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NEVERTHELESS THEY PERSISTED
Gendered Frameworks and Socialization Advantages in Indian Professional Service Firms

The growing literature on gender and professional work affirms that despite increasing feminization across fields, stark gender inequality persists (Witz 2013) resulting in what has been termed a "stalled" gender revolution (England 2010). To explain this persistent inequality, scholars have revealed a range of explanatory mechanisms as well as made a serious case for thinking of the repetitive salience extended to gender, across various levels of analysis, as a "background identity" (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) that creates both gender unfriendly "ideal workers" and organizations (Acker 1990). Yet, while many of these patterns that inhibit professional success for women are universal, researchers investigating contexts outside of the global north have offered some points of divergence and the insufficiency of western theories of gendered professional work to apply across cultural contexts (e.g. Kumar 2012; Mukhopadhyay 2004).

This Article uses the Indian elite professional case to offer further nuance to these narratives about the impact of diverse global cultures on the gendered experience of professional work. I find that while gender certainly infiltrates all workspaces through the framework of a background identity, there remain occupational and organizational differences in the ways in which women experience their environments. Particularly, while Indian women lawyers overall are more disadvantaged in many ways than their international counterparts, women lawyers in very elite law firms do much better than both their local and global peers. Of course, a confluence of factors might be responsible for this unique experience of professional work, but this Article highlights the importance of one set of supply side dynamics: the variations in socializing experiences and expectations *before* professionals enter elite firms.

In doing so, this research adds to the literature that suggests the importance of early training and educational socialization for gender egalitarian outcomes in the workforce (e.g. Cech 2015; Seron et al. 2016). It also lends credence to the "pipeline" fix for gender equality by highlighting the substantive influence of increased representation on the ways men and women both think about their careers. Together, it shows how the stickiness of "background" gender identities can play out in new global contexts: all sites are gendered, but these gendered identities are impacted within their respective embedded cultural contexts.

1.   Gender and Professional Work: Background Frameworks, Socialization Hurdles, and the Indian Case

The persistence of gender inequality across professional fields dovetails our understandings about the feminization of high-status work: the rise in female participation within any given workforce is predicated either on the relative low-status of the work itself or its compatibility with "gender-friendly" traits (England 2010). As a result, women are concentrated in mostly female-friendly, low-status work that, in turn, cements the inequalities of their representation (Davies 1996). To explain these inequalities, most theorists converge on the idea that causal mechanisms producing gender inequality do not work in isolation. Instead, inequality within the professions is created and cemented by a recursive, self-fulfilling mechanism wherein women's entry is constantly pitted against other "ideal types" (Acker 1990; Williams 2000) and background frameworks about gender that are universally unhelpful to women (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway 2011). One way in which reinforcement happens is the ways in which gender socialization impacts entry and advancement of women within professional tracks even as they enter at the same rates as their male peers. It is the unpacking of this socialization, within

the broader context of a persistent gender system that offers the theoretical framework for this research.

Persistent Background Frameworks of Gender

Gender theorists (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) have argued that sticky stereotypes are pivotal mechanisms in the production of entrenched hierarchies because they stem from strong and accepted pre-existing assumptions about how different actors should respond in social situations. This strain of research gives us an important, multi-dimensional view of how gender is "done" (West and Zimmerman 1987), because it reminds us that even though stereotypes attach at the individual level (for example, "she is *too* aggressive *for a woman*"), they are often cemented with interactional and institutional reinforcement, forming a social structure where assumptions about gender identity are not only accepted, but also expected. As a result, social interactions are not only fraught with background assumptions; they are also feeder mechanisms into creating persistent constructs of gender-based inequality in organizations (Ridgeway 2011).

High status workplaces are organic environments for the application of this background framework of gender because they have historically been male-dominated (Charles and Grusky 2004). One reason this is problematic for new entrants like women and minorities is that when the parameters of an ideal worker are already set, all and any deviations from this construct suffer a penalty for not being "ideal" (Acker 1990). Seen from this perspective, if the ideal worker is a man without family responsibilities (Williams 2000), then organizations feel legitimate in levying a motherhood penalty (Correll et. al. 2007) and stigmatizing women when they access "flexible" work (Williams et al. 2013).

Educational Socialization and Gendered Pathways

The wealth of empirical research on women in high status organizations reflects strong evidence for this theoretical positioning. Studies on elite women professionals show that women are disadvantaged at entry (Gorman 2005), have less helpful career referents (Gibson and Lawrence 2010), make fewer meaningful networks (Ibarra 1997), have barriers to promotion (Dencker 2008) and are overall structurally set up against advancing within the firm (Kanter 1993). The legal profession has been a prime site for the creation and reproduction of these gendered hierarchies (Epstein 1981; Menkel-Meadow 1989; Pierce 1995; Shultz and Shaw 2003). Particularly in large law firms, research documents strong structural obstacles for women including lack of formal inclusion (Kay and Gorman 2012), limited mentorship (Melton Mobley et al. 1994), stereotype-ridden professional ideology (Wald 2009), male-friendly partner composition (Chambliss and Uggen 2000), and a general preference for male law-firm capital (Kay and Hagan 1998). Together, these factors have resulted in wage disparities (Hagan and Kay 1995), missed partnership opportunities (Walsh 2012), and other kinds of inequality (Epstein 1981). Research has also begun to reveal ways in which women may adopt "coping strategies" for inclusion and validation (e.g. Hatmaker 2013), but the predominant narrative is of women responding to a biased system that is likely to reproduce unfavorable hierarchies (Witz 2013).

To explain these entry and advancement patterns, scholars have begun to pay especial attention to the role of education and socialization in reproducing gender inequality. Key among these studies have been the importance of socialization in acculturating a sense of identity "fit" between the individual and organization (Cech et al. 2011; Cech 2015; Hatmaker 2013). For instance, while Cech and colleagues (2011), offer that the relative lack of "professional role confidence" that women embody as they navigate the "culture of engineering" contributes to

their attrition from the field; Seron and colleagues (2016) offer further that professional socialization has important implications for the cultivation of this confidence. It is a similar exposition of the advantages of professional socialization that this Article presents.

Gender and Professional Work in India

Global contexts offer new ways to reflect on the implications of these studies; particularly, the cultural variations to the relationship between gender and the professions. In the Indian context, for instance, gender differences exist in professional participation, but they are not determined by the same kinds of supply-side factors as in the West (Mukopadhyaya 2004; Kumar 2012). Simultaneously, organizational inequalities persist and women, to the extent they enter the formal workforce, continue to face strong barriers to success and advancement (e.g. Budhwar et al. 2005; Nath 2000; Terjesen et al. 2009; Vinze 1987). In particular, the legal profession has been generally hostile to feminization. Recent comparative demographic research by Michelson (2013), for example, suggests that while most of the world's professions have feminized over the last half a century, India still remains predominantly male with only about 5% women (compared to an average of about 30%). And as researchers of gender inequality have come to expect, this representation gets even starker at senior positions. For instance, in the over 200 senior counsels in the Mumbai High Court, only one active senior counsel is a woman. In contrast, women in leading law firms are at par at both entry and partnership with their male peers and often talk about gender as though it does not matter (Ballakrishnen 2013).

Ridgeway's theory might suggest that this is a function of temporality – older organizations are more set in their ways than newer organizations and, consequently, more likely to be wary of new entrants. However, even among similarly new and elite professional firms

differences are stark. Particularly, my research suggests that while women in new law firms experience work environments that are relatively gender agnostic, women in consulting firms do not enjoy a similar privilege. Contrasting these two cases of novel field emergence against gendered accounts of the traditional litigation system in India (e.g. Sorabji 2010) that has stayed relatively unchanged following globalization (e.g. Mishra 2016; Rajkotia 2017), this Article makes a case for how different frameworks of gender and identity get negotiated in the Indian context and what that can mean for theorizing about professional stratification more generally.

2.   Research Motivations, Data, and Methods

While all professional sites are riddled with obstacles, the background framework theory offers potential for a possible exception. Particularly, it suggests that in "sites of innovation" where the basic framework of the job is not particularly gender typed, there is a possibility for the background gender frame to be a bit more diluted (Ridgeway, 2011). This categorization of new sites of innovation is useful because it gives us some hope for breakthroughs in existing hierarchies (e.g. Smith-Doerr 2004; Whittington and Smith-Doerr 2008). From Mountain View to Mumbai, there are new kinds of organizations and types of professional practice that didn't exist even a few decades ago. In some cases, it is innovation in types of work and practice while in others; it is an introduction of an entirely new kind of work. And although not empirically concerned with the effects of global capital and workflow, Ridgeway's constructs of evolution and change offer valuable tools to analyze these new changes in global economy.

It is this lens that offered the preliminary design motivation for this research. As an emerging economy, India offers a range of professional work contexts to extend and test Ridgeway's (2011) suggestion that new sites offered optimistic possibility for the renegotiation

of hierarchy. Most professional practice in the country was organized around individual or family practitioners until 1991 when liberalization reforms allowing foreign direct investment exposed the historically closed market to new work, transactions and clients. Following these new reforms, new kinds of professional services (e.g. management consulting) and multinational firms were introduced alongside older professions like law, accounting and banking. But even among existing professions (e.g. law), liberalization brought about organizational changes and new kinds of firms and work began to emerge alongside vestigial individual practice.

Using a theoretical sampling logic (Eisenhardt 1989), the initial case variation (Yin 2003) followed the empirical advantage of variations in India's liberalization process. I choose two cases varying these dimensions of novelty - i.e., the variation in organizational structure and nature of work across firms. The *first* was the case of traditional litigation practice that was still organized in pre-1991 fashion, around individual practitioners or small partnerships. The *second* case were transactional law firms that were only created post-liberalization in 1991 and that worked on new kinds of transactional work including mergers and acquisitions, capital markets and international banking. From my interviews and observations in the field, it became clear that newer firms were indeed differently impacted by globalization – a finding that others studying the professions have noted (see, generally, Wilkins et al. 2017) - and that women, in particular, experienced their careers very differently in these new firms. However, when over the course of analysis, it became clear that novelty along these dimensions was not enough to explain the variation in gender experiences, I chose also to focus on a *third* site – management consultants. I theorized that if novelty of work and structure was indeed what was explaining the difference between women in older litigating practice versus new kinds of transactional law firms, then other kinds of new firms ought also to expose its inhabitants to similar surroundings. The

professionals that entered these new law and consulting firms were graduates of similarly prestigious schools and were relatively homogenous at the individual level (predominantly forward caste, middle class, urban, English-speaking). As a result, these three sites were similar enough to warrant comparison in that they were all highly prestigious work sites with professional entry requirements. But their variations in emergence and organizational structure offered a research design variation that was informative.

Over the course of my analysis, it became clear that novelty along one more dimension – i.e. schools that socialized recruits before entry – could be useful in creating egalitarian frameworks of gender. While elite law firms recruited predominantly from new and elite *National Law Schools*, the hiring pool for consulting firms were graduates from elite engineering and business schools. These schools were similarly prestigious and recruited from homogenous class backgrounds, but they varied significantly in gender composition. The National Law Schools, as new schools that incidentally emerged around the same time as these new law firms, had gender equal cohorts at entry and graduation (Ballakrishnen 2019). In contrast, elite business and engineering schools were more older, more traditional schools that had remained predominantly male even following liberalization. This variation was important, as these data reveal, but the salience of their underlying mechanisms in reproducing inequality was something that emerged from analysis, not something the research was designed to sample on.

Data and Methods.

My data are from 139 semi-structured interviews between 2011-2015 with professionals across these three main theoretical cases in Mumbai, India (*Table 1*). Mumbai was a prime city to locate

this analysis. As the financial capital of a newly emerging economy, the city was home to a range of new multinational professional sites as well as an established presence of older professional firms. The ethnographic interviews focused on these professionals' personal and career histories and their organizational experiences. Initial interviews helped explore emergent themes (Spradley 1979) and subsequently became more streamlined to include, as in this case, specifics about peer interactions, experiences across organizations, as well as the ways in which socialization about gendered meanings *before* entry into these firms shaped exchanges and experiences.

To identify respondents, I first wrote to law firm partners in the five firms in Mumbai that had been ranked consistently as the top legal firms by global ranking agencies over the last five years. Over the course of the first field visit, I met with seven partners I contacted. Elite professionals are notorious for being hard to access. However, these senior lawyers had influential internal networks that they were embedded in which made it easier to contact both junior colleagues and peers in their own firms, as well as with colleagues in the other professional sites. I spoke to women and men in each of these firms, for between 40-90 minutes. Although I oversampled women, the men in the sample were crucial for placing this experience in context since they provided an interactional peer perspective.

Professional organizations in neoliberal sites have received some sociological attention (e.g. Faulconbridge and Muzio 2012) but focusing on professionals, instead, gives us one way of perceiving how individuals and their actions, scale up to organizational outcomes (Thorton 1999). Particularly, while other scholars have explored global gender processes in white collar work contexts (e.g. Radhakrishnan 2009), the rich literature on formal "global" work in India

encapsulates a very different demographic from the elite professionals in my sample[1]. These data cannot – and do not claim to – give comprehensive detail about all the mechanisms at play in global organizations. They do, however, have rich detail about subjective meanings of organizational processes that its actors hold and the rational extensions this has for the environments they find themselves in (Morrill and Fine 1997).

3. Findings

These data reveal two kinds of significant comparisons within these professional spaces. The first is the comparison between older and newer kinds of professional practice. In line with the other evidence of these "background frameworks", older firms were much more rigid in their constructs about an ideal worker and the exclusion of women was legitimated by these constructs. But novelty alone was not explanation enough. The second set of comparisons – between different kinds of newer professional practice - revealed the importance of pre-entry socialization in dictating the nature of inclusion that newer firms offered. Together these findings have implications for extending other research on feminization that suggests that the gendering of organizations need to be understood not just by blatant exclusion of women, but also by their kinds of specific inclusion (Davies 1996).

Comparison A: Traditional Litigation Practice v. Newer Kinds of Professional Work

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[1] In some comparison, employees in elite business process outsourcing units in the IT industry earned on average, between 4167 -7700 USD a year. In contrast, lawyers and consultants at entry in these elite firms made, on average, between 15,500 – 24,000 USD a year.

Historically, professional stratification in India was a simple case of access to resources (Ballakrishnen 2019, Dezalay and Garth 2010). With few domestic institutions to train students and close professional networks, law in colonial India was reserved for the elites. But equally relevant was that elite legal education, especially since it involved the foreign education of unmarried daughters, was restricted to elite *men.* With the professional rewards out of reach and the steep time commitment that conflicted with traditional life course choices (law in India was traditionally a graduate degree, which conflicted with what was considered an appropriate marriage age for women), few women went to law school and even fewer joined the profession on graduation (Gandhi 1987). Recent demographic data suggests that this trend has not changed over the last three decades (Michelson 2013). One extension of this strong sex segregation is that litigation practice in India continues to be a core site where gender is significantly primed in everyday interactions and experiences with hegemonic practices, unequal interactions and gender stereotypes as other ethnographers (Pierce 1996) of the legal profession have recorded. Mohan, a male litigator in his thirties who was in charge of a litigation practice that, in his own words, could have as easily been his sister's, explains the gendered distinction:

> The chances of a future life are at stake when you are a rude, abrasive lawyer and a woman - you are setting up a foundation, at least that is the perception, of how you are going to be judged. My sister had the same opportunities of me, and she would have been a much better lawyer than me, but she chose not to because of this perception - she didn't want to be judged…And clients have other perceptions too - women are unique because of this reputation that can be tainted. You think of women as people you want to keep safe and take care of - you don't want them mistreated, not overburdened and while you give them their respective dues and there is no inequality, its still a perception...

The comment that "rude abrasive lawyers" as susceptible to judgment is interesting because Mohan mentions later in the interview that it is exactly these qualities of aggression that make male lawyers successful in courts. The differences in the pathways between Mohan and his sister further highlight the relative importance of gendered frameworks in defining professional identities – women are expected to be treated well ("kept safe and taken care of", "not mistreated or overburdened") even if such treatment will not give them professional rewards, and they are likely to be judged harshly when they act in ways that might challenge that identity ("the chances of your future life are at stake"). In similar description of identity expectations, Priya, a young litigator revealed that judges were prone to "testing boundaries" with women, often expecting them to have emotional reactions and evaluating their seriousness in the courtroom accordingly:

> …. most judges wont yell at a woman who is making these mistakes, you know? [Someone] who is being an idiot – they wont yell in the way they might have yelled [to teach] a man: they don't give any woman their time. They are always afraid that the girl is going to break into tears….

Alongside demographics of the field more generally, these indicative accounts from Mohan and Priya confirm that in an established professional field like litigation, the assumptive standard of an ideal worker is better met by men (e.g. men had the ability to "shout and scream in court) and women, even when they did meet it, were under constant appraisal and subject to backlash. As a result, Priya and other women like her, had to navigate a professional environment where women seen as not being strong enough for the tasks at hands (e.g. "they are always afraid the girl is going to break into tears", "they back off completely when they think they might cross the line") and their careers, as too futile for seniors to invest in (e.g. "they don't give any woman their time"). This exclusionary set-up that elite professional practice creates for women is not novel in

itself. But it sets up an important comparison point for appreciating newer workplaces without similar embedded expectations.

Unlike set notions of what it meant to be a litigating lawyer, professionals in newer fields like transactional law and consulting felt differently restricted by this imagined notion of the ideal worker. In contrast to litigation, women in transactional law firms felt like gender was not a main determinant of their career trajectory and success. Lata, a senior associate at an elite law firm, describes this comparative ambivalence while describing her identity and work experience:

> People don't think of it as an issue—I get the perspective would have been different if I had been a litigating lawyer. For example, when I was interning [in a litigating office], my senior was a woman and I know that judges looked at a case differently when a male lawyer was arguing instead of a female lawyer. So if I had been in litigation, it would have been different. But not here, not at all.

Similarly, newness of work and organization helped women professionals in new kinds of consulting firms as well. As new firms with new kinds of professionals, there was similar mobility regarding the constructed identity of a "good consultant" and although this identity was negotiated along other lines of difference, gender per se was not an immediately discriminating factor as it was in more traditional firms. Saraswati, a fourth-year management consultant, suggested that although there was not a "single senior consultant with a child and a client-facing role", her environment was "pretty egalitarian" and that there were "very few actual situations" where gender distinctions mattered in her work. In Saraswati's words, "per se, there is no difference in our ability to do the work or in consulting…the only difference, however, comes in getting to the higher levels."

Like Priya's description, gender was still relevant to Saraswati's professional identity but, Unlike for Priya, her description suggests that there were no defined differences in the "ability to

do the work" because she was a woman. This contrast between Priya and Saraswati is useful to highlight the distinctions between older and newer sites. All work is gendered, but unlike old sites where expectations about the perfect worker were set and women had to constantly prove they were either "just like men" or "not too much like women", the notion of the ideal worker in newer sites felt a bit more diffuse. They had to contend with gendered hurdles ("..isn't a single senior consultant with a client-facing role who has a child") but these were not because they were inherently believed to be unfit for the job by clients and peers ("..per se, there is no difference").

Comparison B: New Law v. New Consulting

The accounts of Lata and Saraswati seem similar. And unlike Priya's account, they did not have to continuously prove to their colleagues and superiors that they were the right "fit" for the job. However, while Lata and Saraswati both had the advantage of not having to compete against a fixed ideal type of a "good litigator" or "good consultant", their work environments varied drastically in gender composition. Saraswati's professional life was not as blatantly sexist as Priya's, but despite feeling like there were no "technical" differences, her caveat about more senior consultants is pertinent because it reveals how environments that look relatively modern and egalitarian can still have strong barriers to entry for women despite how they look and feel on an everyday basis.

In contrast, Lata worked for a corporate law firm, within a team with a female partner and was herself a mid-level associate on what she felt was a clear track to partnership. In speaking about her progress and success within the firm, Lata, like many of her within-firm peers, reported gender as not being a consideration and highlighted how their advancement across different

levels of the firm (i.e. both at associate and partner levels) was "on track" and at par with male colleagues of similar standing. At the same time, Lata's position didn't emerge from just an idealized assumption about the firm she worked for. Her firm recruited more women than men the year that she was recruited – two, in the same "track" who started at the same level at the firm as herself – and a little over half the lawyers who had been promoted to partnership that year were women. She had the same opportunities as her male peers in terms of "promotions, bonuses, or getting clients". For Lata, and other women in her firm, gender was not an explicit issue that threatened their career prospects. Research on successful professional women has offered notes of caution in interpreting over-optimistic accounts by women who downplay the role of gender (Britton 2017; Demaiter and Adams 2009). And it would be naïve to assume equal representation of women meant that new elite law firms were not gendered in their own ways. But in creating environments where women felt like they were not actively disadvantaged against, new law – and not *all* new - firms offered a site of aberration.

Socialization Differences

One explanation for why gender "is not an issue" for Lata and her peers was the blasé way in which their male peers accepted – and even expected – their successes. As lawyers trained predominantly in new domestic law schools which evolved alongside the new law firms and were gender egalitarian at intake and graduation, men and women alike felt like there were no strong frameworks of what it meant to be an elite law firm lawyer. Take this explanation given by Nitin, a new partner at one of the elite law firms about why the gender difference seems redundant to him in the Indian case:

I went to law school with these [women] – many of them beat the S***
out of me in class - why would they be different in a meeting or
interaction here? Just because they are a woman? I'm going to say there is
no difference – and it is not just because I can't think of anything. Be it
competence, client facing ability, you name it – there is no difference.
Does a team of 4 boys differ from a team with 2 boys and 2 girls or 4
girls? Maybe banter - (*laughs*) – but that too depending on how close they
are. But for [the] most part – No!

In contrast, professionals in consulting firms were typically graduates of older engineering and

business schools, where gendered frameworks and meanings were more strongly embedded and

the demographics themselves were less gender-balanced. Most consultants – male and female

alike - agreed that the "70/30 ratio" (of men and women respectively) was ideal, but not exactly

possible in more senior levels for a range of attrition reasons including incoming cohort

demographics in business schools, women's "choices" and the inevitable strains of cultural

assumptions about gender *in India* that made it hard for women to stay. Vihaan, a senior

consultant, justified, like many of his peers, his firm's gender composition as a direct result of

similar business-school demographics[2]:

…There are no women at the top, but in the mid-manager level, there is
probably 70/30…yes, favoring men, but maybe I am being optimistic. But
you cannot do anything about this. You also have to look at the supply
side and the selection pool that feeds into this sector, both from
engineering and business schools. [Name Of Firm] tries very hard to pick
women - I mean, not that they get preferential treatment or anything, but if
you see, the number of women in the firm is a higher representation than
the number of women in business school - its hard to do. Besides, not all
business schools have the same male-female mix - cities like Bangalore
have more women than business schools in cities like Calcutta or worse,

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[2] Elite business schools – where consultants in these firms are hired from typically - have between 16%-38%
women (class of 2018) in an average batch of about 400 students a year. This gender ratio is even further skewed
amongst schools in smaller cities and in smaller schools (less than 300 students), which have closer to 6-10%
compared to schools in Mumbai (about 35% female). This is a jump from even a few years ago (class of 2015),
when 100 women acceptances (in each school) were seen as "race that had gone too far" and "at the cost of merit".
See   https://insideiim.com/indias-most-gender-diverse-business-schools-iim-indore-xlri-lead-the-way/   and
https://insideiim.com/has-the-race-for-women-in-iims-gone-too-far/?src=gendiv (last accessed 05/15/2017).

other B-cities… so making that representation filter up is difficult.

Vihaan's reasoning is grounded in his experience. Elite business schools and engineering programs are the main feeder schools into consulting firms and their gender composition does make a difference to the choices consulting firms have at recruitment. But alongside the skewed numbers, being socialized in environments where women were a minority had other implications for the ways in which gender played out in interactions. Farhan, another mid-level consultant who had gone through what he called a "typical consultant" track of an elite engineering and business school education, described it as follows:

> Women have it really tough in [Consulting Firm Name]. They are still a minority and have very high rates of attrition. Its inevitable - with family and children, they just can't keep up with the highly competitive environment. So women typically exit after a child, because then they have to take six months off to have the child and when you are on a tenure system, 6 months means you are no longer in your cohort, so you have to necessarily compete with your juniors. And when that happens, women get emotional and leave.

Farhan's description that women's attrition is "inevitable" was similar to accounts that other consultants shared about these trajectories. But his explanation sheds important light on the underlying gendered constructs of this "inevitability". Women colleagues, by this description, were unlikely to be successful within a "highly competitive environment", both because of their competing personal concerns and their obvious emotional response to this call for balance - attrition. Similarly, Mihir, another consultant who makes this connection between the elite schools he graduated from and his current work environment:

> …There were 414 students in [Engineering School], but only 30 or even 22 girls….With a percentage like that, there are not that many interactions with women or that much training on how to be around women…. What

you learn from just being in an environment like [Consulting Firm] you don't in [Engineering School] because it is not available to you. I think I got that training from [Business School], which had more women and also teams where you had to work with women in. I know it is a bad word, but this exposure to the opposite sex, to girls, only happened in business school, where 25, or sometimes as high as 35 percent were female.

Unlike Nitin who was used to women colleagues in his own competitive environment because many of them "beat the s*** out of him" in law school, for consultants like Farhaan and Mihir, women were new and unlikely entrants into a competitive system for whom entry was an exception and attrition was "inevitable". Instead, the general consensus among consultants was that while firms were "male heavy", they were not "as bad as" the schools that they had most recently graduated from. This, as Mihir suggests below, made consulting firms much better in comparison to the schools they recruited from. And any lack of gender equality was seen as an individual – rather than an organizational or institutional – problem:

[Business School] had 30% vertical reservation for women and [Consulting Firm] doesn't. So even though women are recruited in equal proportion or numbers [of the 17 in his cohort, 3 were women], there is no policy that forces them to stay. This is in spite of [Consulting Firm] not caring if women take time off, putting their clock on pause, etc.

4.   Discussion: Framelessness, Socialization, and Persistence of Global Gender Inequality

Building truly innovative workspaces is difficult because, no matter how radical, old frameworks of operation and management still attach themselves to new organizational forms (Padgett and Powell 2012). But while organizational genesis certainly "does not mean virgin birth" (2012: 5), this research reminds us that new kinds of work environments have some leeway in introducing new kinds of workers who are seen as good fits for the tasks at hand. Unlike women in litigation who had to constantly counter – and fall short of – the benchmark of an ideal male professional,

women in newer work environments like transactional law and consulting felt less constrained by a pre-determined idea of the perfect professional. As newly emerging professional fields, the cultural meanings of what constituted a "good corporate lawyer" or a "good consultant" was still in flux and as fields not predisposed to being gender-typed, both transactional lawyers and consultants alike shared this structural advantage.

In addition, women in these new organizations were also advantaged by the idea of a global, cosmopolitan professional. As graduates from some of the country's best schools, hiring these professionals was a matter of pride for many modern organizations and reflected their ideological commitment to "meritocracy". Further, as urban professionals from English-medium schools, "fit" within organizations was equally buttressed by the advantages of class. But holding the advantage of class constant across elite workspaces, women in law firms still were able to navigate their environments with less sticky constructs than their peers in consulting.

To explain this variation, firm and work novelty, in themselves, were not enough. As new organizations with mild pre-existing frameworks of reference, the structural positioning of new firms were conducive to the construction of novel gendered hierarchies. But what additionally advantaged lawyers in new transactional firms was the exposure to gender-egalitarian constructs *before* entering these workspaces. Elite lawyers who were trained in law schools with gender-balanced entry were better equipped to unlock the advantages of "innovative" gender frameworks than elite consultants who, despite working for new organizations, still remained circumscribed by the sticky frameworks of gender that their male-heavy schools of engineering and business advanced.

This is not to suggest that elite law firms were devoid of gendered meanings and frameworks. In fact, in other work, I show that there were deeply pervasive gendered meanings

that permeated each of these sites; even if the personal returns to these meanings were different across different sites (XXXX), Similarly, neither is this to suggest that lawyers were advantaged because law schools were created with intention to create egalitarian workspaces. The new national law schools were hardly designed as feeder schools for law firms (Ballakrishnen 2019), and these schools remain gender imbalanced and unequal in other important ways (for example, Ballakrishnen and Samuel 2018, re: recruiting female faculty and creating feminist spaces; Basheer et al. 2017, re: caste and class inequality). Instead, the gender equal entry into these schools – and subsequent reinforcement in these firms – was predicated on other factors like a high threshold for entry that attracted the most competitive students (regardless of gender), and new kinds of testing (which were not yet gender-typed)[3]. Further still, it is also possible that the initial gender balance was predicated on the fact that law was not always seen as a uniformly high-status professional field and therefore attracted fewer entrants of high-status (i.e., men). But more than anything, the symbiotic co-establishment of new law schools alongside new elite law firms was happenstance. And the reinforcing pattern for gender equality that it offered between students and professionals was, even if fortuitous, accidental.

5.   Conclusion

This research reinforces the persistence of gendered frameworks across organizations, even in new and modern workplaces. At the same time, it also offers some hope for the curation of more gender-egalitarian professional sites, especially through socialization offered by early gender-equal institutional structures. The law firms in this Article may not be feminist firms, they might not even be equal firms. But in seeming to have parity, they are at the precipice of affording a

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[3] Note that some schools have vertical reservation for women but they've historically never needed to be enforced because women always enter through the general category in enough numbers (Ballakrishnen 2018).

different kind of opportunity to Indian professional women. The cultural malleability of new work is influenced heavily its workers: the earlier professionals are socialized into frameworks of gender-parity, the better set up organizations can be for resisting the plaque of persistent gender inequality.

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Table 1. | List of All Interviews (N = 139)

Gender	Pilot (2011)		2012-13		2014-15		Total	
	F	*M*	*F*	*M*	*F*	*M*	*F*	*M*
Tradtional Legal Practice	4	2	10		11	2	25	4
Domestic Law Firm	3	1	6	4	12	3	21	8
Elite Law Firm	15	3	20	6	4	2	39	11
Banks and In-House Counsel			5		8	1	13	1
Management Consulting Firms					8	5	8	5
Gender Totals	*22*	*6*	*41*	*10*	*43*	*13*	*106*	*29*
Other Informant Interviews (Clients, Industry Reporters)			3		1		4	
Total	**28**		**54**		**57**		**139**	