Transcending Work–Life Tensions: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of Work and Gender in the Middle East, North Africa, and India

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Extant research has considered how professional women negotiate the contradictory demands of work and gender. However, these contradictions may be exacerbated for women from and living in the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and India, as globalization has circulated Western discourses of gender equality that appear to conflict with non-Western discourses of gender difference. To better understand this potential conflict, we conducted a transnational feminist analysis that explored how discourses about work and gender created tensions for young women as they articulated their professional ideals. Three tensions surfaced in our analysis of interviews with women from the MENA region and India: (a) equality–difference, (b) modernity–tradition, and (c) individual–collective. To transcend these tensions, participants emphasized gender complementarity, professional and familial success, and their cultural pride. Taken together, these transcendence strategies indicate how gendered performances in the public sphere are tied to cultural and religious discourses and account for alternative renderings of work and woman that do not privilege Western ideals.

Keywords gender, intersectionality, MENA, organizational communication, transnational feminism, work–life balance

Feminist and organizational communication scholarship about work and gender has discovered surprising similarities among ideals for professional women in Western and non-Western contexts (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Essers, Benschop, & Doorewaard, 2010; Frenkel, 2008; Grünenfelder, 2013). Throughout much of the world, the ideal worker seems to be gendered masculine, embodies leadership and technical skills, privileges competition and autonomy, and has unlimited time to spend at work.
In contrast, the ideal woman appears to be devoted and attentive to her family’s needs (Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2009; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Frenkel, 2008) and able to manage work and family with little evidence of physical, mental, or emotional strain (D’Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2010; Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006). These contradictory identities pose numerous challenges for professional women in their attempts to manage the differences between professional and relational norms of the ideal worker and ideal woman (Ashcraft, 2005; Hayden, 2010; Lucas & Steimel, 2009; Morrow & Fredrick, 2012; Pichler, Simpson, & Stroh, 2008).

Yet when we dig beneath the surface to consider cultural, religious, and ideological distinctions, differences emerge in how professional women throughout the world frame and manage these challenges. For instance, the strategies that women in the West use to approach contradictions of gender and work are informed by Western assumptions that favor individual rights, personal responsibility, gender equality, and suppression of religious identities in the workplace (Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Gebert et al., 2014; Hayden & O’Brien Hallstein, 2010; Kuhn et al., 2008). In contrast, in many non-Western regions, professional women live in a context where religion and patriarchy prescribe a woman’s primary role as mother and homemaker, a man is considered the head of the household, and sex-segregated occupations are the norm (Metcalfe, 2008; World Bank, 2003).

What remains to be seen is how women with professional aspirations navigate this challenging landscape. Indeed, for non-Western young women in particular, negotiating the contradictions of the ideal worker and ideal woman can be especially challenging because globalization has circulated Western work ideals (i.e., gender equitable workplace practices, occupational choice) that become tenuous when embedded in non-Western contexts with more conservative gender norms (Metcalfe, 2008). Transnational feminism offers a lens that can best illuminate how these discourses of work and gender interface and take on new meanings in globalized contexts by problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions of Western ideologies (Dingo, 2012; Moghadam, 2005).

Toward this end, we took as our starting point interviews with young women from the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and India as they articulated their professional and personal desires for work and gender. Participants in this study were enrolled in a Young Women Leaders (YWL) program sponsored by the U.S. State Department and hosted by a large Midwestern university. Although the regions represented by this study’s participants were predetermined by the State Department and were not of our own selection, the YWL program offered an opportunity to consider underexplored voices. Our transnational feminist analysis brought three tensions to the surface—concerning equality–difference, modernity–tradition, and individual–collective—that reveal how dominant ideologies penetrate cultural discourses for women who are caught between Western and non-Western notions of work and gender. To transcend these tensions, participants emphasized family and professional success, their own cultural pride, and men and women as complementary rather than different. This analysis extends work–life research by focusing on non-Western constructions of work and gender, delineating transformative strategies that facilitate gendered agency within patriarchal contexts, and articulating how religion and culture work as powerful moderating discourses in navigating work and life (Dingo, 2012; Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014; Mohanty, 2003; Morrow & Fredrick, 2012). We also underscore the possibilities of transnational
feminist inquiry in organizational communication research. In the following sections we consider work and gender ideals in Western and non-Western contexts and elucidate transnational feminist theory.

**Literature Review**

Dominant meanings of work, both in Western and non-Western regions of the world, are gendered masculine and constructed in opposition to femininity (Acker, 1990, 2004; Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Accordingly, the ideal employee is a “male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children” (Acker, 1990, p. 149). Consequently, professional women face a double bind (Trethewey et al., 2006). They are considered unfit for the workplace when they exhibit stereotypically feminine behaviors and are deemed overly aggressive when they exhibit stereotypically masculine behaviors (Pichler et al., 2008).

Not surprisingly, many professional women do not accept this status quo and, instead, engage in transformative behaviors that allow them to address the demands of work and gender. But the specific ways in which individual women navigate this contradictory terrain varies with culture and context. Western framings of work–gender contradictions for professional women are informed by discourses of individualism, gender equality, and workplace meritocracy. For example, Buzzanell and colleagues (2005) discovered that working managerial mothers “re-framed the good mother image into a good working mother role that fit their lifestyles and interests” (p. 266). This redefined image involved planning and coordinating quality child care arrangements and finding pleasure in having the “best of both worlds” (p. 272).

In a second example, Turner and Norwood (2013) found that breastfeeding working women engaged in some behaviors that either privileged their worker identity (e.g., by keeping their pumping of breast milk to a minimum) or reinserted their maternal identity in the workplace (e.g., nursing their infants during meetings). In these cases, women are individually accountable for work–family negotiations instead of, for example, benefiting from systemic changes in organizational procedures. A woman’s ability to secure and find pleasure in work–family balance is seen as further evidence of gender equality; and there is a concerted effort to attract and keep women in leadership positions to enhance organizational efficiencies (i.e., increasing the range and depth of skills of the workforce, improving staff retention, enhancing an organization’s ability to anticipate and respond to customers’ needs; Alvesson & Billing, 2009, p. 166; see also Perriton, 2009).

In contrast, Frenkel (2008) explained that the “transnational gender order” dominating non-Western regions of the world perpetuates occupational segregation and constructs work and family spheres as mutually exclusive, which often forces professional women to make a choice (p. 355). Moreover, the stakes appear much higher for professional women in these regions in which religious, familial, and cultural norms are deeply ingrained within gender constructions. For instance, although most countries in the MENA region and India have enforced mandatory secondary education and evidenced substantially rising literacy rates for women (World Bank, 2004), women still experience occupational segregation. Systemic structural barriers and rigid cultural expectations funnel women into “feminine-typed” careers that offer lower wages, little room for growth, and long working hours (e.g., nursing, teaching, social work; Hyder & Reilly, 2005; Metcalfe, 2007; World Bank, 2003).
These occupational inequities are sometimes exacerbated by cultural and religious pressures for women in the MENA region and India to marry and have children, and often at an earlier age than their Western counterparts (Frenkel, 2008; Metcalfe, 2007). To be sure, the average age of marriage and first childbirth for women in the MENA region and India has increased since the 1970s but still remains in the early to midtwenties (CIA World Fact Book, 2014b; Quandl, 2014). The average number of children born per woman in these regions is approximately 3.3; in Afghanistan, the average is as high as 5.4 children per woman (CIA World Fact Book, 2014a). In addition, women who push against gendered occupational norms may be unable to marry and may be rejected or even murdered by their spouses and families (Faisal, 2010; “Female Afghani Pilot,” 2013; Maslak & Singhal, 2008; Raza, 2007).

In these non-Western contexts, research has documented several ways that professional women construct their work and gender identities. One strategy is to modify discourses of worker and woman to account for ethnicity and culture. For example, Essers and colleagues (2010) developed the concept of “female ethnicity” to explain how Muslim immigrant businesswomen construct an ideal feminine identity in a masculine context. Female ethnicity “refers to the diverse meanings of femininity attained through the intersection of gender and ethnicity in ethnic contexts” (Essers et al., 2010, p. 321) and manifests as both restrictive (i.e., Muslim businesswomen threaten the honor of Muslim men by traversing the public–private divide; femininity is a problem for entrepreneurship) and agential (i.e., Muslim businesswomen are autonomous professionals). The authors concluded, “Ethnic rules seem to make it difficult for women to live simultaneously according to the rules regarding honour and shame and at the same time, to function as entrepreneurs” (p. 328). In another example, Frenkel (2008) found that Israeli women working in high-tech careers “challenged the perceived correlation between long work hours and high productivity, as well as that between masculinity and permanent availability in the workplace” (p. 370). In essence, these women redefined femininity to balance their careers with cultural norms that disallowed childlessness, full-time child care, or forgoing their career for family. These Israeli women were expected to have and care for children and work outside the home.

A second strategy used to navigate the different expectations of work and gender is to emphasize working for culturally acceptable reasons. Grünenfelder (2013) highlighted how, in Pakistan, “the coexistence of competing discourses forces women employees to negotiate gender relations so that they can reconcile the requirements of being both a good Muslim and a good worker” (p. 600). Participants in this study emphasized that they worked due to financial need or to further their education and distanced themselves from “morally corrupt” or rural, uneducated women (p. 608). Some participants also highlighted their modesty and decency by having their husbands drive them to work and/or avoiding personal interactions with male colleagues.

A third strategy is to reframe oppressive interpretations of religion to accommodate gendered patterns that disrupt the norm. For example, Metcalfe (2008) highlighted the influence of Sharia law and the Quran in the cultural practices of countries in the Middle East regarding the role of women in the family, workforce, and society. While some believe that the role of women should be at the center of the family, others find in Islam an empowering resource that acknowledges “the different but complementary roles of men and women” in the workplace (p. 90). As Morin (2009) explained, these individuals “claim Islam as an essential part of their identity,
but they oppose the patriarchy prevailing in most Muslim societies and advocate for equal rights for women through a reinterpretation or reformation of Islam” (p. 387).

Taken together, this research moves beyond painting a one-dimensional picture of non-Western gender performances as either obedient or rebellious by highlighting the intersectionalities of diverse femininities, or how gender, race, class, and sexuality are linked in a way that can perpetuate oppression or transformation (Crenshaw, 1997). Indeed, these studies acknowledge “identities as being multiple, complex and ambivalent” (Essers et al., 2010, p. 323) and provide a foundation for an empirical examination of how young women from non-Western regions discursively construct work and gender.

Transnational feminism provides a useful lens to investigate this issue. Broadly defined, feminism problematizes patriarchal processes that are institutional, political, and cultural; that privilege men and masculinity; and that disenfranchise women and femininity (Calás & Smircich, 2006; Dow & Condit, 2005). Transnational feminism focuses on how patriarchal processes are networked in a context of globalization and indicates how women are connected by issues rather than by national identity (D’Enbeau, 2011; Metcalfe, 2008; Moghadam, 2005).

For the purposes of our study, transnational feminism offers several advantages. First, this approach invites consideration of how Western meanings of work and gender become problematic in non-Western contexts, in effect exacerbating the contradictions of ideal worker and ideal woman for those caught in the middle (see Dingo, 2012). Indeed, as globalization has circulated Western discourses about work and gender, scholars have noted that women from non-Western countries are more likely to be marginalized by these discourses because they do not account for the culturally entrenched patriarchal processes that shape local understandings and enactments of women’s labor (Chishti & Farhoumand-Sims, 2011; Morrow & Fredrick, 2012; Townsley, 2006). In fact, because of the colonialisit nature of Western discourses of individualism, non-Western women’s voices tend to be obscured and the structural and institutional changes necessary to make systemic gender changes in non-Western contexts are ignored (Dingo, 2012; True & Mintrom, 2001). Second, transnational feminist research exposes moments of resistance and gender transformation in local contexts, encouraging exploration of the unique discursive strategies employed by women throughout the world (Hegde, 2006; Shome, 2006). Third, in considering how work and gender are discursively constructed in diverse contexts, transnational feminist research encourages analyses that expose “how meanings shift as topoi transverse geopolitical contexts” (Dingo, 2012, p. 7) and seek out commonalities across multiple forms of difference such as gender, ethnicity, nation, and religion (Dempsey, Parker, & Krone, 2011; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Sreberny, 2001).

In brief, transnational feminism allowed us to look at how meanings of work and gender shift with context, and to point to the similarities and differences in women’s experiences throughout the world. Toward this end, we asked: How do young women from the MENA region and India discursively construct work and gender? In the next section, we describe this study’s method and analytic framework.

**Method**

**Participants and Context**

This study relied on interviews with young women from the MENA region and India who were also students in a YWL program, an all-women, six-week summer
program sponsored by the U.S. State Department through a competitive grant and hosted by a large Midwestern university. Each year, the program hosts young women from the MENA region and India. Student selection is handled directly by U.S. embassies through a comprehensive admission process that consists of a combination of writing samples, letters of recommendation, and multiple interviews. State Department guidelines require all participants to be proficient in English and that all elements of the curriculum be delivered in English. In many cases, students learn about the program by searching for career enhancement opportunities, through word of mouth, or through encouragement from their academic advisors or mentors.

Participants in this study came from the 2011 and 2012 summer YWL programs. In 2011, 18 women attended the program; in 2012, another 18 attended. At the beginning of each program, the authors invited the women to participate in a study about gender and work constructions in the MENA region and India. Of the attendees, 89% (n = 16) in 2011 and 56% (n = 10) in 2012 were interviewed, for a total of 26 participants. Of these, four were from Afghanistan, five from Egypt, six from India, five from Morocco, three from Pakistan, and three from Sudan. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 25 with an average age of 19 years. Their reported religions were Islam (n = 18), Hindu (n = 4), Christian/Catholic (n = 3), and Jain (n = 1). Although no specific information was provided about the women’s socioeconomic status, all women were attending university at the time of the program, a privilege that is typically reserved for middle- to upper-class families in these countries. The academic majors of the women included business (n = 5), English (n = 3), architecture (n = 2), commerce (n = 2), human resources and management information systems (n = 2), medicine (n = 2), political science (n = 2), engineering (n = 2), economics (n = 1), foreign languages (n = 1), journalism (n = 1), marketing (n = 1), physical training (n = 1), and psychology (n = 1).

From the perspective of the U.S. State Department, the YWL program has four main goals. First, the program seeks to equip students with “transferable” leadership skills, such as critical thinking, decision making, and communication. Second, the program asks students to engage in careful consideration of a social problem that they can take a position on and advocate for upon return to their home country. Third, the program works to foster goodwill between the United States and the students’ countries. Last, upon returning home, students become part of a large alumni network with access to networking and funding resources.

With these broader goals in mind, faculty and staff coordinators charged with administering the YWL program have flexibility in terms of curricular design and content. The program’s curriculum was a combination of conceptual (e.g., lecture, expert panels) and experiential learning (e.g., field trips, community service, cultural exchange). Drawing on the authors’ expertise in organizational, gender, and intercultural communication, the curriculum began by exploring Western theories of gender and leadership and then encouraged participants to contribute their own knowledge about these conceptual areas through classroom discussion, activities, and assignments. From a curriculum development perspective, the goal was not to indoctrinate students or to privilege Western perspectives as the most useful. Instead, exposure to Western assumptions about gender and work served as a catalyst to explore theoretical and conceptual differences in the classroom and beyond. For instance, the conceptual unit on sexual harassment in the workplace encouraged students to problematize understandings of harassment and, in the process, offer comparisons between Western and non-Western perspectives.
Although this sample is limited by total numbers of participants from each country/region, it provides several advantages. First, for most participants, this was their first time visiting the United States and taking courses from a Western perspective. For this reason, participants grappled with the differences between Western and non-Western assumptions, sometimes challenging the transferability of course content, as their coursework and personal experiences and beliefs often conflicted. For example, during the work–life balance unit, we explained how American men are beginning to demand paternity leave. Many women in the YWL had not heard of paternity leave and laughed at the thought of men from their countries requesting such a benefit. Second, young, educated women from the MENA region and India are more likely to push back on gender norms than older women in those same regions (Metcalfe, 2008), yet most still live and work in contexts in which education curricula, organizational structures, and cultural norms direct women into female-typed occupations and traditional gender roles (World Bank, 2003). Consequently, the participants of this study are exemplary candidates for considering sense making about diverse discourses of work and gender.

**Procedures**

We conducted 26 in-depth interviews during the first four weeks of the 2011 and 2012 summer programs. Interviews were conducted in English, because all participants were fluent in English as a secondary language. However, to ensure accuracy of meaning during the interviews, we asked for clarification of expressions, word choices, or terms that were unfamiliar to us because of cultural differences. Interviews yielded 856 pages of double-spaced text. Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes and probed: (a) career constructions and work meanings (e.g., stories that illustrate their perceptions of work, workplace and career norms, and the kind of career they would like to have); (b) what they believe to be ideal roles of men and women (e.g., occupational and familial roles; where do these ideas come from); and (c) the role of culture in gender and work constructions (e.g., the influence of culture and national identity). Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, double-checked for accuracy (transcripts against digital files), and masked for confidentiality. All procedures were approved, as was every aspect of our design, by our university’s institutional review board.

Our data analysis process was informed by transnational feminist theory and guided by this study’s research question regarding work and gender constructions. Data were analyzed using a two-phase inductive technique that included open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To begin, each author went through all transcripts line by line. The coding process began with the generation of a list of open codes across interviews, such as working for a higher purpose, working to change gender norms, independence, family honor, and perspectives on women’s and men’s labor. The open-coding process required multiple iterations as the coding scheme was developed. Throughout this process, we engaged in memoing to tie data together, show relationships, and create categories (Tracy, 2013). We relied on transnational feminist theory to inform how we documented relationships among open codes. Specifically, we looked for instances where commonplace terms about work and gender are transnationally linked but also take on new meaning in local contexts (Dingo, 2012). For instance, many participants valued independence for women but framed their notions of independence along culturally conforming gender norms in
which their father’s patriarchal rule determined whether they could be independent. In terms of axial coding, open codes were collapsed into more concise categories such as “privileging family over career,” “working to change gender norms,” and “different work for men and women.” We engaged in discussions of all codes and categories throughout the processes of data gathering, transcribing, memoing, sense making, and writing.

We employed a number of strategies to ensure that the generated findings represented the data. For instance, in keeping with a transnational feminist emphasis on multiplicity, we considered a variety of participant opinions from multiple countries when pulling together support for each category (Hegde, 2006; Tracy, 2010). We considered the plausibility of our findings through comparisons to previous research. At the same time, we contextualized this plausibility to ensure that participants’ voices were privileged (Tracy, 2010). We consistently compared and contrasted extant work–life research that has focused predominantly on the West with the perspectives of this study’s non-Western participants. To enhance the credibility of our findings, we accessed participants’ tacit knowledge, or “the issues that are assumed, implicit, and have become part of participants’ common sense” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). For example, our findings often highlight taken-for-granted assumptions of participants’ talk about work and gender. We also invited participants to engage in “member reflections” to discern whether the participants found our analysis comprehensible and meaningful (p. 844). These reflections resulted in no changes.

Finally, two hallmarks of feminist research that must be balanced are researcher reflexivity and the privileging of marginalized voices (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Narayan, 1997). The first and third authors are from the United States, and the second author is from the Global South, although she lives and works in the Midwestern United States. To maintain a balance, we tried to be reflective of our own (privileged) positionalities throughout the entire process of data collection and analysis. Yet we worked to avoid overemphasizing our identities so as not to reproduce a colonialist stance that privileges the lens of the researcher (Narayan, 1997).

We also contend that the participants in this study are not wholly representative of their respective countries (Narayan, 1997). Our analysis does group countries according to region in an attempt to articulate points of commonality. Yet we aim to temper this regional focus through “multivocality,” or the presentation of stories from multiple participants, to destabilize the construction of a unified identity among participants (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). In short, we have attempted to produce a text that is nonexploitative and inclusive of diverse participant voices while not positioning participants’ perspectives as representative of entire regions.

**Findings and Interpretation**

This study explores how young women from the MENA region and India discursively constructed work and gender. Our transnational feminist analysis revealed three tensions: (a) equality–difference, (b) modernity–tradition, and (c) individual–collective. To navigate these tensions, participants engaged in strategies of transcendence that work “toward a new definition of the situation” (Putnam, Jahn, & Baker, 2011, p. 39). In specific terms, participants reframed gender difference as gender complementarity, conflated professional and familial success, and emphasized cultural pride as a rationale for gender change.
Equality–Difference Tension

In this section, we detail how participants understood gender equality as women having access to work. Concurrently, participants honored religious norms that advocated gendered occupational differences. To transcend this equality–difference tension, participants redefined gender difference as gender complementarity.

Women Should Work

In terms of equality, participants offered alternative interpretations of religious texts to articulate how religious discourses indicated that women should work. In this way, participants were adamant about the co-optation of religious discourses, which have been used to constrain women’s labor (for a similar finding, see Esser et al., 2010). This was especially true for Muslim participants. Mirit, a premed student from Egypt, extolled the religious misconception that “a woman is more inferior or something, but that’s not the case.” Iona, a human resources major from Morocco, complained about some religious leaders and men: “They change it...something that is not even in our religion,” and said, ‘No, this is in our religion. Women should not go to work because they take care of the family. It’s in our religion.’ No, it’s not in our religion.” Tirsa, a physical training major from Afghanistan, deployed her interpretive power to counter problematic readings of Islam:

Islam never said, “A woman is like a machine. We made that machine only for the man that the man can use them.” But there are a lot of people that they are telling like these things, they want to change the mind of the people about Islam.

In this way, Tirsa problematized interpretations of Islam that position women as inferior to men. In each of these examples, participants were unwavering as they pushed back against interpretations of religious texts that perpetuate narrow and damaging ideas about the role and position of women.

Accordingly, participants described how their religion obliged them to work. Indeed, participants’ overwhelming sense of ambition was fueled, in part, by their religious devotion. Amira, from Egypt, hoped to attend graduate school at Harvard for political communication and one day own her own translation company. She said, “My religion actually reinforces my beliefs in my future career, because woman in Islam has a very big role towards her country and towards her religion, and she has to just not stay at home...women have to participate.” Azah, from Egypt, hoped to be a gynecologist. She explained:

It was normal to think that Islamic women are supposed to just be at home raising their children, but this is not true at all, because the first wife of the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, she was a business-woman...She was just a respectful lady in front of all the men.

Here, Azah praised the prophet’s first wife for both developing a successful career and maintaining her gendered honor.

In sum, the equality half of this tension indicates how religion compelled participants to work. Participant discourses took issue with the co-optation of religious texts as participants reclaimed their interpretive power over religious doctrine and
articulated why these features oblige women to work. In this way, participants explain how men and women become equal in terms of having access to work.

Women Should Do Women’s Work

The *difference* half of this tension reveals how religion perpetuates a separate-but-equal mentality with regard to men’s and women’s work. That is, occupational segregation is the norm. For Mehira, a Muslim from Sudan, the relationship between gender and religion was very pronounced. She explained, “My idea of gender comes from my religion... That we are physically different and maybe also mentally different, because women tend to be more sensitive than men, but in the end, we have equal rights.” Mehira desired a career in management “because it’s a clean environment, you sit in an office, and you dress like a woman, and there’s no physical work.” Mehira’s comments illuminated the separate-but-equal thesis that undergirded many participants’ interpretations of gender roles vis-à-vis their religion. Najab, an Afghani Muslim who hoped to attend graduate school abroad and eventually work to change gender norms, echoed this sentiment: “I say that man and woman, they are different, but their rights are equal... So the jobs must be also different to a man and to a woman.”

In sum, the *difference* half of the equality–difference tension explains that women must engage in women’s work, a more restrictive facet of this tension that rests upon discourses of gender difference. From this vantage point, religious discourses construe men and women as fundamentally different and, as such, their work should be different. Overall, participant discourses articulated a tension between equality (women should work) and difference (women should do women’s work).

Reframing Gender Difference as Gender Complementarity

To transcend the tension between equality and difference, participants drew on their religious beliefs to reframe gender difference as gender complementarity. Amira explained:

I think the man refers to logic and thinking more than emotions; and the woman refers to her heart, to her senses. And that makes balance. That doesn’t mean that the woman is not good and the man is not good. No. It makes the balance, because if the two of them, both of them, have a logical way of thinking, it would be a very hard life.

Tirsa added, “I think that a woman is not complete without a man and a man is not complete without a woman.” Azah, a Muslim, articulated the importance of gender complementarity: “Because I always consider that it’s very important for the religion to obey your husband and to provide a very good environment at your home, so I think that there is a balance.” Later, she explained, “I always spend a lot of time to think about the person that I will choose to be my husband and will choose me to be his wife is thinking that he wants me to be a very good doctor and he wants his wife to support him.” In this case, Azah explained the complementary roles that she and her future husband would fulfill. Azah would potentially have a successful career in medicine, but she would also be responsible for the home and expected to support her husband. Ramah, who worked for an USAID-funded project for gender equality in Afghanistan, added, “I’m following my religion, but at the same time I’m working, like I can do it, like I’m wearing the proper hijab, proper clothes.” Thus
participants explained the need to balance their gendered performances and their career goals.

Notably, this strategy suggests how institutionalized religion is a discursive structure that facilitates a communicative shift from gender difference to gender complementarity. Gender complementarity honors religious norms by privileging the inherent differences of men and women while also advocating for women’s equal access to work, thereby facilitating transcendence of the equality–difference tension.

**Modernity–Tradition Tension**

The modernity–tradition tension explicates how participants questioned traditional maternal roles in favor of a working-mother role. Yet in keeping with tradition, participants honored their fathers’ patriarchal rule when traversing the public–private divide. To transcend this tension, participants conflated professional and familial success.

**Questioning Traditional Maternal Roles**

The modernity half of this tension explores how participants questioned traditional maternal roles. Traditional mothers were expected to compromise aspects of their lives for their children’s success. Narin, from Afghanistan, who hoped to work in management, explained, “Being a mother, it’s like sacrificing your whole life for your children, compromising your whole happiness for your children.” According to Maia, a journalist from Egypt, she “would prefer like staying at home a little bit more than going to work.”

Traditional mothers were also described as responsible for the moral upbringing of their children. It was the mothers who would ensure that, as adults, their children would do good work. For some participants, the mother would be blamed for problematic children. Tirsa explained the pressures placed on mothers when their children misbehave: “Maybe you didn’t give him good advice when he was a child, and maybe he did these things that he learned from you.” For other participants, mothers had the ability to change the status quo, especially with regard to gender norms. Sefa, from Pakistan, who hoped to open her own architecture firm, added, “These values basically come down from a mother. If she makes the brother believe that he is stronger or better, in a way, than the sister, that’s how he’s going to develop these ideas.” Regardless as to whether she is to blame or has the power to change gender norms, mothers were responsible for their children’s moral upbringing.

Participants whose mothers embodied tradition or sacrificed their careers for family were especially disparaging of this maternal role. Nalani, a Pakistani woman who wanted to make films, was critical of her mother’s choice to give up her professional life to take care of her family: “She’s always thought a lot about us and about my father and about other people, which is a really good thing, but you shouldn’t do that at the cost of your own happiness.” In another example, Tirsa blamed traditional maternal roles and many mothers’ lack of education for perpetuating gender oppression:

It is the reason that in our country the woman can’t do something for their self. Whenever a girl want to go school, her father say, “It’s not good for you. You have to be inside of house.” And also, her mother
is the supporter of her father. She says, “Yeah, your father is right. I’m your mother. I’ve never gone to school. You should be like me.”

Noticeably, participants envisioned a more modern maternal role. Narin, who worked as a women’s rights activist, said, “I want to be a mother but not sacrifice all my life for my children . . . If I will be a mother, I will be really . . . each and everything equally for both son and daughter, because I really want to change the practice.” Narin saw the potential of a mother’s influence to change the gendered status quo, but not at the expense of her own career.

The modernity half of this tension exposes how participants questioned traditional maternal roles in terms of sacrificing work for family, being solely responsible for children’s upbringing, and perpetuating gender oppression. In contrast, participants offered a more modern maternal vision that reconstituted motherhood as having the potential to change gender norms.

Honoring Patriarchal Family Norms
The tradition half of this tension demonstrates how participants honored patriarchal family norms even as they attempted to transcend restrictive gender roles. Participants described their fathers as differing from the norm but still responsible for their daughter’s navigation of the public–private divide. For most participants, their fathers emphasized career choice as leading to career success. Tirsa explained that when she graduated from high school her father said, “You can choose everything that you want for yourself. Maybe you want to be a doctor; it’s your life. If you want to be a teacher, it’s your life.” Jahan, from India, indicated that her father was not a “conventional father.” The sex of his children was not as important in determining an education and career path. Instead, merit was privileged. According to Jahan, “If you have the merit to do anything, then you can do whatever you want to . . . He knows that women can shine in fields like sports and politics in my country.” However, this perspective did not mean anything goes. Later Jahan explained why she was not allowed to pursue journalism; she asked rhetorically: “Which father would like his daughter to be involved in a dangerous field?” Therefore, fathers may still hold preconceptions about what constitutes appropriate work for women and, as such, influence their daughters’ chosen occupation.

In summary, the tradition half of this tension describes how participants honored the traditional patriarchal rule of their fathers by securing approval of their desired occupations. Taken together, the modernity–tradition tension indicates how participants simultaneously questioned and preserved traditional, gendered familial roles.

Conflating Professional and Familial Success
To transcend this modernity–tradition tension, participants conflated professional and familial success. For participants, career success was attainable only if they had a family with whom to share their success. For example, Anthea, a woman from India who wanted to be a politician, explained, “I’ve come to realize that no matter how successful you are career-wise, at the end of the day . . . you need to have somebody to go back home to.” According to Rashida, from India, in addition to finding professional success as a teacher, success also meant “carrying my family forward along with me at all stages of my life.” And Amira explained her desire “to have the balance between my family and between my career and to have an inner
harmony, to have tolerance. This is success for me.” Although participants emphasized the importance of family in addition to their professional success, some also echoed similar fears expressed by Western women regarding “off-ramping” their careers for family (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Maia said that young women feel “little bit pressures if they didn’t get married in, like, twenty-five to thirty. They get a lot of—not a lot of pressure, but there is some pressure because the old generation can’t really understand.” Azah was studying to become a doctor. She explained, “I’m afraid that if I get married or engaged, I will just worry about my family at the beginning, and I will just worry about building my home, and maybe I will just be satisfied with my undergraduate degree.”

Professional and familial success also meant that participants maintained family honor. Ramah articulated the pressure she felt to represent her family. While she did not care what the broader Afghani society thought of her, she did care about what her family thought:

Because they live in that society, they will think that I am working with the U.S. government, I am studying with the U.S. government, I am working with males, [so] “She’s not interested in men”…But my fear is that if I get engaged and married with a man, will he allow me to do all these things?

Here Ramah did not question the patriarchal privilege that will give her future husband the same right as her father to determine whether she can continue working.

In these examples, professional success was contingent upon familial success. This strategy also highlighted how familial roles and obligations influenced work and gender meanings, a finding that is similar to the documented pressures faced by Western women (e.g., Buzzanell et al., 2005). What is new is how participants honored tradition in articulating their future desires by requiring professional successes to be shared with family, to maintain family honor, and to sustain the rule of the family patriarch.

Individual–Collective Tension

The final tension articulates how participants individually paved the way to change collective gender norms in their respective regions while also adhering to the collective norms that constrained gender performances. To transcend this tension, participants emphasized their cultural pride as a rationale to change gender norms.

Working to Change Gender Norms

The individual half of this tension highlights how participants arguably charted new ground in their efforts to push back on gender norms. Atiya argued: “Being a part of the change is very important to support it, so practically doing it instead of just sitting around…as a housewife myself.” Sefa explained, “I think that Pakistan is not going to change if all the women decide not to do anything about it. We have to come out in the professional field and make an effort and try and change the way people think.” Iona elucidated what she hoped to accomplish through her work in human resources: “I want to graduate from here so I can improve the situations in companies. And also, it’s dominated by men.” Ramah wanted to work for the Ministry of Education because she wanted to be a role model for other Afghani
women: “I have to be a role model for those girls who are sitting at home, they don’t dare to go outside and work. I have to work, and I have to show them that working is not something bad; they have to work.”

Tirsa imagined that if she were killed for her work to change gender norms in Afghanistan, people might say, “There was a girl by the name of Tirsa; she had a lot of good ideas; she fought for our rights, and someone killed her, and we should respect her, and she is a model for us.”

In this way, the individual half of this tension depicts how individual paid work can contribute to gender transformation at the collective level. Participant discourses emphasized the need for individual women to actively participate in paid work and to use those opportunities to push back and potentially transform gender norms.

Adhering to Cultural Gender Norms

This aspect of the tension articulates how participants attended to the collective and cultural prescriptions with regard to gender. First, culture defined women’s work and men’s work. According to Atiya, Pakistani women have two occupational options: “You become a teacher, or you become a doctor. There’s no third profession for you—respectable profession that your husband or your father would approve of. And the third profession which everybody approves of is a housewife.” Atiya’s chosen profession in advertising did not fit this mold but was still considered a feminine occupation in Pakistan (Nasir, 2005). Mehira reflected on how Sudanese society perpetuates a gender divide that puts women at a disadvantage: “Because working in factory requires training, and the owners prefer men than women because women might get married and just drop job, and then it will be a waste of time.”

Mirit explained how her career choice shifted from a sex education focus to family medicine because of cultural norms:

People may be okay with telling them, “This is part of your health of the family, to take care of your reproductive systems and take care of your children and talk to them about sex.” It’s better than, and more acceptable than, going to people and telling them, “I’m educating you about sex” directly. So I feel that family medicine is socially acceptable, and it would deliver the main things first, and then talking about sex.

As these examples indicate, occupations are gendered according to patriarchal expectations. In many cases, even when it was acceptable for a young woman to pursue a career in medicine, she was still directed to areas that were culturally gendered feminine (e.g., family medicine).

Cultural norms around marriage also have implications for women’s career goals. Amira added, “The most important thing for any Egyptian girl is to get married—the majority [of Egyptian girls]. Then, after that, establish their own career.” Indeed, some occupations can become potentially problematic for marriage. Jahan relayed the difficulties her parents had in finding her sister a husband because “she is a scientist, and she earns lots of rupees ... it’s like very tough for a guy to compete with her ... in Indian society, the guy has to earn more than his wife. It’s a matter of prestige.” In this way, marriage was typically privileged over occupation based on cultural norms, and participants explained the importance of attracting potential suitors no matter what their professional goals.
The collective part of this tension highlights how participants attended to collective gendered and occupational norms. Taken together, the individual–collective tension indicates that participants paved their own way in their work to change gender norms while also adhering to cultural gender prescriptions.

*Emphasizing Cultural Pride as a Rationale to Change Gender Norms*

To transcend the individual–collective tension, participants explained how the pride they felt at the individual level about their country obliged them to work to change collective gender norms. For instance, Najab, who wanted to work in economics, described a typical Afghani woman: “Zealous again, proud, proud to be an Afghan, who never loses her nationality, her Afghani behavior that she has.” Amira explained, “I have to be a participant, and I have to be one who will make the future of Egypt. It’s my duty.” Nalani elaborated on the stereotypes people attribute to Pakistani women: “Everybody is going to be fully clad, fully veiled, and might be somewhat... towards the conservative side.” However, she saw herself as the “modern Pakistani woman,” and her future career in film as an opportunity to combat restrictive and problematic stereotypes about Pakistani women. Saba, from India, explained her desire to “break some more stereotypes” and “show people what they are very strongly believing in is not maybe right all the time” through her work in economics. Thus participants’ pride in their cultures ignited their sense of obligation to work for gender transformation.

Importantly, this strategy also provided security as participants worked to change the gendered institutions that perpetuate oppression. Change must be strategic but is not always about sweeping structural transformations. Narin recommended being thoughtful and strategic when trying to engage diverse stakeholders in gender change: “They will tell you, ‘Oh my god, these are Western terms that you are bringing to our country, these are this, these are that’... We can use different terms that can be very acceptable for them.” In brief, pride in their cultural identity along with strategic communication mitigated tension between restrictive gender norms and work ideals.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to explore how young women from the MENA region and India discursively construct work and gender. Our transnational feminist analysis revealed three tensions around equality–difference, modernity–tradition, and individual–collective that problematize Western constructions of work and gender and push this analysis beyond dichotomies, stereotypes, and fixed categories (Essers et al., 2010). In doing so, our analysis provides a starting point for organizational communication scholars to embrace transnational feminist inquiry as a method of analysis and to productively explore how gender(ed) work is embedded within a context of globalization. Toward this end, we detail this study’s theoretical contributions and pragmatic implications.

First, this study’s findings document how meanings of work and gender shift with culture and context, a charge of transnational feminist communication inquiry (Dingo, 2012; Norander & Harter, 2012; Pal & Buzzanell, 2013). Our analysis spotlights how tensions between work ideals and gender norms are (re)negotiated and continually developed in ongoing interactions between participants and their families, their colleagues, other women, different generations, religious leaders, their
instructors, and their role models. These communicative interactions are nested within a broader field that is informed by religious, familial, and cultural discourses. We consider how women from diverse contexts can affect change, where and how they attain agency, and how they can leverage power to transform their communities. Thus, dominant constructions of work and gender are not inherently good or bad. Instead, we must consider how these constructions are picked up in diverse contexts and how they are used to forward certain intentions. In this way, we answer calls to problematize dominant Western constructions by looking at the role that ethnicity, religion, culture, and nation play in assigning value to women’s work (Morrow & Fredrick, 2012).

Second, the three strategies—reframing gender difference as gender complementarity, conflating professional and familial success, and emphasizing cultural pride as a rationale to change gender norms—allowed participants to transcend the tensions and are premised on a broader discourse of balance that facilitates participants’ agency in a potentially restrictive environment. These strategies transform the dichotomous poles of equality–difference, modernity–tradition, and individual–collective “into a reformulated whole so that the original tensions no longer exist” (Putnam et al., 2011, p. 39). The strategies proposed create a new space outside of these competing tensions that allowed participants to reassert their agency, envision alternative work and gender ideals, maintain their own safety, and honor the traditions of a patriarchal context. For example, gender complementarity advocates women’s access to work while also privileging religious norms that assume men and women are inherently different. Conflating professional and familial success allowed participants to attain career success while maintaining family honor. Emphasizing cultural pride provided a compelling rationale for participants to rely upon as they worked for gender transformation. Taken together, these strategies are underscored by a tenuous balance between honoring the past and charting new territory for the future.

Noticeably, the vast majority of participant discourses privileged the future orientation of the tensions in terms of equality, modernity, and individuality. The few participants who deviated from this norm were from the most rural areas of more conservative regions of the world. But even in these cases, participants acknowledged that their participation in the YWL program reinforced their inclinations toward equality, modernity, and individuality. In this way, the transcendence strategies allowed the women to tread cautiously; to balance their personal freedoms with broader religious, familial, and cultural norms; and to push back at oppositional distinctions between masculinity/femininity, worker/mother, public/private, and East/West.

Finally, the strategies assisted participants in reflectively managing the material consequences of tension negotiation, in terms of occupational choice, marriage, family honor, quality of life, and the very real risks that women are willing to take in efforts toward social change.

Relatedly, our transnational feminist analysis provides an example that problematizes an assumption of Western feminist scholarship that all women’s oppression is the same and that gender change strategies should be underscored by an equal opportunities thesis (Mohanty, 2003). Non-Western women have a contentious relationship with feminism in general because feminism is largely rooted in Western women’s experiences (Morin, 2009). This transnational feminist inquiry accounts for alternative renderings of work and woman that do not privilege Western ideals.
Admittedly, our findings about the struggles of managing work and family are similar to current research (e.g., Buzzanell et al., 2005; Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2009; Dow, 2008; Hayden, 2010). However, there are several differences. First, the ways professional women in the West understand work and gender conflicts are informed by a gender equality thesis in which men and women are more similar than different (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Our findings suggest that participants, for the most part, operated in cultural contexts that privilege an approach focused on differences (see also Metcalfe, 2008). Here, men and women have distinctly different roles that inform how work and gender are constructed. Moreover, participants’ talk presumed heteronormativity, marriage, children, and family honor. There was no talk of the Western ideal of choice and parenting (Hayden & O’Brien Hallstein, 2010).

A second difference between this study’s participants and Western professional women is that, for almost all participants, religious norms informed “organization practices and individual subjectivities at institutional, organization, and individual identity levels” (Metcalfe, 2008, p. 95; see also Acker, 2006). Our findings highlight that one potential consequence of globalization and the intersections of Western meanings of work and non-Western meanings of gender is that religion becomes a moderating discourse. To date, work–life research has yet to account for this significant influence, although there have been recent calls to examine the role religion plays in work and nonwork life (Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson, & Leathers, 2008; Bulanda, 2011; Silberman, 2005; Traversa, 2012). In short, we cannot understand how women perform in the public sphere without connecting their performance to broader cultural and religious discourses about gender and work.

In terms of pragmatic implications, our findings first highlight the need to develop culturally specific work–life policies that avoid taking a broad-brush approach in developing solutions for working women. Our findings point toward the need for work–family policies that recognize the importance of family and religion and organizational processes that value gender complementarity and a different-but-equal mentality. Developing organizational policies within the parameters of dominant religious, familial, and cultural discourses is consistent with transnational analyses that account for nation, geopolitics, and history (Pal & Buzzanell, 2013).

Second, while critics might accuse programs like the YWL of perpetuating colonialist ideologies, we propose a more productive approach. Certainly, in combining the countries represented at the YWL into broad political categories like MENA, the U.S. State Department arguably perpetuates a monolithic vision of global regions that embody vast differences. Yet, as our study demonstrates, programs like the YWL can facilitate transformative spaces for non-Western and Western women alike to explore the shifting nature of work and gender constructions throughout the world. Accordingly, program staffers could design more intentional self-reflection into the curriculum where participants and faculty engage in reflexive exercises about power inequities, problematic groupings, and social change (Norander & Harter, 2012). The YWL program, and others like it, could also take a more proactive role in alerting governmental programs to alternative methods of achieving inter-country goodwill by acknowledging and embracing irony, contradiction, and opposition.

Last, we are aware that our work could be (mis)interpreted or appropriated as putting forth a totalizing narrative of a particular region or religion. To combat this potential, we recommend that feminist scholars of organizational communication...
who are reading, reviewing, editing, or conducting this sort of research engage in practices of “cultural humility” that require a commitment to self-reflection, self-critique, and the exploration of (un)intentional moments of racism and ethnocentrism (Ross, 2010; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Indeed, cultural humility encourages us to “relinquish the role of expert” by highlighting power imbalances and privileging the expertise of participants (Ross, 2010, p. 318; see also D’Enbeau, Munz, Wilson, & Dutta, 2013).3

In closing, we sought to articulate what happens when different discourses about work and gender collide as individuals are exposed to different ways of thinking. We do not mean to treat women and work as discrete categories, and we have attempted to avoid the danger of telling a single story about a region or country. In brief, we seek to sidestep an authentic culture trap (Hegde, 1998). Notably, the women we interviewed were from a specific subset of the populations in these region—one that has access to education, middle-class to upper-class socioeconomic status, and, for most, families who supported their decision to participate in a U.S. academic program. Therefore, we are hopeful that future research will expand on these constructions through more extensive empirical examinations of work meanings and gender norms from a more diverse population of women in the MENA region, and India, and in other contexts throughout the world.

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Notes

1. The name of the program has been changed for this study.
2. Participants described a strong connection between culture and religion, but this finding highlights those instances where participants privileged their cultural or national identity over their religious identity.
3. We engaged in several practices toward this end. First, we wrote theoretical memos to create a space to reflect on our own identities, cultural assumptions, thoughts, and feelings in a safe space (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). We then shared our memos to facilitate productive dialogue about issues related to cultural humility.

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