The Construction of Gender And Ethnicity in the Globalizing Workplace

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Abstract

This article presents Korean American women workers’ experiences of globalization in the workplace. By examining the gendered work practices in Korean transnational corporations (TNCs) in the United States and the women’s responses to them, it highlights the specific features of the workplace that inform practice and identity in particular ways. Because the globalizing workplace includes a division of labor that is defined by ethnicity and gender, the women workers in Korean TNCs cognitively construct gendered practices through ethnicity. Moreover, they use their own ethnicity to explain their responses to the gendered practices. This ethnic construction of behaviors justifies discriminatory organizational practices and perpetuates gender stratification in the workplace. Because work and identity are central feature of modern life, this study enhances our understanding of the globalization process and how it intersects with the specific features of the workplace to configure many dimensions of identity.
Introduction

While gender has only received scant attention in the studies of globalization, feminist scholars have provided insights on the significant role of women in the global economy, specifying their labor participation in various types of transnational work institutions (Bose and Acosta-Belén 1995; Enloe 1989; Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Leacock and Safa 1986; Mitter 1986; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987). Moving away from the previous conceptions of global male domination, recent feminist scholars have developed new theories that highlight the continual interaction of domination and resistance (Grewel and Caplan 1994; Pieterse 1994). They underscore that the "gendering" of the global economy involves not simply the inclusion of women as workers in transnational corporations (TNCs) and global export markets, but rather, those organizations' fostering of gendered principles through their ideologies, practices, and policies (Lim 1985; Poster 1998; Ward 1990).

Subsequently, the new studies emphasize power structures that intersect with gender, particularly the dynamics of race, class, sexuality and regions (Fernandez-Kelly and Wolf 2001; Poster, forthcoming). While these studies illuminate the complexities of gender in experiencing globalization, by viewing gender as a category and, thus, constructed a priori the workplace, they fail to consider the workplace and its particular features as a powerful agent to constructing ideologies, practices, and identity around gender. Furthermore, while some feminist scholars have argued that gender, along with other axes of inequality, is not simply an individual characteristic but accomplished in interactions with others (West and Fenkemarker 1995), globalization scholars have not considered this perspective in understanding the gendering process of globalization.

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap in the literature, by examining the gendered work practices of Korean TNCs in the United States and Korean American women workers' responses to them. Because the globalizing workplace, such as the TNC, includes the juxtaposition of different ethnic groups, whose awareness of their own identity is conditioned by their structural positions in the context of the workplace and the labor market, Korean TNCs present not just a cultural setting but a specific work setting that (in)forms identity and practice in a particular way. Based on observation and interview analysis of Korean TNCs in the United States, this paper asks the following questions: How is the TNC workplace gendered? What are the mechanisms by which gender is constructed and reproduced in the context of the workplace? How do Korean American women understand their experiences of the gendered practices in Korean TNCs?

By addressing these issues, this paper takes a step further from considering TNCs as exporting gender ideologies (Poster 1998); it highlights the importance of the particular features of the TNC workplace that facilitate and perpetuate gender stratification in the workplace. Furthermore, by analyzing the ways in which people cognitively construct the everyday work practices to rationalize their behaviors as well as those of others, this paper illuminates the micro processes through which people actively participate in not only shaping the globalization process but also engendering and perpetuating structures of inequality. It extends the current body of literature on globalization by providing empirical findings and illustrative points that highlight the specific mechanisms and conditions under which the globalization process manifests the conflicting tendencies between homogenization, the impulse to unify, and heterogenization, the desire to remain separate (Appadurai 2000; Lechner and Boli 2000).
Gender and the Global Economy

The globalization scholars suggest that one major way in which people experience globalization "on the ground" is through the conflicting tendencies between homogenization and heterogenization (Appadurai 2000; Lechner and Boli 2000). They argue that experiencing globalization is not a one-way process, in the sense that large structural change is bound to overwhelm individuals, but rather people participate and respond in different ways (Brown 2000; Castells 2000; Lechner and Boli 2000). While this view is compelling and has important implications for orders of inequality as it underscores the role of agency and the "bottom-up" (rather than the "top-down") process in making change, it has remained highly abstract and without sufficient empirical evidence. In addition, most studies in globalization have been macro in their analysis, not to mention their scant attention to the power structures (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and region) that are produced and perpetuated through "micro" processes in various transnational settings, such as the workplace.

Feminist scholars, on the other hand, have been focusing on the relationship between gender and the global economy since the late 1970s, not only to confirm the presence of gender but also to demonstrate the complexities of gender and its intersection with different axes of inequality in the workplace (Poster, forthcoming). As researchers of globalization and global economy have recognized TNCs as key in facilitating economic and cultural activities throughout the world (Dicken 1998; Kozul-Wright and Rowthorn 1998; Held and McGrew 2000), feminist scholars highlight the relationship between gender and TNCs. They indicate that the gendering of the global economy involves not simply the inclusion of women as workers in TNCs, but rather, the TNCs' fostering of gendered principles through their ideologies, practices, and policies (Lim 1985; Poster 1998; Ong 1987; Ward 1990). At the same time, there are findings that indicate that the TNC workplace is shaped by multiple factors of the local context, such as labor shortages, state policies, and preexisting relations of male domination (Ward and Pyle 2000). Moreover, some cross-national studies have shown that local cultural gender ideologies impact women's rates of labor force participation (Clark, Ramsbey and Adler 1991), and levels of occupational sex segregation (Charles 1992). In a study of two TNCs in different regions of Asia, owned by the same parent company, Lee (1995) demonstrated how they developed different styles of gender relations, revealing the locally-specific labor markets and ideologies. Similarly, in a study of an American TNC in India, Poster (1998) found that as TNCs move to different local, national, and regional contexts, gender relations also transform because the cultural and ethnic meanings of gender in those contexts vary. By highlighting the gendering process of globalization in TNCs and the ways in which it varies by cultural contexts, these studies have advanced our understanding of the ways in which people actively participate to shape the consequences that are multiple and conflictive during the globalization process. Furthermore, in so doing, this line of research has begun to incorporate an analysis of gender with other categorizations such as race, ethnicity and class (Arrigo 1985; Yelvington 1993).

Notwithstanding their research endeavors, these scholars have not sufficiently examined how such processes affect people in the work they do and how they make sense of their own experience as a result. More importantly, they fail to recognize the transnational workplace itself as an impetus to identity construction, which creates and recreates identities through work relations and practices.
Furthermore, while some recent studies look beyond the traditional global workplaces, i.e.,
global factories, and include pink-collar clerical work and white-collar professional work
(Freeman 2000), scholars have mostly focused on assembly work in the garment and electronics
industries. As a result, they have paid very little attention to white-collar or pink-collar women
workers in TNCs. While the role of gender in TNC labor patterns has been studied in advanced
countries (Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia 1992; Hossfeld 1990; Kamel 1990), such as the United
States, generally most attention has been paid to the developing countries in Asia (Heyzer 1989;
Ong 1987; Wolf 1992), Mexico (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Peña 1997; Sklair 1993), and the Hispanic
Caribbean (Casey 1996; Ortiz 1996; Safa 1995).
Hence, the examination of Korean TNCs in the U.S. context can reveal some important
differences in women’s circumstances in industrial corporations.

KOREAN TNCs IN THE UNITED STATES
AND CO-ETHNIC LABOR

Among many changes in the global economy, the most notable development is the recent
emergence of TNCs from developing countries, such as South Korea. Once known to the world as
the “Asian miracle,” the Korean case has attracted many efforts to understand its rapid growth in
economy and political stabilization (Amsden 1989; Biggart 1990; Gerrafi 1990; E. Kim 1997; Woo
1990). What makes Korean TNCs in the United States an interesting case, however, is their
relationship with the thriving Korean immigrant communities in their proximity, such as the
southern California and New York-northern New Jersey areas. According to the 1990 U.S. Census,
the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) for Southern California (Los Angeles-Anaheim-
Riverside) and the SMSA for the New York-
Northern New Jersey region have the highest
population of Korean Americans in the United
States. Almost all Korean firms have their U.S.
headquarters in these two metropolitan areas
(Kocham 1994; Ungson et al. 1997). Along with
the native-born, non-Korean Americans in the
firms, Korean TNCs actively recruit their co-
ethnics from the local area, i.e., Korean Americans,
who are college-trained and bilingual.

By co-ethnic, I refer to people of common ethnicity
or who share the same culture. Remarkably, to
date, co-ethnic labor has only been discussed in
the context of highly segregated “ethnic enclaves”
or “ethnic economies” (Light and Gold 2000;
Logan et al. 1994), and not in organizations that
are more mainstream and globalized where
immigrant workers interact with native-born
Americans. Furthermore, much of the ethnic
enclave economy model rests on the “ideology of
solidarity” which emphasizes the mutually
beneficial relationship between the ethnic
employers and co-ethnic employees, while that
may not always be the case (Bonacich and Modell
1980; D. Kim 1999; Poros and Nee
1987; Song 1997). The major difference between
Korean TNCs and the ethnic enclave model, for
instance, is that Korean TNCs have a less-
assimilated group (foreign management)
 hierarchically above the more-assimilated (local
labor), which is just the opposite from the “ethnic
enclave” situations where the more-assimilated
group typically hires the less-assimilated group
for labor. While tensions between the foreign
nationals and the local employees are commonly
observed in TNCs (Levine and Ohtsu 1991;
Prabladad and Doz 1987), I argue that, for the
ethnically and culturally similar Korean
Americans, these common tensions are intensified
by the reversal dynamic of the ethnic enclave
where the foreign management is less assimilated
than the local Korean American labor. In
addition, the “ideology of solidarity” argument
fails to recognize the categories that exist within the same ethnic category. This is similar to the ways that scholars have observed different dimensions of stratification within co-ethnic networks (Bozorgmehr 1997; Poros 2001).

By focusing on the co-ethnic relationship between the Korean national managers – referred to as jujaewon (JJW, henceforth) here – and the Korean American women workers in Korean TNCs, this paper examines the specific features of the work setting that informs gendered practices and identity in particular ways. By elucidating the ways in which people participate in and respond to work expectations and practices built around certain identities, and how they reinforce those identities, this paper demonstrates how identity construction is intrinsic to the TNC workplace and, therefore, fundamental to the globalization process. Furthermore, it illustrates the complex ways in which the globalization process intersects with local conditions to create distinctive “lived experiences.”

Research Design & Methods

The materials presented in this paper are drawn from ethnography and interview analysis of nine Korean TNCs, conducted during the period from 1996 to 2001. The methods employed in the study include 57 in-depth interviews, document analysis, and observations. In the study, I define “Korean TNCs” as firms either wholly or partially owned by the top five largest (total assets and sales) Korean business conglomerates, known as chaebols (see E. Kim 1997; Ungson et al. 1997). In order to examine the relationship between JJWs and Korean American workers, I selected geographical areas where the concentration of Korean TNC establishments and the Korean-American population were both high and overlapped. Using SMSA, I ran a distribution of Korean population in all metropolitan areas and ranked the areas by the total number of Koreans in the area. The list was, then, overlapped with another list of Korean TNCs in the United States to identify the geographical locations where the concentration of Korean TNCs and the Korean-American population were both high and overlapped: the Southern California and the New York-Northern New Jersey regions. I used a referential sampling technique to select firms and interviewees from the two areas. In the initial stage, a number of interviewees were recruited from different informants; further recruitment thereafter came from those initial interviews.

The industries of the sampled firms include manufacturing (electronics and cargo containers), trading, and transportation (shipping). The primary area of business of the firms is sales and marketing. Four of the companies are located in the southern California area, while others are in the New York-northern New Jersey area; all but one of the sampled firms are headquarters (HQ) offices. On average, each firm employs about 85 people.

Division of Labor in Korean TNCs

About 10% of each Korean TNCs workforce are national managers from Korea, jujaewons (JJWs), while 15–20% are Korean American, with half of them women. JJWs are dispatched from HQ in Korea, to monitor and manage the U.S. subsidiary firms. Because of the continuous circulation of managers from Korea, most managerial positions are occupied by JJWs and out of reach for the U.S.-based employees. JJWs are all men, found in the highest-ranking position in each department or area of operation. Korean American men and women tend to occupy various ranks and areas within the firm; they are often concentrated in
departments that require Korean language skills, such as accounting and finance, where many documents and transactions are in Korean. While one or two Korean American women per firm can be found in management positions, they are very rare, as most women tend to be in lower-ranks. Beside the JJWs, there are a few Korean-American managers, who have moved up through the ranks during their long tenure with the company, and a few American managers, typically Anglo-Americans, who were hired as “local experts.” The rest of the Korean TNC workforce consists of non-Korean Americans, who occupy various positions in the firm, especially where English is needed.

While everyone hired from the local area can be categorized as “local” workforce and JJWs as “national” workforce, the Korean Americans from the rest of the “local” workforce are further differentiated in Korean TNCs. The Korean American workforce is categorized by their immigration generation: “first generation,” “1.5-generation,” and “second generation.” The “first-generation” Korean Americans refer to those who came to the United States as adults; the “1.5-generation” group includes those who came to the United States with their parents as adolescents; and the “second-generation” Korean Americans are those who were born in the United States or came to the United States as infants.2

**Gendered Opportunity Structure**

Women make up about half of the “white-collar” workforce in Korean TNCs, and about half of the Korean American workers in Korean firms are women. They range in age from their 20s to their 50s. Many of the younger women are 1.5-generation who tend to have college educations. Many of the first-generation women in their 40s and 50s have either high school or vocational school training. About half of the women are married. While the differences in tenure among Korean American workers vary greater by (immigrant) generation (i.e., the older “first generation” tend to stay the longest in the firm, with an average of 10–15 years) than gender, women generally stay longer (5–10 years) in the firm than men (3–7 years).

Most women workers in Korean TNCs are hired to perform feminized jobs, such as bookkeeping, data entry, and customer service. I describe such work as feminized because “not only does it recruit women workers almost exclusively, but also...the work process itself is imbued with notions of appropriate femininity, which includes a quiet, responsible demeanor along with meticulous attention to detail and quick and accurate keyboard technique” (Freeman 2000: 3–4). Jobs in Korean TNCs are gendered, as researchers have pointed out about organizations (Acker 1990; Bielby and Baron 1986), but they are also ethnically marked (J. Kim 2002). For example, as in many firms in South Korea, customer-oriented jobs in TNCs tend to be occupied by women. Since those jobs require low skill, they tend to be occupied by women with high school or vocational school training. Moreover, because these jobs require English skills but not bilingual skills, only American women are found in those jobs. On the other hand, clerical jobs that involve constant interaction with JJWs and HQ in Korea require Korean language skills. Because JJWs’ English skills are often poor (Ahn 1998), they rely on Korean American subordinates for these skills. Those jobs tend to be occupied by Korean women, most of whom are college-educated. As a result of these dynamics, most Korean American women experience low returns for their educational background.

In addition, it is rare to see Korean American women in management positions, similar to the situation in Korea (Kim and Kim 2001). In the
sampled firms, while women comprise of 3%-13% of the management (excluding those with “assistant manager” title) depending on the size and age of the firm, only zero to three percent of managers are Korean American women. In actual number, it often ends up being one or two Korean American women managers per firm.³

Most of these women managers tend to be single or married with no children. They tend to be with 10 or more years of service in the firm; they usually supervise the areas of payment collection and documentation, where they utilize non-transferable skills and lack bargaining power. Typically, these women had started out in the company doing clerical work in those areas and steadily climbed up the ladder. Not everyone, however, has moved up over the years. Only the few with competent English skills and college educations have acquired “manager” titles, while those with fewer qualifications are still in the same position after more than 10 years with the firm.

People in Korean TNCs offer different explanations for the absence of women’s leadership in Korean firms. While some people say that it is simply the result of JIW’s discriminatory practices, others, especially the women workers themselves, tend to interpret it as the slower trends of promotions in Korean firms. Jennifer,⁴ a Korean American manager, gave an account of her own advancement in the firm, emphasizing the slower trends in Korea in order to normalize her experience.

I started as senior staff. After three years, I became an assistant manager...[I]n Korea, after three years you become supervisor; after another three years, assistant manager; after another three or four years, manager. So it takes like ten years [to become a manager]. So I’ve pretty much caught up all those ranks... My friends around my age [in Korea]...are still assistant managers.

For Jennifer, this tendency to compare her experience with those of staff in Korea normalizes her – and other women’s – experiences. While the slower rates of promotion in Korean companies may affect both men and women, it affects women more directly because women tend to stay longer in positions that are lower in the hierarchy of the firm (Kim and Kim 2001). Jennifer’s lack of awareness of the even slower rate of promotion for women in Korea relative to men serves to protect her from viewing slow progress in the TNC as discriminating.

On the other hand, for others including some men, this is simply due to JIW’s discriminatory practices. According to Tom, a Korean American staff member, it is the JIWs who are responsible for keeping women away from managerial positions because they are generally reluctant to hire Korean women as managers.

[T]hese JIWs are so old fashioned – they can’t imagine hiring a Korean [American] woman for a manager position. I think they will feel intimidated. There haven’t been any Korean American female candidates for such positions, but if there had been any, they would not hire her.

While JIWs are aware of the legal constraints on such overtly discriminatory practices in the United States, they maintain gendered practices through more subtle and discreet ways. For example, Choi, a JIW, described how his company informally weeded out female candidates for positions that are considered “more appropriate”
for men than women, such as engineering and sales:

When we recruit people for certain positions, we never say we are recruiting female workers...I think you could do that in Korea, like “We are recruiting female managers.” [But not in the United States.] There are cases where we are looking for men for certain positions but there are women who apply. What we do, then, is keep their resume but not interview them.

Because JJWs are now better informed and trained about discriminatory practices than they were decades ago, they would never discuss their own overtly discriminatory practices (the description above was as overt as they got during the interviews). Instead, they often make normative statements about what they could not do in the United States in contrast with what they can do in Korea.

**Mentoring**

Like their counterparts in most firms, workers in Korean firms identify mentoring as one of the important elements contributing to their personal success both in the firm and in their long-term career. Because the hierarchy of the firm overlaps with the ordering of age (i.e., managers are older than their subordinates), the mentoring relationship is often paternalistic. The JJWs also have paternalistic relationships with their supervisors and the HQ in Korea (Ahn 1998). The staff generally perceive this as a positive and also a crucial element in getting ahead in the firm. While mentoring is considered important everywhere, this is especially the case in Korean firms because people are expected to stay in the firm for a lengthy period. Because companies in Korea generally hire people for potential rather than specific skills, as is often found in Japanese firms (Hibino 1997; Hoecklin 1995; Negandhi and Baliga 1981), having mentors and positive relationships with superiors is especially valued in these firms.

The lack of mentoring becomes a problem for those women who want to succeed in the firm because JJWs usually do not have such relationships with women workers. While the women recognize that the JJWs' mentoring practices are homosocial (Kanter 1977) and discriminating, it is also the case that JJWs come from an environment where having such close relationships with women workers is not common. Very few women are in management in Korea and most women are still in the low position of the firm, doing clerical and secretarial work (Kim and Kim 2001). Notwithstanding these structural factors, the Korean American women perceive these practices in ethnic terms, referring to them as a "Korean style" of management.
Although no immediate benefits are reported from such relationships, Korean American workers recognize such paternalistic relationships with the JJWs as highly selective and therefore an important part of their working experience. Even if the mentoring involves non-work, non-technical issues, many view this kind of relationship with the JJWs as a privilege. John, a Korean American staff member, described his relationship with his supervisor.

[If] they like you, they would hold on to you, train you, and take you under their wing...As soon I got here, there was a director, who was the second in command. And I worked directly under him, and he took me under his wing and showed me the ropes...So in every situation, he would always have something to say about certain memorable things that I kept with me until now, which is helping me a lot.

In contrast to his experience, Ji-Yun, an assistant manager, describes in the following that, despite the extra hours she put in to show the managers how hard she worked, she has never been able to establish that kind of relationship with them during the six years of her service in the firm.

The company pays so little and there is so much work. I think it's kind of my fault, or maybe it kind of goes both ways. But I work very hard...So that's why they give me so much work, probably because I stay late and work hard. And they must think I do good work. So the more I do, the more I get...it's a stupid thing that you spend so much time at work but that's not going to get you out of the work...after about six years I have put in. I really felt like, 'If I were a man, would they have mentored me better?'

That makes me angry. (Emphasis added)

Correlated to JJWs' tendencies to socialize exclusively with men and mentor them exclusively is the absence of female leadership in the firm. Despite these dynamics, Ji-Yun, like many other women, tends to interpret the JJWs' gendered practices as "Korean." Overall, the women view their male counterparts as being groomed by JJWs through internal job rotations (changing areas of operation), special business trips, and social activities with JJWs.

**Job Rotations**

One of the ways in which JJWs mentor the (male) staff is through job rotations. While Korean companies may not practice job rotations in the same way as Japanese companies do (Levine and Ohtsu 1991), it is a common practice to emphasize potential rather than skills. Referring to such practices in Korean TNCs, one manager told me, "It's not that common, but we do it if we find more compatible work for certain people." The decision about who is more compatible with which job based on "potential," however, is often based on gendered assumptions, as indicated in the following.

Mrs. Park, an assistant manager who oversees a department in a shipping company, explains the gendered nature of work in the company, as well as the industry itself.
stay in my department because they needed me. Meanwhile, I saw every guy come and go.
They were brought in, started out in my department and moved out within a year to sales or booking...the manager would always say to me, Sue, are you OK with this? I mean, can I do something about it if I'm not OK with it...[I] knew that obviously I was not happy with this. (Emphasis added)

Likewise, among the people interviewed, men were more likely to have had more than two different jobs in the firm than the women. I was able to observe similar patterns at one electronics firm where I had conducted fieldwork over a few months and returned a couple of times several years later. Some of the Korean American men had changed jobs in the firm, for example, from marketing to export and from general affairs to marketing. The result of this practice is evident in the gendered division of labor in most Korean firms: more men than women do “line” work, such as sales and marketing, while women are more likely to do the “housekeeping” work in the firm, such as bookkeeping, documentation, and collections.

**Special Trips**
Another venue for mentoring is through special opportunities, such as business trips that have training and educational purposes. Employees sometimes view these trips as paid vacations, but mostly as a privilege, since they are limited to only a few people. Joon-Young, an assistant manager, described how lucky he felt to go on one of them:

Every year, the company chooses five to six people to go to Korea, to visit different places.
production sites, to meet people, and things like that. But it’s really a paid vacation, because it’s really not a serious thing. They pay for everything and you get to go to Korea. And that kind of opportunity is rare. So I was lucky to be one of the chosen ones.

In contrast to his opportunity, Ji-Yun expressed her frustration at always being passed over for the opportunity to travel. In the following, she described how her boss decided to take her male subordinate over her to a training session in another city.

[My] boss...is taking my subordinate. I am upset...if I were a man, would he have more expectation and try to teach me, groom me more? Had I been a man, would they have treated me this way? ...Wouldn’t they have taken me to that meeting, that conference, or that trip? Wouldn’t they have mentored me better? But no, because I’m a woman, I don’t have that kind of opportunity.

Similarly, Jennifer described her colleague’s experience with a JJW who gave her a hard time when she requested a business trip:

[H]e asked her, “Why do you travel? Why do you need business trips?” She said, “Oh, this is my business product”...They are still not comfortable with the idea of women’s travel and business trips. (Emphasis added)

While this JJW’s comments may reveal the “confinement control” (Poster 1998) aspect of his gender ideologies, where women’s activities are controlled and excluded from certain social spaces, Jennifer constructs his behavior (or thinking) through ethnicity by referring to it as being “Korean” rather than as sexist. This kind of ethnic construction allows the women to tolerate these practices.

Socializing with JJWs

The last type of mentoring that excludes women is socializing with JJWs. It usually takes the form of dining, drinking, and playing golf. Dining out and drinking after work – which continues throughout the night what Koreans call yi-cha (“second-rounds” or equivalent to “bar-hopping”) – are a large part of the Korean corporate life that excludes most women, as also observed in Japanese firms (Steinhoff and Tanaka 1994). Although JJWs report that they experience a significant decrease in such activities once they come to the United States, Korean Americans indicate them as typical of the corporate culture in Korean TNCs. Whether it is an occasion for welcoming new JJWs, sending off the old, or entertaining visitors from Korea, it is common for JJWs to go out drinking after work. Such activities, however, tend to be homosocial. Most Korean American male staff with whom I spoke reported that they had occasionally gone out with the JJWs, some more than others, whereas most women did not, even though they knew about these activities.

Sue observed JJWs’ tendency to socialize exclusively with Korean American men and related it to their exclusionary practices. She explained that,

You can kind of see whom the management is grooming for higher position...[T]he last administrative manager, he had a tendency to take out the guys. All the Korean guys,
I've never seen [JJWs] take out non-Korean people on a one-on-one basis. It doesn't happen. I'm talking about clerks, lower-levels. But Korean guys, they tend to take them out, take them to drink. Drinking is basically what they do. They go to Korean place and drink soju [Korean liquor]. And occasionally, they take out females, but they'll take the whole department and they'll take out the non-Koreans too, in that case. But if it's a personal thing, one-on-one or with two or three people, it would never be a non-Korean person.

Even though she describes herself as "more American" (a second-generation), Sue demonstrates not only her familiarity with Korean corporate culture but also her recognition of how grooming occurs in Korean TNCs. Especially through her use of soju, she conveys not only her knowledge of Korean drinks but also her understanding of the Korean drinking culture that is implied by the word.

Besides dining out and drinking after work hours, JJWs' tendency to socialize exclusively with men can be easily seen throughout the workplace. Although such tendencies may not be as visible during work hours behind their offices and cubicles, it becomes more visible as they take breaks for coffee, smoking, or lunch. For example, in every company I visited during my fieldwork, it was common to see a group of several Korean men standing outside the lobby smoking and talking. While taking a smoke break may not be an unusual behavior in the workplace, such activity in Korean TNCs creates a space that is gendered and ethnic as it exclusively involves Korean men. Lunchtime is another setting where this can be observed. During my fieldwork, I was able to join the workers for lunch at a nearby Korean restaurant, where the company paid for their lunch meals. Most of the patrons in the restaurant were Korean. Interestingly, while the lunch hour turned the company "ethnic," it simultaneously uncovered other group boundaries besides ethnicity, such as gender and class (ranks). Even though Korean food seemed to have established a common denominator for the co-ethnics, it also made other divisions more visible. For example, the gender division was more visible as men and women sat separately; also the ranks became more visible, as JJWs were often sitting by themselves, although some of them sat with their Korean American male subordinates. But all the Korean American women almost always sat together by themselves.

Requests for Feminized Tasks

Besides (lack of) mentoring, the women workers identified JJWs' requests for "feminized" tasks as a major gendered practice in Korean TNCs. While there were reports of women being requested by JJWs to perform tasks that they identified as extremely demeaning, such as serving coffee to visitors, not everyone encountered such experiences. Although hiring women as secretaries to serve coffee may still be a common practice in Korea as it is in Japan (Ogasawara 1998), JJWs understand that such practices are not only frowned upon but also have legal consequences in the U.S. work setting. Hence, such topics never even came up during the interviews with the JJWs, although many women reported having experienced it, if not having heard about it from other women. Most women, however, have experienced being asked to do some other forms of feminized tasks, such as typing, making travel arrangements, and translating.

JJWs are selective about whom they ask to serve
coffee, as many of the executives in Korean TNCs do not have their own secretaries. For instance, they never ask women who are managers and American unless they have the title "secretary." They also rarely ask the second-generation Korean American women or "difficult" women, i.e., women who are known to be challenging. Rather, they frequently ask Korean American women who are perceived to be culturally more "Korean." Sue, a second-generation Korean American, reported that, although she had never been asked, Mary, her colleague, who performs similar work but is more "Korean," is asked often.

When a client comes in to have a meeting with general managers, they want coffee so they could call you... But they'll never ask a non-Korean woman. And they wouldn't ask me. They never asked me. Mary used to sit in front of me. They would call Mary. She would get so upset every time they ask and she would say, "Why do they ask me? How come they never asked this person or that person?" They never asked me, right?

It is Sue's observation that the JJWs are selective in whom they ask for these tasks and that JJWs' selections are based on their perception of the women's assimilation - or Korean-ness - which would cue them for the likelihood of compliance. She described a case where a Korean American male staff once served coffee and how the JJWs reacted to that:

One time, that guy who was in administrations, because the girls weren't around, he went in and served coffee. And they [JJWs] asked him not to do it again... [JJWs said] Get a girl to do it.

Similarly, Laura, an American woman with a formal title of secretary in another company, explained how she was asked to come into the office during regular management meetings because they needed her to serve coffee for the JJWs.

I am a "secretary," I guess. I would prefer otherwise. But a secretary is what I am... I used to come in only on certain days. And during the Monday management meetings, they apparently needed someone to serve the coffee. So they came up to me and asked me, "How come you are not in on Mondays? You should come in."

To better understand what kind of work is involved in "serving coffee," I asked her whether coffee was served in tea sets or paper cups.

Oh, paper cups. So they can get it themselves. I mean, I have friends who work in Japanese companies so I know things could be worse. And not everyone is like that. Some of them bring back their cups and other things to the kitchen area. But there are some that just leave things on my desk right over here. (Emphasis added)

Even though it appeared legitimate for the JJWs to request this from a secretary, Laura understood that it was a demeaning task in the U.S. work context. She rationalized it by reasoning that things could have been worse, hence, her comparison to Japanese companies. She also rationalizes her own response to a request that she would otherwise identify as sexist by constructing it in ethnic and cultural terms, that it was a kind of a behavior expected from Korean men.
While not every Korean American woman is asked to serve coffee for JJWs, almost all of them have been asked to do other kinds of tasks that they identify as feminized. These tasks include making travel arrangements for JJWs, translating, typing, and running errands for the supervisors—all regardless of their job description. Ji-Yun, an assistant manager in accounting, complained that she was often asked to do secretarial tasks that are not directly related to her own work. Further, she pointed out the JJWs' biased practices:

But it's just the way they treat girls in general...I worked the longest in our department. Yet, when they need to book a hotel room or something tedious like that...nothing to do with the department work...something they need to arrange, they always make me do it.

While she clearly identifies this as a gendered practice among the JJWs and is upset about it, at the same time she expresses that she understood the reasons behind these requests. She said:

I understand that they are comfortable with [me]. They always say that I have an easy-going personality so they can ask me to do things. And I try to understand them, like they have difficulties in English... But sometimes, it makes me angry. Like everyone else is my subordinate but they don't even think of asking them...That makes me upset...when there are chores, they will automatically, without thinking, just give them to women...[But] there are some women whom they would not ask, even if they were Korean.

Again, her observation of the JJWs' tendency to give these tasks to the Korean American women rather than the men reflects her awareness of their practices as gendered and discriminatory. She also recognizes that the JJWs are selective even among the Korean American women. So she understands that this treatment is not fair and that the JJWs are discriminating. At the same time, however, her explanation of their preference for someone "easy-going" and "comfortable," like herself, reveals her tolerance of their behaviors and rationalization of her compliance to their request.

Similarly, Jennifer, a manager, described her colleague's experiences of being asked to do secretarial tasks despite her educational and occupational achievements. She explained:

Young-Mi was hired two years ago. She had just graduated from Chicago with a MBA. She worked for an American company for one year and then she came here...later, she became a manager...then her new boss [JJW]...had voucher work for his expenses and asked her to do it. In the beginning, Young-Mi thought that he didn't know how to do it, how to access it, how to type...So she kind of did the favor for him. But then, later she found out...that's the Korean way, you know, asking her to do all the administrative stuff. (Emphasis added)

Regardless of whether Young-Mi complied with the request or not, Jennifer's interpretation of the JJW's gendered request as "Korean" rather than sexist not only justifies the JJW's behavior but also defends the traditional gender arrangements in
the workplace. Such rationalization through ethnicity, I argue, allows the women to tolerate the JJWs' discriminatory practices. Identified as "subtle sex discrimination" elsewhere (Benokraitis 1997), these practices are interpreted and accepted by most people as "normal" and "natural" (Ronai et al. 1997) - or "Korean," in this case.

Women's Responses to Gendered Practices

Even though the women workers offer ethnic interpretations of the gendered practices in the Korean TNC workplace, they are aware that these practices are gendered and discriminating, whether they are as overt as requesting coffee or typing work, or as subtle as taking only the men on business trips or to business luncheons. It is the explanations that the women offer about the JJWs’ practices and their own responses to them, which are ethnicized. While they rarely voice their concerns formally to the management, the women respond to the gendered expectations and practices, either by resisting or accommodating them. By presenting the accounts the women give of their behaviors of resistance or accommodation to those practices, I demonstrate the ways in which ethnicity operates as a mode of explanation for not only the JJWs’ behaviors but also their own. The women account for their behaviors of resistance by exaggerating their "American-ness," while they underscore their "Korean-ness" to justify their behaviors of accommodation. Hence, I argue not only that ethnic identity relies on gendered practices and ideologies but also that gender identity draws on configurations of ethnicity in the workplace. Furthermore, I elucidate the ways in which their behaviors accommodating in traditional Korean ways lead to a reproduction of traditional gender relations (see Giddens 1979; Connell 1987).

Resistance as Americanized Behavior

In many cases, when the women describe their experiences of being subjected to gendered practices that they identify as sexist, they often follow up with accounts of their resisting behaviors in response to those practices. Furthermore, they justify their resisting behaviors by emphasizing the Korean-ness of the JJWs’ practices that are often interpreted as "traditional" and "sexist," and by heightening their own American-ness as they display their awareness of and sense of belonging to American norms and regulations against such practices. Jennifer described her earlier experience where she started out at the company as a staff member and was given tasks, such as typing and translation work. She identified them as secretarial.

When I...started in this company, the very first time, I refused it...That's not my work, that's not in my job description...Because I know all the rules in American companies 'cuz I used to work for them. So I told them...I was the only Korean American [and only woman] there because everyone was JJW. So I was a person they hired...for typing and things. And I refused everything...and then my performance evaluation...it was like may be, instead of an A, I got a B. (Emphasis added)

For someone who grew up in Korea and only went to college in the United States, Jennifer's English skills were very impressive. She explained that she had worked for an American company when she was in Korea, so she often
compared her experience of working in a Korean company in the United States with her experience of working in an American company in Korea. Subsequently, she attributed her critical reading of the management’s practices and her resistance towards them to her exposure to and experiences at the American company. She explained:

Maybe…if I were a person who never experienced…American corporate styles or American business management styles, or never worked for American companies even if they were in Korea, then, I might have obeyed [managers], doing whatever they ask.

She indicated her experiences and understanding of the American management style as having influenced her to be outspoken and resisting, instead of docile and accommodating. On the one hand, her interpretation of the JJWs’ expectations displays her cognitive construction of Korean gender expectations. On the other hand, her emphasis on job description and being vocal about her opinion differentiates her from other Korean women. According to the JJWs, job descriptions, while significant in American companies, are practically meaningless in Korean companies – and to the Korean management – where flexibility to take on multiple tasks is considered more valuable. As discussed elsewhere (J. Kim 2002), JJWs interpret these differences in cultural and ethnic terms. They explain that part of being a “good” worker is being flexible, while Americans – and Americanized Korean Americans – may take job descriptions literally.

While some women may resist regardless of the consequences, most do not. They may selectively resist, as indicated in the following description.

Sue recounts an incident where an older Korean-American female staff member refused a Korean-American male staff member who asked her to serve coffee for his client. While the woman had never resisted requests from JJWs, she was able to do it with this staff member.

One of the salesmen…he was a young guy. He was not a JJW. He would bring his clients in and he would ask one of the ladies in administration to serve coffee. One time, she didn’t want to do it because he is not her superior so she could talk back. She said, “Why do you always ask me?” And he said, “Aren’t you the [company] Madame?” And she was furious. She told him, you serve coffee, who are you to ask me?…But if a JJW asked, she always did it.

Since he was not her direct supervisor, it might have been easy for her to resist, but with the combination of his young age and non-JJW status, she was able to resist.

Regardless of the circumstances, such acts of resistance seem to surprise JJWs, who expect the women to act “Korean,” i.e., accommodating if not docile. In the following, Ji-Yun describes her experience of speaking up to a JJW who asked her to serve coffee. Even if she agreed to do it, she refers to her speaking up as a behavior that is not typically “Korean.” Through her narrative, she constructs her resistance as a behavior that differentiates her from other Korean American women. Even though she complied, she declared to the JJW that she would never do it again. This apparently surprised the JJW.

Our [president] once asked me to bring coffee. For some reason, his secretary wasn’t
there. He said something like he had a visitor who was a high-positioned person from the headquarters and he needed something and told me to bring coffee. So I looked at him and said, “OK, I will do it this time”...because that was his first time asking me. So I said, “I’ll do it this time but I have to tell you that this is going to be my first and last”...And he looked at me kind of funny...How can he get upset at me? I mean, you know, he can’t! He has no right to get upset at me. This is an American company and you can’t do that...I guess, when people see me, they think that I am very Koreanized. I may look Koreanized, whatever the reason. They don’t realize that I’ve been here long. So only when we have a situation like that and I say whatever, they realize that I’m Americanized. (Emphasis added)

Although she ended up meeting the JJW’s request, Ji-Yun justifies her non-Korean behavior, i.e., speaking up, by underscoring that his request was inappropriate in an “American” company (since the Korean firms are registered in the United States as independent American companies). Notably, her comment – “only when we have a situation like that and I say whatever, they realize that I’m Americanized” – displays her construction of resistance as Americanized behavior. Even though Ji-Yun speaks English with a heavy accent and explained to me that she is more comfortable speaking in Korean than in English, she emphasizes her American-ness in her account. While others’ perceptions of her as “more Korean” may confirm that Ji-Yun is Korean enough to have interpreted the JJW’s request as “Korean,” both her response to the request and her account of it emphasize her

“American-ness.”

Being outspoken and “talking back” is interpreted as being not Korean but more Americanized, as also observed by Monica, an American female staff person who had worked in her company for over 10 years. She explained:

[In the beginning, some Koreans [JJWs] weren’t used to the women talking back at them, because they just came from Korea and they had hard time understanding this kind of stuff. I am used to this now [Korean culture] but for someone off the street, it will be hard.

Again, “women talking back” is characterized as being American and something that the Korean men would have to get used to in America. Moreover, Monica’s indication of her own assimilation to the (Korean) culture in the firm implies her tolerance for the gendered practices.

While America is no perfect place and they very well know it, the Korean American women often use the expression, “This is America” and the like, to emphasize – and also to heighten – the difference between the JJWs’ Korean-ness and their own American-ness. In this way, they claim themselves as “Americans,” the hosts, while depicting the JJWs as foreigners who need to learn the norms of the new society. While they might be expressing their reliance on or belief in American norms and regulations against these discriminatory practices (although they are most unlikely to take legal action against anyone), they are cognitively constructing gendered behaviors in ethnic terms, by highlighting their American-ness. Even though the Korean American women may be “Korean” enough to observe and interpret JJWs’ gendered practices as Korean, they
accentuate their own American-ness through their constructions of those behaviors and their own acts of resistance. Also, by emphasizing the Korean-ness of the JJWs, often labeling their expectations and practices as "traditional" and "conservative," the Korean American women rationalize and tolerate their practices. Ethnicity, hence, becomes a legitimate explanation for these gendered behaviors.

Accommodation: A Reproduction of Gender Relations

When women give accounts of their compliance with the JJWs' gendered practices – even though they recognize them to be "sexist" and unfair – they indicate their own understanding of Korean norms and expectations. The Korean American women indicate their overall understanding of Korean norms and expectations as the reason for their non-retaliatory or conforming responses. While they view others' compliance to gendered practices as docile and conforming, when they account their own compliance, they rationalize those behaviors in ethnic terms. In the following, Sue compared herself with the American employees in the firm who, in her view, would not tolerate such treatment from the management.

But at the same time, if I were a non-Korean person, I wouldn't have just let it happen to me. I think, they are less afraid of being sued by Koreans. They are less afraid of a Korean person leaving and turning around and suing the company...I think that's always the [company's] fear of the non-Koreans. Someone like me, I think, is ideal for them...even though I fit well within the mold of the company, there were certain times when I think I was very angry and I could've, you know, retaliated it. Retaliate isn't the right word...You know, made a big deal. And if I were a non-Korean, I would've...[but] I think the Korean in me [kept me from it]. (Emphasis added)

As she is aware of the option to take legal actions against the firm for limited opportunities – which she identifies as an "American" behavior – she depicts her non-retaliatory response as "Korean." It seems as though, for the behaviors that cannot be explained by reason, she assigns ethnicity as an explanation. Nonetheless, when women describe their non-retaliatory responses, they tend to distinguish themselves from the Americans and exaggerate their Korean side, as Ji-Yun indicated in the following.

He couldn't ask the Americans to do it. Like in the United States, there are lawsuits and the JJWs have that fear...But I wouldn't do that [sue]...I think there is that [affection] among Koreans. Well, I guess Koreans could also sue, but at least, I wouldn't do that. Sure, I get upset at times, but I am not always getting upset. If I were, how could I have stayed for six years? There are good things and bad things.

While she might have stayed in the firm for other reasons, such as not having outside opportunities, she rationalized her long stay despite the discriminatory treatment by saying there are also "good things" in the company. Similarly, most of the women perceive taking action as risky and ineffective. Further, they consider that, if they remain passive, things will work out for them in
the long run. When I asked Sue why she did not consider doing anything about this treatment, she explained that, "it's not going to accomplish anything." Additionally, she recounted a case where one woman's resisting act in her company did not work out for her.

[One] of the Korean women complained vehemently that, "I heard this guy got this much money, he started much later than I did, then why did he get more money than me?" She was very vocal about it. And...the manager was so upset that she brought this up...she lost points basically. So when the next pay increase comes around or something, she'll get passed by and it's going to happen to her. And everyone knows it...I think a lot of people have the idea that if you complain nothing is going to be accomplished. It's only going to hurt you, especially with money. They JJWs don't want to be told about these kinds of issues. And she was very vocal about it...she told them, "If you are not going to give me the money, I'm just going to leave"...They basically said, if you want to leave, then leave. And she's got nowhere to go [laugh].

While it is generally the case that Korean management does not respond well to workers' resistance, her account illustrates the kind of justification women give for not challenging and remaining passive in the firm. Her emphasis on keeping quiet will work out in the long run, as well as the comment that "she's got nowhere to go," convey the lack of outside opportunities for these women. By indicating her co-worker's approach of confronting the management, which was a failure, she justifies her own non-retaliatory response.

The perception that resistance is ineffectiveness common among Korean American women in these firms. In the following quote, Anna, a Korean American coordinator, explains how complaints made in the past never materialized into any changes in the firm.

But there was no change. It doesn't matter...if you don't like him [JJW], you just have to get out of there...you can't change the personality. I think it has to do with their personality also, how they grew up, their way of thinking. So if you don't like to deal with it, I mean, the company is not going to solve the problem every time you complain, which is right, too. They can't just listen to you all the time.

The talk of "you can't change the company" is a common response among the Korean American women, which in many ways justifies their own reasons for conformity and staying on with the company. Also, by interpreting the JJWs' behaviors as "personality," Anna creates tolerance for their behaviors. Consequently, rather than challenging the existing structure, the women see leaving the company as their only option.

In rationalizing their accommodation to gendered practices, the Korean American women invoke their own ethnicity. For instance, some credit their traditional or Korean upbringing as influencing them to comply with the management, while at other times they highlight their American identity to explain their challenging acts in the company. Whatever they see as the difference between Korean and American cultures, they tend to incorporate as contributing factors in their resistance and
accommodation. Here is an example from Ji-Yun.

My father is very traditional and I grew up in that kind of atmosphere. So maybe that’s why when I started in the company, the managers were surprised how Koreanized I was, considering how long I’ve been in the States. That’s why they might have liked me more. But as we work together, they realize I’m not exactly the way they are in Korea. For example, for compensations, I would approach them about raise and promotion. Koreans don’t do that. The policies there are fixed. No one tries to challenge that. But here, in America, people do that all the time. So I do it too. And I think that’s when they realize I’m not like them. And again, if they tell me to do something that is not right, I will tell them so. That is what makes them feel that I’m different from the Koreans.

Again, her depiction of, being “Korean” versus being “American” is polarized between being docile versus being challenging. Although she explains her traditional upbringing as a contributing factor, she stresses how she is different from the “Koreans.” Similarly Sue explained:

[A] lot of people...tell me that for someone who was born here, I tend to be very Korean in my thinking. My mom is very old fashioned. My mom left Korea a long time ago...my mom is still thinking of the Korea 30 years ago...she instilled in me a lot of the very old fashioned values, which is very Korean. So I have that, like respecting elders...So I have no problems with JJs, bowing to them, in-sa [greet] to them, which is very important to them. They want that. I mean, they need, they look for people, I think, who know how to kiss up, in a way.

In describing her understanding of Korean culture, she not only rationalizes her accommodating tendencies but also implies that she knows of the tacit rules in Korean companies, as conveyed by her use of the Korean word in-sa. This ethnic construction of their own behaviors is significant because it not only reveals the ways in which gender and ethnicity are co-constituted in the context of the TNC workplace, but also highlights the complex ways in which people make sense of their experiences of inequalities through their own structural positions both in the context of the workplace and the labor market.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper examines the gendered work practices in Korean TNCs in the United States and the Korean American women’s responses to them. It highlights the specific features of the TNC workplace, such as the division of labor that is defined by ethnicity and gender, that (in)form practice and identity in particular ways. First, I consider the ways in which the opportunity structures and work practices in Korean TNCs are gendered, and the ways in which people cognitively construct those gendered practices through ethnicity. For example, while the Korean American women recognize the Korean management’s practices as gendered, they interpret them as being “Korean” rather than “sexist.” By constructing the JJs’ discriminatory practices of mentoring exclusively men and requesting women to do feminized tasks as “Korean” rather than “sexist,” the Korean American women create and reinforce these
patterns of behavior as “normal” and “natural.” Secondly, by examining the various ways in which women use their own ethnicity to explain their responses to the gendered practices in the workplace, I illuminate the complex ways in which gender and ethnicity are co-constituted in the workplace. People interpret what may be structural situations in ethnic terms. For example, women explain resistance as a function of Americanization, while explaining accommodation as a function of Koreanization. Thus, they construct a structural issue as an ethnic marker. I indicate that this ethnic construction of behaviors justifies discriminatory organizational practices and perpetuates gender stratification in the workplace. While scholars have identified ethnicity as a cleavage between workers, they have not conceptualized it as a rationalization for acts of worker resistance and accommodation.

This ethnic construction has a strong implication for understanding inequality in the workplace because it reinforces and reproduces work practices and work structure. It is also paradoxical because, on the one hand, this ethnic construction may appear illegitimate vis-à-vis the American way of doing business. But on the other hand, it seems to function because people tolerate it as an essential quality of a “Korean” firm, as also evident among the Americans who use it to justify their own tolerance. Perhaps, multiculturalism and ethic pride may play a part in this tolerance, although further observation may be necessary to examine to what extent they would go with it. For example, where do people draw the line and claim, “You can’t do that, this is America,” as opposed to tolerating them and saying, “This is how they do things in a Korean firm”?

Through my illustrative points on ethnic constructions and the organizational feature of having JJWs on top, this study emphasizes the importance of the TNC workplace and its particular features in gendering the workplace. The continuous circulation of JJWs not only imports the “traditionalist” Korean men to the U.S. work environment but also represents the impulse to replicate “old Korea” as traditional work expectations on women are also transplanted. Hence, it follows the argument that TNCs are responsible in fostering gendered principles through their ideologies, practices, and policies (Lim 1985; Ward 1990; Poster 1998). Furthermore, because the recreational activities, e.g., drinking after work, are more important in the Korean workplace context than it is in other places, the homosocial nature of the workplace (Kanter 1977) is not only more accentuated here but also intensifies the disadvantages that Korean American women have.

In a more pronounced way, the conflicting tendencies of globalization between homogenization and heterogenization in Korean TNCs are manifested through JJWs’ and Korean Americans’ simultaneous promotion of assimilation and ethnic culture, which consequently generates and reinforces the inequality in the workplace. The paradox of the co-ethnic employment in this context is that, while it promotes the idea of “shared culture” and solidarity, it simultaneously emits and intensifies the subtle differences within the co-ethnic group. I indicate that this ethnic construction of behaviors justify organizational practices and perpetuate the stratification in the workplace.

Hence, this paper emphasizes the significance of the workplace as a distinctive context for the construction of gender and ethnicity. It illuminates the specific features of the workplace that construct gender and ethnicity differently.
from other organizations, such as voluntary
organizations. Moreover, because work and
identity are central features of modern life, this
study enhances our understanding of the
globalization process and how it intersects with the
specific aspects of the workplace to configure many
dimensions of identity.
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