Chapter 55
Emerging Digital Technologies and Women's Leadership in Global Business

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ABSTRACT

Despite progress, women in global business are still widely underrepresented in leadership positions. In their path to become leaders, women have to deal with gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices on a daily basis while they interact and perform their work. As emerging digital technologies become instrumental for interaction and performance of global business, women are required to increasingly contest gender inequalities and enact their leadership roles while using these technologies. This chapter explores to what extent the use of emerging digital technologies can contribute to contest gender inequalities and enact women's leadership in business. It does it by revising the literature on emerging technologies and organisational practices and implications for gender and leadership and presenting the findings of an ethnographic study conducted among women's leaders in a global business. The conclusion brings actionable insights and recommendations for professionals, policy makers, and future research.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging digital technologies have permeated and transformed the texture and functioning of economies, markets and organisations over the last decades. Personal computer, Internet, e-mail, smart phone, among other technologies have been gradually incorporated to the repertoire of a growing number of high-skilled professionals, and have become essential artefacts in the constitution of their working practices (Jones & Orlikowski, 2007). Contributions of emerging digital technologies for those professionals are associated with greater level of flexibility and mobility, and enhanced opportunities for coordination and collaboration beyond the conventional constraints of time and place (Castells, 2001). Such contributions are claimed to resonate with women's expectations and needs as they look for alternatives to conciliate motherhood and career as they progress to leadership positions. Moreover, the open and fluid characteristics of emerging digital technologies are deemed to highlight feminine qualities (Plant, 1998; Turkle, 1995) and consequently allow women to greater influence organisational practices.

Indeed, figures in the UK indicate an increase in percentage of mothers with dependent children in employment over the last 30 years, a tendency that has been particularly higher among mothers with children under the age of 5 (EOC, 2006). Flexible work, especially in the form of part-time employment, is also high among women in general (42%) and those with caring responsibilities in particular (46%). Emerging digital technologies have certainly augmented these trends by permitting continuous connectivity between work and home, and flexing working hours. However, these figures show only an optimistic facet of gender issues in employment. The division of domestic labour and child care seems resilient to change, and flexibility enabled by emerging digital technologies have greater potential to accommodate higher levels of working demand into people's private life rather than the other way round (Perrons, 2003; Wajcman, 2007), suggesting uneven implications for women's work-life balance and career progression towards leadership positions.

Furthermore, the lack of women in technology-related sectors of the economy in terms of education and employment endures. In 2008, women still represented a fifth of the employees in information technology industries in the UK (ONS, 2008). Such lack of representativeness has been argued to contribute to a systematic enlargement of gender inequalities by continuously linking technical know-how and skills with masculinity and attributing more economic value to activities of this nature (Wajcman, 1991; Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993). In other sectors of the economy, particularly within high-skilled occupations, gender imbalance is also remarkable but has received little attention from research on the gender-technology relations. Interestingly, most professionals working in these sectors have relied on the use of emerging digital technologies for the performance of their practices, with potential implications for gender inequalities as practices have been associated with moments in which gender relations are mostly (re-)produced within organisations (Martin, 2006), and emerging digital technologies have turned into constitutive of working practices (Orlikowski, 1996).

By focusing on practices, this research examines how women are able to use emerging digital technologies to tackle unequal gender relations, amplify their "real choices" (Mansell, 2006), and enact their leadership roles. The contribution of this approach is twofold. First, it acknowledges the centrality of emerging digital technologies in today's working practices and the implications of the use of these technologies for gender in a wide-range of organisations beyond the technology-related sectors. It also draws attention to the (contingent) agency of individuals in circumventing gender inequalities through the very use of emerging digital technologies. Second, it recognises transformation in gender relations as endemic and increasingly enabled by emerging digital technologies, pointing to the ambiguous implications and the moral significance of the use of these technologies within organisations. This approach becomes even more prominent as participation of women increases within high-skilled occupations (ONS, 2008), share of leadership positions between men and women are still unbalanced in global business, and those in control are expected to secure these unequal relations through practices predominantly enabled by emerging digital technologies.

BACKGROUND

Considerations on Gender and Emerging Digital Technologies

Many feminist studies have argued that, the definition of the term 'technology' in organisations has been historically associated with masculinity, with its origin dating back to the formation of science

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