Gender and Labor Practices in Outsourcing: Is Globalized Work Empowering for Workers?

Center for the Education of Women Visiting Scholar Lecture

"Are you going to write about us?"

The organizing proposition of this lecture is that there is reciprocity between the gendering of labor practices at CTI and the globalizing processes out of which the locus of work is constituted. These gendering dynamics feminized labor practices in both the physical and virtual workspaces employees inhabited. The net result is a complex interplay between benefits and harms of globalization. Whether this work is empowering is in the end a question about the value of globalization: is the process good for those who live in the so-called global South? This question raises yet another question about what "good" is and who gets to define it.

For feminist scholars, there have always been strong correlations between globalization and feminization though we may differ on whether feminization is a characteristic, a cause or just as an unintended consequence of globalization. For Africa, a key feature of contemporary globalization is the practice of tapping it for feminized cheap labor. Certain categories of labor are already well feminized in the global North. Office work, for example, has routinely been assigned to women: an assignment that simultaneously put women at the forefront of office technology adoption. Paradoxically, these technologies then made digitizing work and moving that work offshore easier: if it can be digitized, it can be outsourced. The result: the very technologies adopted for work also become the mechanism for squeezing women out as work moves offshore to another group of women in the context of capital's relentless pursuit of profits. Yet the consensus of scholarship on globalization is that Africa is by and large affected by globalizing processes rather than being a player of any significance. In this lecture, I
want to explore my organizing propositions in relation labor practices, gender and outsourcing with the goal of establishing any intersections among these and the women research participants’ agency and empowerment. I will start by creating a general backdrop on gender and the globalization debate. I will proceed with contextualizing the site I call CTI—a context necessary in understanding its labor practices. I will use a focal participant’s story to provide a more nuanced examination of the effect of these practices on women. And finally, I will explore the question of empowerment.

Authoritative globalization scholarship has tended to be silent on the “woman question,” and as such has often implied that the processes are neutral and affect men and women equally. Hawkesworth argues that this silence disguises some significant aspects of contemporary globalization such as “raced and gendered power” and the continuing struggles of women to contest such power. She calls for “eagendering” the debate on globalization in order to make visible the many ways in which the process affects women within particular nations, races, classes, and ethnicities. Gender is a useful analytic category in the globalization debate precisely because “it provides a way to decode meaning” so as to uncover how gender hierarchies are constructed and maintained in workplaces such as CTI, and this analysis can help us to understand whether and to what extent labor practices on the global stage: the well-being of people is being sacrificed to the pursuit of profit. On the global stage gender power works by excluding, lessening the value of what women do, belittling or even prohibiting women from participating in certain facets of the economy and society. Gender power frames the social opportunities available to particular men and women by creating systems that embrace and reward qualities associated with masculinity and maleness while devaluing qualities linked to women and femininity—as I will show shortly, these dynamics are precisely what frame the experiences of some workers at CTI. By some estimates
roughly “200 million women” work in outsourcing as employees of contractors or subcontractors of transnational corporations (Hawkesworth, 2006, p.12). Women in these labor arrangements may work for long hours for low wages, they may have no choice but meet production deadlines that require them to work overtime, and they may be required to work flexible hours, part time, as temporary workers or under corporate just-in-time production strategies that force them to absorb the cost of low work volume—all of these practices are prevalent at CTI. In Ghana women employees may leave their families by moving to cities to work, a condition that not only puts enormous pressure on families but also exacerbates the consequences of urban migration. Globalized labor arrangements pose severe health risks for women: repetitive stress syndrome, carpal tunnel syndrome, miscarriages, premature babies, babies born with low weight and many more. Labor gets feminized under these conditions not only by virtue of the fact that women populate work sites that utilize these arrangements but because these practices now affect the work that both men and women do. Interestingly, there are some areas of the outsourcing economy that are male dominated and as a result are highly valued by globalized labor arrangements and practices and rewarded as such.

General labor practices at CTI.

CTI is a subsidiary of an American transnational with a presence in a number of countries besides Ghana. It has twenty four hour coverage with three shifts. Employees work in departments that focus on the names of the company whose transactions they processed. At the Ghana site CTI offers mainly business process solutions to healthcare and health insurance providers in the global North. It does claims processing, transactional processing, data verification, data correction, quality control and communications. All of the company’s worldwide sites are linked by its in-house proprietary network powered by information
communication technologies. At the time of fieldwork the site employed roughly 1600 people. 92 percent of these employees were women and it occupied 47,000 square feet of space. The site was administered by a country/site manager (an American) who was assisted by a tier of executives. The second tier executives, all Ghanaians, were a vice president for Business and Marketing, Production and Human Resources. The Human Resource executive was the highest ranking female employee and her responsibility was mainly recruiting, enforcing “discipline” and sustaining the workforce as well as providing care and support of employees. Each of these executives also had a team of assistants. On the production side, CTI had a three tier structure: Production Managers (PMs) there were a few women but mostly they were men, Production Supervisors (PSs) there were proportional representation of men and women in their ranks, Team Leaders (TLs) who were evenly men and women, and data entry clerks who were called Transaction Processors (TPs) mainly women with a few men. CTI provided the following benefits for all employees: one meal per shift, health insurance and transportation to and from work, 3 three week vacations per Ghanaian labor law, and a three month maternity leave for new mothers—again per Ghanaian labor law (Ghana’s labor laws are largely influenced by a colonial British legacy). Employees were paid biweekly through direct deposit. The company at the time of fieldwork according to its public records paid a piece rate of $1.00. After a three year service employees were given a service allowance bonus of $100.00.

I observed and participated in five departments. For my purposes today I will focus on one department—Delta and then share the story of Nots who worked in a department I have called Alpha. Delta processed mainly health and dental insurance claims for its client. It had a female team leader, a male production supervisor and a male Production Manager. At CTI each department “rents” space and equipment so that the more its space is used the less its overhead
costs. Since Delta had 24 hour coverage seven days a week, it had a lower overhead cost. This practice effectively enabled the company to pass the cost of doing business to employees.

The company's proprietary network was web-based but had firewalls that blocked the public World Wide Web from employees. The network also limited access to only the restricted areas an employee needed to complete her or his particular processing assignment. The management team used this limited accessibility as a mechanism to control exposure to information and therefore assured compliance to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPPA from now on). Employees were required to maintain password protected access to their desktops and to lock their computers every time they stepped away from them. They were required to log in at the beginning of their shift and log out when they took breaks as all time on task was tracked electronically. These logins and logouts therefore left traces of employee time on task. The site underwent administrative changes in the course of fieldwork. Mr. Jack departed and was replaced by Mr. Nate. This change obviously affected practices at CTI to some extent.

Cultures and labor practices at CTI

CTI's labor practices were deeply influenced by it being a subsidiary of a US-based multinational. There was clearly an American corporate culture seeking to assert itself even as employees brought their own values and beliefs into CTI. Corporate culture was manifested in how management constructed and then represented the collective identity of being part of a multinational. Management cultivated an ethos that explicitly and implicitly invited employees to develop loyalty and pride in the company. Management and company newsletters and other literature projected to employees a "can do" ethos. Employees were admonished to "go above and beyond" for clients. On the production floor there were posters with the company's
employees—never any Ghanaians—smiling and giving testimonials about being part of a team. Yet these posters, I’d argue, also simultaneously implied the “otherness” of the women. Of the five departments where I routinely observed, only one department had a poster with an image of a black person. But the positioning of the posters was such that they looked down on to the floor, a perfect but no doubt unintended metaphor for the capabilities of a network whose sheer power meant that the employees were always tacitly under surveillance.

While this corporate culture as least as it is constructed by management may be branded Americaa, employees made their own sense of the values and beliefs the company proffered. For example, while the company constructed a narrative of going “above and beyond” for clients in order to stay competitive, a situation that translated into high productivity and perfect quality targets to management, employees’ perception was that they are being pushed too hard—or even exploited. For employees this cut throat push was underscored by the management practice of writing up employees for errors and terminating them on their third infringement rather than investing in and retraining employees. The fact that the company was always firing, then hiring and training new recruits left employees wondering how loyal their employer was to them. Management on the other hand felt employees had no investment in the company as they only saw themselves as hired hands.

Working at cross purposes:
Part of standard CTI practice was to rank employee productivity. Accuracy rankings were graded on a scale of “A” for 98%. This ranking was charged to 99% after Mr. Nate arrived at the site. Grade A= $1.00; B= 85 cents; B= 72 cents; C= 50 cents. Rankings at the “C” level meant that the employee took home a third of wages generated since CTI deducted the cost of errors to its clients. Accuracy rankings were published biweekly with employee ID numbers. According to
the management team, this practice was to motivate and push those working below productivity targets on notice so they would work faster. For the Delta department—for instance, the quality assurance standard at the beginning of fieldwork was 99%. In August the production supervisor announced that the standard was going back to being 94%. This translated into four errors per biweekly pay period. For employees, these practices were a source of pressure that brought on enormous stress. For management the goal was a perfect/error free grade of “A” and in fact the company’s piece rate of $1.00 was based on this. The women hardly ever met this perfect “A” target—hence their claim that the company does not in fact pay a $1.00 piece rate.

While the management team valued accuracy and consistency highly, interestingly, it hadn’t thought it important to share strategic information with employees. For example, the production supervisor at Delta announced a change in productivity ranking but would not share the rationale for the change in the quality assurance standard. The practice of not sharing critical contextual information with the women on the production floor was routine at CTL. It was in my view part of a mechanism of infantilizing and belittling women, a way of treating them as unable to grapple with complexity—all strategies for shaping gender power, feminizing the workplace, and feminizing the work that went in it.

Even CTL’s spatial geography enacted its gender power relations. At the beginning of fieldwork, the site manager’s office was on the fourth floor—the highest elevation of the space the company occupied at the time. Mr. Jack’s office occupied the west wing of the fourth floor. All his employees were either on the floors below or on the far east wing of the fourth floor. Separating Mr. Jack’s wing and the fourth floor production areas was a security desk that usually had two guards. This set up no doubt sent a clear message about the power hierarchy of the workspace.
and the rank and file employees' position in it. The production floor was a factory production floor—a fact that surprised me given the ultra modern exterior of the office complex. Delta's production floor was bland, even shabby, often hot and stuffy with fans that blow more hot air because the air condition often did not work.

At the rate of field work. On my exit from the field, CTI required Delta employees to work seven days a week, sometimes including overtime on regular work days. This meant that women were working at least twelve hours a day Monday through Friday in addition to working on Saturdays and Sundays. Employees were required to work on both American and Ghanaian holidays.

Under Ghana’s labor laws these practices were clearly illegal but the State is at best weak at enforcing its own labor laws and since the women had no systematic structure for negotiating site labor practices, they were left with complaining to each other or to a researcher like me. Yet there is also the fact that the incentive a transnational has for locating work offshore is precisely because it does not want to deal with pesky worker rights advocates. To management all these long hours were part of the “can do” ethos that undergirds its corporate culture. Not surprisingly, employees had a different reading of this. To employees it was being pushed to work under conditions that amounted to coercion and intimidation as there was always the specter of getting terminated if one consistently refused overtime assignments. In addition there was clearly a power differential between those “asking” employees to do overtime and those who were asked to work overtime. As one participant, Shakira put it “They (Team Leaders and Production Supervisors) wait till the last minute to tell us we have overtime. Overtime is really not worth the money unless you do four hours because by the time you pay for transport all the overtime money will be gone.” Because of the irregular schedules overtime created, often employees found their own way home and got reimbursed 5000 cedi. This amount often did not cover
cost of taking taxi (what the women called “dropping”—a door to door service) home. Shakira, like other participants wanted me to understand what she perceived as unfair treatment by a management team whose practices she described as “the American way.” Shakira notes: “If I do my regular shift and I finish that without a mistake and then at a quarter to two my team leader tells me we have overtime and I stay and do it for four more hours oh, are you with me? And I make an error, they will still charge me for the error. By God I am human—can they work for twelve hours and not make mistakes?” Shakira’s point: working seven days a week, for twelve hours or more a day without a day off and being expected to have high productivity and high quality under those circumstances will be difficult for anyone. And Shakira wasn’t the only employee making such a case. The understandings that the different parties constructed of CTI’s goals and their roles in reaching them shaped their practices.

Discursive practices were yet another space in which CTI enacted gender power in this workplace. How different actors understood these were important to appreciating the dynamics of CTI. The rhetoric of memos caught my attention almost immediately. My first encounter was with a curious memo signed by “Mr. Jack”—and posted in the lunch room of all places. The memo said in part, “Ladies, we ask you to keep bathrooms clean and to pick up and dispose of used sanitary towels. Thank you, Mr. Jack.” Another memo, this one a more common version of CTI memo rhetoric began thus: “It has come to the attention of management that some employees have been sleeping in the room on the second floor. You are asked not to use this area for such purposes.” It was signed “Human Resources” with no human agent identified. The absence of human agents in CTI memos by default reinscribed management as a collective power and separated this group from the non-management ordinary folk—the women. The restroom memo was particularly misogynist, insulting, with a paternalistic tone that infantilized
women employees. The request implied that these adult women lacked the knowledge or common sense of personal hygiene. After the appearance of the hygiene memo I decided to check out the women’s restrooms on each floor and did so once week. None ever had bathroom tissue, some had soap some of the time. Baffled by the memo and the absence of what I considered a requirement in a workplace with several hundred women I asked the women. They carried their own supplies and asked others for toilet roll before they left the production floor for restroom breaks.

To the women the company needed to adapt to Ghanaian culture rather than asking them to adapt to American culture. Traditional Ghanaian culture with its emphasis on the group operated with an extended family conception of the family unit. CTI constructed the nuclear family unit for its purposes. At a result questions about who should be covered by an employee’s health insurance, whose funeral an employee could legitimately attend and indeed what counted as marriage given traditional Ghanaian marriages, were all contested and constantly under negotiation. For the management team part of orienting employees to its culture is to explicitly state the company position. For instance Mr. Willy, an assistant to Ms. Sam (the HR executive) told new recruits to CTI during orientation that they could only count an getting time off for a funeral if the deceased was a mother, father, or direct sibling. As he put it, “don’t come and ask to go to your mother’s brother’s wife’s funeral.” CTI’s employee health insurance covered up to two dependants. Employees therefore had to choose who in the family would be covered if they had more than two dependants. When mothers stayed at home with sick children, there were limits no matter how critical the child’s condition might be. Too many of those absences resulted in termination. There is the story of Ms. Emma who worked at Delta and who had a critically ill child. On the fifth day she brought the sick child to work on her back but it was too late— CTI’s human
resource representative called her in to tell her she had been terminated. She cried, she pleaded but management did not relent. Practices such as these put women on notice and they understood the power of the management collective and their powerlessness.

On some rare occasions the company changed positions as with the case of defining what should count as a legal marriage. From my field notes on November 22, 2004 I note:

The Staff Welfare Association seems to have gotten an important concession out of management. In the past the company will only accept Western style wedding/marriage certificates as the standard for determining dependant eligibility on its health insurance plans. The workers note that even though the company is working in Ghana and Ghanaian customary marriages are recognized by law it was the company’s way or no coverage. The Staff Welfare Association has gotten management to accept and recognize traditional customary Ghanaian marriages as legally acceptable for determining dependant eligibility. To the women, this is a major accomplishment.

What epitomized the clashes of cultures in this workplace occurred on October 13. That day I walked into CTI to hear a steady music playing. As it turned out, one of the few male data processors had died on his way to work that morning in a motorcycle accident. The Human Resource office was playing Ghanaian funeral music and everyone from the security guards on up looked glum and sad. The man—a 25 year old was well liked by his colleagues. There were visibly upset and distraught employees. I asked if the employees will be given any time to process any of what they were going through—the answer from the HR secretary was “this is CTI, you just keep working through your tears.” She volunteered that this is the third time they had lost an employee which prompted me to ask about what the company does to help those employees left behind. The HR employee’s response was that at CTI one dies but “the work goes on.” Employees still have to meet productivity targets. Indeed the women, who worked in the same department as the young man, wondered if they will even be granted permission to attend his funeral. That day I noted in an observation commentary that:
Clearly, working for CTI means employees have to learn a new culture not only for the workplace but also for how they make sense of issues in their lives. Considering how Ghanaians deal with death and dying and the elaborate funeral rituals and ceremonies for the dead, this approach to death and work must be disorienting at the very least. These employees have to relearn/reorient their values and their sense of what should be important in their lives at least via a vis the workplace.

If CTI's management team constructed a corporate culture that proffered certain practices as desirable and in its strategic interests, its employees brought their own identities and subjectivities to negotiating and making sense of what was asked of them. Different parties read such appropriations and negotiations from their own locations. There were employee practices that management labeled as cheating. To management some employees cheated as a result of their attitudes to work. These attitudes were different from the assumptions CTI as an organization held. According to the management team, employees were used to salaried employment under which they were paid whether or not they were productive. At CTI on the other hand, employees learned quickly that productivity is what materializes into wages. Indeed Mr. Willy claimed that most Ghanaians go to work for a fixed salary while at CTI people were paid based on performance. According to him this is a change that is really hard for their employees. Mr. Willy called the ongoing evaluation of the women “discipline.” At CTI time on task is tracked and that translates into wages. As such at that may be to employees, it was how CTI did business and the employees had to learn that quickly. It is this that led some employees into cutting corners. From their management ranks “above” managers understood this push in the context of the broader outsourcing economy, global competition for cost cutting while maintaining quality, and profit taking. The management team believed that there was a real danger in not meeting productivity targets. In not having “good” profit margins, in not controlling the cost of doing business in Ghana; the site will not be economically viable to keep and work will have to go somewhere else with cheaper labor and overhead costs. Indeed two departments saw this fate during my time at the site and for the management team it was the fact of market driven business
practice. From their position "below" as data processors, rank and file employees at CTI were according to management at least, often oblivious of the larger context in which the company claimed it operated. In general employees did not relate to or identify with the company. Their perception was that they had a job and that the company was taking advantage of them because of Ghana's high unemployment rate and limited job opportunities. Additionally, they could see the many people who came in during the company's employment screening days—the sense was they had jobs that others were waiting to get and thus they had to work harder in order to do what was asked of them. So even though the women saw the stress and pressure they endured at work as problematic and often sought to tell me that the work wasn't what it was made to be to outsiders they still worked at CTI because they were grateful to have viable employment and because for many of them there were no real alternatives.

Cost as much as possible was passed on to employees—adjusting the piece rate, sending women home when there was no work so that you really just had just at time production, having departments rent space and equipment—i.e. they became subcontractors. Saving money by having women supply their own restroom tissue etc. To the women the company is so determined to maximize its profits that it does not provide even toilet tissue for bathrooms. According to the women they were told that they were not supplied toiletries because "people will abuse it."

Health at work

Labor practices at CTI have consequences for women's health. None of the women who participated in my study will allow a daughter to work at CTI. None saw that work as a viable long term option. The reason given often was that sitting in front a computer for eight to twelve hours even with short breaks was hard. Women talked about the aches and pains they felt particularly at the beginning of their work at CTI. Pregnant women talked about their difficult pregnancies—swollen legs, difficult deliveries and babies with low birth weight. There were women who had had miscarriages though they could not link these directly to work. Women made their own wrist rests to protect themselves from repetitive stress.
injuries. There was also the emotional cost of working under pressure and stress. When I asked women what the single important point they’d like the world to know about their work at CTI, the answer was always the stress and pressure under which they worked.

**Work and the new workplace in outsourcing: Nola as an exemplar**

Nola volunteered for the study after her colleagues at Alpha told her about my research after she returned from vacation. We talked extensively in and out of the workplace. After my fieldwork ended, Nola and I kept in touch and still correspond electronically. I tell Nola’s story through the eyes and voice of my own experience doing fieldwork at her workplace.

Nola was in her mid twenties, lived at home with her extended family and her mother—the family matriarch who was the head of their household. To get to work by the company bus, she had an hour and half commute. It took longer without the company bus service. Since her shift started at 6:00am she had to be at the bus pick up point by 4:30am. Besides work at CTI, she was very active in her church—she was a member of the choir and had been the church secretary the previous year. Nola was also pursuing a baccalaureate degree at a local university and usually went to her classes straight from work. On Tuesdays Nola had an exceptionally long day; she worked from 6:00am to 2:00pm, had classes from 4:30pm to 6:30pm, and then went on to choir practice. When it became impossible for her to sustain all her commitments, she stopped attending choir practice regularly. She had worked at CTI since she was 16. Nola left a secretarial job to work at CTI because she was a global North company she assumed CTI would pay more, provide good benefits—such as Health and Life Insurance, and offer opportunities for skill.
development and career progression. Nola conceded that when she began working at CTI in 2000 she did in fact make a "lot of money" but that had changed as the company slashed wages. As a result her wages had diminished. Further, because she had not been using her secretarial skills, those had weakened too and that was making exiting CTI difficult. She felt trapped—going to school was a way to extricate herself from her current job. Routinized work at CTI offered no opportunities for advancement; she hardly uses the range of expertise she controls as a professional secretary. Though her work provides access to technologies, that access is restricted and under conditions prescribed by her employers. The "new" technology infused workplace that Nola now inhabits is simply adding to work relations that were already based on female subordination—doing work assigned to women. Nola had negotiated an arrangement that allowed her to work her regular shift so she can attend classes in exchange she worked on Saturdays and Sundays.

Nola, unlike many of her co-workers was interested in understanding the context in which CTI operated. She used her technology skills outside of work—often using the web at cyber cafes to research the parent company. She often gave me comparative information about Ghanaian and American workers. She knew what CTI's global North employees were given in benefits and wages and could therefore put her own in larger context. For a two week period in September 2004 Nola worked for 88.73 hours and took home 370,000 cedis. With the Bank of Ghana exchange rate pegged at 9240.00 cedis to the dollar at the time, Nola's wages for those two weeks were $40.80 (see table for sample pay stubs). Nola notes that "When people learn I work for an American company, they think I am making a lot of money. They think I get good benefits. But for real I am suffering to make it. I can't save much and things are getting expensive all the time. My wages keep disappearing." The New York Times article that got me started on this research for example reported the following about data entry work: "It is good work, by Ghanaian standards. The typists earn 500,000 cedis a month (almost $70 -- three times the Ghanaian minimum wage and more than twice the average per capita income) to type the offender's name, address, fine and offense location into a searchable database that is sent back to New York. It can then be stored
electronically and used to generate payment notices. Mr. Stareken said. A World Bank poster that hails Ghanaian participation in the knowledge economy notes that “In Accra hundreds of young men and women are involved in the knowledge economy earning $300.00 a month” that is more than 10 times the average national income.” The poster adds that the information revolution offers young Ghanaians a real chance to leap forward into the knowledge economy in ways that they never could have dreamed of just a decade ago. Beside the issue of how the World Bank came by its $300.00 figure, there is the real issue of defining what constitutes fair wages however that is defined. Clearly, Nola and her colleagues don’t think CTI is paying them fair wages.

At Alpha women processed dental claims. At the beginning of fieldwork Alpha used the standard CTI strategy of downloading client outsourced data onto servers and then tracking the release of these to women like Nola. By the end of fieldwork Alpha was working in an online space that sent its data directly into a shared space with a US site. Nola’s work the at the beginning of fieldwork involved processing batches of dental insurance claim data using provider codes, service codes, rate codes, and other and checking for alignment of service to insurance stipulations. Sometimes Nola verified data that her colleagues had completed, a CTI internal quality control function. Then her role was to check the accuracy of processed data by field and category. Since this was CTI’s internal quality control, she had to catch errors and then fix them. All work was subject to an internal audit before that data left the site.

Sometimes Nola used online tools such as calculators to double check the numbers her colleagues had assigned on claim forms. That Nola recognized her location as a transactional processor at CTI meant she was at the low end of the hierarchy. She understood the power relationships at her workplace. Nonetheless she created her own spaces for asserting her agency. For example, she was actively involved in the Staff Welfare Association and complained that management had hijacked it by micro-managing its agenda and by always putting forward its own agenda items so that employees hardly got the time to discuss issues that were important to their well being at work. Alpha never had any air-conditioning during my entire time at the site. CTI
had purchased giant fans but they only blew hot air. Nola and the other fifty-seven women worked in a room that had fifty-seven computers and a number of servers generating heat in a tropical climate. Whilst observing Alpha one day Nola asked me this pointed question: "Would a white person work in this heat?"

My honest answer was I didn't think so. I asked for women then if the heat affected their productivity.

Their answers were categorical: "Yes". Did they still get docked for errors—again their answers were categorical: "Yes". One day Nola and the other women at Alpha refused to work after CTI unilaterally cut their price/batch rate. A member of the management team was summoned by the Team Leader and Production Supervisor. The management representative had to provide assurances that they would reverse the cut before the women would start work. Such overt acts of resistance though rare at CTI during my time there exemplified the ways in which Nola and her peers constructed and represented their own interventions as human agents. They challenged a company ideology that cast CTI as a "high performance" workplace that empowers workers and values team work. Posters remind Nola she was part of a team. Ironically most of the images in posters were imported: Nola and her peers are admonished to take ownership of their work but are punished if they make mistakes. Thus why CTI wanted to be trying to make new kinds of people at work (Get et al 1996): workers who are part of a global family of employees who should buy into the values, ways of thinking, working, and interacting, its messages are at best contradictory. Nola because she researched CTI's parent company often knew its stock price, its quarterly earnings and would always "read" the actions of the site management as ways to maximize profit for stock holders. To Nola CTI's penchant for lean operations and maximum profit meant that her wages and benefits were always in flux as reducing or cutting what employee were given seemed fairly straight forward to management. Nola described her workplace as full of pressure and stress. It was also suffused with suspicion.

Knowing all of this, my final exchange with Mr. Nate, which also happened to have been my last time at the site, I asked him about CTI's practices. My field notes for day 1 paraphrased Mr. Nate's responses. I note:
Mr. Nate acknowledged that morale is low at the site. He acknowledged that his predecessor, Mr. Jack, broke Ghanaian labor laws. He acknowledged that the women were being made to work 7 days a week repeatedly. He acknowledged that he is aware that the women work on US holidays and then are asked to work on Ghanaian holidays too. He accepted that that was wrong. His explanation of why it happened—domestic clients (in the US) and the managers put pressure on Ghanaian managers because all they care about is their cost, turnaround time, and keeping their customers happy. When they pile on the pressure, there is no one at the Ghana end ready to stand up to employees and say “Hey—these people need time off too.” The managers up the pressure on the production teams and supervisors and they in turn pile it on the Transactional Processors (mainly the women rank and file employees). There is stress and though the TPs know that their employer is breaking labor law there isn’t much they can do and all this causes a lot of mistrust in the work environment.

Mr. Nate pointed out that as a transnational, CTI is always under pressure and there is a lot of stress because of global competition. To him the way to deal with the stress is to balance it so that the women on the production floor aren’t the only people living it. Mr. Nate offered a concrete example. He referred to the Muslim holiday Eid al Fitr which fell on November 15th 2004. Though it is a lunar holiday and therefore had only a day’s notice, he had told his domestic managers in the US that it was a Ghanaian holiday and therefore that they should ship work to other sites on the company’s network. Even so he had given those non-Muslim Ghanaian employees who wanted to work the option of working. Indeed many of the participants in the study had taken the holiday off as “it is rare that we get a day off” according to Shafia. This gesture was however evaluated by the women participants in the context of something else Mr. Nate had done. Mr. Nate told employees during his first meeting with them that he was raising productivity at the site and adjusted their productivity rankings from 98% back to 99% unilaterally. According to the women he couched his point thus: just as all students with hard work could make “As” on report cards, he expected all of them to make the grade. As Nola put it to me, “he put the fear of the lord
into all of us that day.” Though the women saw Mr. Jack’s style as demeaning, their initial impressions of Mr. Nate suggested more of the same. Interestingly, Mr. Nate withdrew my access to CTI after this conversation and then sent his enforcer—Ms. Sam—to tell all his employees not to cooperate with my research any longer even outside of work. As Nola pointed out, “Why should he be telling us who we can talk to? He is not my father and besides if they have nothing to hide it shouldn’t matter who we talk to about our work here.” To Nola, that was just another example of how the company controls employees—overreaching, creating fear, and intimidating them. It was interesting to me that Mr. Nate was eager to acknowledge his predecessor broke labor laws when in fact he was still making people work twelve hours a week and a half months after he took over as site manager. In this workplace power and hierarchy was gendered and so was the work done in it. At every level, it was women and the few men who processed data with the women who were at the receiving end of how that power and hierarchy was exercised.

So is this work empowering for Nola and her peers? Is there a tradeoff between the benefits of globalized work and the consequences of this work? I will give a shorthand answer to this as I suspect you will have your own ideas. We can have a discussion on this.

To answer this question I will draw on Held and McGrew (2007). We have to look at the ethical judgments that are imbued in the benefits and consequences of work at CTI. This then raises the question of whether this work is good for the women. This in turn requires that what is good be defined—and of course then we have to look at who is doing that defining. Thus whether labor practices at CTI are benign, malign, or both is a judgment that should be conditioned by ethical assessments of its consequences for the condition the women find themselves in and how these consequences advance or constrain their progress towards a particular ideal of the “good life.” At a minimum an empowering good life for women who work in places like CTI in the global South should not make their condition any worse and should bring them no more harm than they would face without that work—a standard Pogge (2007) uses to judge the benefits of globalization for the poor. In other words an argument that the women at least have jobs—and
in fact just about all of them were grateful to have jobs—should not in itself be a benefit just as we will not accept an argument that the husband who now beats his wife less frequently is somehow benefiting the wife. At some point then we have accept some minimal standard of social justice that at the minimum is designed to honor the human rights of employees. For rights at work are in fact part of what makes work just. By that measurement, I'd argue that globalized is at best a double edged sword—without some State enforcement of labor laws, it cannot be labeled empowering. Reading this workspace as gendered is the only way to unmask the harm that such work does to women—contrary to what the World Bank professes. Thank You!