

Chapter 1

Introduction

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This volume is unique in being the first edited book on gender issues in transnational business corporations concerning knowledge work. The globalization of technical work, and collaborations between business partners in the global IT industry, has so far been researched mainly by organizational theorists, with their background in business studies, finance, communication, or sociology, and gender has seldom been taken into account in these studies. There is thus still a void when it comes to studies of gender relations in the globalization of qualified technical work and of how gender relations are changed and reproduced in the context of professional interaction, virtual or face-to-face, between women and men from the East and West, respectively.

The book shows how fruitful a gendered take on these issues is, both for a deepened understanding of organizational matters concerning management and employee relationships and for a widened understanding of gender issues. This area of research contributes to organizational research on gender in male-dominated, technical work environments, by showing how gender regimes in such environments are affected by, and affect, the globalization of technical work. It also contributes to research on gender and globalization in an area that is under-researched: highly educated women in professions with relatively high status. And even if most studies of workplaces in global IT enterprises are about men, as men normally are the majority, there is still a lack of research on men as men in the IT industry. The focus on gender in transnational knowledge work also benefits research on gender and technology as it contributes with a deepened understanding of the co-construction of gender and IT in different societal contexts.

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The book hence provides insights relevant for several different academic fields of research and contributes to some of the central debates in business, economics, geography, sociology, masculinity studies, and feminist theory. While primarily a research volume, we hope that the book will also be useful for people who actually develop and manage transnational business relations and strive to do so in a sustainable way. The book offers relevant material for policy makers and could provide inspiration for setting up policies and strategies to address inequalities and eliminate discrimination against women in this kind of organizational settings.

Though as simple and straightforward as the title of the book – *Gender in Transnational Knowledge Work* – may appear, it needs to be unwrapped as the book’s six chapters disclose that the three key concepts “gender,” “transnational,” and “knowledge work” are highly multidimensional. Although these concepts are what bring the chapters together, the authors have nonetheless been given the freedom to fill them with specific meaning. Instead of seeing this disparity as a problematic incongruence, we see it as a strength that the book can offer many angles on these issues. The reader will find the explicit definitions of these three key concepts in respective chapters. Here we will merely draw attention to what this lack of congruence adds to the book by looking a little closer at the multifaceted character of each of these three key concepts.

1.1 Situating the Transnational in Knowledge Work

The chapters introduce gender perspectives to the research area of transnational business relations in an area we call “knowledge work,” referring to work on such a high-qualification level that it usually requires a higher education background. The prime example of this kind of high-intensity knowledge work would be software development. Although several of the chapters in the book focus on the software industry (understood as a subset of the IT or ICT industry) they also include call center work, shared services centers, information technology-enabled service-business process outsourcing (ITES-BPO), and large multinational corporations involved in knowledge work more generally (though not as a prime business). We have even stretched the definition of knowledge work to include a chapter focusing on the higher education setting – computer science studies in India – because we consider this setting highly relevant for understanding gender in transnational knowledge work. The inclusion of this specific chapter on computer science in India is also motivated by the definition of “transnational” as a geographical area. The book primarily concentrates on business collaborations and relationships involving an Asian partner. Several of the chapters concern offshoring and the relocation of knowledge work from Western nations to lower cost locations elsewhere in the global economy, in particular in South Asia. The so-called provider countries are in this book most often referred to as the Global South, which is understandable, as the countries where particular organizations have been studied by the authors are India and Pakistan.

The various authors use somewhat different terminologies to describe the “other side” of the transnational business relationships. In several of the chapters, it becomes clear that the term “West” is most often used to refer to the USA but also to the Nordic countries or to North America and Europe more generally. However, “Global North” is also used to refer to these countries. Reflecting over the normative position of the USA, both in transnational business relations themselves and in research about them, is highly relevant for both researchers and practitioners in this field. Two of the chapters, the one by Jeff Hearn et al. and, in particular, the one by Helen Peterson, Minna Salminen-Karlsson, and Sunrita Dhar-Bhattacharjee, touch upon the issue of the Nordic countries being different from the USA as a context for transnational business collaborations, due to different organizational cultures and different gender relations in society.

The transnational aspect, however, refers to more than solely this geographical dimension. The transnational dimension denotes a wide variety of interactional and mobility patterns and relationships between people who communicate with people abroad in their day-to-day work practices, who travel extensively as part of their work, or who manage business relations across national borders. Empirically, this variety is displayed in the different chapters. They focus in a diversity of ways on the interplay between local and global in gendered divisions of work and careers, as well as in the private lives of the knowledge workers. They also highlight how important it is to understand who is excluded from transnational business relations as these relations produce new segregating patterns in workplaces and a new global division of labor.

1.2 Situating Gender in Transnational Knowledge Work

The chapters in the book cover a range of themes highly relevant for transnational knowledge work and investigate them from a gender perspective: culture, communication, identity work, structures, organizational change, globalization, mobility, resistance, leadership and management, international business, work-life balance, education and labor market, policies, and value systems. The chapters also demonstrate the multidisciplinary within gender research itself and how different perspectives on gender can be combined and developed. The chapters draw on the social constructionist approach of “doing gender,” feminist organization theory, gendered discourse analysis, techno-feminism, and critical studies on men and masculinities.

It is important that a book on gender issues in transnational knowledge work not only highlights women. Men do have gender, and many of the chapters highlight challenges that men face in this transnational business setting. A merit of the book is that it illuminates men’s conditions both in the West and in the South. A comparison of the chapters by Hearn et al., Yasmin Zaidi and Winifred Poster, and Roli Varma reveals that in spite of the vast differences in national gender equality ideologies and policies, the practice of the man being the breadwinner with a supportive

wife, who takes care of the family, is transnational, as it is similar among both Finnish male managers and Pakistani and Indian male employees.

Most employees in knowledge work are middle-class, highly educated people and, thus, to a certain extent share a common background. The book highlights how the lives of these women and men are, however, influenced in different ways by transnational business relations. Their lives and working lives are “transnational” in different ways and to different extents. They can also be described from different perspectives: Debra Howcroft and Helen Richardson’s chapter with an overview of the unequal benefits of the globalization of service work is nuanced by the case studies in several other chapters. The conditions in the West and South as such are different, and conditions for women and men in these settings are also different. For example, managers who appear in the chapters of this book are men, and women seem to be less transnational due to gender-segregated patterns. However, there are also differences among women and among men – not all men are transnational to the same extent.

In sum, the book thus contributes to the development of understandings of the intersection of several different empirical and theoretical fields. Hopefully, the reader will find the chapters valuable to gain increased awareness and understanding of the complexities of these issues. Next, we want to draw attention to how the book contributes to the specific field of study, that is, gender in organizations.

1.3 Transnational Transgressions of “Gender in Organizations”

Studies on gender relations in transnational companies in non-Western settings benefit organizational research and organizational practices in at least three major ways. First, the authors of this volume increase our understanding of gender relations in knowledge workplaces outside the Western sphere as such. There is a vast amount of research on gender relations in Western companies, but gender relations are always situated, and Western findings do not automatically apply in other cultural contexts. While the chapters in this volume give insights in how gender is constructed in some non-Western settings, much research remains to be done in this developing research area.

The chapters in this volume also draw attention to the fact that studying gender and developing specific gender equality plans and policies is in itself a distinctly Western approach. Singling out gender and gender issues from other diversity issues in a work environment in this manner is a culturally and socially situated practice. In a multicultural society, such as, for example, India, the prominence that gender issues have received in the West during the last decades does not seem reasonable. In the West, gender equality as a particularly important issue has its history, starting with the second-wave feminism in the 1970s. In a country like India, there are and have been a number of movements pertaining to gender, and also nationality,

religion, region, language, and caste, and the singling out of gender as a particular problem to be dealt with, by particular policies, is to a certain extent an import by Western companies. In particular, Smitha Radhakrishnan's chapter addresses this issue, but it is also touched upon by Zaidi and Poster.

Second, studying gender relations in knowledge companies in non-Western cultural contexts can hopefully open the eyes of Western researchers for the cultural situatedness of many concepts and general assumptions which are often easily reproduced even in research. This can enhance the interpretative sensitivity and openness for alternative perspectives in gender studies in organizations in general and also in studies in the West. The chapters in this volume, for example, present alternative definitions and understandings of concepts and ideas such as "career," "work-life balance," and "family-friendly policies." Even the meaning of "gender equality" becomes destabilized when transferred to a context outside of the Western organizational setting.

Another example of what happens when the perspective is shifted from a Western context is how apparent it becomes that the stereotypes about technology coded as masculine are situated, specific for the European and North American societies. Several of the chapters highlight the so-called women-friendly aspects of IT that make careers within this field attractive to women in the South. The book, thus, shows that a focus on gender in transnational companies can contribute to the development of new perspectives on gender in relation to technology.

Several of the chapters use theoretical concepts and analytical approaches that have been developed in the West and show how they can benefit from being applied in a new context, although not without cautiousness and reflexivity. This deepens the understanding of the underlying complexities of gendered constructions of relations, identities, and organizations. An example is the theoretical framework developed by Joan Acker that is widely used in studies of gender in organizations and is referred to in this volume in the chapters by Peterson, Salminen-Karlsson, and Dhar-Bhattacharjee and by Radhakrishnan. Both chapters find that this framework, when used for analyzing gender relations in organizations in the South, reveals that it has originated from studies in Western organizations. Even when being a usable tool, it does not catch important aspects of organizations in the South, as it, as Radhakrishnan points out, restricts itself to the organizational reality without accounting for the vastly different experiences, expectations, and societal and cultural conditions that employees in different cultures carry with them in their organizational lives.

Third, and as a combination of the first two, more situated knowledge about gender relations in transnational companies can have implications for gender equality practices. A number of transnational companies, with their headquarters in the West, have general gender equality policies, which are to be enforced in all offices, including those in the Global South. While equality between human beings can be seen as a global value, gender equality policies, which are based on Western ideas of problems and their solutions, without knowledge of the cultural context where they are to be enforced, can be interpreted as cultural imperialism. Understanding the local conditions on their own terms is necessary for improving them. The book

highlights, for example, how career-oriented women in the South encounter different obstacles than their colleagues in Europe and the USA do. Several of the chapters in this volume allow for the alternative voice to be heard – providing a different definition of the problems with gender inequalities, as well as of solutions for achieving gender equality, which help us expand our vision.

Not only does the research in this book contribute with interesting perspectives on women's and men's conditions in different national and cultural contexts, but research on gender in transnational business relations can also challenge concepts, categories, and practices that are often taken for granted as common sense by managers in transnational companies and reproduced even in research.

1.4 Structure

The book consists of six substantive chapters, and although the methodological approaches and the theoretical starting points differ greatly between them, they complement rather than contradict each other and share several intersections when it comes to empirical focus and results. The aim and results of each chapter are outlined more in detail below.

Debra Howcroft and Helen Richardson's chapter "A Gendered Analysis of IT-Enabled Service Work in the Global Economy" offers a comprehensive introduction to the field of gender and transnational business relations. It attempts to achieve an understanding of the intersections of gender, formal and informal labor market, service work, ICTs, and globalization. The chapter is an updated version of an article previously published in the journal *New Technology, Work and Employment* over 8 years ago. However, the updates and the new issues raised for discussion make this a highly relevant article. Drawing on a large secondary material consisting of previous studies, statistics, and reports, it focuses on women's working lives in the global economy. More specifically, it discusses in detail some gendered issues specific for information technology-enabled service-business process outsourcing (ITES-BPO), the IT sector generally, shared service centers, and call centers. It sets these discussions within a framework of multiple theories about globalization, the knowledge economy, and the network societies and the supposed consequences for women and for gendered relations at work, in organizations, and in the labor market. This chapter introduces several different themes that the subsequent chapters investigate further and develop. It ends with an extensive list of suggested issues for further research with which we can only agree. There is still a need for further research on the development of definitions and statistical databases, the formal and informal economy within specific global commodity chains, detailed historical and occupational studies, international regulation of labor, and an intersectional approach to these issues.

Roli Varma's chapter "Paradox of Empowerment and Marginalization: Women in Computer Science in India" contributes with knowledge on the complex and paradoxical gendered construction of computer technology itself, the technology

with which the employees described in the book actually work. Varma starts from their education. Studying computer science is an attractive educational route for Indian women for reasons depending on the context of the Indian society. Although the women she interviewed did describe that it is much more difficult to pursue computer science as a woman in India than it is for a man, mainly due to social pressures and biases, these women also described the empowering and liberating force associated with this field of study. These results are particularly interesting due to the fact that they challenge the Western understanding of computer science as a masculine discipline.

Varma's chapter reveals that much of gender research on the masculinity of computer science education and profession has a Western point of departure. Women are excluded from IT jobs in India also, but due to societal contextual aspects, rather than due to the social construction of technology as a masculine field or due to the social construction of technological competence. Her chapter highlights the social and psychological benefits of IT for Indian women, such as independence, self-esteem, and social status. Although focusing on women's experiences, the chapter also reveals the pressure on men to conform to cultural expectations in different cultural contexts and that men are being pushed into IT for high status without being presented with a choice and without considering whether they are interested in such a career or not.

Helen Peterson, Minna Salminen-Karlsson, and Sunrita Dhar-Bhattacharjee's chapter "A Perfect Match? Cultural Clashes and Gendered Work Ideals in Transnational IT Companies" describes more closely the conditions in the working life of Indian women in IT, by focusing on the clashes between different gendered work ideals in the Swedish and the Indian business context and how these clashes influence collaborations on management level. The analysis highlights how managers and employees in the two countries manage cooperation across not only national boundaries but also across organizational cultures where the construction of the ideal worker looks very different. While the Swedish work ideal reflects masculine constructions based mainly on an entrepreneurial attitude, the Indian work ideal is associated with authoritarianism and paternalism, and although both work ideals to a certain extent exclude women as ideal workers, they also create hierarchies between men and exclude certain enactments of masculinity. The analysis here shows how women find it difficult to live up to the gendered work ideal due to family obligations. However, in what might seem to be paradoxical, women are also seen as ideal workers due to these family obligations, as this makes them less prone to leave the company as part of a career strategy to improve salaries, a strategy used by men and creating problems for the companies that have to constantly recruit new employees. Indian men are described as pressured, by family and by the idea of the male breadwinner that still remains strong, to make a career by constantly changing workplaces, thereby raising their wages.

This chapter reports from a research project that has established Swedish research on offshoring as a new field of study and broadened the field as the results differ from previous results from studies of American and British offshoring experiences. In relation to the international body of work in the field of offshoring, the chapter

shows that Swedish companies encounter different problems than American and British ones, mainly due to a larger distance between the organizational cultures. But this also means that there is potential to find different and new solutions to problems.

Smitha Radhakrishnan's chapter "Culturalism as Resistance: Exploring the Contradictions of Gender Policies in Indian Multinationals" also touches on the issue of computer engineering being viewed as an appropriate job for women – due to the air-conditioned and clean work environment. Indian women's working life in IT companies is further elaborated, for example, by showing how the enactment of professional femininity in the IT business in India is closely linked to a specific Indian femininity that is appealing in both India and the West. The Indian context also provides an interesting background to reconsider familiar sociological key concepts and feminist debates. One such example is the much researched, so-called work-life balance.

But above all, the chapter is an important contribution to studies on gender relations at work. It focuses on the implementation of gender equality policies, aiming at improving the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women, in multinational organizations. Radhakrishnan has interviewed human resource directors and employees in India's technology industry about the implementation of gender policies. Her chapter illustrates the importance of also including an analysis of the national and cultural context in order to fully understand how organizational corporate policies such as these are developed, implemented, and resisted. Similar arguments are transferable to studies in all contexts, not only Indian multinational corporations. However, as the author remarks, this is an aspect that is rarely taken into consideration – as many of the existing studies on gender equality in organizations and policies based on them use a perspective that limits itself to the boundaries of a single organization.

Jeff Hearn has together with *Marjut Jyrkinen, Mira Karjalainen, Charlotta Niemistö, and Rebecca Piekkari* authored the chapter "Top Men in Transnational Companies: The Construction of Men, Masculinities, and Work-Family Intersections within 'Gender-Neutral' Contexts." This is the first of the two chapters focusing on masculinity, showing masculinity constructions in the West among managers in transnational companies, how top men involved in knowledge work construct and display masculinity. Drawing on two large Finnish studies of management and gender equality, the chapter analyzes managerial masculinity in relation to family and work-life balance issues. The relevance of a critical masculinity perspective is apparent, as the majority of the top managers in these companies are men. Although the chapter analyzes the construction of masculinity in a transnational business context, one of the chapter's major contributions is the way it situates the analysis within a national as well as a transnational business context, showing how important the national context is for the work that is undertaken, as well as for the identities of the managers. The findings illustrate how the Finnish local context is permeated by a widespread ideology of gender neutrality, which helps to conceal gendered power relations in organizations, as well as in the private, family context. In spite of the Finnish societal gender equality rhetoric and policies, the managerial masculinity in

these Finnish transnational companies is built on a narrow traditional breadwinner model, assuming a heterosexual man with a supporting wife and closing out women as top managers.

Yasmin Zaidi and Winifred Poster are the authors of this book's last chapter: "Shifting Masculinities in the South Asian Outsourcing Industry: Hyper, Techno or Fusion?" This chapter offers a different yet complementing perspective, on the constructions of masculinity in transnational business relations: that among employees of transnational knowledge companies in the South. Just like the chapters authored by Hearn et al., Radhakrishnan, and Peterson, Salminen-Karlsson, and Bhattacharjee, it draws on an extensive data collection during several years and in several organizations. In this chapter, we are also introduced to two different national contexts, as the case studies were conducted in both India and Pakistan. The analysis builds on interviews with both software engineers and developers and international call center workers. It provides an intriguing outlook on the interplay between the global and the local, when masculinities are constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated in both professional and personal relations and influenced by a highly transnational context. The authors ask whether emerging South Asian masculinities are transgressive or regressive of gender relations or perhaps both. They found that some of the different, often contradictory, masculinities that emerge are the results of a fusion of old and new as the traditional Indian and Pakistani masculinities encounter the expectations, norms, and gender relations in the transnational workplace. This final chapter also highlights how these transnational business relations and the construction of masculinities and femininities are interlinked with postcolonial, political relations and the "war on terrorism" by relating these issues to the need of disguising their ethnical belonging, which infuses the consciousness of the call center workers.