mentioned, "Of course, this is not a good time for easily spending money on a business, it's time for small-scale businesses with small risks and Instagram is the best place for it." Paying attention to what has marked the context of my study in recent years including rising level of poverty, and an increasing informalization of labor, I can argue that Instagram is a great fit to the current economic condition in Iran: Instagram is free to use and tax-free. It is also very easy for people to change their career path or their business on Instagram because there are no costs of changing a business.

None of the aspiring micro-celebrities I talked to mentioned that their husbands or fathers do not let them work outside of their home. But they all agreed on the ease of working at home, which enables them to take care of their domestic chores. "Nothing is better than staying at home for women," Arshia told me at the end of our conversation. I felt this as well during my participant observation in a photography session at Nasim's house. One of the videos needed to be taken three or four times, because her six-year-old daughter was playing around us all the time and producing noises that Nasim did not want to include in the footage.

Similar to different types of jobs that are done at home, aspiring micro-celebrities' working at home leads to them becoming socially and economically coerced, devoid of any kind of protection by trade unions (Mies et al., 1988). This form of invisible labor also remains underpaid, although it has a value for the economy. Enabling women to create a balance

23

between their domestic chores and their need to raise an income can be, in itself, understood as a reproduction of the sexual division of labor as well that I will explain further in the third chapter. Women can start a business on Instagram, only if their husbands agree to be responsible for the family costs. The uncertainty and insecurity of digital labor can only be tolerated by women in Iran, who are not traditionally in charge of family costs. In her interview, Shole mentioned to me that "I could not start this business, if my husband was not capable of paying all the costs of life." It was also strange to hear from Arshia that her income during one year of incessantly working on her page on Instagram was less than one month income of an employee. It was, thus, a bit surprising for me to hear stories about the occasionality of working on Instagram. Before entering the field, I had this presupposition that everyone would call their labor a form of entrepreneurship and their page on Instagram as a business. During the fieldwork, I realized that women avoid using the term "business" or its Persian translation "Kasb-o-Kar" (meaning to work and earn). Instead, they would say "I have my own page on Instagram" or "I have a job on Instagram." I took this as a sign of informality and the denigration that has happened in recent years to the general idea of running a business on social media. In the same vein, there are other gender norms that are reaffirmed by women's aspirational labor on Instagram, such as the importance of taking care of domestic chores which is reinforced by women I talked to. For instance, a form of blogging on Instagram has emerged in recent years that suits women who want to add some fun to their business page on Instagram, without revealing their face. Being called *Faceless Blogging* (*Bloggeri-e-bedon-e-chehre* in Persian) this genre of blogging teach women to present everything on Instagram, except their face. This type of blogging reproduces gender norms by forcing women to remain unrecognized even if they are doing a business. *Faceless blogging* that helps women reconcile the family and society restriction to stay at home with their need to raise an income.

24
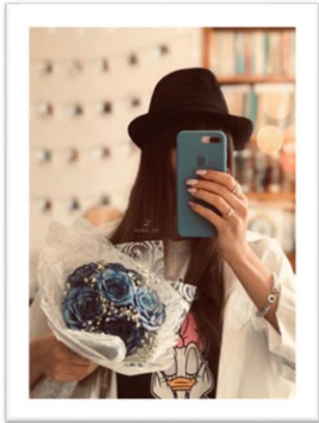
Overall, having a job on Instagram seems rewarding, mainly because it provides women with an opportunity to overcome socio-economic restrictions of the real world, including high rates of unemployment. However, the picture of women's labor that I described in this chapter shows that Iranian women choose to do a form of entrepreneurial labor which may remain unpaid or underpaid for a while. By producing affections, communications, and sociality on Instagram, women generate the information that is needed for this platform to run its business. As I showed above, women are choosing to do a precarious, uncertain, and insecure type of labor that isolates them at home, where they cannot have any type of protection by trade unions. As I discussed, most of these women I talked to work for a while on their Instagram page and invest in the quality of their online presence without even being paid.

But why Iranian women are convinced to do so? Researchers suggest that digital laborers start to do free labor to build a bridge from their existing experiences to their future aspirations (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). Women choose to do this labor because they see a chance of empowerment in online businesses. In a study of fashion bloggers, Brooke Duffy introduced the notion of "aspirational labor" for describing a gendered form of digital labor that encourages users to become creative producers in order to be compensated one day with social and economic capital (Duffy, 2015, p 4). In the next chapter, I extend the idea of aspirational labor to show the reasons behind an increase in the number of Iranian women who are willing to start a business on Instagram.

25

Chapter three: Complicating exploitation and empowerment on social media

In the previous chapter, I reviewed both exploitative and non-exploitative aspects of digital labor among Iranian women aspiring micro-celebrities. As I showed briefly, even those aspects that might not seem exploitative lead to women's labor remaining unpaid. In this chapter, I answer two main questions: first: why are women convinced to do precarious digital labor that they might not enjoy and second: what are these women's aspirations for starting a home-based business on Instagram?

In the first section of this chapter, I explain my informants' aspirations and hopes for working on Instagram. These aspirations and hopes help women reconcile the empowering and exploitative aspects of digital labor in a better way. I then continue by arguing why women's labor can be described as aspirational labor. As I indicate, aspirational labor conceals less wanted or unwanted aspects of digital labor. My main argument in this section is that women are doing precarious, entrepreneurial, underpaid labor in the hope of achieving their unfulfilled desires and expectations after the Islamic Revolution.

Precarities and uncertainties of digital labor are not the only hidden parts of it. Digital labor has also a social and in the end economic value that needs to be considered as well. To elaborate on these aspects of aspirational labor, I draw on the concept of reproductive labor and identify the subjectivities and social order that is reproduced and sustained by Iranian aspiring micro-celebrities.

Aspirational labor

The image of "working on Instagram" that I encountered during a blogging event in Tehran was not even close to what I have seen during three years of constantly following bloggers and influencers, for it remains hidden from audiences that working online has many undesired parts. It was on the blogging trip that I realized the extent to which aspiring micro-celebrities are forced to control their presence on Instagram to make sure that everything will go as they have planned or, it is better to say, aspired for. In the beginning of the trip, I just thought it might be cool if I also shared some *Instagram Story*[2] of this trip on my personal account as I always do. I posted a *Story* of Rahil, a 28-years old girl who is branding herself as a *SEO* expert on Instagram. I tagged her because I thought that might bring her some followers. A few hours later, I posted another *Story* from Erfan, a 24-years old boy who wanted to become a self-development coach for young people who are taking the entrance exam to national universities in Iran. Erfan was surprised how creative my *Story* was, mentioning this happily to Rahil and his other friend. At this moment, Rahil checked my Instagram *Story* immediately and told me with a sense of humor: "Couldn't you post a better *Story* of me?" She expected me to create a *Story* about her that is as creative as the one that I made for Erfan. Later on, during my intimate conversations with other participants in the blogging trip, I heard from Rahil that becoming successful on Instagram requires a few months or even years of what she called "*Khak Khori,*" a Persian expression that literally means "eating soil" but refers to "difficult unpaid labor,". People who do *Khak Khori* spend the first hard working years of a career, something like an unpaid internship to gain enough experience that is required for starting a career.

The labor I was introduced to was aspirational because it seems to be a transitional period that will help aspiring micro-celebrities to transfer from the current moment to a more desirable

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[2] Stories are photos and videos that disappear from Instagram profile, Feed and messages after 24 hours.

future. For many women who are active on Instagram, what they are doing right now is either underpaid or unpaid. The main thing that convinces them to do a precarious and multi-layered type of labor is a vague hope that in the future they will achieve whatever they want. For many of my interlocutors, their dream labor is waiting for them somewhere in the future. Shole told me in her interview:

> *I don't have that much income right now, but it's not that important for me. More important for me is my bigger business idea of having my own line of skincare products. So, I am branding myself as a trusted person and this might take a few years, but I would like to get to this point that my followers buy whatever I tell them.*

Working on Instagram for women is also aspirational because it invites women to invest in everything, themselves, their life, and their business. In this sense, aspirations might be described as "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011, Bulut, 2020, Gray & Suri, 2019). Hopes and aspirations are "cruel" because they can be achieved only at the cost of security and lead to uncertainty of labor in the digital economy. In the case of aspiring micro-celebrities, optimism becomes meaningful in aspiration of achieving something big in the future. In a study of fashion bloggers, Brooke Duffy also introduced the notion of "aspirational labor" for describing a gendered form of digital labor that encourages users to become creative producers to be compensated one day with social and economic capital (Duffy, 2015, p 4).

During my fieldwork in Tehran city in Iran, I recognized that there are two different types of aspirations that are convincing women to do precarious labor on Instagram: 1) aspirations and hopes that are related to the Instagram and 2) aspirations that go beyond this platform and can be fulfilled in the real world. The most repeated aspiration for many of aspiring micro-celebrities is to improve the performance of their page and the key for that is to be displayed on *Instagram explore*, where a lot of people who are not necessarily following them can see their post and become interested in following them or buying their product.

28
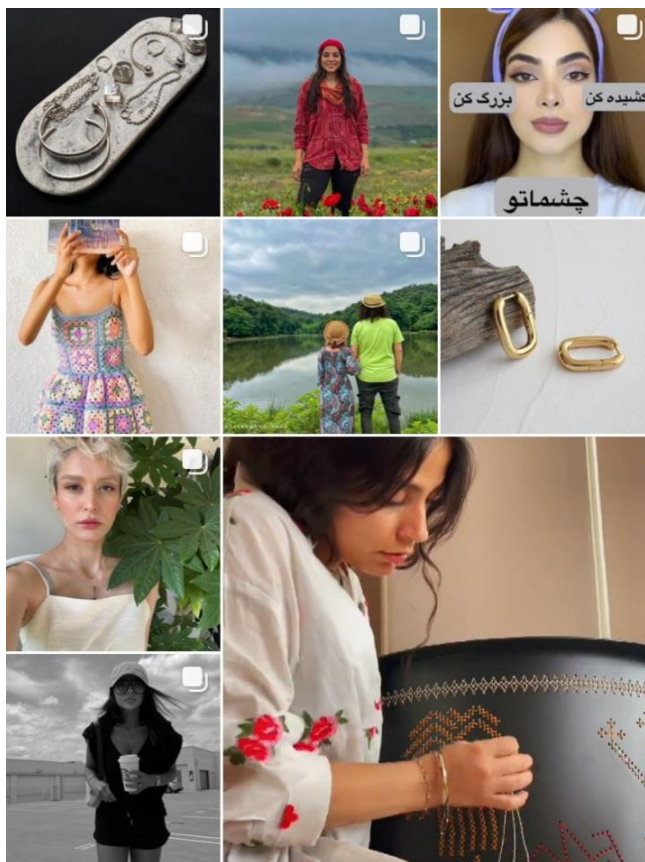
A screenshot of my Instagram Explore, a place that that displays the most viewed posts of accounts that I am not following but might be of an interest to me (based on the data that has been gathered of my previous activities on Instagram)

Many aspiring micro-celebrities whom I talked to had aspirations they could achieve out of Instagram: becoming an exporter of handmade soaps, having a factory for skincare products, or having a workshop for producing wooden handicrafts. None of these aspirations can be achieved if Instagram was not accessible to these women. Since women's economic and educational efforts were blocked by the state, they feel to be trapped in a condition that has been theorized by Shahram Khosravi as 'waithood,' mainly because they were not able to transform their education into a well-paid job (Khosravi, 2017). Many of the woman I talked

to during my fieldwork decided to do unpaid labor on Instagram in the hope of achieving their unfulfilled desires and expectations after the Islamic Revolution.

Aspirational labor becomes pleasurable not just because it promises something in the future. As discussed by the existing literature, mythologies of autonomy, economic independence, creativity, and doing what you love (Duffy, 2017; Liu, 2004; Neff et al., 2005; Ross, 2009; Tokumitsu 2014) are at work on social media to make it enjoyable and conceal the less desirable aspects. In a textual analysis of posts about blogging on Instagram, I found a series of mythologies related to working on Instagram that indicated the ideals of labor as flexible, fun, creative, and more importantly economically rewarding. These themes are:

- **Having an infinite source of income**

- **Being flexible and, more importantly, not working that hard**

- **Being able to work from home**

- **Being creative**

- **Being yourself, a combination of self-realization and success**

- **Networking and finding online friends**

- **Becoming economically independent**

These mythologies construct work on Instagram as a combination of pleasure, autonomy, and economic independence and help workers assume that they are doing something valuable. With the help of mythologies of good work (Arvidsson, 2019), aspirational labor becomes also depoliticized, ignorant of social and economic restrictions of the real world, which will be explained further in the next section. As I argue, precarities and uncertainties of digital labor are not the only hidden parts of women's labor on Instagram. Digital labor has also a social and, in the end, economic value that might be hidden. For instance, in their construction of aspirational labor as a desirable type of labor, aspiring micro-celebrities also "cast themselves as model subjects" and encourage others to follow their path. As a result, aspiring micro-

30

celebrities become an *army in waiting*. I will theorize this as the reproductive value of women's aspirational labor, produced by women who encourage other users to join the labor force and by doing so play a key role in sustaining the system.

Subjectivities reproduced on Instagram

From this perspective, mythologies of digital labor work at both individual and social level. At individual level, myths of doing a type of labor that is fun, autonomous, and emotionally rewarding help laborers continue their work with consent and tolerate the difficulties. In a larger level, myths become justificatory narratives of digital labor that encourages other users to join the labor force and play a key role in sustaining the system. In this section and the section to come I complicate the prevalent understanding of digital labor as a form of immaterial labor that can only be exploited by being transformed to data and sold to advertisers. As I show, women's aspirational labor has also a reproductive value for the economy in two senses: First, by promoting aspirations among other Instagram users and presenting an autonomous and empowered self, these women encourage others to join a labor force. Second, women's aspirational labor sustains a certain social order by reproducing the sexual division of labor that the economy needs for accumulation of value.

During my conversation with aspiring micro-celebrities in Tehran blogging trip, I came across the term "dream-selling" (*Roya Foroshi* in Persian) a few times. When my informants talked about Instagram experts in a critical way, they used this term to refer to the untruthfulness of promises made by them. In this chapter, I would like to add that aspiring micro-celebrities are not only the people who are buying these dreams, but they are also the ones reproducing them. They reproduce these dreams and myths by, on the one hand, talking about their aspirations as if they are easily accessible, and on the other hand, presenting an autonomous and empowered self on their Instagram page. One of the greatest examples of this

31

reproduction of aspirations can be seen in the pretentions loving of the job among aspiring micro-celebrities. No matter how precarious and uncertain the reality of aspirational labor can be, the image is a type of 'good work' that seems encouraging to other women. By presenting an autonomous and empowered self, these women encourage other women to join an online labor force, for which having a certain type of subjectivity is necessary. This was especially true to Mahi, who wrote on her Instagram profile "I try to live a doll-like life." In one of her posts, she also notified her followers that "whenever I make one of my dolls, I feel like it is a piece of my heart and soul." This was also the case with Sanam, one of the women that I found on *Elmira Nekou* page on Instagram. In a recorded voice that Sanam published about her work on Instagram, she explained how she treats her leather handmaid bags "as her children." She also introduced herself as Nora's mother (Nora is the name of her brand).

This laborer subjectivity that is produced and reproduced by different actors on Instagram is entrepreneurial in different senses. The type of subjectivity promoted by aspiring micro-celebrities is willing to take risks, invests in herself, loves what she is doing, and wants to change something. But more than anything, this subjectivity is a *multipotential* that invest in herself to survive the economic condition. This self-investment which is at the core of entrepreneurial labor has been described in the existing literature as "A company of one" (Lane, 2011) or "Me Incorporated" (Bröckling, 2016, p. 20). These aspiring micro-celebrities seem to be undefeatable by any kind of difficulty, including the economic crisis. When I asked Mahi about Iranian Parliament bill for banning social media platforms, she replied, "I will do something else if they ban Instagram, I won't wait for anyone to do anything for me anymore." These women seem empowered to an extent that they will not even see it as an obstacle.

The supposedly empowered entrepreneur that is promoted on Instagram plays a vital role in hiding all the structural restrictions that might be an obstacle for women and make them responsible for their condition. In fact, the mythological narratives that are at work now on

32

Instagram tell women that there are no excuses for them to postpone starting their own business.

In one of his inspirational posts, Hajimohamadi, one of the most known Instagram experts, has explained:

> *Assuming that you can't earn money because you do not have your own office is a restriction that exists only in your mind not in the outside world ... look at your home and find a corner you can start your business from there.*

With the help of ideologies and mythologies of good work (a job that rewards autonomy, independence, and financial prosperity), hopes and aspirations become also depoliticized, ignorant of social and economic restrictions. Without paying any attention to the limitations and restrictions, aspiring micro-celebrities are driven by the hope that they can also win the attention of thousands of followers and raise income, just by doing what they love. In this way, aspiring micro-celebrities are an active player in the economy, "disciplining other users into social norms and patterns of behavior that support the system" (Jarret, 2013). In addition to subjectivities, women's aspirational labor reproduces the social order in which women stay at home to raise and income. Drawing on Maria Mies's argument about the value of women's reproductive labor, I theorize the social value of aspiring micro-celebrities' labor on Instagram.

Reproduction of the sexual division of labor

In order to theorize the social value of women's home-based businesses in Iran, I will focus on feminist theorization of women's domestic labor and its value in reproduction of a certain social order. Domestic labor, in this sense, remains invisible and hence unimportant, but at the same time reproduces the sexual division of labor and increases women's economic dependence. Based on the existing literature, I will argue that like women's domestic labor,

women's unpaid or underpaid labor on Instagram produces "subjectivities and social relations" that guarantee the persistence of a certain social order in which women can do certain jobs.

Women's aspirational labor on Instagram sustains a certain social order by reproducing the sexual division of labor. Part of Maria Mies's book (1983) is focused on gendered dualities of labor. As she suggested, women's labor (particularly domestic labor) has been defined by capitalism as something that they have in their nature, in contrast to men's wage work, which is in interaction with nature (to exploit it and make surplus value). In this sense, women reproductive labor in capitalism is done based on their physiology as women and is optimal for producing use-value for the satisfaction of human needs. Based on Mies's argument, this perception of women's reproductive labor in capitalism is linked to a sexual division of labor, in which women do a 'natural activity,' but men do what she calls the 'human labor'. This division of labor leads to a devaluation of women's reproductive labor. As indicated by Mies, this denigrated labor is at the same time necessary for sustaining men's power to contribute to the process of production, like many other forms of reproductive and non-wage labor that are necessary for sustaining capitalism.

The separation of domestic from productive labor is the result of an economic system that privileges monetized exchange to other types of value making, like nonmonetized production (Alessandrini 2012; Dalla Costa and James 1972; Federici 2004; Fortunati 1995). As Federici has argued, the process of separating production from reproduction in capitalism differentiated work along gender lines. As a result, the economic importance of women's ability to reproduce the well-being, health and more importantly life of people (better to say working subjects) and its function in the accumulation of capital becomes invisible, being mystified as a natural vocation, and labeled "women's labor". Based on this argument, gendered division of labor leads to marginalization of women and increases their economic dependence. If we consider aspiring micro-celebrities' activities on Instagram as a form of non-wage labor, there is a

possibility of characterizing them as invisible labor. As discussed by Maria Mies, capitalism is always in search of strategies for removing all types of non-wage work from public perception (1986, p 32). The big difference between domestic labor and women's aspirational labor on Instagram is that the second is done in the hope of a reward. Although these women have chances to raise income after one or three years, there are always other women joining the aspirational labor force. For this reason, aspirational labor may remain a category of invisible, unpaid, and undervalued labor.

The sexual division of labor that then results in the separation of reproduction from production and a denigration of women's domestic work can also be observed in the context of Iran's society as well. As Valentine Moghadam suggests, the social and economic position of Iranian women is influenced by the world-system (capitalism), by the mode of production, by the state and their class. In her work about Iranian women workers in modern age (2000), she argues that the traditional sexual division of labor in Iran is not confined to Islam, it is also a result of Iranian state being influenced by the ideology of domesticity with the development of capitalism in western countries (Moghadam, 2000, p 329). In such context, women's labor at home is devalued and denigrated not just because of religious rules, but also because of cross-cultural characteristic of gender relation under capitalism.

This helps me illustrate that women's labor on Instagram not only provides a fiscal value for the economy, but also produces and reproduces social and cultural orientations that are inasmuch significant. As Paul Dourish and Christine Satchell (2011) have suggested in their study of social networks, besides their role in production of fiscal value, the new digital platforms are a space of social interactions in which normativity and morality are also produced and reproduced.

As I showed in the two previous sections, even the desired aspects of working on Instagram seem more like a trap for women. Giuliana Commisso (2006) suggests, capitalism invests not

only in the economic and cultural dimension of society, but also tends to exploit every element of social life or what Marx called "living labor". As a result, women's inclination towards creativity, their enjoyment of flexibility as a form of having control of their job, and their preference of raising income from home leads to their labor remaining unvalued and more prone to exploitation.

The non-fiscal value of reproduction of a social order is in sustaining the sexual division of labor. Based on Maria Mies's explanation of domestic labor as an undervalued but productive labor, I argue that digital capitalism has reframed labor on social media in a certain category that suits women better than men. In this way, certain types of jobs (flexible, entrepreneurial, and emotional) are emerged on social media that fit women's assumed expertise in caring and communicative abilities. Based on what has been told, feminist scholars like Kylie Jarret (2013) theorize digital labor as a form of reproductive labor and by doing so they argue that labor on social media is exploited in a complex way. I will finish my thesis by clarifying more on this issue.

Aspirational labor as exploited labor and its feminist critique

The main problem with the concept of aspirational labor is its reductionist view towards the value of communicative and affective exchange on social media. In her criticism of digital labor on social media, Kylie Jarret argues that reducing users' activities on social media to content and data is the result of thinkers' strong belief in the division of affect and economics, which results in negation of the value of social relations that can be reproduced by this type of labor (Jarett, 2013, p 17). Following this critique, I used the framework of social reproduction to problematize our understanding of digital labor. My aim in my thesis was to pinpoint the invisible and devalued aspects of this form of labor. As I explained in the previous section,

aspiring micro-celebrities promote certain types of aspirations and hopes related to a certain culture of labor, which encourages other women to join a labor force in digital capitalism. In addition, they sustain a certain social order by reaffirming gender norms and reproducing a sexual division of labor that is necessary in the economy.

Similar to reproductive labor, women's aspirational labor becomes denigrated and devalued. The insecurities and precarities of labor on Instagram render it as a form of cheap labor, exploited, devalued and disrespected (Jarrett, 2022). In terms of its invisibility, this type of labor resembles women's domestic labor: it is unpaid or underpaid, it has an uncertain future, and brings with it insecurities and anxieties. Unpaid job of Iranian women micro-celebrities seems to be out of the financial realms of society, mainly because it is done from home. From this point of view,

If we consider aspiring micro-celebrities' activities on Instagram as a form of non-wage labor, there is a possibility of characterizing these aspirational activities as invisible and devalued type of labor, similar to women's reproductive labor. As discussed by Maria Mies, (1983) capitalism is always in search of strategies for removing all types of non-wage work from public perception (1983, p 32). The fact that women's domestic work is unpaid, made feminist scholars to argue that this type of labor remains in the margins of capitalism system to become a source of value.

From one point of view, Iranian women's small-scale businesses on Instagram might be a continuation of what Bahramitash and Esfahani (2011) has identified among Iranian working-class women in Tehran in 2016. In their study about gender and entrepreneurship in Iran they found that many Iranian marginalized women have started a micro business in the informal sector. Focusing on the idea of "social entrepreneur" they realized that the only way for Iranian women to achieve economic livelihood is to become micro-entrepreneur with the support of social networks. From this perspective, a large population of Iranian aspiring micro-celebrities

can be regarded as micro-entrepreneurs who start a home-based business in order to achieve some degree of economic empowerment and access to resources on Instagram. In this sense, Instagram can be seen as an informal sector that engages laborers who are willing to do unpaid or underpaid jobs.

Conclusion

Considering all the analysis in my thesis, one question needs to be clarified more. Is the labor that is done by Iranian women aspiring micro-celebrities on Instagram exploited or not? The answer is not straightforward. The way feminists theorized users' digital labor as a form of reproductive labor has significantly changed our understanding of exploitation on social media. Although there is a huge amount of economic value in women's labor on Instagram, there are still some parts of this labor that might seem empowering. Small-scale businesses on Instagram, for instance, offer women a job opportunity that is undertaken in domestic settings, enabling them to link their nurturing role to their economic agency. However, as I argued in chapter two, working from home isolates women at home, where the value of their labor is denigrated, and they cannot have any type of protection by trade unions.

My thesis was also shaped around this idea that Iranian women's aspirational labor not only has an economic value in both international and local scale, but it also has a hidden non-economic value. With the help of feminist approaches to digital labor, I tried in my thesis to show that women's aspirational labor on Instagram produces and reproduces social and cultural orientations that are as significant as their economic value. As my findings indicate, Iranian women's aspirational labor plays a key role in reproducing subjectivities, gender norms, and social relations that sustain the existing social order. With their aspirational labor, Iranian women produce subjectivities that support and sustain the capitalist system on a global level and local economy at a local level. Women's aspirational labor on Instagram also sustains a certain social order by reproducing the sexual division of labor and pushing women back to home. In this way, I challenged the existing understanding of social media as a great tool for women to reintroducing a new identity. The precarious and entrepreneurial labor that I witnessed in the field was rather a reproducer of existing social relations that are exploitative of women.

39

In my thesis I focused on two problems with framing users' activities on social media as immaterial labor. Firstly, this approach is more focused on users' freely given labor, not users who work in the hope of being paid by social media; secondly, it is ignorant of the dichotomies of paid/unpaid, labor/leisure, empowerment/exploitation that might be experienced by users who aspire to become professionals on social media. This opens a door for studying various forms of digital labor without reducing their value to that data and being able to see the social and cultural value of this labor as well.

My thesis also opens a way for analyzing the way digital labor is sold in different contexts with the help of different narratives that seem appealing to workers, no matter how precarious and uncertain it is. In other words, to become an ideal type of labor, digital labor needs a justificatory regime that makes its material conditions sensible (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Jarrett 2022). In my work on Iranian women's aspirational labor on Instagram, I tried to identify some of the narratives and myths that not only conceal the precarious and exploitative nature of digital labor but also cover the structural inequalities embedded in the economic system. Along with autonomy and empowerment, myths such as having income while staying at home and being flexible enough to take care of the domestic responsibilities seems to be helpful in concealing the less desirable aspects of digital labor for Iranian aspiring micro-celebrities. In this sense my thesis contributes to studies of digital labor by bringing Iranian women's experiences to the field. With appropriating women's assumed expertise in caring and communicative abilities, the economy is benefitting from women's small-scale businesses on Instagram a lot.

For women as well, Instagram is the only place they can raise money on. Assuming that many aspiring micro-celebrities in Iran have been unsuccessful in finding decent jobs, I argue that their aspirational labor is a response to increasing economic inequality in the labor market, and the same time an attempt to become entrepreneurs in a neoliberal context. Due to the

40

economic anxieties of this time, my informants were convinced to start a business on Instagram even if this is very small and simple. For many of my interlocutors, selling something on Instagram was better than just losing the time. From this point of view, Iranian women's small-scale businesses on Instagram are another form of micro-businesses that Bahramitash and Esfahani (2011) observed among Iranian working-class women in Tehran in 2016. To bring livelihood to the life of their family, Iranian marginalized women start micro businesses in the informal sector. As I argued, Instagram plays the role of a new informal sector in Iran, offering a precarious and insecure job condition to aspiring micro-celebrities.

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