Rockets, Robots, and Radical Workspaces: Flexibility and Discrimination in Women’s White-Collar Narratives
**Flexibility at Work**

Helen works at a small firm in Seattle, Washington, specializing in professional project management services that they supply for big companies. The large tech company she works with, headquartered near South Lake Union, is her firm’s largest and most important account. Though no one has ever directly told her that she is not as smart or as competent as the “blue badges” (full-time employees) on the tech campus, its common among Helen and her peers to feel as though they are treated as “lesser” because of their status as “yellow badges” (vendors and service suppliers). Helen’s experience is not unique to her situation. In fact, Helen’s experience as a vendor with a small firm, whose services are contracted out by a large parent company, is a rather typical image of the contemporary work experience for a woman in a flexible work environment (Smith 1998)

Over the past decade, the United States has added millions of new jobs to the economy. According to a survey-based study conducted by economists Lawrence Katz of Harvard University and Alan Krueger at Princeton University, in the ten-year period between 2005 and 2015, the United States added almost ten-million jobs to the domestic labor market (Kopf 2016). Though this data initially bodes positively for workers, the majority of added jobs share one key-characteristic, they all fall into the category of temporary, part-time, or contract work. That is to say, none of these jobs are included in the category of traditional 9-to-5 employment. Rather, contract and temporary employment is included in the “alternative work” category (Kopf 2016), a group associated with uncertain work cycles, little opportunity for career growth, and part-time employment (Kallberg 2009; 2011). Though workers often enjoy a certain amount of “flexibility” (Cook 1998; Smith 1998; Kallberg 2011; Kopf 2016) that comes with the “gig
economy,” such as considerable control over scheduling, this flexibility comes at a significant price. Despite experiencing more control over their labor process, contract and temporary workers often forgo the job certainty, compensation, benefits, and protections that accompany full-time, permanent, or traditional employment arrangements (Kallberg 2011).

In addition to the uncertain and precarious (Kallberg 2009) nature of temp and contract work, another key feature of the “alternative work” category is its demographic composition. By 2015, Krueger and Katz¹ found that women were more likely than men to engage in alternative work, due in part to the adoption of flexible work arrangements in already female-dominated industries (Kopf 2016). Though alternative work arrangements are a relatively recent development in the history of labor organization, the speed with which the gig economy has feminized is a phenomenon worthy of investigation. The low compensation, uncertainty, and lack of benefits that characterize flexible labor organization confers a particular value, influence, and status onto the bodies that occupy contract and temporary jobs. Helen’s anecdote, in which she experiences feeling lesser as a “vendor”, or contracted employee, is merely one such narrative in which this conferred value is experienced. Though Helen does not directly face gender discrimination in this experience, that flexible labor arrangements are increasingly populated by feminine bodies suggests that the logic of flexible work and hegemonic gender norms are intimately related in the process of labor organization. It is this hypothesis that guides the following investigation.

This research questions whether flexible labor organization is inherently gendered, or, rather, if conventional gender stereotypes and logic necessarily fill “alternative,” and flexible job

markets with feminized bodies. This paper engages part of this question. By assessing women’s accounts of their labor process through inductive coding techniques and comparison to literature on gendered and flexible organizations, I begin constructing an image of how bodies fill new definitions of the abstract “job” (Acker 1990). My findings suggest that, despite new flexible structural arrangements, gendered organizations are recreated through the same naturalized gender framework as Acker (1990) identifies in her original theory of gendered organizations. However, because flexible organization encourages workplaces to rely on output measures and panoptic, horizontal methods of labor regulation rather than space to organize gendered bodies, the logic of the gendered organization is changed insofar as it relies on output rather visibility to demonstrate commitment to work. Flexible workplaces become gendered through supposed individually rather than systematically regulated occupational gender segregation. Though the flexible workplace rewards workers for increasing output, my findings demonstrate that women are still expected to orient their workday around mythological motherhood commitments. As such, women often exist within teams of workers with similar work-life commitments and schedules, often yielding gender homogenous teams. Therefore, in flexible workplaces with neoliberal policy and culture (Kallber 2011), hegemonic gender conventions manifest through individualized and panoptic self-regulated (scheduled) labor control (Kelly, 2010). Supporting this claim, this paper will: First, outline the theoretical foundations of the gendered organization; Second, outline research contributions and methods; Third, explicate research themes and findings; Lastly, offer major conclusions and suggestions for future research.
Gendered Organizations

This research is informed by Joan Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations, regarded among sociologists as key text for understanding gender inequality at work. Distinct from feminist critiques of bureaucratic institutions preceding her, which treat organizations as gender-neutral structures, Acker argues that gender is instead “deeply embedded” in the logic of organization and bureaucracy. That is to say, rather than understanding organizations as ahistorical institutions with socially-neutral structures, Acker argues that the structure of organizations, bureaucracy in particular, necessarily reproduces existing social and class inequalities.

Observing the reconstruction of occupational gender segregation consistent among organizations, Acker argues that the logic of gender inequality is embedded in organized institutions and thereby genders notions of a “job” as an implicitly masculine endeavor. This gendering necessarily creates the myth of an “ideal worker” (Brumley 2014) that is committed primarily to their job with few non-workplace distractions. This idealized construction precludes the possibility of a valuable feminine worker, thereby excluding femininity from the logic of workplace organization. In an example of this masculine organizational ideology, Acker (1990) observes: “those who are committed to paid employment are ‘naturally’ more suited to responsibility and authority; those who must divide their commitments are in the lower ranks” Acker (1990). Expected to exhibit a primary responsibility and devotion to family care and domestic labor, women are conventionally excluded from a masculinized work ideology in professional settings (Williams 2001). Therefore, in Acker’s framework, because jobs and work
are hegemonically constructed through a masculine logic, organized labor systems are inherently
gendered in which conventional gender segregation of the labor process is reproduced.

Acker (1990) claims that the reproduction of gender inequality in organizations,
manifesting as occupational segregation, differential access to power, and workplace autonomy
and legitimacy, manifests through five key processes: the division of labor, the construction of
symbols, gendered social interaction, individual identity, and the logic of organizational systems,
which Acker specifically identifies as bureaucracy. The present investigation specifically
addresses and examines the fifth element in Acker’s conceptualization, organizational logic.

Acker defines organizational logic as the “underlying assumptions and practices that construct
most contemporary work organizations… [with] material forms in written work rules, labor
contracts, managerial directives, and other documentary tools … including systems of job
evaluation.” (Acker 1990). In short, organizational logic constitutes the workplace culture,
policy, and structure that perpetuates systemic discrimination. Unlike her predecessors, Acker
identifies the problematic nature of normalized and supposedly gender-neutral of standard
organizational logics:

Rational-technical, ostensibly gender neutral, control systems are built upon and
conceal a gendered substructure… in which men’s bodies fill abstract jobs. Use
of such abstract systems continually reproduces the underlying gender
assumptions and the subordinated or excluded place of women. (Acker, 1990)

Though “rational” (Acker 1990) and normalized systems of organizing the labor process are
ostensibly “gender-neutral” and meritocratic, masculine notions of a “job” and ideals of
workplace conduct (Brumley 2014) inherently produce a gendered logic of the work process.

Gendered preconceptions of work, and a consequently masculinized work process,
produce tangible gender differences in power, occupation, class status, and social status within
organizations. Numerous studies demonstrate, in particular, how a gendered workplace logic reproduces occupational gender segregation based on hegemonic assumptions of task competence, leadership ability, and commitment to work (Stainback, Kleiner, Skaggs 2015). In this hegemonic matrix, for which common sense gender ideology is the operating logic, women’s work is systemically devalued due to common sense assumptions about women’s ability and commitment to work. This ideology reveals itself in corporations with a workforce stratified along axes of compensation, power, legitimacy and autonomy, in which women consistently occupy the lowest hierarchical tier (Britton 2000; Acker 1990, 2006; Stainback, Et. al 2015).

Aside from theory, gender segregation in corporations is a phenomenon observed in both scholarly and popular writing, and is best demonstrated by the gap in feminine representation among corporate leadership roles. For the Fortune 500 companies that share full diversity data (only 16 do) women occupy only 20 percent of positions. Among CEOs, this percentage shrinks to 6.4 percent (Fortune 2017). These statistics do not however demonstrate racial stratification that occurs in these organizations. For instance, while African American women represent almost 8 percent of the private sector workforce, they occupy only 1.5 percent of executive positions (Anon 2017). In addition, there is not one African American woman represented among Fortune 500 CEOs (Anon 2017). Furthermore, the racialized and masculine organizational logic that structures contemporary corporations is revealed in the segregation of labor in which white men consistently occupy most positions of power.

There exists a considerable amount of research supporting Acker’s work (see Britton 2000; Biernat , Fuegen 2001; Hultin 2003; Elliott, Smith. 2004; Acker 2006; Castilla, Benard
2010; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, Moen 2010; Williams, Muller, Kilanski 2012; Brumley 2014; Stainback, Kleiner, Skaggs 2015). However, since the 1970’s the structure of the professional workplace has undergone significant logistical and organizational transformation. In particular, with increasing globalization, international trade, and technological and communication efficiency, many large corporations have reorganized the structure of their labor forces to accommodate changing economic demands that necessitate flexible work environments (Bonacich 2008; Kallberg 2009; 2011). As such, Acker’s (1990) work, predicated on analysis of bureaucratic organizations, cannot characterize the operation of masculinized organizational logic in the era of global labor markets. Addressing the organizational shift, this research assesses how a new globalized, neoliberal economy and associated “flexible” organizational labor ideologies (Smith 1998; Ciscel, Smith 2005; Bonacich, Wilson 2008; Kallberg 2009; Kallberg 2011; Williams, Muller, Kilanski 2012; Brumley 2014; Radovic-Fanta 2017), has affected the traditional gendered logic of corporate organization. Specifically, I question how masculine notions of a “job” are maintained, understood, and altered in the new structure and culture of the flexible workplace to reproduce gendered divisions of labor. Answering this question, I ask how women’s experiences in the professional workplace not only reflect current global labor paradigms associated with flexible, feminized, precarious, and temporary employment (Salzinger 2003; Kallberg 2011), but, in addition, how their experiences, indistinguishable from their feminized standpoint in a gendered organization, are specific to the flexible work environment. Through these questions, this study seeks to understand how gendering is practiced and recreated in the flexible workplace in forms that may be consistent
with or challenge hegemonic, masculine definitions of work that dominate the “traditional”
(Kallberg 2011) and bureaucratic workplace (Acker 1990).

**What is Flexible Organization?**

The current era of labor organization, characterized by “flexible” production, distribution,
and labor ideology, is a product of what Kallberg (2011) identifies as “neoliberal globalization.”
Kallberg defines this paradigm as the process of deregulation, logistical and technological
innovation, and increased economic competition beginning in the 1970s. In the wake of
anti-communist and anti-socialist rhetoric during the Cold War, socially-minded practices and
policies associated with Keynesian economics were dismantled. During this period of
“deregulation and increased international free trade,” the market could operate domestically and
internationally without much government interference (Bonacich, Wilson 2008). With a
deregulated market, companies faced an unprecedented level of international competition
(Kallberg 2011). No longer holding “oligopolistic” (Kallberg 2001) positions in key industries,
the new era of deregulation, globalization, and price competition necessitated increases in
efficient production and distribution, and decreases in costs (Bonacich, Wilson 2008; Kallberg
2009; 2011).

Developing alongside and in response to an increasingly competitive and globalized
economy and intensified product market competition, technological and logistical innovation
created the conditions for “flexible production” processes (Bonacich, Wilson 2008; Kallberg
2011). As product cycles grew increasingly short due to the availability and demand of global
consumer goods, competition placed a “premium on flexible manufacturing ” replacing
traditional systems of Fordist mass production (Kallberg 2011). Associated with 24/7 production,
outsourcing, and global production and distribution chains (Bonacich, Wilson 2008), new technologies and open trade policy allowed corporations to decentralize, outsourcing labor to countries with the fewest regulations. As Ciscel and Smith observe in their research on “flexible and incessant” (2005) labor regimes, once firms began outsourcing, they “could seek out the cheapest labor and have them work under the most oppressed conditions” (Ciscel, Smith 2005).

A partner of flexible production, globalization encouraged U.S. firms to cut costs by re-conceptualizing labor organization, specifically avoiding U.S. labor laws by de-internalizing and offshoring labor (Ciscel, Smith 2005). Further, the trend toward global markets made it less advantageous for corporations to make long-term investments in their workers, setting a precedent for labor relations globally in which the power and autonomy of the immobile worker was severely weakened. Organizational logic no longer mandated bureaucratic systems of internalized labor markets and permanent jobs to cultivate economic growth.

In the United States, the exportation of labor, increases in immigration, and the deregulation of government economic protections and labor safety nets undermined the power and presence of unions. New neoliberal logics and economic policy weakened the “traditional source of institutional protections for workers … severing the postwar business–labor social contract” (Kallberg 2009). Coupled with the decline of traditionally unionized and male-dominated blue-collar labor markets in the United States, was the increase in non-traditionally unionized service-industry jobs. In the context of less government oversight, a precedent of flexible labor arrangements abroad, and the growth of service industries, United States firms increasingly utilized “non-standard” and flexible employment relationships such as “independent contractors and temporary help agencies” (Kallberg 2011) with “flexible” labor
regimes to organize new labor markets lacking in legacies of unionism. Further, like the now
outsourced and offshored blue-collar jobs, service industry markets in the United States began to
reflect the organization and precariousness of flexible production regimes, a system predicated
on exploitative, uncertain, and low-wage work (Smith 1998; Salzinger 2003; Ciscel, Smith 2005;
Kallberg 2011; Radovic-Fanta 2017). Moreover, like the new global marketplace, flexible labor
organization became the standard structural and cultural paradigm of the late-twentieth and
twenty-first century labor markets in the United States.

Considered an especially “neoliberal” system, (McKay 2006; Kallberg 2011; Williams,
Et. al 2012; Brumley 2014) flexibility is associated with dependent, vulnerable temporary
workforces (Salzinger 2003), product orientation (Kallberg 2011), and the degradation of worker
rights, wages, agency, benefits and protection (Smith 1998; Salzinger 2003; Bank-Munoz 2004;
Ciscel, Smith 2005; Radovic-Fanta 2017). In this context, neoliberal organizational logics
necessarily create new gendered workplace subjectivities. Unlike bureaucratic work
environments for which masculine notions of a job were connected with vertical career ladders,
permanent long-term employment, and individualized tasks identified in their job descriptions
(Acker 1990; Williams, Et al 2012), flexible labor organization dissociates workers from
“standard” (Kallberg 2011) employer-employee relationships that offer stability and continuity.

In the flexible economy, workers become sensitized to confusing organizational
structures, the uncertainty of temporary work, fractured and decentralized team-work spaces, and
a lack of definitive career paths (Smith 1998; Williams, Et al 2012). As Williams (Et. Al 2012)
succinctly observes: “work is increasingly organized into teams composed of workers ... who
work with considerable discretion on time bounded projects and are judged on results and
outcomes, often by peers” (Williams 2012). In this new labor process, traditional notions of a “job” as studied by Acker (1990) are unable to characterize the experience of modern workers, particularly the experience of the employee-employer relationship.

Further, as standard notions of a masculinized “jobs” (Acker 1990) are eroded, so must our understanding of the gendered workplace conventions that perpetuate workplace inequalities such as the division of labor and gendered segregation of occupations. Thus my research attempts to re-conceptualize how conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity are maintained and remade in new flexible workplace arrangements in order to confront, address and subvert contemporary workplace inequalities.

**Flexibility in Professional Workplaces**

Most research on flexible organizations in the contemporary economy (Williams, Et. al 2012; Brumley 2014) concerns the exploitative conditions endemic to production and distribution jobs (Smith 1998; Salzinger 2003; Bank-Munoz 2004; Ciscel, Smith 2005; Boniach, Wilson 2008; Radovic-Fanta 2017) such as manufacturing and transportation. Less analytical attention has been offered to flexibility and its influence on the structure and culture of professional workplaces. Though the meaning and impact of flexible ideology changes with class, geography, gender, industry, and race such that poor, brown, and feminine bodies become the most exploited and vulnerable global class (Slazinger 2003), the flexible economy also has gendered, raced, and classed implications for more privileged groups.

Flexible ideology has fundamentally altered the structure and culture of the professional workplace (Cook 1998; Williams, Et. al 2012). Though the meaning of flexibility is uncertain and takes several forms, professional workplaces employing flexible neoliberal ideology exhibit
several key characteristics. In particular, “standard” notions of a job characterized by bureaucratic, vertical, hierarchical structures and control are completely eroded (Kallberg 2009). Rather, individual tasks and job situated in “career ladders” (Williams, Et. al 2012) are increasingly replaced by product-oriented work in team environments (Smith 1998; Poster 2008; Williams, Et. al 2012). In addition, companies increasingly hire temporary and contract laborers rather than full-time, permanent employees in order to cut costs associated with traditional employee benefit packages. These trends create an unprecedentedly neoliberal professional workplace in which efficient, flexible and product-oriented labor forces are maintained at the expense of worker protections, security, and wages.

Following the exportation of much blue-collar work to feminized, brown bodies, abroad (Salzinger, 2003) flexible, “non-standard” (Kallberg 2011) labor organization in the United States is most frequently associated with, and observed in service industry work (Kallberg 2011). Service industries are the fastest-growing sources of employment in the United States. In 2009 “more than 85 percent of of people in the United States worked in service industries” (Kallberg 2011). Though service work is quickly replacing “higher-paying manufacturing jobs” that “fueled the growth of the middle class” (Kallberg 2011) in the twentieth century, service work is not replacing the compensation blue-collar work offered. In particular, service industries exhibit the most rapidly declining wage and salary statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017; see also Kopf 2016; “America's growing temporary workforce” 2016). Furthermore, service industries have become simultaneously the largest, and yet lowest-paying and most precarious sources of (flexible) employment in the United States.
Interestingly, women also dominate service industry jobs. For instance according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women represent 63 percent of business support service jobs, 74 percent of education and health service jobs, and 72 percent of public human resource jobs (BLS 2018). As the wages of male-dominated industries stagnated and declined after 1970 (Kallberg 2011), women were forced into the labor market to support their families. This entry into the paid-labor force coincided with growth in service industry and white-collar jobs such that service work, particularly administrative and support roles, became feminine work (“pink collar” (McLaughlin 1983)). Though women no longer enter the workforce merely to support their husbands and represent almost half the workforce in the United States (Kallberg 2011), workplaces still remain gendered. Men typically have better quality jobs, more job autonomy, receive better salaries, work more full-time jobs, and share fewer household responsibilities (Acker 1990; Britton 2000; Kallberg 2011).

That the fastest growing industries in the United States rely on flexible labor organization are also the most precarious, low-paying, and feminized is a trend worthy of analytical attention. As Acker (1990) and her successors demonstrate, gender, legitimacy, and workplace power are intimately connected. As women’s work and women’s roles are devalued relative to men’s, such that women systemically receive lower wages, less job autonomy, and less legitimacy, the value of feminized occupations are similarly lessened and lower-status in the workplace (Acker 1990; Salzinger 2003; Stainback, Et al 2015). Therefore, as service industries grow along with a feminized labor force, researchers must ask how gendering of the work process influences, reinforces, and perhaps justifies the cultivation of a dependent, flexible labor-force. This article engages part of this problem. In particular, analyzing women’s experiences in flexible work
environments, I question if and how gendered labor logic is recreated in the frame of flexible organization. Engaging these questions through the series of interviews that follow, this study begins to understand how gender is reproduced in the contemporary economy (Acker 1990; Williams, Et. al 2012). Further, my findings suggest that while the structure of the professional workplace changes, the logic of conventional gender roles is reasserted in new ways. Though women report experiencing wage parity as well as agency and choice in the schedule and structure of the their workday, the gender segregation that also occurs in these workplaces would suggest that subtler forms of gender discrimination remain at work. In particular, the structure of flexible workplace may in fact reinforce the very gender roles and time expenditures in work activities (Presser 2003) that similarly restrain women’s mobility in more “traditional” (Kallberg 2011) work environments.

Methods

This article is based on 10 in-depth and audiotaped interviews with women working in professional settings. Participant organizations are all associated with the “tech” industry and either offer technical services or support the companies that offer technical services. Most of the participant-affiliated corporations are or were located in Washington State in the Puget Sound area. Of the corporations not located in Washington, one company is based in Texas, and the other in San Francisco, California. Two of the tech companies participants identified in their employment histories have been purchased by larger firms. Over half of the women are contract or temporary workers or have work as a contract or temporary worker. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and were conducted in-person, over the phone, and using video-chat platforms such as Zoom. Interview transcripts were analyzed using the inductive
coding techniques described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Transcripts were read several times and used to identify themes among participant experiences responding to organizational logic of flexible workplaces as well as experiences of discrimination within these spaces specific to their gender.

Several participants were identified and contacted using alumni and employee relations networks through the University of Puget Sound. Participants not contacted using this method were recruited using participant networks and snowball-sampling techniques. Participants were selected on the basis of gender identity (feminine) and experience in the professional, corporate workspace of tech companies. Of the 10 women, 8 identified as white or did not identify, 1 identified as Indian, and 1 identified as “from the Middle East.” Participant ages range from 26 to mid 40s, over half of the women do not have children, and about half have been or were married, or have partners. Participants were questioned about their background (education, previous jobs and job experiences), current job, structure of their current corporation, corporate culture, labor process, future goals, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and experiences of discrimination. Responses were used to understand characteristics of experiences of discrimination as they occur in flexible work environments.

**Findings**

How is the professional tech workplace gendered in the new paradigm of labor organization? The influence of global capitalist labor relations is realized in local corporate spaces through women’s experiences of indirect discrimination. As corporations assume flexible organizational cultures and structures, the gendered logic becomes neoliberal in character in which gender discrimination and segregation is re-interpreted and justified as differential output.
While the definition of a standard “job” (Acker 1990) has shifted to reflect the logic of the global economy, namely flexibility, the use of conventional gender tropes as measures for determining worker ability, culture fitness, and promotions, continue to be reflected in participant narratives. Though gender discrimination remains present in the flexible workplace despite corporate efforts to promote diversity through discursive cultural reconstruction, many participants were unable or reluctant to identify their experiences as discriminatory. Participants that did identify experiences of discrimination as specific to their gender were similarly hesitant to blame their organization or cultures of masculinity, and instead opted to fault individual character flaws or job status.

These findings suggest that the organizational logic of the flexible workplace, though exhibiting a structural framework distinct from bureaucracy, similarly reproduces a gendered labor force through occupational segregation. However, unlike bureaucratic organizations that Acker (1990) observes, flexible professional workspaces structured around panoptically regulated team structures, that offer the illusion of horizontally distributed power, employ a distinctly neoliberal logic and product-oriented workplace that holds individuals responsible for their experiences of discrimination. Further, the fragmented, somewhat confusing structure of the flexible workplace obscures patterns of discrimination across teams, and renders systemic discrimination less-visible. Moreover, though flexible workplace organization reproduces occupational gender segregation based on common sense gender logics, unlike bureaucratic environments with hierarchical arrangements of gender stratification and division, “flexible” structures allow women to achieve similar pay-grade “levels” while remaining in gender

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2 “Our Workforce Demographics.” https://www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=10080092011
segregated departments, often spatially distinct from other physical team spaces with different output expectations. This spatialization of the workplace renders gender segregation, ultimately, the product of neoliberal output logic in which the gendered organization is reconstructed by naturalized gender differences with differing production and work-life expectations.

In participant narratives, flexible organization masks gender segregation and discrimination under a neoliberal logic that is specific to the structure and culture of flexible team organization. In workplaces organized around teams with product-oriented work cycles, gender segregation is disguised as workplace power is horizontally dispersed within a panoptic system of labor control. Generating the appearance of more horizontal, and individual power than in vertically organized systems, team structures reclassify gender segregation as a choice rather than a systemic problem. For instance, women experienced a considerable amount of freedom in scheduling and structuring their workday manifesting as control over location: “It doesn't really matter where I work from as long as I’m doing my job” and well as control over the temporal workday: “… I work exactly an 8-hour day. Its very regulated by me. I mean, I found a team I could do that on.” As the previous participant identifies, many of the women noted that this control over their workday was specific to the teams they were working within. However, this supposed agency often conflicts with the gender composition of the workplace in which binary genders are heavily segregated. Further, though women experience control, this segregation of bodies would suggest that a gender logic is a work in structurally organizing the labor force.

In addition, panoptic methods of labor control, particularly measurements of output and work-days, regulate women’s “flexible” work schedules such that team members often exhibit
similar amounts of “work-life balance.” As mentioned above, a participant identifies that her “8-hour day” is a consequence of the team she chose: “I found a team I could do that on.” This quote suggests that certain team cultures are more conducive to a standard workday than other teams. Another participant also mentions that all of her team members try to keep a similar work-day: “... if you're taking a dramatically lower work-level than all of your coworkers it would look bad on you... but most of my coworkers keep a nine to nine-and-a-half hour day…” Therefore, though several women acknowledge that “quality of your work is more valued than the quantity…”, allowing women the freedom of flexible and remote working, this emphasis on maintaining consistent workdays both temporally and among team members remains present. This observation suggests that teams may experience a panoptic system of control in which women both feel free to adopt flexibility, yet maintain labor practices consistent with the normative work-days of their teams. Furthermore, observing gender segregation in the context of flexibly-organized and panoptically-regulated teams structures, my findings suggests that the flexible workplace disguises gender segregation and standard-workdays as personal choice.

**Teams, Work-Life Balance, and Panoptic Mechanisms of Labor Control**

Teamwork was one of the most consistent experiences women identified as central to their workplace and labor process. Though teams were often clearly divided along gender lines based on particular “products,” services, or occupations, many participants did not interpret this phenomenon as occupational segregation or discrimination. Rather, women often rationalized this division through both conventional, naturalized gender stereotypes, or as a product of individual “preference.” Additionally, because women experienced a considerable amount of agency and leeway in their roles in a product-oriented work environment, dictating their
individual work schedules and work location, they often experienced their workplace as conducive to work-life balance. Further, team-based labor organization focused on production rather than space disguised segregation and discrimination individual choice rather than systemic gendering using the logic of conventional gender tropes, in which women “flock to certain teams” and departments because they “prefer” certain parts of the labor process.

In the team structures that dominated labor organization in participant-affiliated corporations, flexibility often refers to a respatialization of the work process. Women often identified that, because teams focus on output and products, visible workplace presence was not necessary as long as they kept up with responsibilities. For example, Rachel, who works in recruiting at a large Seattle-based tech company, mentioned the following about the organization of her workplace:

Every building has a team usually. These big towers have multiple teams, and a coffee shop and you can work anywhere you want really, but then there's these conference rooms you can work in … and it’s pretty flexible. I sometimes work from home … Nobody really monitors what anyone else is doing. Unless you have a meeting and you have to be face-to-face with somebody, it doesn't really matter.

Without prompting her, Rachel immediately identifies how a “flexible” workplace both encourages and is shaped by the product-oriented culture of her workplace. With new advancements in technology and communication, workers, even on the same team, do not expect to meet “face-to-face.” As a result, not only is the physical body of the worker not mandated in any particular space, the workplace is also fundamentally spatially reconstructed as bodies of all levels, pay-grades, and teams are allowed to move about freely. This image confuses the image of a bureaucratic workplace in which the static
“location of physical space” (Acker 1990) is central to gendered divisions of labor and
the overall construction of gendered organizations.

Like Rachel, Kate also works for a large tech company based in the Puget Sound region.
Also similar to Rachel, Kate experiences flexible team structures as a new spatial arrangement of
her labor process, allowing her to work from home:

*Do you commute to work or do you work remotely?*
I commute.

*Were you remote at your previous jobs?*
At the gaming place I was remote about 60% percent of the time, but I like half
and half. It breaks up the routine. Every once and in while it’s nice to stay in your
pajamas on the couch and do work. I like that. But I also like going in because I
like the current people on my team.

Kate also notes that her remote work environment is, in part, the result of her company's effort to
reorganize the labor process not only to a team-based structure, but also a product-oriented work
environment:

*What did reorganization mean?*
Instead of being a matrix environment, we moved to a functional or project based
environment. What that means is, for example, structural analysis used to sit
together and they would be a service organization, and they would service fluids,
mechanical systems, structures… we broke that them up because 20 is too large of
a team for a manager, it should be about 8. That organization has been broken up
into little project teams based on the [product] they service.

Like Rachel, because Kate works in a product-oriented work environment organized into small
teams, visibility is less important for her work process than producing results. As long as she
completes her work, Kate can work from home. Once again, Kate’s experience of the flexible
workplace reveals an emphasis on production rather than visibility that is inextricably linked to
labor organization. A seemingly beneficial characteristic of the flexible workplace, parents, often
women, can use the product-oriented structure to their advantage “schedule more time around
their kids,” and creating more work-life balance. However, as participant narratives also reveal, emphases placed on productivity rather than visibility can have different outcomes across various teams and workspaces. Following naturalized gender tropes and gendered workplace logic that construct men as the ideal worker, neoliberal, product-teams develop work cultures exclusive to gendered work styles. In particular, participant narratives often revealed that in teams for which 24/7 work schedules are the norm, the bodies that fill these jobs are often male.

For example, Amanda and Sarah work at the same company in Seattle, Washington. Working on teams with a higher proportion of women and parents than other departments within the company, Amanda and Sarah report great work-life balance and satisfaction with company culture. In particular, Amanda, a recruiter in a female-dominated department identifies the following about her work-life experience:

How is your own work-life balance? Are you having a positive experience?
I am… I feel like it's up to the person. I think if you're one of those people who is super ambitious and you don't have things on the side you know like keeping you from going home, you could easily work a lot of hours and people might get used to that. If my manager wants me to work late I’m just like nope, I got stuff! And I've never had a manager [in my department] who didn't respect that. Most of us on my team try to keep a consistent work-life balance and about eight-hour days. But you can have a flexible schedule, I could work from home if I wanted.

Though Amanda feels satisfied with her “flexible” and independently monitored work-life arrangement, she correspondingly identifies that the experience of being overworked is often the fault of the individual: “I think if you're one of those people who is super ambitious and you don't have things on the side … you could easily work a lot of hours.” Further, in Amanda’s experience, if an employee and teammate is not conforming to the work-life habits and standards of other team members, they thereby run the risk of receiving too many project assignments from the team leader, and become overburdened. In this assessment, Amanda reveals the somewhat
panoptic labor controls of the product-oriented and team-work environment. Acknowledging the group dynamic that sustains a standard 8-hour workday: “Most of us on my team try to keep a consistent work-life balance…”, Amanda demonstrates the self-disciplinary character of her team work-life culture.

Like Amanda, Sarah works in a female dominated department within their company. Though there are proportionally more men on her team, because many of the male workers are parents with caregiving responsibilities, the culture Sarah’s team is similarly conducive to work-life balance:

_Do you ever feel like you get overworked? Or overwhelmed?_
I get overwhelmed. Most of the time it's something I can fix myself if I talk about it. If there’s too much stuff and something I’m working on just blows up, there’s always a team of people who you can work with. You just can’t say yes to everything… like if you say yes to everything, you are going to have too much work to do.

_So you need to know how to balance?_
Yeah, I have a 13 month old daughter, and I see her every night and morning and I work exactly an 8-hour day. Its very regulated by me. I mean, I found a team I could do that on. There are multiple teams at [this company] where you can do that and multiple teams at [this company] where you can't. And the people that want that work-life balance will not gravitate towards those teams where you can't have it.

The rhetoric in Sarah’s description is remarkably similar to that of Amanda. Like Amanda, Sarah states that, while her own work-life balance is good, her arrangement is the product of personal choice: “If you say yes to everything, you are going to have too much work to do.” In addition, less emphasized in both Amanda’s and Sarah’s stories is the panoptic force at work in regulating what constitutes as normal work life balance for each team. In particular, Amanda, after stating the individual is to fault for feeling overworked, also acknowledges that she has a team (of mostly women) that keeps a similar schedule. Sarah similarly mentions first that it is the fault of the individual for feeling overworked. However, following this assessment, Sarah states that
although she made the choice to have an 8-hour workday, it is in fact the team culture that allows her to have such balance: “I mean, I found a team I could do that on.” In Amanda and Sara’s descriptions, in product-oriented work environments, teams function to panoptically regulate standard output levels and therefore desired levels of work-life balance.

Upon questioning both Amanda and Sarah further, they reveal that not only is work-life culture specific to certain teams, this balance is also specific to gender and gendered occupations. For example, I ask Amanda the following questions about the gender composition of her workplace:

*Does recruiting typically have more women than men?*
Yes.

*Why do you think that is?*
HR in general attracts more women. If you look at [the company] overall… like finance and development, more men flock to those, and more women flock to HR. I think that’s because HR is the softer side of business.

*What do you mean by softer side?*
Employee relations, working with people. Benefits, hiring, personnel. I think they just enjoy it more.

In this excerpt, Amanda acknowledges the occupational segregation that happens in her workplace. Further, she reveals that segregation happens though conventional gender logic in which women are predisposed to enjoy and excel in certain “soft” occupations (Acker 1990), a conventionally gendered trope. In addition to occupational gendering, Amanda continues, acknowledging that not only are occupations gendered, but that gendering results in differential work-life expectations across teams due to naturalized gendered assumptions:

*Do you think there’s anything about the culture in the development and engineering departments that keep women away?*
Oh the engineering conundrum. Whew. That’s a big one. There is a perception about work-life balance that would keep women away.

*Is it a real issue?*
There is a lot of talk but I think that it’s also the culture [here], which is a sort of scrappy, you get to own really cool projects… it is so exciting because it is super
intense and challenging but at the same time you may turn off people who may not appreciate that level of responsibility and intensity. It's not for everybody. But people will maintain their hours themselves and work on teams that work for them.

In her somewhat vague and round-about answers to my questions, Amanda, having already acknowledged that men gravitate to engineering, states that women avoid these teams because they cannot handle the “responsibility and intensity” of the challenging and demanding masculine work culture. This statement is in stark contrast to the description of her own team that Amanda finds “collaborative,” conducive to work-life balance, and feminized. Furthermore, Amanda reveals that the segregated and gendered nature of the team structure at her company creates normative, panoptically-regulated, and localized work cultures. Similarly, Sarah, pushed to expand on work-life culture among teams, echoes Amanda’s observations:

*Do you see a lot of gender diversity across teams?*
I think it depends what team you are on. What team you're on here really dictates what kind of experience you are going to have. Your either going to be on a team where everyone is going to be working 8 or 9 hour days, like our team… or you can be on a team that works long hours.

*What teams fall on either side of that spectrum?*
I would say the development teams work longer hours, and the business teams are more in the middle.

In a workplace structured around production-oriented teams, gendering is realized through the segregation of bodies according to conventional gender roles. In this system, implies that women expected to perform, conventionally expected to perform childcare, are often grouped according teams with shorter work days and better work-life balance. In contrast, more masculinized team settings, such as development, typically work longer days, which can be an issue for women attempting to begin a family or balance work with childcare.
Though the notion of conventional gender roles employed in the modern workplace may seem like an outdated analytic framework, many women reported experiencing negative feedback, discrimination, or a stalled career due to conventional notions of women’s gender roles. For instance, Lilly, a senior developer at a mid-sized international software company, and “breadwinner” for her family, reported being told to “take time off for her kids” by her boss while working full-time at a previous tech job. Similarly, Anne, an engineer at a small tech company reported “watching” as her friend, a senior worker at the company, was passed over for promotion for a less-senior male colleague because she was pregnant, and assumed more committed to her family. The leadership team at the reported company was composed of all men. Another woman discussed her experience of calling her workplace, a large mostly-male tech company, while at the hospital, about to give birth because the company was having trouble processing her “disability” request so she could take time off to care for her child. These narratives reveal that conventional gender roles are the forefront of the organizational imagination. However, because women are also expected to be more committed to the reproductive labor process than their careers, workplace logic often excludes womanhood in rationalized organizational policy and notions of a “job.” In particular, the final narrative reveals that women are often simply not considered in the logic of the masculine organization, in which giving birth is a feminized “disability” and disrupts labor process.

Moreover, as women’s narratives demonstrate, though they experience considerable flexibility in their work schedules, their individualism is in fact mediated by the very teams that offer them the illusion of agency. Many of the participants reported working on teams with a large proportion of women despite the predominantly male composition of their workplaces. In
addition, though they often expressed that their work cultures were conducive to work-life balance, several women reported having a “work-life” arrangement specific to their panoptically-regulated and gendered work environment. Though the flexibility of their labor process offers women considerable power over the spatial and temporal character of their work, many of the women interpret this power as the product of individual choice and preference for conventionally gendered work rather than as a systemic organizational gendering: “I found a team I could do that on.” Given the gender composition of most tech-industry workplaces, it is likely that women experience, rather than choice, pressure to work in gender segregated occupations and teams that follow the logic of conventional binary gendering.

Placed teams with lower output expectations following conventional work-life balance arrangements, the gender segregation women experience reaffirms masculinized work culture as described by Acker (1990). Grouping women into feminized teams expected to produce less than male-dominated teams, the production-oriented, neoliberal, and flexible workplace maintains a system reliant on naturalized, common sense gender roles, but reinforces segregation through a new organizational logic. That is, participant experiences reveal that although they are offered comparable compensation to men, they are grouped into departments and teams with lower production expectations (influenced by work-life balance standards) stifling their organizational influence and stalling their career growth. The effect of occupation gender segregation is also reflected in participant responses. Because the team structured workplace is regulated by output level, individuals that produce more, often advance faster through corporate hierarchies. For instance, as one participant observes:

I mean there are I’m sure there are people that come in, work an 8 hour day, and get promoted. It might take them 3 years, and it might take somebody else that worked harder, or worked more hours, 2 years… If your priority is your family,
then you are going to have a slower promotion cycle, and if your priority is your career, you are going to have faster promotions.

Though this statement does not address gender directly, the gendered consequences are clear. For women expected to work on teams with better work-life arrangements, and therefore work fewer hours and potentially produce less than their male counterparts, product-oriented, neoliberal work-environments could be a decellerant to women’s careers. The neoliberal character of the above participant’s product-oriented work logic divorces the very real social circumstances of workplace from the actual labor embodied workers perform. In this culture, the gendered realities and expectations of non-work-lives are not considered in promotion cycles, team organization, or production. Rather, in the flexible workplace structured around product-focused teams, organizational logic is gendered by the fact that the “job” remains a masculinized idealization in which the best worker also the most temporally committed producer (Williams 2012; Brumley 2014).

Conclusion

Despite new flexible workplace paradigms in which teams have replaced individualized “jobs,” and abstract tasks are replaced by temporal product assignments (Williams, Et al 2012), gendered organizations are recreated through the same naturalized gender framework as Acker (1990) identifies in her original theory of gendered organizations. However, because flexible organization encourages workplaces to rely on output measures and panoptic, horizontal methods of labor regulation rather than space and visibility to organize gendered bodies, the logic of the gendered organization is changed. Focusing on output rather visibility to demonstrate commitment to work, flexible workplaces become gendered through supposed individually rather than systematically regulated occupational gender segregation. Though the flexible
workplace rewards workers for increasing output, women are still expected to orient their workday around mythological motherhood commitments. As such, women often exist within teams of workers with similar work-life commitments and schedules, often yielding gender homogenous teams. Therefore, in flexible workplaces with neoliberal policy and culture, hegemonic gender conventions manifest through individualized and panoptic self-regulated (scheduled) labor control.

In a global labor market increasingly characterized by low compensation, uncertainty, production-oriented work schedules, and lack of benefits, flexible labor organization produces new consequences for the bodies composing the gendered organization. Organizing the labor process around production while decreasing worker protections and stability disproportionately effects women existing in conventionally gendered environments. Expected to perform the majority of childcare, women in product-oriented, neoliberal work cultures risk career deceleration and occupational segregation for lacking the masculine characteristics of the “ideal worker.” Though participants often rationalized gender segregation as personal preference for certain team environments, their performance of femininity underscores the embeddedness of gender both at work and in non-work life (Kelly 2010). The flexible workplace has not altered the conventions of gendered social organization in the United States. Rather, despite incredible gains in women’s workplace rights and increased representation among women in professional work and leadership, women’s legitimacy and capacity work for work is continually undermined by patriarchal notions of gender complementarity. The essentialist idea that gender is binary reinforces the legacy of gender “roles” as well as gender myths, including the assumption that
women are predisposed to perform childcare. Until the sexism of gendered culture is addressed, work will continue to exist as a masculine domain.

References


