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Received: 20 October 2022 | Revised: 12 April 2024 | Accepted: 28 May 2024

DOI: 10.1111/gwao.13163

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

Good girls? Ideal workers in online retail warehousing

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Abstract

Online retailing challenges the traditional male coding of warehousing. Based upon an ethnographic study at two Swedish online retail warehouses, this article seeks to understand why certain warehouses are numerically dominated by women. Employees express that men are less focused and more careless and easily bored than women, and hence not desirable for the goods-handling work. The warehouses extend to hard-working women driven by the shame of doing wrong, which reflect their orientation of bodies in the direction of enhancing production and profit. Workers attribute the positive social atmosphere at the warehouses to the numerical dominance of women and the small size of the workplaces. At the one hand, the constructed sameness of (women) workers through hard work and jargon contribute to a collective identity that strengthens them. At the other hand, the binary gendering of work and workers also contribute to making the ware houses into 'straight spaces' (Ahmed, 2006).

KEYWORDS

e-commerce, female-dominated, organization, queer phenomenology, spatiality

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1 | INTRODUCTION

This article explores the organization of work and gender at small-sized online retail warehouses. In Sweden, the geographical context of the present study, men count for 76% of all warehouse workers and 'warehouse worker' is the second most common job for men (SCB, 2023). Similarly, in the US, men make up to 72% of the warehouse workforce (Gutelius & Theodore, 2019). The gender-coding of warehouse work does not only apply to warehousing as a field of work, which historically emerged from the industrial sector associated with men and masculinity (Mulholland & Stewart, 2014). A gender-coding is also found at workplace level of individual warehouses, in how tasks perceived as 'heavy' tend to be performed by men. For example, emptying incoming/loading outgoing goods from/to trucks. How assembly or clerical work, and other tasks perceived as 'light' tend to be performed by women (Cockburn, 1985; Gruchmann et al., 2020; Gutelius, 2016) reflects assumptions of women as having a better 'attention to detail' than men (Gutelius, 2016: 215; cf. Bonachich & Wilson, 2008: 231). The heavy/light division does not mean that the men-coded warehouse work is more demanding than the women-coded ditto; the repetitive nature of tasks often performed by women could still make them burdensome (Cockburn, 1985). What is materialized here is co-constructs of gender and work, making (different types of) warehouse work appear more/less suitable for men and women.

Online retailing makes warehouse work and gender into a timely issue. In Sweden, online consumption has increased during the past years with an annual growth of 40% in 2020 and 20% in 2021 (PostNord, 2022) resulting in online retailing making up 15% of the retail market in 2022 (PostNord, 2023). The Swedish Union of Commercial Employees expects the number of online retail workers to become more than double by 2030 (Carlén & Rosenström, 2018), and figures from 2017 had already demonstrated growth, with 77% increase in the online segment of retailing during the last decade, accounting for approximately 5% of all retail workers (HUI Research, 2019). The fact that online retailing is directed at individual customers means that orders tend to be small-sized and that the deadlines are shorter than in traditional warehousing (Boysen et al., 2019) given market demands for fast deliveries. What online retailing brings with it is, seemingly, a warehouse work that differs from that as we know from before.

The research-based knowledge about online retail warehouse work is relatively scarce, especially in the Swedish context (cf. Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2020; Apicella & Hildebrandt, 2019; Briken & Taylor, 2018; Delfanti, 2019; Fuchs et al., 2022; Gautié et al., 2020; Loewen, 2018; Pottenger, 2020; Vallas et al., 2022; Vgontzas, 2022). The studies conducted with a gender focus have identified a current feminization of the workforce in the US and in South Asia in that more women are working in online retail warehouses than in other types of warehouses (Gutelius & Theodore, 2019; Sprague & Sathi, 2020). Such findings make it seem likely that the small-goods handling for individual customers challenges the traditional association of warehousing with men and masculinity. Moreover, similarly to what has been shown in other types of warehouses, a gendered task division is found in online retail warehouses: men tend to perform work involving forklifts or trucks, for example, un/loading heavy goods, and women tend to do the picking and packing tasks (Loewen, 2018; Reese, 2020). Studies of online retail warehouse work and gender are particularly scarce in the Swedish context. With reference to a report from the Swedish Commercial Employees' Union (Swedish: *Handelsanställdas förbund*), what we do know is that women workers report worse health than men workers in online retail warehousing. Stress and repetitive and monotonous work tasks are examples of factors resulting in bodily pain and fatigue among them (Rosenström, 2016).

Based on an understanding of warehouse work as traditionally male-coded and the tendency for more women to perform warehouse work with the introduction of online retailing (Gutelius & Theodore, 2019; Sprague & Sathi, 2020), this article seeks to understand why certain warehouses are numerically dominated by women. An ethnographic study of two online retail warehouses, *Homeware* and *Electronic*, makes the empirical basis for this. Homeware and Electronic are small sized with regards to the number of employees and the size of the warehouses. How the workplace spatiality—its materiality in the form of floors, walls, furniture etcetera and the employees' discursive-meaning making of it—has been shown to matter for the gender-coding of in-store retailing (Johansson &

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Lundgren, 2015) inspired a focus on such aspects in online retailing. Thus, the article aims to explore the organization of work and gender, with a focus on what makes the ideal worker and how this can be understood in relation to the warehouses as material-discursive spaces. These research questions are to be answered: What significance does the online retail space have for who is constructed as the 'ideal worker' in the warehouses? What characterizes the spatiality of the warehouses?

The article continues with the theoretical framework used. First, I introduce Acker's (2006) 'ideal worker' concept and how it relates to the spatiality of workplaces. Second, I present the queer phenomenological perspective (Ahmed, 2006) that makes a foundation for my analysis of gender, work, and spatiality relations. I then move on to the methods. Participant observations and semi-structured interviews with employees at Homeware and Electronic constitute the material for the later analysis and discussion.

2 | CO-CONSTRUCTS OF GENDER AND WORK

Gendered understandings of what competencies and qualities are needed to perform a particular job influence who is considered valuable in a specific work context. Acker (2006) distinguishes between 'the gendered organization of work and the gender and racial characteristics of the ideal worker' in arguing that 'although work is organized on the model of the unencumbered (white) man'—for example, with work hours ill-suited for women with responsibilities over children—the ideal worker is often not a man but 'a woman, particularly a woman, who, employers believe, is compliant, who will accept orders and low wages' (Acker, 2006: 450–451). Hiring women, and more so racialized women, thus appears a cost-effective alternative as compared to hiring men (Acker, 2006; see also Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019; Lindemann & Boyer, 2019). In other words, women are the ideal worker in many contexts does not mean that the work is ideal for women, but it means that women are ideal for the capitalist production and profit.

Further explanations as to why men and women are perceived as differently suited for different types of work can be found in the spatiality of work organizations. Feminist scholars have shown how spaces in working life are gendered (Tyler & Cohen, 2010), how spatial divisions of men and women contribute to the gendering of work/-ers (Massey & McDowell, 1994; Spain, 1993), and how it constrains those of us who are gender non-conforming (Doan, 2010). The way 'space' is approached varies in the work and organizational literature (see Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Weinfurtner & Seidl, 2019). In my understanding, spatiality is material-discursive in its being, referring to the materiality of the workplace (the floors, walls, furniture, etc.) and its discursive meanings (how managers and workers relate to it). Johansson (2015) draws on a similar understanding in her study of in-store retailing, concluding that the physical rooms of the workplace, and the boundary-making between them, make part of the gender-coding of the work tasks. In stores, the distance to customers matters for where workers of different genders are found (Johansson & Lundgren, 2015) and tasks performed close to the customer are commonly coded as 'women's work' asking for staff that embodies white feminine body ideals (Walters, 2018; Williams & Connell, 2010; see also Zampoukos, 2021). That *online* retailing is often performed in warehouses makes it interesting in this regard; rather than being a frontline service work, the good-handling tasks take place at a physical distance from the customers, which likely comes with a different set of requirements on the workers (Johansson et al., Forthcoming).

Of relevance for this study are studies that have found co-constructs of gender and work via a 'good girl' ideal. The Swedish meaning of the 'good girl' term (Swedish: *duktig flicka*) differs from how it in the US is applied to label women who comply with ideals of purity culture, in comparison to 'bad girls' having sexual intercourse outside the monogamous, heterosexual relationship (Armstrong et al., 2014). In Sweden, 'good girl' is often used in relation to work. In a study of health and social care organizations, Regnö (2013) shows that managers found women to be a problem in that they were perceived as emotional, gossipy, and conflictive. Misogyny was visible in how the hard-working women were accused of being overachieving 'good girls.' Sjöstedt Landén (2012)

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demonstrates in a study of knowledge work in the public sector that the 'good girl' was desirable in that she was considered loyal and hard-working and contributed to productivity in a way that the 'laid back' male coworkers did not. Yet, the 'good girl' was also thought of as affecting the work environment negatively with her high ambitions and assumed inability to admit failures. The balance for women of wanting to be seen as 'good and hard-working' but 'not *too* good or *too* successful' (Mattsson, 2015: 692, emphasis in original) is likewise discussed in a study of a medical research unit. By self-defining as 'good girls,' women researchers ascribed femininity to their professional identity—and avoided overstepping on their subordinated position in the academic gender order, even though they labeled themselves as hard working. Self-defining as 'good girls' also positioned the women together, based on ideas of likeness, in resistance to the gendered power relations at the workplace (Mattsson, 2015). That the 'good girl' corresponds to Acker's (2006) idea of the ideal worker as 'a woman, who, employers believe, is compliant' (pages 450–451) does not necessarily mean that their femininity would make them submissive (cf. Dahl & Sundén, 2018).

3 | STUDYING GENDER AND WORK FROM A QUEER PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Organizations are gendered and gendering. Acker (1990, 2006) suggests that organizational practices and processes—via the general requirements for work in that context, (in)formal hierarchies, and recruitment and hiring, among other things—(re)produce the relative patriarchal privilege of white men and subordination of women and non-white others. In arguing that such practices and processes create an ideal worker, what is centered in Acker's (1990, 2006) theorization is not so much the workers as the organizations; while workers make the organizations in practice, workers appear in the background in the theory. This is where Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology with its focus on how bodies are oriented by their surroundings becomes useful (cf. Olofsson, 2021). Even though Ahmed (2006) does not direct the queer phenomenology toward an organizational context—although she does relate it to 'institutions' (page 132)—it can be useful when trying to understand organizations, the work performed therein and its relation to gender.

Queer phenomenology is applied as a theoretical perspective in trying to understand gender and work in the studied warehouses. While other strands of feminist phenomenology could be useful in doing this, such as Marion Young's emphasis on women's gendered embodiment and spatiality (Gardiner, 2018), Ahmed's queer prefix brings with it a necessary critical element. Instead of taking for granted the numerical domination of women workers in the study of an organization, queer phenomenology casts light on *why* women and not many with other genders are working there.

Three queer phenomenological concepts are applied in my analysis: 'orientation,' 'direction', and 'background'. 'Orientation' is about bodies' relation to other bodies and things. Spaces orientate bodies, and the relation between a body and other bodies/things will decide whether the body feels at home in the space or not. While a familiar body is a body that aligns with other bodies/things, a body that is disorientated in the space is made unfamiliar to the other bodies/things. A familiar body is allowed to extend to the space in that the space extends to the body, whereas anybody who is orientated in another 'direction' will be out of place in how does not align with the space (Ahmed, 2006). The direction of bodies is decided by the 'background,' the background explains 'what is behind' the bodies' arrival (Ahmed, 2006: 38–39). A 'white space' orientates bodies around a white-colored background and a 'straight space' orientates bodies around a heterosexual background (Ahmed, 2006, 2007). The straight space can be inhabited by people of different sexual orientations, but bodies arrive there differently—some arrive feeling at home and others out of place (Ahmed, 2006).

My use of these concepts is inspired by scholars who have brought queer phenomenology into organizational studies. In their study of service work at a pub, Riach and Wilson (2014) show that the spatiality of the organizations and the orientation of bodies therein made certain sexualities and sexual encounters appear

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appropriate and others not. Some years later, Vitry (2020) made explicit the link between 'organizing' and Ahmed's 'orientations' in arguing that 'the process of organizing participates in producing spaces [...] which can orientate bodies along certain vertical line' (page 939). Specific forms of organizing decide which bodies are aligned with that space and which bodies are not; how work is organized will determine who will feel at home at a particular place and, through the arrival of those who do feel at home there, the organizing will be (re)produced in the same way. Of usefulness here is Vitry's (2020) term 'capitalist space.' In encompassing the capitalist background of (work) organizations, whereby (workers') bodies are orientated in different ways around the production (Vitry, 2020) the 'capitalist space' term resembles Acker's (2006) emphasis on class as a basis for inequality in organizations.

4 | METHODS AND MATERIALS

An ethnographic study conducted in 2021, as part of my PhD study of online retail warehouse work and inequality, forms the empirical case for this article. The main research methods have been participant observations and semi-structured interviews. I spent 8 weeks at two online retail warehouses—4 weeks at Homeware and 4 weeks at Electronic—where I interviewed managers and workers performing the warehouse work.

Homeware and Electronic have fewer than 20 employees each, who are engaged in marketing, customer service, etc. in the office or performing goods handling in the warehouse. My study primarily focuses on the latter. While warehouse workers at Electronic, which sells electronic accessories and gadgets for mobile phones, tablets, smartwatches, etcetera, do all their goods handling in a designated warehouse building, Homeware, which sells homeware including a range of utensils for cooking and baking, additionally has a store adjacent to the warehouse wherein part of the work is performed. I refer to both spaces as warehouses in this text, given that the store space functioned mostly as such as well.

During the total 8 weeks of observations, I was at the warehouses 2–5 days a week, 5–8 h each day. Workers introduced me to the goods handling, and I worked side-by-side with them in unpacking incoming goods, picking goods from shelves, and packing the outgoing goods. The observations were materialized in a field diary. I wrote down practical information such as date, time and place, visual and sensorial descriptions of things I experienced, direct quotes and issues I wanted to dig deeper into.

The interviews are listed in Table 1. Interviewees were selected based on their involvement in the goods handling. The occupational titles among interviewees indicate possible power relations concerning their different positions, which could have an impact on their approach to work and gender. However, given the small size of the organizations, both managers and marketing assistants had continuous experience of working with the same tasks as the warehouse workers, and that is why I have aggregated the material from both groups as a single dataset. Even the CEOs worked with goods handling when required by high order levels. Interviews were recorded upon participants' agreement, and later transcribed.

The observations made it possible for me to begin the analysis early on, while I was still 'in the field' (see Davies, 2008) and the field notes make visible how my knowledge developed day-by-day. The interview transcripts have been analyzed with a thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, was used as guidance). The analysis processes followed these steps: (a) I transcribed the interviews; (b) I read the transcripts; (c) I coded the transcripts and pasted the coded text into a grid table. In the grid table, the farther right column listed the interviewees, and the upper row was labeled with the code titles; (d) I used mind-mapping to gather the codes into overarching themes and sub-themes, (e) I created a new grid table with the interviewees listed in the farther right column and each thematic title in the upper row. Pasting the quotes into the table allowed me to read what had been said under each (sub)theme by whom. The grid table is illustrated in Table 2.

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TABLE 1 List of interviews.

Interviews Homeware		
Harry interview 1	CEO	60 min
Interview 2		50 min
Jenny	Warehouse manager	40 min
Julia and Karin	Marketing assistants	45 min
Josefin	Warehouse worker	40 min
Interviews Electronic		
Sofia interview 1	Warehouse manager	60 min
Interview 2		70 min
Lilly	Warehouse worker	35 min
Vilma	Warehouse worker	35 min
Majken	Warehouse worker	40 min
Moa	Warehouse worker	30 min

TABLE 2 Illustration of grid table summarizing the analysis of interviews.

	T1. Organization of work			**T2.**
Theme, subthemes:	**ST1. Work tasks**	**ST2. Competencies and qualities**	**ST3. Task division**	**...**
Participant:				
Interviews Homeware (2021)				
Harry	*Extracts from transcript*	...		
...				
Interviews Electronic (2021)				
Sofia	*Extracts from transcript*	...		
...				

5 | THE WORK TASKS: MANUAL SMALL-GOODS HANDLING

> I finally got to participate in what they all had been talking about: the handling of incoming goods from China. They had been calling it that—"China"—and everyone knew that it would take a lot of time and effort. Majken and Vilma put the boxes on the wagon and opened them. The boxes were crammed, but when I declared that: "Wow, they have left no space in these boxes!" Majken and Vilma replied that this was a comparatively well-organized delivery. (Field notes, Electronic)

Online retail warehouse work consists of goods handling, including the unpacking and sorting of incoming goods, and the picking and packing of outgoing goods. Incoming goods were dealt with differently at the warehouses. At Homeware, the tasks of unpacking boxes, scanning the goods into the online system, and sorting the goods to shelves were usually performed by one or a couple of workers, in parallel to others continuing picking and packing. At Electronic, everyone participated in it to make sure the goods were unpacked as soon as possible. The handling of incoming goods was a timely task in both warehouses. The pallets usually contained a variety of goods

and at Electronic it was not uncommon for the boxes to comprise a disorganized delivery of many types of products. This meant that workers would have to manually gather, for example, 50 smartwatch screen protectors scattered around the box, into one pile and count them to make sure the product type and number corresponded to the accompanying list. The handling of incoming goods hence helped workers to increase their knowledge of the product assortment.

> Josefin said that they're aiming toward a complete match between the digital shelving system and the actual shelving system. "It should be that easy to pick so that [the CEO] Harry's mum can do it" but, she added, this was unfortunately not the case. The company had been growing fast and, as a result, products were not always where they were supposed to be according to the picking list. I understood that product knowledge is vital for the warehouse workers, not only because of the faulty shelving system but also because some products are looking very similar to others. (Field notes, Homeware)

Picking was similar at Homeware and Electronic. It began with someone printing the picking lists. Workers then brought the lists and completed each order by walking the shelves and picking the dedicated goods. The picking lists were structured based on a strive to minimize the time and effort it took to complete one picking round. When the right products were located, they were put on a cart or a tray, which at the end of the picking round was placed next to the packing desks. Workers considered picking to be a difficult task relative to the other tasks. The warehouse shelving systems were organized to fit the broad range of goods and increases in the product assortment often required some goods sections to be packed close together and others to be moved. The reorganizing of goods appeared to me as a constantly ongoing process. A practical implication of this at Homeware is seen in the field note extract above: the warehouse worker Josefin emphasized how easy picking is in theory, by using the example of the CEO's mum, that is, an older woman not working in warehousing. However, a product's digital location did not always correspond to its shelf location, and, because of this, workers could not trust the picking list blindly. They sometimes had to look around and consider where the specific product would most logically have been placed. An interrelated issue was picking errors, meaning that someone had picked a product that looked very similar to the right one, for example, a white sugar paste instead of white marzipan. A similar issue was seen at Electronic, where many products that resembled one another had the same shelf location. For example, C002Y referred to aisle C, shelf 002, box Y, and in this box, there could be 7 same-sized phone cases for an iPhone X. The individual phone cases often lacked a label with the product number on them; some of them did differ by colors or patterns, while others were much more alike. To pick the right one, workers had to be familiar with the small details differing between the products.

Packing differed at the two warehouses. At Electronic, putting the phone and smart watch accessories in envelopes was described to me as so easy that 'you don't even notice that you are packing when packing.' At Homeware, packing appeared slightly more demanding. Orders often contained several products and many of them were large. Glass goods and liquid food products required additional packing. When showing me how to pack, Josefin explained that the first step is to find a suitable carton box—it should be big enough to fit all products, yet it must not be bigger than necessary, as the cost increases with the size. Having the box in front of you, all individual products must be scanned to ensure that they match the customer's order. The actual packing is like the game Tetris, Josefin told me: the products should be 'locked together' tightly both as it helps protect the goods from breaking and as they want to avoid transporting air. The finalized package should be 'neat and tidy'—to make it look good for the customer and to make sure that the waybill will be scannable at the shipping terminal.

As I will explain the next part of the article, these work tasks were linked to gendered ideas of who was more/less suited to perform them.

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6 | THE WORKERS: HARD-WORKING WOMEN KEEN TO DO A GOOD JOB

> The warehouse manager Sofia demonstrated how one should stick the waybill on the envelope before putting the products in—"this has been a bit difficult for the guys to grasp." Sofia said she thought it might have to do with girls being keener on doing the "right" thing. She gave the example of picking: when teaching how to pick, the new workers get to try picking on their own, after which the more experienced workers will look through what they have picked and correct any incorrect picks—"It is enough with that feeling of shame for [the girls] to do the right thing next time" explained Sofia. (Field notes, Electronic)

Previous studies have demonstrated that the gendering of warehouse work relates to the assumed physical strain of tasks and women's and men's assumed (in)abilities to perform heavy work (Cockburn, 1985; Gruchmann et al., 2020; Gutelius, 2016; Reese, 2020). The above field notes suggest that gender matters differently at Electronic. Sofia developed her thoughts in an interview, where she said that the different behaviors in men and women workers that she has observed over the years could be explained by many women—herself included—having been brought up to become overachieving 'good girls' (cf. Mattsson, 2015; Regnö, 2013; Sjöstedt Landén, 2012). The 'good girl' professionalism is built on a threat of the shame they would feel if not performing to standards:

> You know, you so fucking badly want to do the right thing. So, if you find one of those good girls – and there are plenty of them – then it's a piece of cake to teach them the job. They memorize everything and they'll ask about the things they cannot memorize. Or if they do wrong, then you'll notice, and they get so ashamed that they never do wrong again. And all the guys I tried with, apart from the current one, have been quite the opposite. (Sofia, Electronic)

> I feel like the girls have always been like "Oh, I'm so sorry, I will think about that from now on." And then do things right. But the guys have been like, "Aha, okay," and then they continue to do things the wrong way. So, I don't know, I've felt like they don't really care about what you tell them. (Lilly, Electronic)

Others shared Sofia's perception of gender differences. The warehouse worker Lilly implied that men have not been as good at taking instructions as women, which was also suggested by the warehouse worker Moa, who stated that they have had a problem with a 'lack of respect [among men workers] for the fact that women are in charge.' Lilly further underlined that generalizations are problematic, however, she added, 'the thing with those [men] who have been here is simply that it has not worked out. They have often been doing things wrong, like picking the wrong things, packing the wrong things; they have not been as focused as we who work here now.' Vilma, another warehouse worker, similarly perceived a difference in the attentiveness to details among men and women who have been employed at Electronic, although the reason why it has not worked with those men is not 'because they are men, it is that they haven't cared as much and haven't worked as hard as they should have.' While Sofia, Lilly, and Vilma seemed to want to ensure me that they do not believe that men and women are different by nature, they had all experienced that men and women performed differently at work. Similar descriptions were made at Homeware:

> I believe that some guys feel this is boring, that there is nothing fun about packing and picking. We had a worker, a guy, who was here for one summer, but then he came to me and said that "You know what, I can't do this. I need a job with a broader variety of tasks." I feel like those we've employed haven't understood that when packing is done, then you can do other things. But they've felt that

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packing is boring and therefore called in sick instead. So that's something I've been thinking about – why girls seem to manage this job better than guys do. (Jenny, Homeware)

When I asked about the gender composition at Homeware, and what reasons they could see for the numerical dominance of women, differences between men and women were also highlighted. How Jenny, the warehouse manager, explained that men might not have the ability to look beyond the 'boring' parts of the job surprised me. I had understood that the workers experienced that they had opportunities to vary tasks over the workday; they had seemingly found an informal task division that corresponded to what each individual preferred working with. For example, Josefin often worked in the front of the warehouse, unpacking incoming goods and serving (the few) in-store customers, as she enjoyed the service aspects of the job, while Nils often reorganized the shelves, as he preferred being in the back of the warehouse. I expressed this to Jenny, who replied:

> Yeah. It's like when you begin working here, then you must learn how to pack. And there is no one [of the previously employed men] who has crossed that border and continued working here. I'm also thinking that when people think about online retailing, they think about stores. And generally, more women are working in stores. We've had a lot of job advertisements, but it's mostly women who apply. (Jenny, Homeware)

According to Jenny, the numerical dominance of women workers could have to do with general perceptions of online retail work as equivalent to (women-coded) in-store retail work. Another possibility is that 'mostly women apply' given the product assortment at Homeware, that working in (online) retailing with selling utensils for cooking and baking would attract women. However, what Jenny says is interesting in relation to the comparisons that were made at Electronic. Both Vilma and Sofia described that people who apply for jobs at Electronic assume that it resembles work in other types of warehouses. Sofia stated that she has 'zero interest in those truck guys working in industrial warehouses' and when I asked why, she explained:

> I believe the service mind is important, given that our work is not very automated. If you have already been drilled into it [the service mind] in another job, then I think you could learn the other things, like attentiveness to details and multi-tasking. So, I feel like stores and restaurants, well that type of job, provide reasonable experiences in comparison to an industrial warehouse with trucks. That is if I don't come across anyone who seems super among the truck guys. Because we don't have trucks, although many imagine we do. (Sofia, Electronic)

In this section of the paper, we see contrasts between the (women) workers' descriptions of their work and their explanations of how others (men) would experience it. A love for goods handling was not the main reason why any of the women worked there. The repetitive characteristics of the tasks made it tiresome after some time, but workers were still motivated to work there as the social relations between coworkers made it fun. At the same time, the monotonous goods-handling was used by the workers as an explanation for why men would not stand this job. In the next section, I will elaborate on how not only the work tasks and workers but also the workplace matter for how women are considered ideal for online retail warehousing.

7 | THE WORKPLACE: (NOT) A WOMEN WORKPLACE

> I've received some funny reactions when I've interviewed some of those truck guys. I usually tell them like "Okay, now we're going down to the warehouse, it is not much bigger than this office" and "We're a lot of girls, we do not use trucks, it might look a bit different from what you imagine." And they're like "Yeah, yeah, sure" until they enter the warehouse and are like "Wow." (Sofia, Electronic)

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The numerical dominance of women interacts with the small size of these workplaces in (re)producing the spatiality of the warehouses. At Electronic, Sofia made comparisons between the online retail warehouse and 'industrial warehouses'—as she labeled them—in terms of the former containing women/no trucks and the latter containing men/trucks. At Homeware, comparisons were made between the online retail warehouse and retail stores. In the interview with the marketing assistants Julia and Karin, when discussing the numerical dominance of women workers, they expressed that they had not truly thought about it before. Julia laughed and said it might have been nice for Nils to have some men coworkers as the workplace sometimes resembles a 'chicken yard.' Karin compared it to her previous experience of working in women-dominated retail stores, where 'there are always some people who don't get along' (cf. Regnö, 2013) and Julia continued:

> I don't think Homeware is a typical women workplace if you consider what it could have been like.
>
> I agree with Julia.
>
> When there is a lot of complaining but no one does anything to improve it, you just sit in the lunchroom and complain about stuff. And when push comes to shove, and you have a Friday meeting about what is bad, then all is fine, then you say nothing. But that is not the case here. And that [the complaining] might not be a women's thing, I don't know, but I feel it could be sort of a women's thing. (Julia and Karin, Homeware)

The spatiality of the warehouses seemingly matters for the co-constructs of gender and work. Julia and Karin explained that the small size of their workplace—how they are 'close' to one another'—contributes to hindering the poisonous climate they imagine at other 'women workplaces.' Jenny expressed that the group dynamics at Homeware have fostered a social climate that makes the workplace a safe place and that they are 'like family.' Josefin similarly labeled her coworkers as siblings. Hanna, another one of the warehouse workers, also made the family analogy, and further explained that the workers have the same sense of humor:

> Something I have thought about is that they have two printed photos of "good-looking" guys on the wall above the packing tables. I find these photos interesting because they remind me so much of when, as a child, I went with my mom to the car repair shop and there were posters of half-naked women with silicone boobs. The guys in these photos were dressed. I asked Josefin who hung them up, and she told me it was Jenny who had put them there "as a motivation." (Field notes, Homeware)
>
> A little later, Hanna was kneeling in front of the packing table, I guess it was because she was going to pick something up from the cart, and Josefin said something like "There you are on your knees." Hanna replied, "I like to be down on my knees" and then said that it is her favorite weekend activity. Josefin laughed and stated that it was only Tuesday. It was clear to me that both were referring to sexual activities and Josefin said something along the lines of "and people believe men are the ones using rough language – they should only know what women are like." (Field notes, Homeware)

I interpret these accounts as jargon illustrating what Hanna meant when describing the joint humor at Homeware. The jargon—the printed photos of men on the wall, which were thought of as bringing 'motivation' to the women workers, and the implied reference to blow jobs in the conversation—can be understood as orientating the workers not only toward gender but also (hetero)sexuality. References to sexuality were reoccurring during my weeks of observing, where I overheard and participated in conversations about miscarriages, not wanting to have children, and menstruation; experiences that commonly bear heteronormative connotations to a 'female

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reproductive body' (Rydström, 2020; Sang et al., 2021). Although Nils had no issues with being a man in a group of women, he went back to work when such topics were brought up during lunch hours. The social relations between (women) workers were discussed at Electronic as well:

> I think it is very nice since... well, you feel a bit more comfortable maybe. I guess that it's not a given, but I feel like that, right now. And that might have to do with me liking everyone who works here, it might not only be because they are women. But I do find it nice that we are women only, because you can talk about anything [...] But, also, I would not have anything against a guy working here. (Vilma, Electronic)

Like Vilma, who reflected on the open, social climate being something linked to the numerical dominance of women, Lilly told me that 'once a guy joins the group, the atmosphere changes' and added that it 'does not apply to all guys, but to most of them who have been here.' It is interesting to note that Vilma and Lilly both talks about gender in binary terms. In how they note a bond between the women while also pointing out that there might be men who fit in the group, gender is ascribed relevance and irrelevance simultaneously. Here (binary) gender differences (between men are women) are seemingly argued to matter for the social atmosphere at the warehouse while also being considered nongeneralizable in any broader sense. Sofia relates to gender and work similarly:

> I feel like we will shoot ourselves in the foot if we continue with it for too long.
>
> What do you mean? What could be the downside of it?
>
> I think there's a huge downside to it. I really feel it is time to hire guys and not only a lot of white girls. To get a broader range of personalities, or backgrounds, because of course, you have different experiences. I think it can be good for various reasons. (Sofia, Electronic)

As previously discussed, Sofia argued that 'good girls' make good workers and 'truck guys' are out of place in the online retail warehouse space. Yet, as made visible in the quote above, Sofia wanted to hire more men (and non-white workers) as that would broaden the 'range of personalities' and 'experiences' in relation to the current women (and white workers') majority. In both these narratives, assumptions of men and women as different (perhaps even dichotomous) are implied.

8 | DISCUSSION

Spaces orientate bodies, meaning that bodies are moved in certain directions by the space; bodies whose direction aligns with other bodies/things are familiar bodies (Ahmed, 2006). Workspaces can be understood as orientating bodies to be in line with the specific work—*this is the work to be performed* > *these competencies and qualities are needed to perform it* > *this somebody meets those requirements*—and workers aligning with this direction will feel familiarity and be perceived as familiar at the workplace. Previous research suggests that workers who are in line with 'heavy' warehouse work have a body representing male masculinity, based on interrelated assumptions of heavy/light tasks and physically strong/less strong workers (Cockburn, 1985; Gruchmann et al., 2020; Gutelius, 2016; Reese, 2020). The present study nuance this. What appears central to who is desired at Homeware and Electronic is assumptions of men and women's different abilities to deal with the monotony and repetitiveness ascribed to the warehouse work. The online retail warehouse orientates bodies that do not blindly trust the shelf

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location given by the picking list and who manage thinking like Tetris in striving to make neat packages. A straight line follows: *manual small-goods handling in online retail warehousing > requires workers who are continuously service-minded and attentive to details > women, who are hard-working and driven by an underlying shame of doing wrong, meet these requirements*. Co-constructs of gender and work make the ideal worker a woman, in contrast to (perceptions of) less focused, more careless, and easily bored men. References to men workers performing truck-handling of larger goods in bulk at large-sized warehouses make clear that the online retail warehouse not only orientates women based on what is physically there, in the space, but also what is not.

How bodies are orientated, what direction they take, is decided by the 'background' (Ahmed, 2006). 'Capitalist spaces' orientate workers around a capitalist background (Vitry, 2020) and Homeware and Electronic orientate workers who are ideal for the online retail warehouse production and profit. The manager Sofia's labeling of the workers as 'good girls' and how workers appeared to relate to the same when talking about their work, contributes to my theorization in this regard. Homeware and Electronic orientate women as the warehouse spaces extends to 'good girls' whose direction aligns with the goods-handling. How 'good girls' are also identified in studies focusing on other fields of work (Mattsson, 2015; Regnö, 2013; Sjöstedt Landén, 2012) illustrates that 'good girls' are likely ideal for capitalism more generally (cf. Acker, 2006). While Mattsson (2015) found that the 'good girl' label made the women researchers appear 'hard-working' yet not '*too* good or *too* successful' (page 692, emphasis in original), the women in my study appeared less hesitant in positioning themselves as better than men. Their descriptions of men as less focused, more careless, and easily bored than the present women workforce (Sjöstedt Landén, 2012, make similar findings) are seemingly not based on beliefs of biologically determined gender differences. Still, such constructs contribute to stabilizing the gender binary, if yet in a social constructionist sense. The small size of Homeware and Electronic, and the numerical dominance of women, likely enabled the women's self-positioning as superior, in a way that would not have been possible in a larger warehouse with a higher quota of men managers and workers. Moreover, compared to Mattson's (2015) findings, it is possibly easier for the women warehouse workers at Homeware and Electronic to highlight their strengths, given that they do not compete against each other career wise in the same way as researchers in academia tend to do.

Homeware and Electronic orientate women in how they extend to 'good girls' and women aligning to this ideal can also extend into the space (cf. Ahmed, 2006). On the one hand, the 'good girl' is an expression of femininity in keeping with norms of productivity, which likely does not profit women as much as it profits capitalism (cf. Acker, 2006). On the other hand, the 'good girl' term was not used by the manager Sofia in a deprecatory way toward the workers (cf. Regnö, 2013). Sofia rather seemed to want to acknowledge the women's hard work. Different from Sjöstedt Landén (2012) and Regnö (2013) who found that 'good girls' were looked upon as a problem in that they were perceived as reinforcing unhealthy work ideals, my findings do not suggest that the women's work performance would be negative for the work environment. Everyone perceived it a positive thing to be a workplace with mostly women. This contributes to shifting the general focus on femininity as 'always and only tied to oppression, subordination, sexualization, and subjectification' (Dahl & Sundén, 2018: 270). Julia and Karin's description of 'a lot of complaining' as being general feature of 'women workplaces' (cf. Martinsson, 2006; Regnö, 2013) reflects such negative connotations to femininity—in how they ascribed it to other workplaces and in how they distanced Homeware from it. Yet, how workers 'can talk about anything' was explained by the numerical dominance of women and the social relations made them feel 'like family.' The sameness produced through how these spaces orientate women contributed to a collective identity that strengthened them. While such a collective identity could function as a marker of difference toward the company management (see Mattsson, 2015) I also believe that the small size of the warehouses contributes to blurring (the experiences of) organizational power relations.

Building further on the discussion of sameness, Homeware and Electronic can be understood as 'straight spaces' (Ahmed, 2006) in that workers are orientated around a heterosexual background. Here, my interest has not been on who is rendered queer(ed) but rather on the (re)production of the normative (cf. Doan, 2010;

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Riach & Wilson, 2014; Vitry, 2020). The 'good-looking guys' on the wall posters orientate (women) workers who desire men, and (women) workers who have a uterus will have a seat at the lunch table in that many of the conversations extend to them. Workers who do not desire men, or who do not have a body assigned female at birth, will be orientated in another direction by these spaces, as illustrated by Nils who leaves the lunch table when topics related to the 'female reproductive body' are brought up. However, although Nils is orientated differently than his women coworkers, he is seemingly not queer(ed) by the space. Despite turning away from the lunch table, in a different direction than the women workers sitting around it, Nils functions as a complement to them as well. In the task division between Nils, who spends his days reorganizing goods in the warehouse back, and Josefin, who unpacks incoming goods in the warehouse front, they are both orientated around a capitalist and heterosexual background holding that 'man and woman must work together as two different' and 'as part of a corporate marriage' (Martinsson, 2006: 139, translation from Swedish) to enhance productivity.

9 | CONCLUSION

Based on an understanding of warehousing as a male-coded field of work and a tendency for more women to be employed in *online retail* warehousing, this article has explored the organization of work in small-sized online retail warehouses numerically dominated by women. It has demonstrated that *the online retail warehouse orientates women as the 'ideal worker'* via *co-constructs of gender and work*. The manual small-goods handling asks for somebody who is consistently service-minded and attentive to details; this somebody is defined as a hard-working 'good girl' driven by a will to do right and an underlying shame of doing wrong. Second, *capitalism and heterosexuality make backgrounds for how bodies are orientated*. Online retail warehouses as a 'capitalist spaces' (cf. Vitry, 2020) orientate bodies in the direction of enhanced production and profit. A body 'in line' with the warehouse space is straight in being a 'good girl,' but the space also orientates bodies 'straight' in terms of sexuality (cf. Ahmed, 2006). The latter takes place in jargon where references are made to women-to-men desire and in conversations where the 'female reproductive body' is centered. To conclude, the warehouses are not gendered simply in that the work is associated with women and hence women are hired. The gendering has to do with these spaces extending to (certain) women via capitalism and heterosexuality, hence allowing (such) women to extend into the spaces as well. As such, these women workers are strengthened both in their professional identity and in their group belonging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, Kristina Johansson and Samuel Heimann, Luleå University of Technology, for providing feedback on the manuscript, and El Häkkinen, Malmö University, for your input on 'good girls' and femininity. Thank you, the anonymous reviewers for the useful comments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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How to cite this article: Rydström, Klara. 2024. "Good girls? Ideal workers in online retail warehousing." *Gender*, *Work & Organization*: 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13163.

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