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**Think local, act global?**  
**On the introduction of discrimination from a cross-cultural gender perspective**

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**Abstract:**

The meaning of gender is culturally constructed, thus multi-national companies are facing challenges when acting with their specific (local) culture background in other cultural settings. The paper discusses the case of a German engineering company located in Thailand. The human resource management was confronted with the employment of a *Kathoey* resulting in a decision dilemma. The ambivalence of sticking to the own corporate culture, tolerating the societally given Thai context with its own laws and values, balancing the reputation effects in Germany as well as in Thailand, the need to critically reflect on the local (gender) norms and the delocalized context highlights the various aspect of cross-cultural management in particularly with respect to gender.

Contrary to main stream cross-cultural management literature referring often to essentialist concepts of culture (Hofstede and Trompenaars for example) , the paper will elaborate culture as a form of organizational practise. It is investigated how local norm systems and sense-making processes impact delocalized management and impose imperialistic gender hierarchies. The far-reaching effect of such management decisions leads to the recommendation to follow the idea of “think local, act global” instead of “think global, act local” in terms of critically reflecting on the societal impact of the subsidiaries’ cultural context.

Keywords: Thailand, Germany, Kathoey, gender discrimination, cross-cultural

**Introduction: A case of culture clash**

The following case is taken from Claes, Hanappi-Egger and Primecz (2012) and describes an illustrative example of how cross-cultural management decisions are specific kinds of organizational practices impacting the social context of delocalized culture:

‘Have you ever been on a plane full of German males on their way to Thailand?’  
Adam Becker, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Toras, a German engineering company, sat back in his chair and pondered the question which his sales director Frank Klein had just posed upon leaving the room. What was he supposed to do now?

He picked up the document which the director of his company’s Thai subsidiary had sent two days previously. It was an employment contract for a sales manager in Thailand, signed by the

local Thai human resources manager, the local German director and the applicant, indicating the monthly salary of the new sales manager. It was a standard contract, and in his role as human resource director at the German headquarters, Adam had not noticed anything unusual at first glance. He was glad that the Thai subsidiary seemed to have identified an experienced salesperson for their highly specialised biotechnology and weighing devices. Reviewing the documents attached, including a copy of the passport and driving licence, he remembered how surprised he had been to discover that the identification of sex was noted as 'M' for male, and yet the face shown on the documentation was that of a woman. Only then had he noticed that the applicant's signature on the contract was preceded by 'Mr'.

The first thing he had done the morning before was to call his director in Thailand, Detlef Mueller, for clarification.

He had been somewhat taken aback by the explanation:

- She's a Kathoey.
- A what?
- A transgender. A ladyboy, if you like.

A ladyboy! Images flashed through his mind: Thailand, the sex industry, ladyboys, prostitution...

- It isn't what you think, added Detlef. Kathoey's are everywhere in Thailand, in entertainment of course, but also in sales, in medicine, in legal professions. They are a part of everyday life. She's the right person for the job, and so we gave her the contract.

Adam had scheduled an appointment with the sales director for the afternoon, but Frank had come in just after the conversation with Thailand, obviously very upset, and brandishing the contract for the Thai sales manager.

- Have you seen this? Have you noticed that he has recruited a ladyboy?
- Yes, I've just been talking to him. He says that it's no big deal in Thailand.

A long discussion had ensued, with Frank explaining that they were in a serious business, and that clients elsewhere would not be so understanding. There would be all kinds of jokes about Toras employing a ladyboy in Thailand. Adam had argued that rejecting a transgender individual was against the law; that such action would put them at risk of being sued for discrimination, and furthermore, it was against the diversity policy of the company.

But Frank had been adamant. The reputation of the company was at stake. Until now the name of Toras stood for excellence in the field. It was a highly regarded engineering company with an international customer base, collaborating with pharmaceutical and other research laboratories, as well as production facilities, around the world. Maybe the Thai salesperson was good in her field – he could see that from the curriculum vitae – but how would customers from different countries react to this individual? And what would be the impact on company business? It was not their role, after all, to change the world.

Adam explained that public opinion in Thailand was quite different, that people were used to doing business with transgender persons, and that there was a much higher degree of tolerance. And besides, the contract had been signed.

- Well, said Frank, we will just have to cancel it. I know the world of sales, and in our business we cannot afford to come over as being involved with ladyboys in Thailand.

They had decided to call Bangkok again. Detlef, somewhat annoyed, tried to understand the dilemma of the two directors at headquarters, but repeated that this was a complete non-issue in Thailand. Furthermore, he emphasized that discrimination was against Thai law, and that cancelling the contract now would be regarded as grounds for legal action. He added that this topic was frequently brought up on the many talk shows on Thai television, and so they had to step carefully. There could be serious repercussions on the company's image in Thailand, making it very difficult for them to find a new sales manager. He added that headquarters should be sensitive to the local environment and culture.

Frank retorted that they had to consider the global environment, and what the reaction would be from customers elsewhere. Maintaining the overall global image and strategy was more important than accommodating this one case in Thailand. They simply could not take the risk. After the conversation with Bangkok, Frank insisted on Adam cancelling the contract, even if it meant giving the candidate a month's salary in compensation. As Adam still showed signs of hesitation, Frank walked to the door, saying:

Have you ever been on a plane full of German males on their way to Thailand?

The case resulted in the cancellation of the contract and the Kathoey being offered a one month's salary in compensation. The whole story became public when the fired sales manager spoke about her case and her experience on Thai television, mentioning the company by name and explaining how she had been treated by the company as a Kathoey.

This example will be taken to discuss the problem of impacting de-localized cultural contexts in cross-cultural management, a topic often ignored by the scholarly communities.

While a large number of publications on cross-cultural management are focusing on the meaning of cultural clashes, miscommunication, or culture conflicts and on their damages for the company's performance (see for example Holden 2002 for an overview), little research is done as yet on the impact of imposing certain cultural norms that the company adheres to the societal culture of the host countries.

The discussion of the above mentioned case study contributes to the scholarly work on the impact of cross-cultural management on the subsidiaries' cultural context with respect to diversity management. The case study shows several aspects of cross-cultural practices, in particular how managers of a specific cultural background act without being aware (or taking

care) of the cultural contexts they create as a multi-national business, or of the way their practices affect the cultural contexts in host countries. This article will contribute to the discourse on how companies change the norms of the “guest” country by imposing specific views and values. In other words, it will be argued that managers’ decisions as described in the case may lead to discriminatory practices in societal settings that originally had not been exposed to these kinds of discrimination.

The discussion will be framed by the theory of organizational practices and “doing gender” from a cross-cultural perspective. Thus, as a first step the idea of culture as organizational practices and the concept of “doing gender” will be presented. As a next step the case will be taken as illustration of the societal impact of management’s decisions with respect to (gendered) discrimination.

### **Culture as (Gendered) Organizational Practise**

Although the topic of “culture” is subject to vivid scholarly discourses and gained even more relevance due to the globalisation of business, there is as yet no satisfying definition of the concept. Instead of a generally valid definition of “culture”, there are overlapping and partly contradictory approaches of the meaning of “culture”. Allaire and Fisirotu (1984) for example identified different definitions of the term “culture” across eight main schools of thought. As is well known by now, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) came up with their own definition of culture after reviewing 100 different approaches. Their definition refers more particularly to the function of culture. Hence, culture is seen as a set of behavioural guidelines implicitly or explicitly determining the behaviour of people. Culture is therefore the historically developed structure of behaviour transferred by one generation to the next and learned through socialization.

The orientation systems and behavioural codes that shape people’s understanding of their world and social interactions also include gender topics. There are gendered norms and values, role expectations and understandings of what it means to be a man or a woman. Various country-comparisons – such as the Gender Gap Report - show how different the living circumstances of women (and men) are over the world. Those statistics show for example that there are huge differences in women’s involvement in the public sphere (economy, education, and politics), and in health status between the countries ranked in the report, in particular between the highest position (Iceland) and the lowest (Yemen) (Hausmann et al., 2010).

Culture – including gender topics – does not only refer to the societal level, but also to the organizational level (see Hanappi-Egger 2011; 2012) since organizations have to be considered as open systems embedded in socio-cultural contexts. Hence it has to be kept in mind that “culture” encompasses societal value and norm systems as well as organizational and professional aspects of culture (Mead, 1994). “Culture” is still often defined as a rather static and

fixed concept (see Hofstede 1980; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993) and consequently managers are trained in the “do’s” and “don’ts” in order to be successful in international business. This view is clearly being challenged in the light of new research and approaches in cross-cultural management. Culture cannot merely be seen any more as a form of static framework allowing us to “specify” and define culture using specific dimensions or categorizations. Cultural standards or cultural dimensions represent stereotypes about people such as “the Germans” (being punctual, accountable, strict and reserved) or “the Asians” (being polite, trying not to lose face). Those stereotypes are used to gain orientation in social interactions and to reduce complexity (see Hanappi-Egger 2012), but nevertheless risk the reproduction of stereotypes.

While in the scholarly work on cross-cultural management the focus is often on an understanding of culture as framework guiding behaviour, recent publications are referring to the role of organizational practices. Primecz et al (2012) e.g. argue that cultural comparison strongly deals with the idea of highlighting differences and neglects the question of social interactions and negotiating over the meaning of cultural contexts (see also Claes 2009). Consequently the approach of “culture” as negotiation, i.e. as organizational practice, highlights the fact that “patterns of meaning and agency in the organization arise from the interactions and negotiations of its members”. (Brannen and Salk 2000: 456) Nevertheless negotiation cannot be discussed without taking the role of power and power asymmetries into consideration, more particular in the field of international business:

In the area of cross-cultural management, globalisation has always been a central concept describing new forms of acting internationally. Thus, the meaning of “place” has experienced a change with respect to the relation of “local” and “global”. Massey (1995) highlights the fact that these places are linked together in unequal ways and represent power relations: “We can imagine a centre of power at the world headquarters, from which radiates control of a variety of sorts to the different branch-plants, marketing offices, development laboratories and so forth. There may be continental, regional and national ‘headquarters’ too which function as relay-stations for the overall decisions of head office but which also have power to take certain kinds of decisions for themselves” (Massey, 1995: 69-70). While e.g. Bartlett and Ghoshal (1998) highlight the fact that headquarters also learn from their subsidiaries, many scholars on cross-cultural management still focus on the role and impact that the headquarters have on their subsidiaries.

According to Tempel and Walgenbach (2007), very few scholars have investigated the cross-fertilization of the global diffusion of management practices on one hand and the influence of national institutions on the other hand. The debate has been pointlessly polarized, the debate should be about the interaction between local, national and international influence (Sisson, 2001 cited by Quitanilla and Ferner, 2003).

According to Tung (1995) the case under consideration can be positioned in the field of “managing intra-national diversity: “Managing cross-national diversity refers to managing the interface between peoples of two countries, such as that between expatriates and host-country nationals. Managing intra-national diversity, on the other hand refers to coping with the realities of an increasingly diverse, both ethnic- and gender-wise, workforce in a given country”. (Tung, 1995, p. 482)

Part of this diversity is gender (see Hanappi-Egger 2006). Feminist theories introduced the notion of “gender” in comparison to “sex”. While sex is biologically determined, gender is socially constructed; it is the product of socialization and experience (Calas and Smircich, 1996: 219). Hence, it is not the biology itself but the societal and cultural meaning leading to gender phenomena across cultures. From a gender and power perspective the latter is strongly interwoven with issues of the hierarchical ordering of gender and its rhetoric construction. “Doing gender” thus refers to individual or organizational practices contributing to the reproduction of gendered meanings in social settings (compare Hanappi-Egger 2011; Tienari et al 2002; West and Zimmerman 1987). Additionally, Gherardi (2003) argues that language is a crucial feature in producing gender inequality. In recent years the interest in the role of language for transmitting, maintaining and producing gendered biases increased. Foucault (1977) highlights the concept of discourse as a system of regulation and thus a way of establishing powerful forms of sense-making.

As demonstrated in the case study, labelling “kathoeys” as “ladyboys” and consequently close to prostitution, the hegemonic (Western) dualistic gender concept distinguishing between either men or women is subtly reproduced. Contrary to the Western understanding, the Thai context allows for a more sophisticated understanding of gender, in particular of transgender people. Transgender is an umbrella term, used to include people whose lifestyles appear to conflict with the gender norms of society. In the use of the broad term, a transgender person crosses conventional boundaries of gender in clothing, in presenting themselves, going even as far as having multiple surgical procedures to be fully bodily reassigned in their preferred gender role. Whittle et al. (2007) have found that trans-people have complex gender identities, often moving from one ‘trans’ category into another over time. In the Thai context transgender people are part of the local lifestyle. Although many Thais see transgenderism as a non-normative pattern of behaviour which deviates from the ideal, they also see it as quite natural.

The case study shows how two societal cultures can collide with respect to sex/gender categories: a dualistic sex category concept at the German headquarters and a multi-faceted sex/gender category concept represented by the Kathoey at the Thai subsidiary (see also Claes 2011). Due to the power asymmetry the German manager is able to stick to his understanding of gender and ignore the Thai context of multi-faceted gendered identities. The fact that the German headquarters dismissed the contract with the already hired transgender manager, and the public

discussion about this case, will impact the Thai perception and attitude towards transgender people. The demonstration that the Thai gendered culture is not appreciated by European investors clearly will lead to an internal re-consideration of daily practices and norms.

The impact on Thai managers may be more important than one would expect in a country heavily dependent on foreign investment, especially in a time of economic downturn. Indeed, the case re-enforces the idea that in order to be ‘modern’ in a globalized world, Thai subsidiaries should listen to and adapt to foreign headquarters’ demands. While there was no discrimination against Kathoey so far, the case introduces new forms of discrimination. The Thai society will experience how others – in particular investors want them to “be” or “to behave”. In other words, culture as “organizational practice” also pertains to negotiating the meaning of gender concepts – which clearly takes place in certain power structures.

### **Lessons learned: Think local, act global?**

Considering the fact that culture also determines the way other cultural contexts are perceived, leads us to the recommendation to “think local, act global”. This refers to the topic of the transfer of (gendered) biases from a local perspective to a de-localized context without being aware of the impact. The “doing gender” (and culture as practice) approach is focussing on social practices and thus offers possibilities to critically reflect on gender-based inequalities.

The case demonstrated how specific gender regimes are reproduced and consequently impact other cultural contexts. The CEO of the German headquarter applied his taken-for-granted assumptions on “Kathoey” without questioning his own biased cultural background. By “doing gender” he imposed gendered inequality in a context where this was not the case – instead of negotiating the meaning of transgender people in the Thai context. Or, as West and Zimmerman (1987) would formulate it: ‘Doing’ gender can be understood as the "activity of managing situated conduct, in the light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category". Culture as practice therefore refers to the mutual dependency of structures and agency (Schatzki 2001), strongly shaped by given power structures. The following figure 1 highlights the basic features of this approach:

Figure 1: culture as (gendered) organizational practice



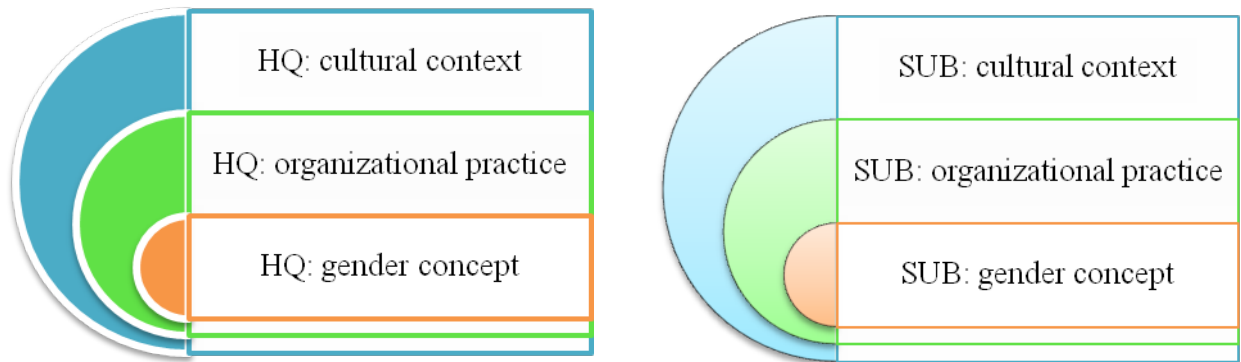


Figure 1 indicates the mutual dependency of headquarters' cultural context and the subsidiary's cultural context. It is assumed that organizational practices include gender concepts, and are embedded in the given socio-cultural context.

In the international business context, these frameworks are confronted with the cultural context of the subsidiary in terms of socio-culture as well as in terms of organizational practices, including their gender concepts. There is a kind of mutual influence, but nevertheless the way negotiations are settled depends on the power of the involved parties. In cases of power imbalance the more powerful agency will force the weaker party to accept its cultural norms and values.

“As organizational environments become more global, dynamic, and competitive, contradictory demands intensify. To understand and explain such tensions, academics and practitioners are increasingly adopting a paradox lens.” (Smith and Lewis. 2011: 381). The paradoxical approach enables us to advance the argument that there can be both a divergence and a convergence of management practices. “The coexistence of global and local into each other is at the core of the Yin Yang approach to understanding culture, marketing and international business in general in the age of globalisation” (Fang, 2012:208). The paradoxical approach is an umbrella for the embrative theories of both convergence and divergence, both global and local, where national culture dynamic takes place in the age of globalisation such as the glocalisation theory.

The issue in the given situation clearly is that the involved headquarters might not be aware of the impact their decisions have in the regional context. In other words, their own local perspective has to be adapted to a broader context, in terms of being careful with imposing specific views, and affecting other cultural norms by doing so.

As Quelch and Jocz (2012) illustrated in their book *All business is local*, there will always be a tension, some competing trends between local and global pulling multinationals in all directions.



There is a twofold requirement for international companies: making local management practices coexisting with global management practices.

One might subsume this topic under “ethical behaviour” – but in our sense it is more specific. The case – though it does not offer enough insights to be able to really evaluate it – seems to be a question of “business case” with respect to diversity management: The decision to fire the Thai sales manager might sound reasonable with respect to the expected cost in Germany, which might in their eyes be caused by being associated with the bad reputation of the sex industry in Thailand. Being a “serious” engineering company, the possibility of being associated with prostitution seems to be a high risk for the CEO.

Nevertheless cross-cultural management is not only about the “reputation” of the headquarters’ in its home country, but also about its reputation in the host country. In our case the reputation as an equal opportunity employer may suffer from this form of discrimination – leading to a damaged public image in the host country, as well as - in the eventuality of international attention – globally. Moreover, the opportunity to re-affirm their commitment to non-discrimination at home and internationally was not taken advantage of. Therefore it is of great importance for future managers to be culturally sensitive, which means to come up with an understanding of “culture” as negotiated meaning.

When different cultures clash with each other, this collision or friction can help motivate and encourage cultural process learning on both sides (Fang, 2011). As Brannen and Salk (2000) suggest, it will probably lead to the integration of both cultures into a new hybrid ‘negotiated culture’. Therefore, when different cultures meet, the potential for penetrating into each other exist and coexist within each other. This cultural learning of value and practices is a direct result of the cultural encounters and clashes happening in the global marketplace and cyberspace of globalisation, foreign direct investment and Internet (Bird and Fang, 2009).

The implication for management is that firm structures and corporate culture will not simply mirror one distinct national culture. From the meaningful interaction of individuals, a corporate culture can be identified and adjusted to adapt to changing conditions and different national cultures. However, modifying the corporate culture to attain a competitive advantage through greater standardisation is easier and possible while difficult when employees have greatly different and shifting cultures.

Chevrier (2009) explored the relevance of national culture to management in a global feature blurring borders and boundaries. In her view, the transfer of management practices in a globalized world requires to understand behaviours and to design instruments that fit and respect both the legal constraints and the political cultural context. The transfer of business practices that may suggest the imposition of an external power on locals is destined to be repelled. Therefore,

elaborating knowledge of national political cultures (and not in terms of shared values) provides key facets for elucidating and interpreting social practices and meanings. The standardization process is thus exposed to resistance and the point is to identify the variables that resist the globalisation process.

In this context of balancing the dynamic and paradoxical tensions of competing forces of global and local, multinationals have to respond. Vance (2006) examined what he called the company headquarters upstream and local country business units downstream processes developed by multinational companies (MNC) to build global synergies and effective implementation in business units. Upstream operations usually refer to the strategic-wide important decision making process. Global convergence through global standardization and integration is a desirable to reach efficiency. There is therefore a collaboration and communication across borders and efforts to standardize the management practices at a global scale. The objective is to link the business units and transform the MNC into a sustainable system with collective and shared values and common guidelines for 'winning behaviours' (Gertsen and Söderberg, 2011). However, the abolition of local habits in favour of global standards can be the source of frictions between the headquarters and the subsidiary.

MNCs are the receivers and the promoters of those paradoxical movements of convergence and divergence of management practices. On one hand, there is a need of convergence for global efficiency and on the other hand there is a need for divergence in order to be responsive to local conditions and be sensitive to cross cultural differences. Foreign subsidiaries are therefore at the centre of a dual or paradoxical pressure to conform both to the norms and rules of the local environment in which they are implanted and to the headquarter expectations of MNC-internal consistency (Björkman et al, 2007). They have to juggle with both 'global integration' and 'local adaptation'. It is thus essential to understand that those paradoxical trend takes place at the same time and to understand where, when and why culture matters.

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