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# Critiquing the marginalised place of research on women within international business

## Where are we now and where should we be going?

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to provide a critical perspective of how the theme of women, and more broadly gender, have been treated in extant international business (IB) literature. It also suggests meaningful and promising avenues in this research space.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive literature review; rather, it offers a critical and reflective view on the development of the IB stream of literature in which discussion of women has been largely marginalised.

**Findings** – While women and gender have been topics of considerable discussion across a range of disciplines in the social sciences, they have received limited examination in the IB literature despite this discipline being most suitable for such, given its socio-cultural analyses across international borders and organisations.

**Research limitations/implications** – Several themes are suggested as fertile future research avenues. These themes identify gaps in existing knowledge but, more importantly, also problematize prevailing views that IB scholars tend to hold about women and gender. The future research themes suggest that the very context of IB signifies the need for systematic gender analysis which might advance current understanding of women specifically and gender, more broadly, in the IB field.

**Originality/value** – This paper makes a salient and timely contribution to the IB field in providing an original, erstwhile unexamined critique of the marginal reflection on women and gender within extant IB research.

**Keywords** Gender, Women, International business research

**Paper type** Research paper

### Setting the scene: the international business field is falling behind other disciplines regarding women and gender

Over recent centuries, the degree to which the world has become internationalised (and the nature of such) has changed dramatically. Yet, from the times of nations sponsoring



explorers to discover new land, trade with other societies and/or colonise, govern/administer and establish missions on already-inhabited lands through to current expatriation of staff in multinational organisations in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors, gender has not figured prominently in international business (IB) research and writings. Indeed, IB research is unusually quiet, relative to other disciplines in the social sciences, on the topic of gender. In a recent book chapter titled “No gender, please, we’re international management scholars!”, Tienari (2014) points towards the marginalisation of gender as a theme within the mainstream IB academic discourse. While it can be argued that the role of men throughout internationalisation and within the IB literature has been portrayed in narrow terms and has taken insufficient account of national, race and class inequities, research on women’s role in IB has not advanced markedly from the times of early globalisation in which they were little discussed in the written word. In short, the IB literature has paid, and continues to give, little consideration to gender generally and much less to women specifically.

In this viewpoint article, we emphasise the extent to which research on women has been neglected in the IB field. Importantly, we nest our focus on women within a broader discussion of gender as analysing women’s standing in IB research as integrally linked to recognising the dearth of research on all aspects of gender in IB. Thus, proffering the need to advance research on women in IB is contextualised within a call for a more nuanced discussion of all gender concerns in IB. We begin this article by first setting the scene in discussing key debates about women and gender within the social science and science disciplines. Second, we delineate the motivations for, and focus of, the article. Third, we specifically scope the extent to which women and gender have been examined in relation to IB, both in IB research and other related social science disciplines. Fourth, we present puzzles in IB research in which we question existing assumptions and raise issues, which we suggest are warranted for examination in future research. Finally, we present a section on looking forward in which we suggest where we should be moving as IB researchers.

The limited consideration of women and gender in IB is puzzling in light of the considerable (and growing) interest, over a long time, shown to women and gender issues in many other related social science, as well as scientific disciplines. Over several decades, neuroscience, sociology, history, psychology, economics and management have all, with their respective specific foci, paid substantial attention to the subject of gender in respect to considering debates about differences (or lack thereof) between men and women and how gender is conceptualised by researchers and is understood as a lived experience of individuals across a range of global societies.

*Neuroscience* in regards to gender has been occupied with studying the anatomy and functions of the brains of women and men (Cahill, 2006; Cosgrove *et al.*, 2007) and the complex interplay between genetic and hormonal influences, as well as developmental and environmental factors that produce discernible cognitive differences between women and men (Carruth *et al.*, 2002; Bouchard and McGue, 2003). The sociology of gender has primarily attended to perceived socio-structural inequalities between men and women, the institutional and historical dominance of men over women throughout most societies (Rosenberg and Howard, 2008; Witz, 2000) and to the idea that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon not directly related to biological sex (Chafetz, 1997; Martin, 2004). Feminist *history* has operated from the underlying assumption that because men have held the balance of power in almost all societies through nearly all of

recorded human history, the historical traditions, cultural contributions and struggles of women have been systematically neglected (Canning, 1994; Hall, 1991; Lake, 1996; Sinha, 2000). It has, moreover, focused on both recovering a historically accurate account of women throughout the course of civilization and rewriting the narrative of history by taking into account the obscuration of women's issues (Pedersen, 1991, 2000) in patriarchal societies. *Psychology* has examined gender mainly from an evolutionary perspective (studying sex-based differences in personality, emotions, parenting) (Buss, 1995) and from a developmental viewpoint (examining language acquisition and development, perception, motor skills, etc.) (Geary and Bjorklund, 2000). Behavioural *economics* studies have assessed gender differences in relation to characteristics such as competitiveness (Gneezy *et al.*, 2009), cooperation (Schwieren and Sutter, 2008) and risk-taking/aversion (Eckel and Grossman, 2008).

While earlier *management* research focused on females' experiences and behaviour, later studies have examined gender-related phenomena associated with structures and processes that operate in organisations and in society as a whole, a shift apparently initiated by Kanter's (1977) book *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Within this discipline, researchers have examined whether women and men manage and lead differently or better (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Bass *et al.*, 1996; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Melero, 2011) and indeed some limited research has suggested that being female, rather than inciting prejudice, may actually be an advantage when working internationally and across cultures (see Adler, 1994; Stroh *et al.*, 2000). Yet there remains an "implicit gendering of concepts of management, with the concept of the "manager" being implicitly male unless stated otherwise" and this "gendering of management research frequently goes unaddressed" (Eden *et al.*, 2015).

Management and human resource management literature has suggested that many industries in the developed world will remain male-dominated and, even in those in which women are better represented, a large body of research found inequities for women. Acker (2006) suggested that in some instances, women may suffer a triple disadvantage based on their class, ethnicity and gender. She further argues that while workplaces may provide fertile grounds for attempts to change patterns of inequality, the study of such (including the oppositions which may result from change practices) provide opportunities to observe frequently invisible aspects of the reproduction of inequalities (Acker, 2006).

Inequalities seem to exist in organisational recruitment (Alvesson and Due-Billing, 2009; Perry *et al.*, 1994), career development and advancement (Burke, 2007; Ng *et al.*, 2005), promotion to senior management (French and Sheridan, 2010; Goodman *et al.*, 2003; Powell and Butterfield, 1994), board membership (Terjesen and Singh, 2008) and pay (Connolly *et al.*, 2012; Whitehouse, 1992). Such lack of representation and limitations on opportunities in employment and advancement may result from employment discrimination which marginalises the role of women in organisations. Most developed countries and increasing numbers of developing countries have enacted legislation against gender discrimination which usually incorporates both direct and indirect discrimination. While direct discrimination occurs when there is policy or action which specifically results in individuals of a particular group being handled less favourably, indirect discrimination may not be as obvious and thus potentially responsible for more disadvantage that occurs. Waddington and Hendricks (2002) defined indirect discrimination as disparate treatment and adverse impact and noted that some

jurisdictions recognise that failure to provide reasonable or effective accommodation constitutes discrimination. Further, other scholars have noted that sexual harassment continues to pervade society. Leskinen and Cortina (2013) importantly provided a new tool for measuring gender-based harassment which drew on their analysis of women's experiences with harassment in what the authors referred to as hostile work environments. Berdahl (2007) suggested that sexual harassment reflects the harasser's protection of sex-based status with social status being stratified by gender hierarchy.

The disciplines previously mentioned (along with others such as law, political science and linguistics) have given rise to *gender studies* as a separate interdisciplinary academic field in the early 1970s. The emergence of a separate field was a response to perceived gendered inequalities in the development of academic knowledge (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004). As a sub field, gender studies has matured significantly since, and scholars have collectively learned a great deal about gender. We need to ask though, what have we learned about women and gender in an IB context?

### **The motivation behind this article, its focus and a few definitions**

There are multiple reasons why we need to conduct more research on women within the context of broader debates around gender in IB. We highlight three such reasons.

First, the "I" in IB implies operating in multiple cultural, institutional, social and political environments. Because these are both different across national borders and interconnected, globalisation adds a layer of considerable complexity to issues of interest to business in general. In the sense of the rapid changes in cultural values and social practices which are increasingly transparent in a globalised world, the limited study of women and gender (in all its manifestations) as a line of enquiry in IB is perplexing. In the midst of considerable research on women and gender over several decades in various disciplines, some fundamental issues remain unresolved and findings in relation to other issues need further problematization and analysis by IB scholars. While the IB academic field prides itself on its receptiveness to insights from other disciplines, IB scholars have not engaged thoroughly with the crucial question of the role of women and gender in IB. This lack of critical debate is surprising and difficult to justify for a discipline that is now relatively well established. What it means to be a woman and how we understand gender are culturally sensitive constructs – which are understood, interpreted, communicated and enacted in different ways in different societies/cultures. So, if any discipline ought to be interested in issues around women and gender it is IB, which otherwise attends closely to how culture influences the conduct of business across a range of disciplines across national boundaries. The disproportionate lack of coverage in IB research of a topic as important as women and gender more broadly is, therefore, an anomaly.

Second, in a large scale study of global mobility trends Brookfield Global Relocation Services found that women now comprise 19 per cent of those sojourning for international assignments (which represents a slight drop on findings from previous years) (BGRS, 2015). It has been argued that while women may be under-represented in careers in multinational enterprises, their numbers may be higher amongst those in the not-for-profit sector (Hutchings and Michailova, 2014) and who voluntarily relocate to work as self-initiated rather than organisationally assigned expatriates (Tharenou, 2010). So, we need to understand more about the motivations of women from a range of backgrounds to live and work cross-culturally and engage in IB.

Third, despite the previously noted discrimination against women in employment and advancement in organisations, their numbers as employees overall and in management roles and positions of influence in business and politics has increased markedly over the past century, which followed on from being mobilised into war service in many countries and nationalist production in the former Communist world. Thus, in addition to requiring more understanding of women's contributions in IB organisations, the IB discipline is tasked with providing a more nuanced assessment of women's comparative employment throughout the globe and the implications this, thus, has for their opportunities to engage cross-culturally with international non-government for profit or not-for-profit organisations.

Against the background of the above reasons for why research on women in IB should be flourishing, the status quo seems to tell a different story. Why is there such a discrepancy? It might be argued that until very recent times, the IB academic discipline has been overwhelmingly dominated by male scholars throughout its history, and, moreover, these scholars have tended to predominate in fields such as international economics, finance, trade, operations management and logistics which have also been male-dominated in practice and reflect a positivist, quantitative paradigm which may tend to be less self-reflective in respect to giving attention to gender analyses. Moreover, fields such as economics, finance and strategy may have been perceived as most integral for the operations of IB and despite growing recognition of the critical importance of sometimes perceived "softer" fields such as human resource management, gender continues to receive scant attention. Moreover, while younger women are moving into IB disciplines (including male-dominated ones such as economics and finance) in greater numbers, they tend to be supervised in doctoral research by male professors, have mostly male peers and few female role models. In addition, though most of the gender research has been done about women and by women, we speculate that women may be reticent to undertake research about women because they perceive their research may not be taken so seriously because it is just "another woman researching women". Indeed [Metcalf and Hutchings \(2014\)](#) argued that there is an inherent riskiness within academia of women naming themselves as feminist scholars. Interestingly, the same accusations do not seem to have been levelled against men who research men in organisations – which have dominated the history of management and IB research!

While we acknowledge that "[c]urrently, there is no agreed usage of the term "gender"" ([Davies, 1996](#), p. 663), for the purposes of this article, we adopt the definition of gender as "the socially constructed roles, behaviour, activities and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for men and women" ([World Health Organisation, 2012](#)). The social categories of gender are connected to, yet different from, biological functions and processes ([Connell, 1985](#); [Duxbury and Higgins, 1991](#); [Lefkowitz, 1994](#)). This, in itself, poses a challenge to research, as observed by [Ely and Padavic \(2007\)](#); in their analysis of empirical research on gender in organisational research published over a 20-year period, the two terms are more often than not used interchangeably. The authors summarise this under the assumption "gender is conterminous with anatomical sex" ([Ely and Padavic, 2007](#), p. 1,122) that has guided most of organisational research and that has disguised the socially embedded nature of gender. A relational conception of gender implies moving beyond the female/male dualism ([Flax, 1987](#); [West and Zimmerman, 1987](#)) and regarding gender as a relation instead of a personal attribute embodied within individuals ([Scott, 1986](#)). While realising that "both men and women are prisoners of gender" ([Gherardi, 1996](#), p. 187), we consider



that gender meanings are established (rather than given), dynamic (rather than static) and institutionalised (rather than individually enacted).

In this article we focus on women as a theme in IB research because as we have previously noted, while gender is marginal as an area of investigation within IB literature generally, there are key reasons why we focus specifically on the position of women herein. We do acknowledge, though, that there is also need for more research on gender in IB which encompasses (albeit not being restricted to) such issues as comparative cultural explorations of men's identities in IB. We also note that although discussion of deconstructing gender, and also queer theory, within critical management studies has been considered (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008; Plummer, 2011), we need to examine lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people's engagement in IB across cultures. Recognising that there are many aspects of gender which warrant examination within IB research and that there are not universal definitions across cultures of what it is to be female is the rationale for framing our commentary about women within a broader gender context and why we also return to the term gender because we deem it relevant throughout this viewpoint article.

### **Women and gender and IB: scoping the field**

We now turn to an analysis of the extent to which women and gender in IB has been given consideration within the leading IB journals, within other social science journals and the extent to which women and gender are broadly considered by the IB discipline.

#### *Our international business journals on the issue of women and gender: a brief glance*

In exploring 25 years of IB research in one of the oldest and leading IB journals in the field, *Journal of International Business Studies*, Wright and Ricks (1994) highlighted research interests and recommendations for future research. Amongst a wide range of potential research areas (many of which have been examined in the years subsequent to their article), while personnel and managerial performance were broadly noted as important themes for future research, there was no specific reference to gender issues. In traversing possible changes in the IB environment and practice in forthcoming years, Czinkota and Ronkainen (2008) in *Management International Review* emphasised terrorism; globalisation; corruption; cultural adjustment; information; location and source of growth; environment; demographics; and reforming the global corporation. These are issues of critical importance to the IB community of practitioners and researchers but again there was no specific reference to gender even in respect to cultural adjustment which earlier research had suggested is affected by gender (especially female) and family situation (Caliguirri and Lazarova, 2002; Lazarova *et al.*, 2010). In a review of IB research published in a special issue of *Journal of International Management*, Aharoni and Brock (2010) considered the development of IB research as an academic discipline and suggested some trends looking forward. They highlighted that the field had its inception in leading US business schools and focused on marketing, economics and finance, but, as research expanded, it incorporated the work of Western European scholars and later researchers from other parts of the globe. Buckley (2002) pointed out that three topics have been well addressed by IB scholars, namely:

- (1) explaining foreign direct investment;
- (2) explaining the existence of the multinational enterprise; and
- (3) understanding internationalisation processes.

Griffith *et al.* (2008) examined the most cited articles in IB in the decade until 2006 and noted an emphasis on topics, including knowledge; bargaining power; customer power; supplier networks; learning; diversification; and collaboration – issues which were broadly addressed in the papers published in the special issue. In suggestions for future directions and challenges, Aharoni and Brock (2010) included free trade; the multinational firm and, in particular, in respect to industry/sector and country of origin; globalisation in respect to localisation/regionalisation/internationalisation of industries; business-government interactions; and managerial challenges encompassing the complexity of the global context, liability of foreignness, network organisations, decision-making and innovation.

Differing from these authors and their suggestions for future research, Roberts and Dörrenbächer (2012) clearly highlighted gender as one of the topics to be pursued by IB scholars. In their editorial on the future trajectories of the journal *critical perspectives on international business*, where they reflect “on the field of IB to identify concerns of mainstream scholars and to contrast these with those of central concerns to critical scholars of IB” (p. 4), they wrote that “issues of gender, race, age and identity in IB management practice and scholarship” (p. 9) are among the topics that have not yet received attention in the field of IB but deserve to do so.

Without negating the critical importance for investigating the previously highlighted issues in IB and in future research in the context of an increasingly interconnected, technologically focused world, it is evident that what continues to be missing from the history of IB research and trends for future research is a focus on women (and gender) in IB. This point is reinforced by Tienari *et al.* (2015) who also noted an absence of gender perspectives in discussions of mergers and acquisitions. These authors emphasise that although “sensitivity to gender would be beneficial to our understanding of mergers and acquisitions” (p. 28), no articles published in management journals listed in the Financial Times 45 view mergers and acquisitions from a gender perspective, and only two articles published in the past 20 years in eight journals[1] focus on gender in the merger and acquisition context. Tienari *et al.* (2015) conclude that “gender does not qualify as a theoretical debate in the field” (p. 18). We note that other (sub)fields would not score better. Moreover, this dearth of research on women and gender in the context of IB is also evident in special issues (and calls for papers) of leading IB, international management, human resource management and gender journals published in the past decade.

*Special issues about women and gender in other disciplines – an absence of international business research*

To consider the attention given to women and gender in relation to IB, we specifically researched recently published special issues. We found that there have been no special issues published on women or gender in the past five years in IB/international management journals, including *critical perspectives on international business*, *International Business Review*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of International Management*, *Journal of World Business*, *Management International Review* or *Thunderbird International Business Review*. We then broadened our search to the related fields of management and human resource management to see if they had examined women or gender in the context of IB. We found a recent special issue devoted to a global perspective on diversity and inclusion in work organisations [*The*



*International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(6), 2015], although the articles tended to focus on in-country studies of diversity (including in some cases gender) rather than on the experience of working across international borders or in internationalised organisations. Moreover, a special issue on global diversity management [*The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18(11), 2007] also included some papers on gender but, again, they tended to be focused on in-country analyses.

Though human resource management journals include articles on gender and also occasionally publish research on gender/women in the context of international management/business specifically, there were no special issues on gender/women in the last five years in *Human Resource Management*, *Human Resource Management Journal* or *Human Resource Management Review* either.

There have been a number of special issues on gender in recent years in which most of the articles were focused on women, although in almost all cases these were published in gender-related journals. Namely, special issues have focused on gender/women and management/business/work [*Gender, Work and Organisation*, 17(5), 2010], gender/women, management and leadership [*Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 31(1), 2011; *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 28(6), 2013; *Gender, Work and Organisation*, 18(3), 2011; see also call for papers for *The Leadership Quarterly* – submissions due end of 2015[2], contemporary views on gender and management [*Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 23(7), 2008], gender/diversity theorising [*International Journal of Management Reviews*, 14(2), June 2012] and gender, inclusion and diversity in the professions [*Gender, Work and Organisation*, 19(5), 2012]. These special issues have not, however, focused specifically on women or gender within an IB or even an international management context.

In early 2015, a call for papers was announced with the working title of Gender in IB and Management which is to be published in *Cross Cultural Management*[3]. The proposed special issue highlights that gender and the working world is still a relatively neglected area in cross-cultural management and identifies a range of issues that might be considered in relation to women working internationally.

Based on the above observations and analysis of foci of key journals, it is clear that while there are occasional articles published in the IB journals which could be broadly categorised as focused on gender, it is not too far a stretch to argue that the dynamic that is observable in other related social science disciplines in respect to emphasising the importance of studying gender has not yet occurred to any special extent in the IB discipline. There is currently a lack of research on women and gender in IB; also, the research has not been signalled as an area of importance into the future. In respect to IB, women remain an under-researched area in mainstream IB journals – or at least those that suggest that they are targeted specifically towards IB researchers and practitioners.

*What has then been said about women and gender in IB research?*

To be clear we do not claim that there is no IB research at all on women or gender. Instead, we emphasise that the coverage is limited, focusing on too narrow a range of topics and too disparately covered to really highlight the necessity to understand gender, both in respect to issues relating specifically to women and in regards to providing a more nuanced understanding of the role of men, as well as gender

identification and orientation of individuals across cultures, races and classes in an increasingly interconnected globe.

IB research has focused on, and returned to, only a few issues in relation to women which have included (but albeit are not limited to) global comparisons of the minority of women in senior management (or other professional) positions; the preference for selecting men rather than women for international assignments (Altman and Shortland, 2008; Harris, 2001; *Insch et al.*, 2008; see also Shortland, 2014); women's career paths being circular or non-linear (Baruch and Reis, 2015) or what Shortland (2015) refers to as kaleidoscope; and gender stereotypes enacted because of lack of or misunderstanding of cross-cultural differences (Cuddy *et al.*, 2010). We have previously engaged with some of these themes (Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Hutchings and Michailova, 2014; Hutchings *et al.*, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015). It is fair to say that when women and gender are studied in IB, they are typically a variable examined along with other variables (at the same or hierarchically lower level of analysis) rather than being the key focus of studies, with women and gender subordinated to other variables.

We also note that much of the research which has examined women working internationally has been overwhelmingly focused on women working in (usually senior) positions in multinational corporations and Western women traversing the globe to work in other developed countries or developing countries (Hutchings and Michailova, 2014). There is a necessity for more research on women from developing countries who take international assignments. There is also a need to provide a more nuanced understanding of the full range of positions in which women work internationally, including:

- senior government officials such as foreign affairs ministers and trade commissioners;
- other public sector employees such as diplomats and military personnel; and
- those working in the not-for-profit sector incorporating humanitarian relief and aid workers.

IB work on women and gender remains fragmented, and, despite some existing thoughtful contributions, it does not collectively represent a comprehensive treatment, or provide profound and gradation of analyses and findings that, because scholarly conversations can have impact and meaning for IB research and practice. While the IB discipline prides itself on borrowing insights from both sister disciplines (e.g. management, strategy, entrepreneurship) and more distant disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology), IB scholars seem to remain curiously unprepared to fully engage with the crucial question of the role of women and gender in IB. So, if any discipline is prone to be interested in such discussions, it should very much be IB being that it is the discipline that examines phenomena that transcend national borders. Indeed, drawing on comparative cultural underpinnings, IB researchers should be well placed to analyse and critique gender stereotypes – descriptive stereotypes (beliefs about how women and men behave) as well as prescriptive ones (beliefs regarding how they should behave)[4] – that are held about cultures cross-nationally and elucidate knowledge to assist the IB community to transcend such stereotypes and facilitate better cross-cultural understanding.

Two anomalies come to mind – the coverage is disproportionate to the importance of the topic, and the coverage is focused on a narrow number of topics. The scholarly conversation on gender in IB can be pursued in terms of analysing how the concept of gender is likely to be understood differently in an IB context (as compared to that in other disciplines that have more actively engaged with the issue of gender) and potentially directing research on women and gender matters in IB to address issues that remain, for one reason or another, under-researched and unresolved. Thus, given that we support the view of Tienari (2014) that gender is not actively addressed within the mainstream IB literature and, in particular, we see research about women as remaining on the fringes, we now highlight some key complexities and contradictions which have erstwhile not been addressed by IB scholars and propose some important questions for future research with which the discipline might engage.

### **Remaining puzzles international business research should address in relation to gender**

Based on previous work by IB scholars, there are themes that pose interesting puzzles that point towards some promising research avenues. These themes are presented below according to their level of analysis. Before we address them, however, we note the following: consistent with the definition of gender that we have put forward earlier in the article, research that we advocate should shy away from studying attitudes and behaviours of men and women *per se*. The relational definition that we have adopted requires analyses and examinations that accentuate masculinities and femininities that are embedded in particular contexts – historically, culturally, politically and institutionally. Doing so would particularly resonate with the IB discipline; it will however also inherently be associated with a focus on:

[...] gender relations as power relations that take a binary form, a form in which women (or rather the qualities that women represent) are constructed as “devalued Other”, as carriers of qualities that thereby remain unacknowledged and denied (Davies, 1996, p. 664).

#### *At a macro/societal level*

The IB (published) literature is largely embedded in western thinking. Masculinities and femininities and gender identities are culturally bound, and, indeed, colonisation has impacted on how colonised people perceive their identities relative to colonisers. While we acknowledge that colonised men may have constructed their masculinities relative to the masculinities of the male coloniser, women and men have been said not to have experienced colonisation in the same way. McClintock (1995, p. 6) suggests that prior to colonisation, women were variably disadvantaged in their own societies, and colonisation brought about their being used as slaves and agricultural workers and also as prostitutes, concubines and mothers, meaning that they needed to negotiate not only inequalities in their own societies with their own men but also a “violent array of hierarchical rules and restrictions that structured their new relations with imperial men and women”. There is a well-established feminist post-colonial literature which generally draws on post-structuralist frameworks, such as Foucault, although it also includes neo-Marxist and psychoanalytical theories in highlighting the alterations that occurred as a result of colonisation and which continue to have a constitutive role in the present (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). Post-colonial feminist scholars have critiqued the assumptions inherent in Western feminist approaches which have sought to speak on

behalf of third world women as if an undifferentiated object/subject of Western academia, and they seek to re-examine the epistemological assumptions in Western feminist theories given their inception through positions of Western power and privilege (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). Moreover, one of the myriad legacies of colonisation is that western research does not fully engage with non-western research paradigms and traditions. Further, for people who have been subjected to colonisation, the very name “research” continues to be perceived in negative terms with indigenous peoples throughout the world criticising research carried out within their own and other indigenous communities (Fredericks, 2008). Because of this, we miss important insights coming from intellectual traditions from outside the western world. In the outlets that we read, review for, publish in and rank, indigenous thought is not widely available. However, it can possibly reveal wisdom and insights about women and how we understand gender that could potentially redirect (or even turn) conventional IB gender-related thinking. So, we need to consider what we can learn about women and gender in IB from literature positioned outside the mainstream western IB writings.

If we shift our thinking to analyse women’s position in their societies in countries outside the western world, we highlight some contradictions to the often well established, but not necessarily correct views, of westerners. For instance, it is usually a surprise to the western mind that compared to developed western nations, former socialist Eastern European countries had for decades more advanced policies and practices in relation to women and remain global frontrunners in gender equality. East Europeans are often surprised with the western preoccupation with gender discourse, combined with lack of action in practice. There was no need to discuss gender equality in the Eastern Bloc; it was there, very much enacted in practice (Domsch *et al.*, 2003). Women in socialist Eastern Europe gained a much better position, both in the labour market and management than women in Western European countries (Fodor, 2004; Nagy and Primecz, 2014). This is not really surprising bearing in mind that “gender relations both form and are formed by different kinds of states, different kinds of economies, and different types of political action” (Gal and Kligman, 2000, p. 5). Post-socialism has somewhat changed the picture; in the sense that there has been a decrease in female employment numbers, starting in the early 1990s. However, 37 per cent of senior management posts are still occupied by women in these countries (with Russia ranking as no. 1 with 43 per cent) and well above the average of 24 per cent across the west, with statistics remaining consistent over the years (Grant Thornton’s, 2014 IB Report). Similarly, in another Communist country, China, national production meant that women were gainfully employed and gender equality was emphasised; yet, in a de-socialising era, old patriarchal traditions have come to the fore, even though younger members of the society emphasize on individualism, and female consciousness is relevant in a period of market reforms (Leung, 2003). Turning to the position of Muslim women, it should also be noted that despite patriarchal power structures and inherent political and social disadvantages for women in some parts of the Muslim world (as indeed also pervades the non-Muslim world), Islamic revelation has meant it was common for Muslim women to retain their maiden name after marriage and be able to inherit land/property (Esposito, 2002) before this also occurred in western societies.

If we also consider legislators and officials as part of management, a cross-national analysis is illuminating. The USA and the UK would praise

themselves for having the greatest representation of women across the western world (42.7 and 35.7 per cent respectively), but, in the Philippines and Panama, the numbers are 54.8 and 48.1 per cent, respectively (Catalyst, 2012, cited in Hutchings and Michailova, 2014). Rwanda tops the list regarding proportion of seats in parliament held by women (47 per cent) in front of four Nordic countries, with Costa Rica and Cuba also in the top 10 (Bullough *et al.*, 2012, p. 402). The world's first female national head of government was not in the western world but, in fact, was Sirimavo Bandaranaike, elected in 1960, to serve as Prime Minister of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) – almost 20 years before Margaret Thatcher was elected as Prime Minister of the UK (Terbrush *et al.*, 2012).

This leads us to ask then – Why is it that, in some respects and in some instances, economically less developed countries seem to be far more advanced than more developed ones in terms of gender policies and practices and political representation of women? What implications does this state of affairs have for IB activities?

#### *At micro/individual level*

We do not seek to delve into a discussion of how women and men are problematized or to critique claims made by established research traditions about differences between genders – but, we do note that some of these stated differences are important for a discussion of how we understand women within IB. For instance, if both psychology and economics tell us that women are, in general, more risk-adverse than men (Borghans *et al.*, 2009; Powell and Ansic, 1997), how can we explain that there may be more interest by females than males to self-initiate expatriation – voluntarily deciding to relocate to other countries to live and work rather than being assigned by their employing companies? After all, while traditional, organisationally assigned expatriates have rather secure positions and enjoy much more certainty, the opposite is likely true for self-initiated expatriates in the sense that they rely on their own abilities and ambitions and do not have the security or cross-cultural training (or usually the same extent of remuneration and resources) provided by an assigning organisation. Research has suggested, though, that women may be more prepared to consider self-initiated expatriation to address problems with achieving managerial career development/promotional advancement in organisations (Tharenou, 2010) and increasing numbers of entrepreneurial women are establishing their own businesses internationally (Gundlach and Sammartino, 2013). Even though relocation may provide career development opportunities which may not be available in their home countries, this may also evidence risk-taking behaviour for women who relocate from developed countries in which there is gender anti-discrimination labour law. In contrast, it may be a risk-avoidance strategy for women who self-initiate expatriation from home countries which provide limited opportunities for women to maintain, and advance in, their careers to countries which have greater gender egalitarian employment markets and organisations. Thus, this issue provides intuitive ground to be able to question and problematize a long-held view about women and indeed gender differences in risk-related behaviour.

Landmark research from decades ago concluded that females in higher positions do not really exercise presumed cooperative behaviour but are competitive with men and even more so with other women (Staines *et al.*, 1973). Further, the view has continued to



be held with the Queen Bee phenomenon[5] having been well documented theoretically, as well as empirically in both management and gender studies (Ellemers *et al.*, 2004; Mavin, 2006). Against a backdrop of these studies, how can we explain that in IB, female expatriates may complete, and succeed in, their international assignments not only because of their knowledge and skills but also when they may be beset by not having the same opportunities for networking or mentoring as their male counterparts (Linehan and Scullion, 2008)? Have they actually undertaken conscious and elaborate networking based on reciprocity and cooperation?

The themes we have presented are not only a result of merely identifying gaps in existing knowledge but also of problematizing existing views that as a discipline of scholars, we hold about women and gender. The themes suggest that the very context of IB may signify the importance of a careful gender analysis and may advance our current understanding of women and gender in the IB field.

#### *Looking forward – Where should we be going?*

The reflections we have presented so far are associated with what could be referred to as mental confines that influence how IB scholars think about women and gender or the lens through which women, men and gender are viewed and examined (or not examined!). There is, however, also a second layer/level, namely, the (seemingly gender-neutral but possibly quite gender-loaded) agencies and structures through which gender is enacted. It is the latter one that we address briefly as a final issue within this viewpoint.

A separate, but related, part of our analysis is that we are struck by how many female PhD students we educate and how many young female scholars attend the IB conferences internationally – both the main Academy of International Business (AIB) annual conference and the regional chapters and symposia. However, when we look at the more senior delegates, we cannot help but notice that there are very few women represented. Thus, not only there is limited engagement with studies of women in the IB literature but also the academic IB profession seems to demonstrate under-representation of women. This has been and seems to remain a persistent trend which despite increasing numbers of women entering academic careers in IB fields does not seem to change over time. Where are the female scholars going and why? Or does this show the under-representation of women in IB in the past, but we could expect that it may change over the coming years as the younger women progress through the ranks? Sociologist Maureen Baker (2012) argues that current universities' priorities and collegial relations often magnify the impact of gendered families and identities and perpetuate the gender gap. It would be illuminating to find out whether there are significant differences in working hours, salary, career progression, rank, job security and satisfaction in our IB field specifically and learn more about female IB scholars and whether they are leaving the profession to work in other industries. Brooks *et al.* (2014) found evidence that "women may be disadvantaged by their sub-discipline specialisation when their research is evaluated using journal rating lists" (p. 999), a factor that demotivates striving towards climbing the career ladder. We suspect that despite the progress made in improving women's career chances, they still come second to men on a range of indicators. The lack of senior female role models (relative to male ones) and the associated lack of extended powerful networks are likely to perpetuate perceptions of exclusion and of being penalised by existing research assessments at

individual, departmental and business school levels. Moreover, we might speculate that women who are more advanced in their careers are also advanced in their child rearing years and/or have ageing parents, and, thus, attending conferences (particularly internationally) conflicts with caring responsibilities. While flexible work structures within universities may facilitate their daily work, commitments to family outside of standard work hours may preclude women's involvement in after-hours networking, attendance at professional association events and international travel. We could further question whether this under-representation also correlates with the lack of attention given to women in IB research as in other fields of research women tend to strongly predominate amongst those studying both women, specifically, and gender, more generally. These are issues that warrant much more critical scrutiny.

A similar observation relates to tracks and streams at our IB conferences. Though the 2015 AIB Conference had 15 tracks and none were devoted to women or gender, it should be noted that since 2001, AIB has included women in IB networking group, which, amongst other activities, encourages research on gender-related issues in IB, sponsors women-related research panels and provides a best paper award (for increasing gender awareness in IB) at the annual conference[6]. To the best of our knowledge, though, a theme on women or gender would typically be missing from the main tracks of most other regional chapters and other conferences broadly related to IB. In 2014, the Australia New Zealand International Business Academy annual conference introduced a track called "Gender and IB", but this has not been taken up in subsequent conferences. At the same time, it is not unusual that there are panels and plenary and other types of discussion sessions conducted on the theme of women or gender in the context of IB conferences. And while some are slim in terms of attendance, others tend to attract substantial interest. As part of our call for further research to be undertaken on women in IB and for journals in the field to more actively promote research on gender, we also ask that as a discipline we consider more representation of gender in annual conferences/symposia. Moreover, we need to seriously engage with questions around the marginalised place of women and gender not only within IB research but also what seems to be limited visibility of women themselves in a range of IB academic fora.

## Notes

1. The eight journals are *British Journal of Management*; *Culture and Organization*; *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*; *Gender, Work and Organization*; *Gender in Management: An International Journal*; *Human Relations*; *Organization*; and *Scandinavian Journal of Management*.
2. [www.eawop.org/news/special-issue-of-leadership-quarterly-on-gender-and-leadership](http://www.eawop.org/news/special-issue-of-leadership-quarterly-on-gender-and-leadership)
3. [www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/products/journals/call\\_for\\_papers.htm?id=6046](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/products/journals/call_for_papers.htm?id=6046)
4. On the specificities of and differences between descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes see for instance, *Burgess and Burgida (1999)*, *Heilman (2001)* and *Vinkenburg et al. (2011)*.
5. The Queen Bee syndrome was coined by *Staines (1973)*. It is the notion that women who have achieved power in a misogynistic culture do not necessarily help other women do the same. The syndrome refers to female rivalry in the workplace (*Mavin, 2006*); it describes a woman in a position of authority who views or treats subordinates more critically if they are female.
6. See <http://kelley.iu.edu/waib/>

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### Further reading

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