Just Like Global Firms: Unintended Gender Parity and Speculative Isomorphism in India's Elite Professions

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Against most male-dominated accounts of professional work, elite law firms in India pose a puzzling exception: women make up about half of these firms, even at senior levels of partnership. Using in-depth interviews with over 130 professionals in India's elite litigation, transactional law, and consulting firms, this research suggests that elite law firms—as new local organizations—aggressively differentiate themselves from their more traditional peers to establish organizational legitimacy. At the same time, as institutions trying to mimic global firms without actual scripts for doing so, these firms engage in a form of "speculative isomorphism" through which they signal meritocracy and modernity to their global audience. Because equal gender representation is one such mechanism, the result is environments where certain kinds of women are uniquely advantaged.

Recent comparative demographic research on the legal profession reveals that while most countries have followed a trend of positive feminization over the last half a century, two countries—India and China—still offer strong resistance to this norm (Michelson 2013). Of these, India, despite having one of the world's largest legal professions with over a million lawyers,

still remains the least feminized with women comprising less than 10% of the profession overall. This unequal representation becomes even starker at senior levels (Ballakrishnen 2019). And the patterns described in historical accounts (e.g., Sorabji 2010) continue today, with many successful professional women still facing inhospitable work environments (Mishra 2016; Rajkotia 2017). India's new corporate law firms, however, offer a sharp contrast to this pattern, with women attorneys in these firms experiencing a vastly more encouraging professional environment (Ballakrishnen 2017a, 2017b). Among these new and prestigious firms, women constitute slightly more than half of the entering cohort and a similarly significant representation at partnership (see Table 1). This kind of gender parity is unusual for prestigious workplaces in general (Acker 1990; Epstein 2000; Kanter 1993; Pierce 1996; Williams 2001) but especially stark given the broader evidence about gender and professional work in India (Naqvi 2011; Patel and Parmentier 2005; Sood and Chadda 2010). What enables women professionals to so successfully navigate their environments? In particular, what about these new kinds of organizations afford women within them a differential experience? This is the empirical point of departure that motivates this research.

To answer this question, this article takes a comparative and reiterative case-study approach. Using data from 139 original semi-structured interviews with professionals in India's elite litigation, transactional law, and management consulting firms, I analyze the variations in the experiences of similarly high-status professionals to shed light on the ways in which different organizational environments and motivations influence individual experiences. In unpacking these comparisons, I find two specific factors to be of relevance in dictating firm choices and culture. First, following a line of research that suggests the advantage of new firms to offer new kinds of gendered environments (Ridgeway 2009), I find that institutional novelty is important: newer kinds of professional practice in India like transactional law and management consulting are indeed more hospitable to women than more traditional forms of practice like litigation. However, not all kinds of new practice are equally advantaged. This research suggests, somewhat counterintuitively, that the most egalitarian work environments are found not in local offices of global firms (such as global management consulting firms), but rather in domestic firms with foreign-facing clients and transactions (such as Indian corporate law firms).

In analyzing this unlikely empirical case, this article engages with a set of interrelated conversations about global organizations

Table 1. Comparative Gender Representation in Legal Profession

	% Female	
	United States (2013)	India (2013)
Legal profession	34	5–10%
Elite law firms (private practice, entry-level)	44.8	55
Elite law firms (private practice, partnership)	20.2	45

Notes: For United States Women in Legal Profession statistics, see American Bar Association Market Research Department, April 2013. For Indian women in the legal profession statistics, see Michelson (2013) reports census data indicating that women are just 5 per cent of all lawyers, about half the number in bar council admission records for a similar time period (Ballakrishnen 2019, Table 3). Note, however, that most Bar Council records report all law graduates registered with the Bar. All data on elite private practice are collected by author and reflect entry and partnership rates at two of the largest elite law firms at the time of data collection. Note that data on private practice for U.S. lawyers in private practice includes associate and partner numbers in all law firms. This offers a conservative comparison since retentiona and partnership in large law firms is typically much lower than in smaller law firm practice. For notes on demographic data on the Indian legal profession more generally, See Ballakrishnen 2019.

and institutional emergence. First, this study adds to the literature in recent decades that has increasingly focused on professional organizations and legal institutions as a way to make sense of the layered relationship between the global and the local (Halliday and Shaffer 2015; Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008, 2012; Dezalay and Garth 2002; Garth 2016; Klug and Merry 2016; Liu 200; Liu and Halliday 2009; Muzio and Faulconbrdige 2013; Plickert and Hagan 2011). As recent comparative research reveals, India's market liberalization offers an especially useful landscape to investigate many of these questions (Dezalay and Garth 2010; Krishnan 2013; Wilkins et al. 2017). While most high-status professional practice in the country was traditionally organized around individual or family practitioners, market liberalization in 1991 introduced foreign investment across sectors, and alongside it, exposed many historically closed professions to new work, transactions, and clients (Ballakrishnen 2017b; Wilkins et al. 2017). As a result, it became possible to observe the experience of professionals in old kinds of organizations engaged in traditional modes of legal practice (e.g., litigators usually organized in stand-alone or small practice settings) as well as professionals in different kinds of organizations engaging in newer kinds of professional work (e.g., transactional lawyers in new corporate law firms and management consultants in new consulting firms). The comparison of different kinds of new practice is particularly important because these similarly prestigious professional firms emerged under distinctly different regulatory conditions. Management consulting firms, for example, continue to follow a multinational corporation (MNC) model, in which local firms (all formed post 1991) act as offices of large global consulting houses and their operations remain scripted by the international parent firm. In contrast, market regulation prohibiting foreign investment in the

legal services market meant that corporate law firms emerged as an elite professional sector within a post-liberalization environment, but *without* global firm involvement (see Table 2).

Second, these variations offer structural fodder to examine the relationship between novelty in organizational emergence and the advantages novelty offers professionals working in those organizations. Although organizational scholars warn us that there are no virgin births (Padgett and Powell 2012), gender scholars have alluded to the usefulness of organizational novelty (Ridgeway 2009, 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004) in creating new kinds of equalities within firms. Particularly, Ridgeway suggests that when new kinds of work are done in new kinds of organizational environments, the combined novelty offers new capacity for the renegotiation of the gendered expectations and preexisting frameworks (2009: 187). Other research from this project offer implications for this "frame" argument on the gendering of the Indian legal progression (Ballakrishnen 2017a, 2017b, 2018). This article seeks to extend this proposition by revealing that while new organizations were determinately better for women than older organizations, not all new organizations were similarly advantageous. In comparing the experience of professionals across similarly high-status new firms (i.e., management consulting and corporate law firms), this article asks what organizational motivations produced the conditions that made some new organizations more favorable than others for their female professionals.

Third, and most centrally, in answering the question about variations between new organizations, this research offers new extensions to theories of neo-institutionalism in emerging markets. There is expansive research on comparative professional work and for-profit corporations (e.g., Drori 2008; Kostova et al. 2008; Orrù et al. 1991). While not always employing the language of neo-institutionalism, this research illustrates how, just as corporate organizational practice has become domestically standardized (Dobbin and Sutton 1998; Edelman et al. 1999), global workspaces have begun to converge structurally but still retain strong endogenous influences of their local environments (e.g., Muzio and Faulconbrdige 2013) and culture (e.g., Plickert

Table 2. Field and Firm Emergence for Major Indian Professions

Field	Post-1991	Global Organization	New Organization
Consulting	⚙	⚙	⚙
Accounting		⚙	⚙
Banking		⚙	⚙
Law			⚙

and Hagan 2011). As a result, firms in Boston and Bengaluru alike are likely to incorporate sexual harassment and corporate social responsibility trainings, but they do it for legitimacy, not out of commitment to the cause. Similarly, the multinational management-consulting firms in my sample saw gender parity as a strong structural commitment; however, they fell short of being able to substantively deliver on it because they saw the ideal as impossible, especially "for a country like India." In contrast, as Indian organizations responding to new global markets and clients, the very elite domestic law firms felt that they had to over-emphasize their global credibility—both to differentiate themselves from traditional Indian firms as well as to emphatically signal solidarity with the idea of a "global firm."

Seen this way, in addition to revealing new gendered extensions of the global legal profession, this research lends itself organically to a theoretical line of inquiry about legal institutions in emerging markets, especially with respect to the recursive relationship between global scripts and local firms (Halliday 2009; Halliday and Carruthers 2007). Further, it offers a new way of thinking about neo-institutionalism in these contexts—a mechanism I term *"speculative" isomorphism*. As I elaborate below, regulatory constraints that barred foreign law firms from India also created a special kind of organizational vacuum, within which domestic law firms had diffuse ideas of what was considered "global" and little concrete connection to organizational praxis and culture that could specify the more complicated realities of manifesting this ideology. As a result, unlike local offices of global consulting firms that could ride on the legitimacy of their parent organizations, domestic law firms saw themselves as needing to adhere to, replicate, and often outperform the ideals of the western firms they sought to emulate. It is this performance of meritocratic mimicry for the purposes of global legitimacy—and its subsequent incidental advantages for women within it—that this case exposes.

1.   The Local Workings of Global Scripts: Neo-Institutional Theory and Recursivity

With the expansion of international business over the last three decades, new kinds of complex "transnational" (Bartlett and Ghoshal 199) or "globally integrated" (Palmisano 2006) organizational forms, processes, and phenomena have emerged as a response to the demand for efficient and territory-agnostic services (Evans 1995; Prahalad and Doz 1999). To dissect this global proliferation and integration, and especially to underscore the ways in which organizations around the world have begun to develop certain immutable "glocal" cultural codes,

institutional theories of legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977) and convergence (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hannan and Freeman 1977; Meyer et al. 1983) offer useful tools. From this perspective, global codes, norms, and organizational schemes, despite being less rational in structure for many local contexts, take root in globally competitive environments to alleviate local concerns of legitimacy (Meyer et al. 1983). From the adopter's perspective, this convergence offers an antidote to uncertain environments (Powell and DiMaggio 1991: 69). One way[1] this modeling happens is through a process of institutional mimicking, in which organizations act on cues from their peers and ideal types to signal and enhance their institutional membership and standing (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Recent empirical accounts concede that globalization has been crucial in spearheading an expansion of both markets and myths and that new global organizations seeking legitimacy feel the pressure to confirm notionally with dominant ideas, rules, and practices (Bartley and Child 2014; Lim and Tsutsui 2012; Meyer 2002). The scattered empirical evidence these theories have motivated offers a pretty cohesive and pessimistic picture: modern organizations undergo a process of institutional isomorphism (Aldrich 1979; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Kanter 1972) because they seek power, legitimacy, and economic fitness (Powell and DiMaggio 1991: 66). However, despite their best efforts, they fall short in their mimicking of these global norms, because they are saddled with a "liability of foreignness" (Zaheer 1995), or because they pay lip service to technical instead of institutional rules (Meyer et al. 1983), or because their modeling makes them less, not more efficient (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Even so, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that, over time, this dynamic will result in a field-level isomorphism as more and more organizations turn to the same scripts of emergence for legitimacy.

Alongside these accounts that explain convergence or isomorphism at the organizational level, socio-legal scholars have offered similar hybrid relationships between the global and the local at more macro institutional levels (Halliday 2009; Halliday and Carruthers 2007; Halliday and Shaffer 2015). Halliday and Carruthers (2007), for instance, argued that the globalization of legal institutions (similar to the aggregate "organizational field" in neo-institutional theory) has happened through recursive

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[1] Other theorists have offered different mechanisms for such convergence around global norms—Hannan and Freeman (1977), for instance, argue that this is a competitive survival tactic: organizations feel the demands of their competitive environments and converge in order to catch up with, or in some cases, stay ahead of their peers. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) move away from the pure competition hypothesis, and instead argue that isomorphism is useful beyond selection and survival, that it is a marker of institutional viability.

reiterative cycles of law and norm making at the national and global level, respectively. Thus, change in legal systems (and by extension in other systems that are based on legal systems) is not so much a unidirectional response to global cues but rather a more interrelated and relational process by which the local and the global interact and integrate with one another. The sociology of law literature has since expanded on the implications of this recursive relationship between the local and the global, offering one more lens with which to conduct a nuanced consideration of the emergence of India's law firms (e.g., Dezalay and Garth 2010; Plickert and Hagan 2011; Wilkins et al. 2017). In particular, this approach lends itself to thinking of institutional change in emerging economies not just as a straightforward mimetic process of isomorphism, but also as a two-way process wherein these institutions are changed at the global level by norms and adaptations taking place at the national and local levels. India offers an especially rich arena for investigating these negotiations around legitimacy and convergence from an emerging country's perspective. It also, as I offer in the next section, provides an organic setup for studying natural variations in organizational motivations and ideological positions vis-à-vis global cues.

2.   Research Context, Case Selection, and Data and Methods

Market globalization has offered new research incentives to scholars interested in the transnational ramifications of the legal profession (e.g., Dezalay and Garth 2010; Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008, 2012; Liu 200; Wilkins et al. 2017). It was similar theoretical purchase that motivated this research. In 1991, the Indian government, in response to a balance of payment crisis, initiated a process of economic liberalization and market deregularization (Nayar 1998). These reforms had important financial and currency implications, but they were central to shaping the scope of India's professional service sectors because they introduced the gradual privatization of predominantly state-run sectors and the liberalization of foreign direct investments and trade. Particularly, following these reforms, India witnessed the entry of multinational professional firms and the emergence of new kinds of professional services (e.g., management consulting) alongside older professions like law, accounting, and banking. But even among existing professions, liberalization brought about organizational changes and new kinds of firms began to emerge alongside vestigial individual practice.

Two consequences of these liberalization reforms were central to this project's research design because they offered purchase for analytical sampling across cases (Yin 2003). First, while some professional practices like litigation remained unaffected by liberalization measures (Galanter and Robinson 2014), others like international transactional law and management consulting only emerged as a consequence of the foreign direct investment that liberalization permitted (Galanter and Rekhi 1996). There was a considerable influx of foreign investment and capital and a need for new kinds of transactional professionals to service this influx. Second, in addition to new kinds of work, market liberalization also introduced new kinds of workplaces. Significantly, there were no local offices of multinational consulting firms before 1991[2] (introducing, then, new kinds of work *and* workplaces) and although the conception of many of the elite Indian law firms preceded market liberalization, they emerged into their current form—as sophisticated, full-service, "big law" firms—following these 1991 reforms (Gupta et al. 2017). And here too, other regulatory conditions offered case variation. While most elite professional service sectors like banking and management consulting are organized like standard MNCs, with international investment and firm organization, the Advocates Act (1961) restricts international investment into the Indian legal profession and forbids the "practice of law"[3] by non-Indians.[4] This produced a unique organizational and service novelty: the significant influx of foreign capital and the absence of local competition meant that large domestic law firms had a fertile opportunity to evolve as a "one

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[2] Local independent consultants worked across a range of industries more or less as freelancers. But the main industry players were all global professional service firms with a renewed India presence following the 1991 liberalization.

[3] The meaning of "practice of law" in the Advocates Act 1962 has been hotly debated since the first foreign law firms attempted to establish liaison offices in India in the early 1990s. The Bombay High Court ruled in *Lawyers Collective v. Bar Council of India Chadbourne, Ashurst, White & Case, and Others* (2009) that the "practice of law" is limited to Indian citizens. But in 2012, the Madras High Court held that nothing in the Advocates Act prohibited foreign lawyers from visiting India on a temporary "fly-in/fly-out" basis or subcontracting legal work to outsourcing firms. In March 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that foreign lawyers could visit on a "casual basis" and advise on foreign laws and international commercial arbitration, so long as such visiting and advising was within the rules of the Bar Council of India (Ballakrishnen 2018; Singh 2017).

[4] The Advocates Act 1961 §§ 24, 37 restrict the right of practice to Indian citizens and practitioners from countries offering reciprocity. And while the Bar Council has allowed a few individual foreign lawyers (all of Indian origin) from recognized universities to practice in Indian Courts foreign law firms are still excluded. See http://barcouncilofindia.nic.in/disk1/foreign.pdf for the Bar Council Resolution on acceptable reciprocal standards. Proposals to expand the scope of this reciprocity have met resistance within and outside the country. http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/News/International_Business/NRI_lawyers_demand_removal_of_restrictions_on_working_in_UK/articleshow/3536849.cms

stop shop" for commercial matters (Galanter and Rekhi 1996; Krishnan 2013). As Gupta et al. (2017: 49) argue, this "milieu provided the space, opportunity, and demand for law firms to emerge as indispensable service providers to the major domestic and foreign players in the Indian economy."

Despite these crucial regulatory differences, these new kinds of professional service firms also shared important similarities: elite law and management consulting firms were both similarly exclusive when it came to staffing, they paid high salaries, were considered highly prestigious, and recruited incoming cohorts of successful candidates from elite national law and business schools (Ballakrishnen 2018). At the same time, they varied in other ways—they were differently managed, they valorized different tasks as crucial to their professional identity, and they serviced different kinds of clients. And, as I detail below, each of these variations revealed itself to be significant in the creation of differential contexts for the professionals who worked there.

2.1   Design and Case Selection

In addition to the structural variations afforded by India's market liberalization, this research benefited from its multiyear design, which allowed an iterative analytical process not just between data and existing research but also between data collection and analysis before subsequent rounds of comparative sampling (Yin 2003). When I began this project in 2011, I planned on doing a qualitative study about the experience of lawyers in neoliberal professional service firms. Like other researchers (Pratt 2000) inclined to inductive organizational research, I was interested in elite Indian law firms because they were an extreme case ideally situated for building theory through qualitative research. As firms structurally cut off from direct Western influence but still responding to the large market for international legal services, I saw these firms as prime sites to investigate firm emergence and experience during a transitional market, especially as juxtaposed against more traditional kinds of legal practice. Using the broad theoretical proposition that variations in organizational history would be central to shaping experiences, my exploratory study focused on the differences between lawyers in old and new organizations. From this initial data, the emergent theme highlighted was that of gender "not being an issue" among professionals in newer law firms. Subsequent interviews (2012-2013) specifically probed ideologies around gender and paid attention to the experience of gender in the workplace. In both these stages of this project (2011, 2012-2013), I used variations in emergence before and after the 1991 liberalization to make sense of the ways in which novelty enabled professionals in the Indian case to navigate their

environments. As I described earlier, this focus on novelty was initially guided by the variations in organizational emergence that the 1991 reforms offered. However, upon analyzing the relevance of the gender finding, it was also useful to test the proposition that new kinds of work environments could offer the potential to renegotiate rigidly set background assumptions about gender (Ridgeway 2009, 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Extending beyond the empirics of western organizations and career outcomes that grounded this theory (e.g., Smith-Doerr 2004), this research was broadly refocused to ask: What kinds of negotiations are possible at the individual level following drastic labor market changes?

Following these theoretical and empirical motivations (Eisenhardt 1989), I chose to focus on two sites that showed this variation in organizational structure and the 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* was the case of transactional law firms created after the 1991 liberalization that worked on new kinds of transactional work (e.g., mergers and acquisitions, capital markets, and international banking). In addition to doing different sorts of work, the tasks involved in these two types of firm also varied. Traditional litigation practice in India involved drafting and appearing on behalf of (predominantly domestic) clients in local and state courts as well as limited advisory work on specialized areas. In contrast, the post-1991 corporate law firm model was set up to respond to a need for Indian lawyers in more commercial transactions. While many of these corporate firms also worked with litigators, their predominant practice was to advise, consult, and negotiate on behalf of sophisticated corporate clients who often brought repeat business. I also interviewed lawyers in elite but traditionally organized litigation practice in order to evaluate the advantage of new sites (Ridgeway 2009). From my interviews and observations in the field, it became clear that newer firms were indeed impacted by globalization and that women in particular experienced their careers very differently in these new firms.[5]

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[5] I also hypothesized that if this gender finding was just a response to newness and the organizational structure of these firms, then *all* new law firms would have the same advantages. To test this, I added a new case of lawyers in other new law firms that were not particularly elite and found that the gender parity did not play out in the same ways as it did in very elite law firms. In particular, I found that while elite law firms saw themselves as catering to and competing with a global standard for legal services, new but less elite law firms that did not face similarly sophisticated and global clients did not see themselves as international firms. In these less elite firms, women were still better represented than in traditional legal practice, but women felt their status differently than in the elite law firms.

In 2013, when it became clear from the first two waves of analysis that novelty of work and organizational structure alone could not explain the variations observed in different organizations, I decided to add a *third* site to the project that would focus on relationships between the local and the global via clients and organizational structure. While the comparisons in the early part of the project were useful for teasing out mechanisms of novelty, they were all cases within the legal profession that were necessarily domestically owned and managed. My theoretical impetus for choosing this third case was to introduce variations in organizational factors like ownership, management, and external audience (i.e., clients). I was particularly interested in the differences between external-facing domestic firms and internal-facing international firms (Table 3). I theorized that if novelty was indeed what was behind the difference between women in older litigating practice versus those in new kinds of transactional law firms, then other kinds of new firms ought also to expose their inhabitants to similar surroundings. However, a scan of the management-consulting sector—an equally prestigious professional field that was also "new"—revealed that women did not enjoy the same kinds of representation there as in the new law firms. Pursuing this line of sampling offered useful analytical variation since transactional law firms were, as I describe above, domestically managed while servicing international clients. It was to introduce a case that was organizationally novel but globally managed that I chose the third case of management consulting firms that were set up in a classic MNC model—that is, as local firms of global conglomerates that dealt with local clients and transactions. I conducted these interviews in 2014-2015. Together, three sites were similar enough to warrant comparison in that they were all highly prestigious work sites with professional entry requirements (see Table 4). But their structural variation (in organization, nature of work, and external audience/clients[6]) offered a triangulated research design for understanding the ways in which these variations impacted cultural understandings about work and workers.

2.2   Data and Methods

My data are from 139 semi-structured but in-depth interviews conducted between 2011 and 2015 with professionals across these three main theoretical cases in Mumbai, India (Table 5). As I explain above, data were analyzed in three critical stages—first

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[6] I have elaborated elsewhere on the ramifications of differences between client preferences and the ways in which those differences legitimate organizational logics and choices (Ballakrishnen 2017b).

Table 3. Indian Professional Service Firms: Management and Clients

	External-Facing Clients or Transactions	Internal-Facing Clients or Transactions
Externally owned or managed	Process outsourcing	Consulting, banking, accounting services
Internally owned or managed	Elite law firm	Domestic law firm, litigation

Table 4. Comparison of Cases

Case Dimensions	Traditional Litigation	Consulting	E Elite Transactional Law
Commonalities			
Type of professional	Professional degree	Professional degree (predominantly elite)	Professional degree (predominantly elite)
Status of profession	Varies	High	High
Differences			
Organizational structure	Old	New	New
	Individual practice, partnerships	Global MNC firms, local Indian offices	Domestically managed firms, lockstep partnerships
Predominant nature of work/ transactions	Old	New	New
	Court appearances	Advisory, transactional	Advisory, transactional, negotiation
Clients	Old	Old	New
	Domestic clients, traditional	Domestic clients, traditional	International clients, large domestic conglomerates

after the pilot in 2011 to establish the parameters of the study; then in 2012-2013 after the first stage of the interviews investigating the experience of gender across different organizations; and finally in 2014-2015 after the addition of the third comparative case of consultants.

As a financial capital with an established presence of both older and newer professional service firms, Mumbai was a prime city to locate this analysis. To identify respondents, I first wrote to a random selection of 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 5 years.[7] Over the course of the first field visit, I met with 7 of the 15 partners I contacted. Once the first connections were established, internal networks that these senior lawyers were embedded made it easier to contact and interview more respondents. These partners were influential contacts who connected me with junior colleagues and peers in their own firm, shared with me details and contact information to lawyers in other

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[7] This is a standard typology of the organizational stratification within the Indian legal profession (Gupta et al. 2017). In the years after this research, this cohort of "elite law firms" now includes six firms following a split among one of them. However, it does not affect this sampling since the organizational split was geography based and did not affect the "elite firm" category among Mumbai's law firms.

Table 5. List of all Interviews ($N = 139$)

Gender	Pilot (2011) F	Pilot (2011) M	2012-2013 F	2012-2013 M	2014-2015 F	2014-2015 M	Total F	Total M
Traditional legal practice	7	3	16	4	23	5	46	12
Transactional law firm	15	3	20	6	4	2	39	11
International banks & consulting firms	--	--	5	--	16	6	21	6
Gender totals	**22**	**6**	**41**	**10**	**43**	**13**	**106**	**29**
Other informant interviews (clients, industry reporters)	--		3		1		4	
Total respondents	**28**		**54**		**57**		**139**	

professional firms, and connected me with colleagues in banking and consulting practices. I spoke to women and men in each of these firms, for between 40 and 90 minutes each. Although I oversampled women, the men in the sample were crucial for placing the women's responses in context as they provided an interactional peer perspective. Other scholars have explored global gender processes in white collar work contexts (e.g., Radhakrishnan's 2011 idea of the "good worker" in India's IT firms or Freeman 2000 on "pink collar work" in the Caribbean), but the rich literature on formal "global" work in India describes a very different demographic from the elite professionals in my sample.[8]

Interviews were initially set up to probe into a set of predetermined areas including: family history, professional schooling experiences, career trajectory, career aspiration, everyday experiences, and barriers to progression. Preliminary interviews offered a range of open-ended biographical data, allowing for more structured inquiry in subsequent interviews. Early interviews also helped explore emergent themes (Spradley 1979) and subsequently became more streamlined to include specifics about, among other things, personal and professional interactions with clients and the ways in which those interactions shaped exchanges and experiences. All interviews were in English, except for the odd word in a vernacular language, usually used for effect. For many of my respondents, the primary model for being interviewed was the press and most were pleased (and many, required) that I did not reveal their identities in published research. Some respondents were uncomfortable with being recorded, so I took notes in shorthand during interviews and transcribed them immediately afterward. When recorded, the interviews were professionally transcribed.

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[8] In some comparisons, employees in elite Business Process Outsourcing firms in the IT industry earned, on average, between US$4167 and US$7700 a year. In contrast, at the time of data collection, lawyers and consultants at entry in these elite firms made, on average, between US$15,500 and US$24,000 a year.

As I have described in the case selection section above, findings from these early field visits were used to theoretically sample professionals across sites. All interviews were coded initially around thematic categories that motivated the interview questions across three levels of analysis: individual (life and career biography), interactional (socialization at school; relationships with mentors, peers, and clients), and institutional (organizational hurdles; external cultural influences). The emergent data were further analyzed for similarities and differences that were interpreted based on existing research on institutional theory, organizational innovation, global mobility, and workplace gender dynamics. This led to a more focused coding around themes at different levels of analysis that afforded these similarities (e.g., mobility into an elite professional class, and dependency on domestic help) and variations (e.g., learned behaviors at school, organizational culture, and reception by clients). While underlying mechanisms emerging from these themes are interrelated and have been elaborated in other research (Ballakrishnen 2017a, 2017b, 2018), for the purpose of this article, I rely mostly on the differences in organizational structures and influences across cases to highlight variations in the ways in which firms created and received their individual cultural narratives. These variations were a sub-theme that emerged from the more focused coding of the data on "organizational history" and "external cultural influences."

These interactions were symbolically influenced by my own identity and engagement. I am a female, Indian-born, and dual-trained lawyer with experience in international transaction law: these interviews were done when I was affiliated with prestigious Western schools and a few of my respondents knew me by professional association. These associations were crucial in granting me access to these busy professionals, yet it is possible that their representations to me were in response to my current professional and academic affiliations. Despite the interpretive implications and limitations of these subjectivities, these data also simultaneously offer perspective on how presentation of self was moderated when respondents engaged with external expectations and standards.

The rich theorization of globalization offers important perspectives about the ways in which institutions transfer and port across geographic boundaries. But much of the evidence for this line of research comes from macrolevel data. Focusing on professionals gives us one way of perceiving how individuals and their actions scale up to organizational outcomes (Thornton 1999). By paying attention to the ways in which professionals working in these firms understood and experienced their surroundings, my research offers some purchase on how organizational actors read

and respond to cues in their naturally occurring contexts (Weick 1985). This research cannot—and does not claim to—give comprehensive detail about all the mechanisms at play in global organizations. It can, however, offer 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 Alan Fine 1997).

3.   Legitimacy Concerns: New Firms for New Work

While lawyers with successful pre-liberalization practices started many of these firms, it was only post-1991 that the organization of elite law firm practice began to mimic the institutional prototype of the Anglo-American corporate mega-law firm (Galanter and Rekhi 1996; Gupta et al. 2017; Krishnan 2013). The context of these firms' emergence were essential because it set up why these firms were in a uniquely vulnerable position, both vis-à-vis their peers within the profession as well as their global audiences.

As I describe above, before 1991, private investment in domestic industries was not allowed and trade was heavily regulated. This meant that domestic lawyers were involved in mainly domestic transactions. However, with liberalization, domestic law firms had to reinvent themselves to deal with a range of international cross-border transactional work (e.g., mergers and acquisition, private equity, and international finance transactions). Balinder,[9] an older senior partner who had left three decades of private practice to join this firm, described the change in work:

> You know how when they say "firms" before that (globalization), they meant lawyers who did some testamentary property or company work… but it was not transactional. There were always Company Secretaries or Chartered Accountants in big companies who took care of things like that. It was only after 1991 that this began to change…. There was a good market, and auditors couldn't do work outside their company…and of course, then there were new regulations that expanded the scope for what lawyers could do… so the firms *[he signals with air-quotes]* "adapted."

But it was not just new work, it was also who this new kind of work was being done for. Following the regulatory reforms of 1991, many smaller firms continued to do transactional work for their existing domestic clients who were foraying into more sophisticated commercial transactions. But a small set of law firms

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[9] All names used in this research are pseudonyms.

began growing in prestige (in part because of their initial high-profile domestic clients) and began servicing international clients and large domestic conglomerates in globally significant transactions. Elaborating on a conversation about how liberalization had changed the organization of legal practice, Balinder described the change in exposure at this time of transition:

> Suddenly, there was exposure to the globe. In-house counsels could only do so much. But for [joint ventures], mergers, those types of sophisticated things—well, for those types of things, you know you need a lawyer…. The risk perceived was just that much more and these [international] clients wanted lawyers.

Thus, for the first time a lot of this transactional work, especially in the most prestigious of these firms (such as the one where Balinder had been a partner for more than a decade), included a strong international component where either the work or the clients were global.

Finally, since the piously defended nationalist monopoly of legal services limited the entry of international law firms into the Indian market, these elite firms, unlike their counterparts in other Asian countries (e.g., Liu 200), emerged without direct structural support or intervention of Western law firms. Partners (many of whom were involved in the original movement to oppose the entry of foreign firms) saw this as an opportunity to showcase their unique capabilities. For instance, Rahul, a senior partner who had transformed his practice from what was originally a small private practice to one of the country's most "global" transactional law firms, seemed both aware and ready for this competition:

> There is no difference between [Name of a Major U.S. Law Firm] and us—if we are on a matter, we are as good as them. In fact, sometimes I think we have the better work product…. Because we are new, there is energy here. People are excited about this work—and this is where the magic is happening. India Shining, and all that.

But alongside Rahul's striking confidence, was also some insecurity about the process, especially in terms of what it would mean when the market for legal services inevitably opened:

> There is that fear, we had no one teaching us, so we had to learn, you know? They have been doing this work for hundreds of years, for us, this is new. But we have learnt, we have managed. We don't really need them—if they [International Law Firms] enter [the Indian Legal Market], they will need us.

Together, these emergence conditions created a fragile position for elite Indian law firms. These firms were organizing themselves in new ways, doing new work, facing sophisticated international clients, *and* they were doing all of this without the direct structural intervention of foreign firms. And as firms that were boisterously opposing the entry of foreign law firms, Indian law firms seemed to be in a particularly vulnerable position for maintaining and signaling a competitive global image to their competitors and clients alike. To strategically position themselves, firms adopted two dominant mechanisms, each of which was meant to signal a certain identity of modernity and meritocracy both to external audiences (i.e., clients, international peers) and to their own associates. First, they differentiated themselves from the rest of their peers and made clear that they were unique professional spaces not tainted by the old-school logic of their predecessors. And second, they started aggressively signaling that they were capable of being global firms. Both these approaches, especially the latter, required them to mimic norms of global firms, which they did in a variety of ways. However, crucially, as firms without any real connections to these Western firms, this knowledge was asymmetric and the mimicking, as a result, speculative.

4.   "We Are Not Traditional": Differentiation Logics

Key to this identity creation was that these firms were entertaining new global clients while emerging as a contrast to traditional law firms and legal practices that were riddled in traditional, local scripts of nepotism, patriarchy, and old-boy networks (Gandhi 1988). But their projection to an external audience seemed predicated on a deep internalization of the organizational identity by associates and partners *within* the firm. Niyant, a young man in his early twenties and a rising third-year associate in one of these elite firms, described one common attraction for young professionals who wanted to join these firms:

> I really like being part of [Elite Law Firm]—it is a really professional…. There aren't other places in the profession with this sort of professional culture—it is shocking, but this is the sort of place where having connections can actually hurt you…. It is all based on merit—I can't see myself leaving for another firm…. This is not like out there [in litigation]—here, *[in air quotes]* "royalty" holds you back.

The "royalty" Niyant worried about was the fact that members of his family (which was active in business) knew some of the firm's partners personally, a connection that he feared would "hold him

back" if viewed as inappropriate by his peers. His worry was not unfounded. Projecting the image of a deeply meritorious institution was central to the way in which these firms distinguished themselves from their peers in litigation. It cannot have hurt Niyant that his parents knew the managing partner, but the fact that he was ashamed of it revealed something of the cultural image the firm was trying to foster. And it was not in vain. Nina, a young partner who, unlike Niyant, did not know anybody in the firm before she applied, told me mockingly that she, like many of her peers in her firm, "did not have to know Judge Uncle" to get her job: a reference to the tight old-boys network that still advanced the careers of many lawyers outside of these transactional law firms. Instead, as a graduate from one of the country's top law schools, she felt her career was based on merit in a way that legal careers often were not before the advent of these new firms. In her words, "Finally there was a route to a secure career [these firms] that I could get through merit."

But it was not just that these associates and partners *felt* like their firm was different from traditional litigation practice. Top law firms in the country recruited in local law schools almost exclusively on the basis of merit and invited their new associates to an environment that was both visibly and organizationally different from traditional legal practice. While litigation practices and smaller firms operated in decrepit old buildings, offices of large elite law firms in Mumbai looked and felt like any international law firm. Located in prime real estate, and designed to impress, these air-conditioned, fine-art-studded offices felt distinctly different from the pigeon-nest lined buildings, with their old elevators, that housed older litigation offices. But it was not just how these spaces were experienced by associates that was telling of how deeply ingrained this logic of differentiation was. Partners, many of whom had been central to the creation of these firms, were keen to highlight the ways in which their firms were unlike traditional legal practice in the country, especially when it came to how the firm treated its associates. Kamal, a senior partner who had seen the firm grow over the last two decades, made the comparison this way:

> In the courts, in litigation practice, nobody is treated equally—the judiciary still hasn't reached that level of maturity. The thinking used to be "Ah, the women will come, get married" or, even, "If they make a point (during court arguments) then it will be more emotional than substance." But all other things being equal, in a place like this [an elite law firm] women score over men…. Things like gender discrimination, gender harassment, that just isn't there…look, we have equal number of male and

female partners. A thought like this doesn't even arise… The culture is just different here.

The "culture" Kamal mentioned is important because it set the tone for the kind of merit-based workspace that Niyant and Nina spoke about. This projection of being more gender sensitive than litigation practice was central to the identity of these firms—as was the ideology that gender would not be the yardstick used to discriminate. Instead, by maintaining high standards of merit-based entry, they saw themselves as being above the clutches of discrimination that plagued their more traditional peers. And this commitment was well received. Like many of her peers, Lata, a senior associate in one of these firms who saw her path to partnership clearly before her, told me "if I had been in litigation, it would have been different…. But not here [in an elite law firm]."

5.   "We Are Global": Mimicking Logics

The emergence of the new Indian corporate law firm was also marked by another association—firms emerging as a response to what they saw as global expectations of performance and propriety. In my interviews, partners and associates alike spoke about "merit" and "egalitarian" norms in a range of ways, both to signal that they were no longer wedded to old notions of ascription-based advantage but also to signal that they were rising from this preexisting framework by being more internationally competitive and specifically meritocratic, "just like global firms." Thus, there was a dual categorization of merit: merit served both as a way of signaling departure from the old but also as a way of merging with the global image these firms were attempting to foster. Several lawyers in these firms talked about the ways in which their firms had really become a function of the global clients they served. For instance, Sapna, a woman senior associate told me, "In transactions, by the end of it, I could be a *Mr.* Sapna….there is no difference…and I'm happy I am not treated differently." She also explained that the price of working in a very prestigious law firm was that her work depended on the whims and preferences of her international clients. As an example of this dependence, she offered:

We are not like the Courts where every national holiday is off— we are on 24/7/365. The only big break we get is Christmas, when the US and UK just shut down and work starts to slow down. There is no question of taking a similar break for, say, Diwali or Holi…. [Name of Law Firm] won't even allow us to

> ask if the client is OK with it…. When the client says "jump,"
> you don't ask why.

Sapna's emphatic description of "when a client says 'jump'…" elucidates the sentiment that many of these lawyers expressed—that as new firms catering to international clients, elite law firms were subject to external scripts of practice and performance. Structuring work schedules differently for international clients, in a way that superseded their local clients' interests—or even their own (Diwali and Holi are both major Indian holidays)—was reflective of a larger institutional pecking order. And the culture around gender—beyond how these firms looked or how associates structured their work schedules—was one more way in which firms could signal this "global" attitude. It was not unlike Kamal's explanation for his statement that "the culture is just different here" in his law firm:

> Exposure! Things have changed… [we are] keeping up with the times. It's not like the litigating offices where people have to worry about connections or gender—we are like any an international law firm. Merit is everything.

Note that this explanation was not rooted in gender itself, but instead in the extensions of merit signaled by "keeping up with the times." Faced with new clients and new times ("exposure"), firms were charged with the task of dispelling preconceived notions about professional work in India. And they did this by both distinguishing themselves from their predecessors ("it is not like litigation") *and* aggressively signaling their assumed similarity to global firms ("we are like an international law firm").

I use the phrase "assumed similarity" here because this perception of international firms as capstones of meritocracy and gender parity was closer to an ideal-type assumption than it was to reality. And this senior partner's statement was not an isolated reference—some version of the phrase "merit is everything" came up in other conversations about gender in these firms, confirming that even if they did not have structural access to global firms, there was a central assumption that the ideology of merit and equal opportunity was important to those global firms. The pressure to "keep up with the times" demanded an aggressive reorientation that brought these Indian firms' own image in line with this prominent ideology, to show that they were serious global players. At the same time, as local firms without strong connections to the global firms they were trying to mimic, their knowledge and response to these macrocultural scripts was both speculative and, incidentally, more adherent. I use the term "speculative" here

because there is no indication that firms thought gender equity was the only or even a central way to signal this global isomorphism. They were trying to do everything they could to gain legitimacy by being "modern" and "meritocratic": being gender-agnostic happened to be one way of accomplishing this. But importantly, many of the ways in which they were trying to be "just like global firms" arose out of conjecture rather than actual knowledge. In fact, as the case of consulting firms revealed, actual knowledge was counterproductive to the gender project because, among other things, actual knowledge could reveal that women were ill represented in most elite global workforces.

At the same time, pandering to the notion of meritocracy did not always mean that all lawyers in Indian firms had little idea of how Western firms looked or operated. In exploring this emergent theme of the interpretation of global scripts in later interviews, I asked lawyers to explain the ways in which they imagined international firms: What did they think these firms looked like? How did they think their own firms compared? There was a lot of variance in this meaning-making process, especially given that different lawyers had different levels of exposure to Western firms (a few, though not many, had spent a year in the United States or the United Kingdom getting a graduate law degree or had spent a few months on secondment in a foreign firm). But while the lawyers I interviewed did not imagine these spaces in any uniform way, it was clear that most of them envisioned these firms as environments staunchly upholding the ideology of meritocracy and gender equality even if they were unsure about the resultant outcomes of such ideology. For example, a partner who was comparing her firm composition to that of international law firms seemed unsure (but optimistic) about the ways in which Indian firms measured up:

> …. And the women? Well, it's the same as any international firm—India is changing you know? In fact, maybe we have more partners who are women than in the U.S…. Is it true?

For other partners, the firm's gender representation evolved to surpass global cultural norms. A male senior partner, who early in my fieldwork had framed the gender ratio in his firm (about 50% women, across levels) as a function of meritocracy, gave a public interview a few years later about the ways in which India's elite legal service firms were not just competent, but also better than firms in the West when it came to gender:

> … the East, I think, has learned a lot from the West. I have learned a lot from the West in terms of how I've been able to lead

> and build this firm, but there are also a number of things which we can do differently…. I think the way we deal with diversity is very different. More than half our firm is women, including at the partnership level. And the environment that we have been able to create… sometimes not consciously, but it's just happened that way… I think we truly believe it's a meritocracy.

In other words, lawyers did not necessarily think that Western firms had equal number of women; instead they saw meritocracy and equal opportunity as core ideals on which these firms were built—or at least saw meritocracy, independent of outcome, as an important ideology that these firms subscribed to. And in their need to aggressively signal both competence and competitive advantage in a global environment, meritocracy became a predominant ideal norm that Indian firms paid ceremonial deference to. In turn, their offices looked like the firms in whose image they emerged: they structured their partnerships with lockstep compensation, they hired from prestigious law schools in the country with recruitment and internship cycles that resembled those of their foreign peers, and they promoted their women partners without attention to gender. This lack of attention to gender did not mean these firms were being gender friendly, and this non-discrimination on the basis of gender did not mean that firms were substantively egalitarian. As I show in other work (Ballakrishnen 2017b, 2018, 2020), these conditions privileged different kinds of inequalities and reproduced a range of other hierarchies. But in being nondiscriminatory on the axis of gender within a professional sector where this was highly unusual, these firms, almost inadvertently, superseded the gendered outcomes of the Western firms they were attempting to ideologically mimic. As the senior partner above put it, these development occurred "sometimes not consciously…it's just happened that way."

6.   "What Are They Doing Right?": Consulting Firms and the Standard Hurdles of the MNC Model

The underlying nuance in the case of Indian law firms becomes clearer when they are compared with management consulting firms. Like the elite law firms, management consulting firms were new organizations that had similar ideological commitments to modernity and meritocracy. They recruited from similarly elite professional (engineering and business) schools, often shared office real estate in compounds with the same "look and feel" as elite law firms, and professionals within these firms worked the same kinds of hours. But these were local offices of predominantly foreign multicountry professional service firms,

and gender was experienced there in much more typical ways. In these firms, women raised the standard issues that scholars studying gender in elite workforces have long identified as the persistent problem of sustaining egalitarian workplaces: gender-typed essentialism (Pierce 1996), sustainability of female careers (see Kay and Gorman 2008, for a review), lack of adequate mentorship (Blake-Beard 2001; Epstein 2000), male-friendly partner composition (Chambliss and Uggen 2000; Gorman 2006), and overall gender-based stratification (Epstein 2000). Most female consultants started any conversation about gender with the blanket acknowledgment that they knew of no senior women with families who also had client-facing roles. Still, many insisted that this was despite the firm being completely committed to equality. The explanation offered by Subbu, a rising senior woman associate in the Mumbai office of an international consulting firm, was, simply, "India":

> As a company, [Name of Consulting Firm] is extremely committed to making gender a priority. I know they put a lot of thought into it and across the world, they've been more successful. But you have to realize, this is India—so no matter how many interventions you make, at the end of the day, it is going to be affected by how things play out in the ground.

Subbu's explanation revealed a classic decoupling narrative: global organizations had the best intentions, they tried implementing as many interventions as possible, but "at the end of the day" gender equity was still subject to what were seen as inherently local hurdles. This narrative about the difficulty of translating ideas into practice "in India" contrasted strongly with law firms in the same India, especially given that the professionals across these firms were often from similar class and cultural backgrounds in that they were highly educated, urban, English speaking, middle-class professionals. To the extent that class was dictating their entry and experience, they should have experienced similar advantages across these firms. The structural commitment to egalitarianism also contrasted strongly with the law firm story of gender parity as something that "just happened that way." Rather, unlike consulting firms that adopted explicitly gender-friendly work arrangements (e.g., flextime options) from their parent firms, domestic law firms did not have structural incentives that made it easier on the female professional. There were no "gender groups" or formal mentoring networks that helped women feel secure about their careers. There was no formal childcare arrangements or policies, and boundaries around work and family were negotiated on a case-by-case basis. For

example, of the 11 female partners in transactional law firms in my sample, 4 had children, and each of these partners had negotiated on an individual basis how they would construct their maternity leave and work schedule.[10] And yet, despite these differences that should have structurally advantaged women in consulting firms, it was in domestic law firms that women felt the constraints of their organizational environment least. This organizational contrast did not go unnoticed. As I was wrapping up an interview with Tarunya, a senior woman consultant on the partner track who seemed very invested in making consulting more "gender friendly," she asked me if I knew what lawyers were doing "right," especially since consulting firms were "struggling to retain women at the top." Tarunya's question attributes organizational agency to the gendered empirics in law firms that, by their own admission, was not "their doing." And any response attributing this success to the variations in emergence would have been unhelpful to her. Still, the unpacking of these comparative cases affords theoretical insights about the importance of novelty—and naivety—in organizational emergence. And it is to explore the pertinence of this variation that this article turns to next.

7. The Institutional Advantage of Not Being a Global Firm

The variations in organizational emergence and structure offer a core explanation for the varied organizational identities—and, therefore, individual experiences—across these three similarly elite professions. As firms seeking to emerge as global players within a specific preconceived and particularistic context of professional traditionalism, elite law firms found themselves in a unique position. They were structurally different from their peers in litigation, in that they were doing new kinds of work within new kinds of organizations. But while this novelty was important in diffusing the gendered expectations that attached to more traditional kinds of work (Ballakrishnen 2017a, 2017b), novelty alone, as the case of consulting firms reveal, could not explain the role of their particular emergence in determining gendered outcomes. Specifically, this article highlights the importance of emergence histories and contexts: unlike consulting firms that were global firms entering the Indian market, elite law firms were shaped by their position as domestic

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[10] I argue in other work (Ballakrishnen 2020) that this negotiation was made possible by both the kinds of individual class advantages and support structures (e.g., local extended family and domestic help) that were common to women across organizations, as well as the specific temporality of transactional law careers (i.e., their ability to have children *after* they became partners in their early thirties, as these firms typically recruited lawyers after a 5-year undergraduate program and had partner tracks of between 7 and 10 years).

firms emerging from a particularistic legal profession from which they wanted to differentiate themselves from. Unlike consulting firms that were inherently global organizations, especially within the context of their audience (i.e., local clients), elite law firms were much more conscious of this need to emerge as global players, given the specificities of their emergence. While consulting firms, with their clear global identity, could afford to blame the attitudes and culture in India for their failed implementation of equality initiatives and outcomes (e.g., Subbu's explanation that "you have to realize, this is India"), elite law firms as monopolistic domestic firms facing external markets were much more vulnerable and insecure about their global identity. As this research shows, the development of law firm organizational identity involved two major strategies: (1) the differentiation from the older scripts of their traditional predecessors and peers in litigation ("we are not traditional"), and (2) the positive association with global scripts ("we are global"). As internally managed firms with external facing environments, Indian law felt the need to differentiate themselves from traditional frameworks of nepotism and patriarchy (which plagued internal-facing domestic firms) *and* reach for new identities that would aggressively signal their competitiveness in global markets (which they needed to do because they lacked the legitimacy of being actual "global" firms).

Alongside these differences in emergence and identity, there was also an explicit variation in information flows between the global and local in these two cases: unlike their interprofessional peers, elite law firms lacked not just the symbolic advantage of being attached to high-prestige global firms, they also lacked clear knowledge of the ways in which global firms actually adhered to their ideological scripts. As local organizations mimicking their parent firms, large consulting houses and international banks seemed more well versed both with the myths *and* ceremonies that were involved in replicating global firms. Consultants spoke at length about the range of structural interventions these firms undertook to create more diverse workspaces—flexible hours, mentorship programs, and alternative work arrangements—but they were similarly well versed in the ways in which these interventions had failed in other workspaces across the globe. As a result, when these interventions did not bear fruit in their local Indian offices, that failure did not taint the overall legitimacy or identity of these firms as "global" or "meritocratic." The explanation for the decoupling was more global, and if there were any particularistic disadvantages in the local context, it fell on, as Subbu states, the incapacity of the environment, not the modernity of the firm. In contrast, domestic firms could not afford a similar decoupling. These elite law firms, as domestic monopolistic firms, were emerging from with a particular regulatory climate

with cultural associations of nepotism and gendered hierarchies. Starting from this place of questionable legitimacy, especially as they emerged as domestic firms facing international clients and sophisticated transactions, meant that firms felt the need to over-compensate for their environment by aggressively signaling their global standing and ideology. This pragmatic legitimacy creation (Suchman 1995) happened in a range of ways—these new firms looked like elite foreign offices, they recruited associates like elite foreign firms, and they adopted strong meritocratic microcultures to match their aspirational macrocultures.

However, Indian law firms also had to contend with the fact that they had a more diluted knowledge about the workings of global firms. A few partners had spent time in international firms, and many more were constantly facing these firms as associates in transactions, but there were no formal flows of information between these firms. It is this relative naïveté that set up the conditions for a form of "speculative" mimicking, and, ultimately, iso-morphism. Their positionality incentivized elite law firms to hyper impress their global identity, but since the knowledge of these macrocultures was somewhat asymmetric, the resultant signaling was based on assumptive ideas about the global—that is, it was speculative. I use the term "speculative" because the intention here was not specifically to make these firms gender friendly, but rather, a zealous effort to be as close to the ideal type of a global meritocratic professional firm as possible. One way in which this convergence played out was in their vocal commitment to meritocracy—a commitment which, given the comparative professional spaces into which these women could have gone, offered a new haven for professional development for women lawyers in these firms. Thinking of this gender outcome as an incidental consequence of a much grander project of idealized organizational identity also explains why most of the partners who were asked about this unique gender outcome explained it away as something that "just happened" or something that ought to have been obvious given the fact that they were a "global firm." In turn, this created an environment, which while not actively gender friendly, remained one within which women—senior and junior alike—did not feel like they were actively disadvantaged.

Globalization and its effect on institutions have been thought of mainly as an economic or political project. This case of new emerging Indian law firms suggests that it is also a social and cultural project, often maneuvered by invisible scripts and cues. Institutionalization of global norms is not usually observed at this level because data like these are often unavailable to scholars interested in the transfer and impact of norms—a micro perspective gives us fresh insight and complicates our understanding of

the mimetic isomorphism of global firms. By focusing on activity and meaning-making processes across different organizational sites, this article draws from microlevel and mesolevel data that institutional scholarship acknowledges as critical (Powell and DiMaggio 1991: 16), but rarely employs in its macrolevel inquiry. Doing so gives us unique empirical access to observe how potent concepts like legitimacy and decoupling actually play out in these international organizations. Additionally, by investigating at this microlevel with a multisite case study, this research not only joins a growing effort to observe institutionalism play out in organizations (Hallett 2010), it adds rigor to this reorientation by situating it in a comparative case-study context (Plickert and Hagan 2011).

Yet, no matter how essential organizational environments are for the creation and sustenance of internal stratification, institutional inquiry offers only one set of explanations. Significantly, it does not take into account the other mesolevel and microlevel processes that might also be at play. For instance, the role of cultural sorting and matching (Rivera 2012) in determining good fit for these organizations could be crucially relevant for telling us how class and elite credentials operate in this emergence Institutional inquiry also does not throw light on the ways in which other interactions and relationships—with clients, peers, and family members—play out in these firms and the ways in which these expectations help produce the unlikely outcomes we have observed. In parallel research (Ballakrishnen 2018), I reveal the role of varying socialization factors in producing different kinds of gender-sensitive workplace peers: especially between new law schools that trained lawyers that entered these firms and older engineering and business schools that trained management consultants. Similarly, forthcoming research from this project (Ballakrishnen 2020) sheds light on the invisible family labor involved in sustaining these kinds of intersectional advantages for a certain kind of elite professional. Additionally, while this research can give us some insight to the process and strategies that firms employ in reorienting their identity in a globally competitive market, it does not have similarly comprehensive information about global clients and the effectiveness of this mimicking.[11] Further still, despite the comparative nature of this study, the gendered "level playing field" in law firms could be theorized

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[11] While this research does not have comprehensive data about global clients to shed light on the success of mimicking, the role of clients remained integral to offering market justifications for gender egalitarianism across these firms. I explore this dynamic and theorize on the essentialist norms behind it in other work (Ballakrishnen 2017b). Particularly, I reveal how consulting firms served local clients who could be presumed (unlike international clients) to prefer men to women for essentialized reasons, thereby offering an additional legitimation for their gendered imbalances.

through the lens of relationality within other sites in the legal profession: that is, the conditions of parity in law firms offer a haven for women, but they also mean women do not have the same opportunities as men upon exiting these firms, thereby prejudicing the substantive equality they purport to offer at first glance.

Despite these caveats about their ability to fully explain gender differences across firms, the institutional mechanisms at play in the Indian elite law firm case still holds valuable lessons for theorizing about global legal orders and the ways in which logics of emergence and isomorphism can produce heterogeneity across similar kinds of professional actors. The early literature on neo-institutionalism reminds us that organizations adopt practices and structures not just for the sake of efficiency but also because their cultural environments construct that adoption as being proper, legitimate, or natural (Meyer et al. 1983). Through ritual performances, organizations struggle to preserve fragile meaning-giving myths in the face of inconsistent cultural demands and uncertain technical capacities. The Indian elite law firm case shows us that sometimes, in the absence of these scripts, the isomorphism rests, not just on mimicked scripts, but also on imagined scripts. And in cases where the mimicking was based on assumptions rather than knowledge of the original type (e.g., in law firms), the resultant convergence was even stronger than in cases where the forms were being replicated (e.g., in consulting firms). Together, these findings give us new tools and context for understanding micro inequalities in global organizations—especially in transitional economies that are overcompensating in ceremony for the disadvantage of their emergence environments.

8.   Conclusion

In comparing different organizational settings, this research reveals that gender exceptionalism in Indian elite law firms is the incidental result of a process aimed primarily at seeking legitimacy. Emerging from an environment steeped in hierarchy and particularistic assumptions about gender, these firms saw local differentiation and global mimicking as useful strategies to signal their competitiveness in new markets. A prominent part of this signaling process was the ideological commitment to being "meritocratic"—a catchall phrase that was prominent in respondents' explanations of gender parity in their firms. The relative ambiguity of the explanation was crucial in determining the specifics of their performance of meritocracy. While some lawyers thought that they were mimicking global firms, others saw this performance as showing that they were better than global firms in

confirming to the ideal type. In both cases, though, as firms with no connections to Western firms and logics, these elite law firms were using assumed external myths and overcompensating in their performance—thereby converging with an imagined set of global norms through what I call "*speculative isomorphism.*" In contrast, local offices of global firms did not feel the same threats to their legitimacy and saw their inability to substantively implement gender egalitarian workspaces as a frustrating but understandable extension being in a country "like India."

More broadly, this research reminds us that wins for gender equality in workspaces can, as in other cases (Phillips 2005), happen unintentionally and may be couched in other more broadly conceived and supported movements. The success of the Indian law firm case has not been as much about a feminist movement as it has been about legitimacy and economic opportunity. This brand of accidental feminism does not lend itself to policy implications—after all, demanding institutional dissonance to achieve gender parity seems both unsavory and nonportable. And while ideological commitment for equality is not enough, it is simultaneously true that, left untended, such unintentional opportunity for women can be short-lived. At the same time, neo-institutionalism also gives us reason to hope. Where beliefs matter, ritual and symbolism can have long-lasting substantive impacts that, in turn, produce new cultural scripts. No matter what the initial incentive to create these structures may have been, these firms with gender-parity partnership are likely to have at least one effective weapon in their arsenal—an early script of gender egalitarianism, which, by extension, might be instrumental for future generations of egalitarian firms and professional identities.

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