

Decoding Embedded Gendering in Mobile Working – A Case Study

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Joan Acker's concern underlying her conceptualisation of deeply embedded gendering of work processes is that social and organizational processes are depicted as "gender neutral" while on the contrary they perpetuate deeply embedded gendered constructions of power and processes. Acker suggests that this project of hegemonic masculinity is carried out through what she conceptualizes as the "abstract job" based managerial policies and practices. This study attempts to engage with the concept of "abstract job" in the changing context of mobile workers. The study also explores the responses of mobile workers to the gendered changes in mobile working by adapting Merton's fivefold framework depicting responses to such changes. The findings provide conceptual insights into decoding embedded gendering in mobile working.

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Introduction

Acker's (1990:142) concern underlying her conceptualisation of deeply embedded gendering of work processes is that social and organizational processes are depicted as "gender neutral". Studies suggest that instead they perpetuate deeply embedded gendered constructions of power and processes (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016; Padavic et al., 2020; Ozkazanc & Clark, 2018) on account of hegemonic masculinity (Hearn, 2019) and its dominance (Kelan, 2017:178) in the "everyday practicalities of gender interactions" (Jagger, 2008). Attempts at "(un)doing gender approaches at work" (Kelan, 2017: 174) with ferreting out of the manifestations of gender remaining a formidable task.

It is in grappling with this "ferreting out" problem that Merton's (1938: 672-82) conceptualization of culture, which posits that in every context, there is an identifiable primary cultural frame of reference of "dominant expectations" and "allow-

able means” which underlies thinking and action, is useful. For instance, the primary cultural frame of reference in the Indian context can be hypothesized to be founded “on the basis of women’s identification with childbearing and domestic life” (Acker, 1990:152). And the primary cultural frame of reference in profit-oriented organizations is to maximize utilization of every resource towards the dominant expectation of profit maximization.

Seen through Merton’s (1968: 212) dominant expectations-allowable means frame of reference, socialization processes inculcate “the construction of divisions along gender” (Acker, 1990 :146) around the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1995) which marginalizes women in social and organizational structures and processes. Studies suggest that when hegemonic masculinity is the “dominant expectations-allowable means” frame, economic exploitation (Goger, 2013), social and managerial suppression (Mezzadri, 2016), denial of political and worker rights of women (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015) are some of the consequences given the interplay between deeply embedded patriarchal hegemonic masculinity and the pervasive profit maximizing interests (Ayaz et al.,2019: 898).

The embedded nexus between patriarchy and profit-making interests according to Acker (1990:154) revolves around the centrality of the “abstract job” based managerial policies and practices. Acker further depicts the “worker” holding the “abstract job” as a universal “man” and “the real worker is the male worker”

(1990: 149). Organizations implement the “abstract job” by recruiting workers with the expectation that the worker should exist “only for the work” (Ackers, 1990:149) and “cannot have other imperatives that cannot be included within the definition of the job” (Acker, 1990 :149). Any “worker-occupant” of a given “abstract job” has to align with the “dominant expectations-allowable means” frame of reference of both the embedded constructions of hegemonic masculinity marginalizing women as well as the organizational-managerial interests of profit maximization with the understanding that “too many obligations outside the boundaries of the job would make a worker unsuited for the position...” (Acker, 1990 :149). And who, therefore, is “unsuited” in this conceptual line of thinking? The Acker answer is unequivocal – “the woman worker assumed to have legitimate obligations other than those required by the job, did not fit with the abstract job” (Acker, 1990:149). They are even “devalued because women are assumed to be unable to conform to the demands of the abstract job’ (Acker, 1990 :152).

Thus the concepts of “abstract job”, “the real worker”, the notion that the most suited “abstract job-real worker” is a universal “man”, translates to mean that any “worker-occupant” in an “abstract job” is one who can demonstrate total commitment to the assigned roles and responsibilities and will not engage in any other “off-work” activity.

Concretely in the “real world” of organizational imperatives, both the expect-

tations of hegemonic masculinity as well as the dictates of profit maximizing management come together in the execution of the “abstract job” in and through a “body” which occupies the “abstract job.” Reading between the lines, implementation of the abstract job can only be achieved if the “body” which occupies the “abstract job” has what can be termed as an “uninterrupted work capability.” The key idea which fulfills the expectations of hegemonic masculinity and managerial utilization of the “body” occupying the “abstract job” is in the operative word “uninterrupted”.

The delivery of the idea of the “abstract job” is through the concept of “uninterrupted work” which meets not only the expectations of hegemonic masculinity and also of exploitative profit- making imperatives.

Acker’s theorizing is in the abstract domain, the positing of “a job” is an abstract category, separate from the worker, is an essential move in creating jobs as mechanisms of compulsion and control over work processes...Use of such abstract systems continually reproduces the underlying gender assumptions and the subordinated or excluded place of women (Acker, 1990 :154) But abstract theorizing is an idea; and the idea to become “real” has to be grounded in the organizational praxis of profit making. The delivery of the idea of the “abstract job” is through the concept of “uninterrupted work” which meets not only the expectations of hegemonic masculin-

ity and also of exploitative profit- making imperatives.

The concept of “uninterrupted work capability” of every “abstract job-worker occupant” is the key operative idea decoded from the Acker conceptualization of the “abstract job.” This concept straddles both gendered and exploitative structures and interests because it is not only an articulation of hegemonic masculinity but is also a representation of work intensification which constitutes exploitative managerialism.

The concept of “uninterrupted work capability” emerges as the key construct underlying Acker’s conceptualization of gendered work which not only determines “goals, purposes and interests” but also “defines, regulates and controls” the socially legitimized and allowable means to ensure adherence to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity as well as exploitative managerialism in the pursuit of profit maximization. The concept of “uninterrupted work capability” is the primary frame of reference which produces as well as reproduces both gendered discriminatory embeddedness as well as exploitative managerial perspectives, policies and practices.

The centrality of “uninterrupted work capability” in gendered processes and exploitative managerialism does not mean that agency is not exercised by the “worker-occupant” of “abstract jobs.” Structuration theory posits that “the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality”

(Giddens, 1984: 25) which is both “constraining and enabling.” The primacy of “uninterrupted work capability” in the structure-agency duality throws up a diversity of agentic responses. In order to examine this duality of structure and agency, here again Merton’s fivefold “dominant expectations-allowable means” framework can be adapted to conceptualize the enactment modalities of agentic resistance in dealing with the embedded gendering of social and organizational processes (Merton, 1938: 195-210).

The fivefold agentic response continuum takes the form of “conformity” where both expectations and means revolving around “uninterrupted work” expectations are adhered to in both social and organizational spaces; “innovation” where “uninterrupted work” expectations are accepted but allowable means are rejected; ritualism where “uninterrupted work” cultural expectations are abandoned or scaled down and allowable means are leveraged to one’s own advantage; “retreatism” where there is assimilation of both “uninterrupted work” cultural expectations and allowable means but there is inability to cope leading ultimately to flight from both social as well as organizational spaces; rebellion where both “uninterrupted work” cultural expectations and institutionalized means are rejected in order to create alternative responses.

And as the primacy of “uninterrupted work” expectations adopted by management means is faced with varied agentic challenges, in the gendered social order

driven by hegemonic masculinity and exploitative managerialism, “anomie ensues” (Merton, 1938: 674) in the form of the breakdown of dominant norms and arrangements which hitherto constituted their status quo of dominance, discrimination, devaluation and exploitation in both social and organizational settings. Dominant power holders react by resorting to tighter controls even as “the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority” (Gramsci, 1999: 248). It is therefore hypothesized that the hegemony of the dominant groups intensifies in organizational and work processes through the centrality of the policies and practices of the “uninterrupted work” regime.

Method

The conceptual discourse up to this point is meant to clarify the focus of this study which primarily is to examine empirically whether there is evidence of how both patriarchal hegemonic masculinity and exploitative managerial structures deploy policy and practices centered around the primacy of the concept of “uninterrupted work capability” in order to pursue its profit maximization orientation. The study also seeks to examine the modalities of agency as visualized by the Merton agentic response framework as the mobile workers confront the “uninterrupted work” oriented regime.

The choice of a qualitative approach for this study was primarily to gain deep understanding (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 227) by listening to those who are sub-

jected to the “uninterrupted work capability” dynamic and to “ferret out” the narratives and counter narratives revolving around the concept in the lived experiences of “mobile” workers in an airline organization context.

Since this study is based on the ordinary, everyday lives of mobile workers, the narrative approach is not only best suited to access the conversational resources of subjects (Lyotard, 1984; Kvale, 1996; Van Maanen et al., 2007; Morison & Macleod, 2013: 566–77) but it also presents the possibility of generating interpretive understanding in the words of the respondents themselves (van Maanen, 1998). The semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005 : 88) of 57 respondents is above the standard which is around 30 (Boddy, 2005). Special efforts were made to adhere to ethical standards and prior informed consent was obtained (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The reflexive-interpretative analysis and interpretation of narrative extracts are presented next.

Analysis, Interpretation & Insights

The discourse thus far on the sensitizing concepts front has thrown up the proposition that the dominant norms-allowable means stranglehold on mobile workers is constituted by the combined effect of the patriarchal and exploitative managerialism deployed through the instrumentality of the concept of “uninterrupted work capability”. Whether this conceptual insight is borne out by the narratives of airline mobile workers is examined through the analysis and inter-

pretation of the evidence gathered for the purposes of this study from 57 airline mobile workers.

Morphology of Uninterrupted Work Regimes

Mobile workers testify that management has created a hostile environment with the adoption of hardline tactics against mobile workers who do not fall in line - with liberal use of threats, suspensions, terminations and denial of even leave (P2). The denial of even eligible leave based on bilateral agreements is not only evidence of managerial thinking where “leave” is articulated as “work interruption” at the individual level but is also evidence of hardline tactics in establishing an “uninterrupted work” regime.

Mobile workers have had the advantage of hard won worker rights through collective struggles using collective bargaining, direct action and legal recourse. The general ecosystem of militant managerialism has led to not only erosion in the hard won legal rights but also in the declining influence of collective organizations and their diminished ability to be heard as a representative voice leading to enhanced insecurity of mobile workers. Such a scenario is also conducive to managements in enforcing “uninterrupted work” practices even at individual levels quite often infringing bilateral agreements on working conditions with impunity (P44).

The continuous assault on mobile worker security by militant

managerialism combined with the weakening of collective representation and voice by the management also leads to not only the weakening of mobile worker faith in the protective ability of trade unions, but it also leads to the erosion of trade union authority over rank and file mobile workers. Union directives are viewed with suspicion which in turn weakens union voice further, often engineered by non-responsive managerialism. This reinforces managerial hegemony which makes mobile worker sense of vulnerability even more acute. (P44)

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Since there is a general decline in employment levels in airlines due to job cuts as well as freeze on recruitment, relocation is a difficult proposition. The curtailment of mobility from one organization to another due to job cuts at the airline industry level works to the advantage of managements adopting hardline tactics to ensure alignment of every mobile worker with the maximization of work role continuity. The inability of mobile workers to move to other organizations reduces the leverages available to counter managements (P44).

In the pursuit of enforcing the primacy of uninterrupted work maximization, hard line management tactics is directed towards denying time off which is a right conferred by hard won bilateral

agreements. As it is there are frictions and tensions on the home front with spouses due to non-availability at home on account of mobile working time, mobile worker commuting time, elder care time. Insecure work environments built on the premise of uncompromising primacy of “uninterrupted work capability” policies and practices lead to disrupted spousal relationships and unstable home environments. Tensions at both ends could be unhinging for mobile workers with a greater impact on women mobile workers on account of dual but unequal responsibilities leading to alienated consciousness. (P1)

Morphology of Uninterrupted Work

The alienated consciousness is a product of the changing industrial relations ecosystem which is a product of “uninterrupted work” demands and the direct impact it has on the psycho-social life of the mobile worker. The narrative below gives a graphic picture of the changing work-life dynamics of a mobile worker.

“You are out for 8 days and then you just get one day at home and then you are back on a flight... no public holidays, no weekend offs... you have families to look after and you have got a lot of work to do at home... so that’s make it really tough...right now there is no family life and it is getting very difficult. Physically you are tired most of the time...you are not getting enough rest even in the aircraft... if you are doing 16 hours flight and you are not getting your 5 hours horizontal rest that’s not right... It is supposed

to be given to you...again, on a 16 hour flight earlier the crew complement would be 16 but it has been reduced to 11... Now we have proficiency checks every year. You have to go through medicals and if your BMI is above 22 you get 3 months extension and after that you are grounded. ...and people who apply for leave don't get leave... you have 10 CLs for the year and that also you have to apply 45 days in advance and when you are applying 45 days in advance they either give a CL or they can easily schedule a flight... by the end of March they have 8 CLs still pending...there is nobody to talk to... they do not reply to your mails... there is a lot of stress, lot of negativity... and there are other things also in your life" (P56).

Working terms and conditions and well laid out due process arrangements leave the mobile worker drained out, demoralized, dispirited and disenchanted.

Non-stop "uninterrupted" mobile working protocols combined with the physical and social demands and deprivations consequent to changing managerial policies and practices which have scant respect for time honored legally sanctioned agreements and customary practices regarding working terms and conditions and well laid out due process arrangements leave the mobile worker drained out, demoralized, dispirited and disenchanted with the once celebrated joy of flying. Both genders are subjected to intense work intensification but women feel the brunt of the consequences even more.

Child care, elder care, spousal demands when juxtaposed with the unremitting whirl of mobile working roles and rules lead to extreme stresses and strains on women mobile workers.

"Having a child there is no special protection or privilege... You don't fly you don't earn money... Progression is based on seniority and women who seek motherhood fall behind..." (P 38)

"My kids are used to my flying... When I go... I will put chick peas, paratha in the fridge and then they will have to manage somehow... This is the main thing, being professional is one thing and being mother is another thing... My husband is not a typical father type...he doesn't involve himself ... Once I called... When no one is picking ... I was worried... Then the neighbor has had to go and look them up... Around the world flight... colleague was surprised at what I had to do... teach my kids on phone... I was doing some homework project help. I have always maintained Indian time. I cannot keep my phone off. Even before the flight... when I'm supposed to rest... I can't. Once there was smoke in the kitchen... Have taught them how to close circuit breaker... It is your priorities... I need kids... I'm okay with that..." (P37)

Uninterrupted work demands at the workplace end and disproportionate elder care and child care and home care demands at the home end leave women mobile workers with harried minds, frayed nerves and volatile emotions apart from lost earnings, loss of seniority, and loss of recognition of capability and

acknowledgement of demonstrated performance.

“Being a woman in the mobile working world, the difference is very much there... You don’t get the benefit of doubt when mistakes are made. You have to be diligent, hardworking, simple... cannot be daring, exceptional... she is good being a girl... I know that I am better than many others and did not feel the burden of the gender.. If you do badly... They label these women; men do not get labelled... WhatsApp groups are misogynist... porn comes up. Women who take maternity leave are seen as less professional... they are more oriented to raise their children is the unsaid undercurrent... there is lot of focus on what we wear... You take off your nail paint before going on a check flight...”(P38)

Discriminatory evaluations of women as such using non-role considerations and also the colorable valuation of women seeking the right to motherhood in mobile working role performance is symptomatic of the deep rooted undercurrent of hegemonic masculinity which devalues, denigrates and discriminates against women in spite of demonstrated competence and comparable performance. This in spite of being as good or even better than their male counterparts on the knowledge, skills and on-the-job performance fronts.

Morphology of Agency

The evidence related to the agentic resistance of mobile workers against the strategy and tactics to enforce an “unin-

terrupted work capability” ecosystem takes three forms - retreatism, ritualism and rebellion.

“When you reach dispatch if you own your uniform you have agreed with whatever is happening to you, so either you don’t come on a flight or if you come on the flight, it means you have accepted whatever is being given to you... and the idea is not to talk about problems... it just hurts people more...”. (P 55)

Once a mobile worker wears his/her uniform and logs in for duties as assigned and goes on board the aircraft, the “body” should just adhere to what is enjoined as responsibilities.

Several mobile workers acknowledge the insecurities but they adopt a strategy based on retreatism and ritualism where the body performs the ritual and the mind retreats. The view here is that once a mobile worker wears his/her uniform and logs in for duties as assigned and goes on board the aircraft, the “body” should just adhere to what is enjoined as responsibilities. The evidence on display here is evidence of the contradiction between mind and body when “performing” in the context of the “uninterrupted work” regime in operation. The body is populated by an alienated mind and the sentiment is one of ritualized retreat engaged in sullen performance and stoic resistance.

“I have been a fighter... cannot change it as an individual..Now I am just

a little wiser.. better thing is to sidestep... it eases the pain..." (P 40)

The interpretive insight from this escape into retreatism is that the counter to managerial unilateralism is not unilateral individualism in resisting the "uninterrupted work" regime but the collective restoration of bilateralism.

Not everyone retreats into ritualistic performance duty. Some continue to struggle against the travails of the "uninterrupted work" environment.

"Every circular that comes out our first reaction is NO now..." (P 6)

Most women mobile workers reject the "uninterrupted work" norms imposed on them and they make use of whatever legitimate allowable means to show their resentment and display their resistance.

"Today very quiet people are so militant...because they have been harassed. They are unable to manage.... Now if you report sick as per bilateral, still they send a Doctor to some crew members' houses to verify" (P 20)

Even reporting sick becomes an act of resistance to the "uninterrupted work" thrust of management tactics. The power holders faced with the threat of loss of control, intensify retaliatory action by sending Doctors to verify in violation of bilateral which leads to further disaffection.

"It was very clear that bilateral had been agreed upon...the bilateral, I insisted on it ... not because of union or manage-

ment because it was the legal thing to do ... had been sending emails logging in violations... seventeen of us were terminated ... filed a case...Union office bearers said this is your own battle.... the other 16 don't want to do it ... I was told that I filed a half-baked case and I've spoiled it for the others ...in the fourth hearing the judge issued orders... the court had given four weeks to reinstate which was not complied with. we filed for contempt of court...I had only tried to undo the wrong...and bring back dignity of the crew..." (P 15)

Mobile workers' expectation is that the bilateral will be complied with. Representations of violations are viewed as an act of defiance by management. The experience of loss of work, income and reputation due to unjustified and unfair termination action forces a mobile worker to initiate legal action even as the union abandons the member on grounds that it will harm the interests of those who do not want to resort to legal recourse. The irony is that even when the Court rules in the mobile worker's favor, higher management does not comply leading the litigants to file a contempt petition to get reinstated as per Court orders. This narrative captures the troubles and travails of an individual mobile worker who puts up a resistance to the "uninterrupted work" regime because as one respondent puts it - a "demoralized pilot is a dangerous pilot..." (P 51)

Discussion

The evidence from this study suggests that there is a sense of alienation

of airline mobile workers given the “uninterrupted work” syndrome. There is also evidence of agentic resistance to the “uninterrupted work” policies and practices.

The evidence from this study suggests that there is a sense of alienation of airline mobile workers given the “uninterrupted work” syndrome.

Strangely, Marx’s response to the question “what constitutes the alienation of labor?” (Bottomore & Rubel, 1973:177), which spells out several interlinked elements associated with the alienated class relations conception - work not fulfilling, negates self, produces misery, denies wellbeing, hinders self-development, is physically exhausting, is mentally debasing - seems almost synonymous with the lived experiences of gendered mobile workers battling “uninterrupted work” policies, practices and processes as shown by evidence in this study.

Acker takes the view that “class relations are always gendered” (Acker, 1990: 145). Acker further observes that “gender processes and ideologies are embedded in globalizing capitalism in the separation of capitalist production and human reproduction and the corporate claims to non-responsibility for reproduction; in the important role of hegemonic masculinities in globalizing processes, and in the ways that gender serves as a resource for capital” (Acker, 2004:17). The evidence in this study shows that the gen-

der resource is exploited through the “uninterrupted work” regime which silences unions, discredits unions in the eyes of mobile workers through ignoring collective representations, engages in brazen violations of bilateral agreements, denies leave entitlements, increases flight duty spread-over, reduces rest periods, reduces number of crew members on board, targets mobile workers who do not comply, victimizes mobile workers who display leadership on behalf of fellow worker grievances, short changes work-life balance, spares no room for child and elder care, disrupts spousal relations, suspends, terminates and disregards even Court orders. All in the name of “uninterrupted work” delivery at the individual mobile worker level.

Even as paid work is experienced as “alienated labor” by women mobile workers like any other worker, in addition women workers experience embedded exploitation in the hands of hegemonic masculinity - a condition which has been described aptly by Marx in these words (Marx, 2007: 82) – “the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of worker to production, and all relations of servitude are but modifications and consequences of this relation”. “Relations of servitude” reproduce patriarchal structures and structures of domination and exploitation in such a manner that “social and cultural structures alike are perceived as “natural phenomena” (Lukacs, 1971: 92-103). In this sense, the concept of “uninterrupted work” is not gender “neutral” but is intrinsically gender “leveraged” because ultimately, the exploitative structures and processes which

produce relations of servitude single mindedly leverage every conceivable factor towards profit maximization. This is the latent and manifest goal of the “uninterrupted work” regime – the normalization of social submissiveness through cultural anxiety achieved in this case through “uninterrupted work” policies and practices.

And as Sen (2009: 8) cautions, “We have to ‘read’ what we feel and seem to see, and ask what these perceptions indicate and how we may take this into account without being overwhelmed by them”. As the evidence in this study shows, three of Merton’s five agentic response possibilities of ritualism, retreatism and rebellion are in evidence as women struggle with anomie and alienation in the face of patriarchies, hierarchies and exploitative structures brought on by the intensification of mobile work demands through the “uninterrupted work” strategies and tactics of a more aggressive management. It is the interpretive “reading” of the key idea behind managerial maneuvers which can provide insights to launch sustainable counter action to restore more humane, democratic and egalitarian relationships, processes and outcomes.

Conclusion

Dashper (2019) observes that masculinist undercurrents leveraged by profit-oriented structures continue to normalize gendered-alienated work. However, “What moves us, reasonably enough, is not the realization that the world falls short of being completely just

– which few of us expect – but there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate”. (Sen, 2009:7)

The Acker concept of “abstract job” has to be translated into a “remediable” concept of “uninterrupted work” in order to mount a coordinated counter narrative to deal with gendered injustice embedded in mobile workplaces.

And this resistance needs a transformational frame not only in terms of an “abstract” formulation as in Acker but in the Amartya Sen sense of actionable “remediable” frames of reference. The Acker concept of “abstract job” has to be translated into a “remediable” concept of “uninterrupted work” in order to mount a coordinated counter narrative to deal with gendered injustice embedded in mobile workplaces. Cultural sensitization has to sublimate to the praxis of conscientization in the Freire (1996) sense – concrete manifestations of “uninterrupted work” practices need countering through both critical consciousness and contextualized action at individual and collective levels to call out remediable injustices in gendered mobile work processes.

Acknowledging managerial unilateralism as a remediable injustice and working to revive democratic bilateralism in mobile working contexts, in order not only to counter the exploitative nature of “uninterrupted work” regimes but also to address the unequal burden of

consequence for those on the wrong side of the gender divide, could mark a good beginning.

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