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Getting It “Right”

Swedish organizations navigating gender and gender equality through a gender equality award

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Literature Review	6
Setting the stage: Women at Work	6
Historical Overview	6
The Business Case	7
Alternative Perspectives	10
Unpacking the Case	15
Contributions of our study	17
Methods	18
Paradigms guiding our research	18
Post-Structuralist Feminist Theory	18
Interpretative and Critical approaches to analysis	19
Methodological Approach	20
Sources of data	20
Recruitment and participant information	21
Interview design & procedures	21
Data Analysis	22
Steps in data analysis	22
Reflections	23
Analysis	24
Gender equality is a Brand	24
Gender Equality is a Moving Target	28
How Organizations "Do" Gender	31
Understandings of Gender Equality	32
Discussion	36
Conclusion	40
Acknowledgements	42
References	43
Articles	43
Books	46

Online sources	46
Attachments	47
Intervjuguide (Svenska)	47
Interview guide (English)	49

Abstract

This qualitative study takes an inductive approach towards the field of gender and gender equality work. The main aim of the study is to gain understandings of how companies who seek recognition for their gender equality practices use an award for gender equality and how they view the concepts of gender and gender equality. Our research draws from a poststructuralist feministic metatheoretical framework as we stress how reality is socially constructed and discursive fields dictate how we view gender and gendered relations. Drawing on interpretative and critical approaches, our data is approached in an open and explorative way. Our findings reveal that understandings of gender and gender equality work are shifting thus making these concepts ambiguous. As an attempt to make sense of them, companies create a branded identity as organizations “getting it right”. We suggest that future research elaborates on the relationship between branding and recognition seeking and also call for extended research on practical suggestions for “undoing” gender in organizations.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Equality, Branding, Benchmarking, Recognition Seeking, Awards, Business Case For Diversity

Introduction

Diversity in the workplace receives a great deal of scholarly and practical attention. The dominant view in Swedish society is that diversity is something to manage and that gender equality – often defined as achieving an equal number of men and women in an organization – is the goal. Despite a plethora of scholarly research, corporate diversity programs and governmental initiatives to equal the organizational playing field for women, several key problems still exist such as unequal pay and a lack of women represented in particular professions and in top management.

A key problem, as we see it, is how both scholars and practitioners tend to discuss the gender dilemma from a business case perspective. Viewing gender from the business case perspective suggests that organizations today move beyond the mere legislative aspect of gender equality, stressing the benefits of a diverse workforce that suggestively increases creativity and profitability for organizations, making diversity into a strategy. We argue that how scholars and practitioners frame diversity and its intended outcomes, such as team functioning, social justice or increased profits, will determine how diversity is actually “done” at work. In other words, when it comes to “doing” gender to create equality, one’s rationale makes a difference. We therefore explore how one’s rationale makes a difference by examining the phenomenon of corporate awards for gender equality. There are organizations and groups who grant awards to other organizations for doing good work, excelling at a task or “leading the pack.” It comes as no surprise, particularly given the growth of corporate branding, that organizations seek recognition as a strategic opportunity to communicate something positive about themselves. In fact, several awards are being granted for organizations who are “getting it right” when it comes to diversity management. In these cases, seeking recognition for good work can be seen as stemming from a business case philosophy where the purpose for good work might be intricately linked with strategic outcomes.

One of Sweden’s business magazines highlights Swedish commerce and enterprise by ranking companies and businesspeople according to various parameters and variables. One of their rankings caught our attention, as it aims to identify Sweden’s best workplaces, from a gender equal perspective. The aim of the award is to promote gender equality by recognizing organizational efforts that attempt to equalize the power imbalance between men and women.

Although a business case perspective and awards for diversity do bring the topic to the table, which is a necessary first step, it remains an empirical question how they guide understandings of gender and gender equality. Therefore, in this study we explore how organizations seeking recognition for “getting it right” understand gender and gender equality. We seek to shed light on these questions from a feminist perspective that aims to actively contribute to the gender equality debate in order to enhance equal opportunities in the work life.

At the heart of this study is our desire to add a dimension to the research field that asks why, given the myriad of solutions meant to engage the “diversity dilemmas,” does gender inequality remain. We realize that this is too broad an undertaking for one study. Therefore, we will root our inquiry in exploring gender and gendered understandings in organizations that are recognized for “getting it right.” Explicitly, our research questions guiding our study are:

How do organizations seeking recognition for their gender equality work use the award?

How do organizations seeking recognition for their gender equality work understand gender and gender equality?

In the following literature review we will explore current research framing the business case for diversity and how critical feminist scholars oppose this, in order to put this study into the context of the current research on gender equality. Furthermore, our methods chapter will explain how we approach our study, explaining how we are guided by theoretical paradigms such as post-structural feminist theory as well as interpretative and critical approaches. Our analysis presents our empirical findings that depict how our participants in this study use the award for branding purposes, and how their understandings of gender and gender equality seems to be a moving target for them to pursue. By discussing this from a feministic standpoint, we then critically review the implications of our findings. In the last chapter we conclude our findings, discuss implications and present our perspective on how to move forward in this debate addressing suggestions for both scholars and practitioners.

Literature Review

The purpose of our study is to gain understandings of how organizations view gender equality and gender and how they utilize an award for gender equality. The following chapter aims to present a comprehensive summary of the on-going debate on current research related to our study. This literature review therefore aims to map the area of research connected to recognition seeking and gender equality in organizations in order to determine how our study can fill any significant gaps that have not yet been highlighted in the current debate. Our research purpose calls for us to account for how gender relates to the phenomena of recognition seeking and how gender inequality is a modern problem. First, we focus primarily on research done on historical and current aspects of diversity and gender equality. Second, we turn to feminist, interpretative and critical theorists in order to explore aspects that the business case has ignored, for instance creating equal opportunities, power of discourses and socially constructed meanings. Then we introduce our case and conclude with our study's purpose and why we see this to be a relevant topic of study.

Setting the stage: Women at Work

The scholarly concepts of diversity, gender, gender equality and feminism are central to this research project and we would argue that it is important to clarify in what regard they are linked to each other and how they play a role in this study. In order to put this in to context, a socio-historical overview is necessary where we frame the issues surrounding gender equality.

Historical Overview

The gender equality concept is derived from women's liberation movement, the so called "first wave feminism". This first wave was based on a liberal feminism arguing for women's right to vote, which today has evolved into the postmodern feminism with multiple perspectives for instance radical, psychological, Marxist and poststructuralist, that has spread the idea of gender equality in to basically all societal institutions such as politics, education, research and working life (Calás & Smirchich in Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1996). The first waves' major achievements were the opening of higher education for women; reform of the girls' secondary-school system, including participation in formal national examinations and the widening of access to the professions (Calás & Smirchich in Clegg et al., 1996).

Society started to pay attention to gender equality in the workplace in the early 1960's. This period of time is known as the "second wave feminism". It recognized the domination of masculinity in society and therefore demanded the same opportunities and terms of compensation for men and women in the workplace (Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1996). At that time, the affirmative action view was used as the way to compensate injustice towards racial minorities, which in the 1970's developed into the so-called equal opportunities framework, which included gender, arguing for justice from a fairness and social responsibility standpoint (Rönnqvist, 2008). From an equal opportunities perspective, gender equality is important to achieve because gender inequalities mean pay gaps, underrepresentation of women in certain professions and make it difficult for women to make career progress (Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1996).

The Business Case

A decade later, these issues were often recognized in pair with diversity and became managed accordingly. In response to the problems stemming from a lack of gender diversity and equality in the workplace, several organizational and governmental programs were put in place, hence we see the emergence of Diversity Management. The concept was introduced in the 1980's as a way for organizations to make use of differences in order to create more dynamic workplaces (Roosevelt, 1990). Diversity management is also known as "The business case for diversity" and it soon became a popular perspective in management practice and management research and its benefits have been widely debated as well as celebrated (Sippola & Smale, 2007). The diversity concept was born in the U.S and is therefore more widely spread in North America than in Europe. In the early nineties the concept of diversity was introduced in Sweden and translated in to "mångfald", a translation that differs slightly from the English term, which is closely related to the synonym "difference" (Rönnqvist, 2008). At this point in time, when the diversity concept was introduced in Sweden, the concept of gender equality was already claiming ground within Swedish organizations. By the early 2000's, the Swedish diversity concept, strongly influenced by diversity management theories had to a large extent taken the place of the gender equality concept in organizations as the way to go about gender equality work (Rönnqvist, 2008).

Ever since gender equality legislation has required organizations to consider gender discrimination, organizations have been trying to make gender initiatives into something

beneficial. Therefore, a “bottom line” mentality now values diversity if it proves to be beneficial, i.e. profitable to the organization (Rönqvist, 2008). In response, organizations moved quickly beyond the mere legislative aspects of diversity management and started to realize that doing good gender equality work acknowledges wins to gain in several areas, both organizational and strategic. The business case therefore concludes that managing diversity can and should provide a competitive advantage for organizations (Graeme, 2009; O’Leary & Weathington, 2006;). The business case for diversity is a widely used concept, not only by practitioners but also among research scholars. As Robinson and Denchant (1997) points out: “The bottom-line focus of today's business environment requires that diversity initiatives be treated like any other business investment” (1997:30). Cost savings, talent recruitment and business growth are some of the incentives mentioned by Robinson & Dechant (1997). Hutchings and Thomas (2005) argue that it also offers a better understanding of the market and increases creativity. A specific focus on women as a variable of the business case for diversity has caused researchers and practitioners to re-direct their challenges. They argue that a company investing money and time in training for women has certain business interests in keeping them (Nentwich, 2006; Reskin, McBrier & Kmec, 1999; Rubin, 1997).

However, managing diversity recognizes difficulties. Even scholars that align with the business perspective acknowledge that practitioners do not always use it properly. O’Leary and Weathington (2006) argue that the issue is not whether or not diversity management is useful but to understand how to work with it. As stated by Perrinton (2009), “The business case discourse has been an established part of organizational life for many years, but that does not mean that those who use it understand it” (2009:221). Harrison, Price and Bell (1998) discuss two kinds of diversity; the surface-level and the deep-level. Surface-level diversity can be equated with demographics and deep-level diversity with attitudes and values. Organizations tend to focus on the surface-level, relying on statistics to demonstrate their commitment to fostering the diverse workforce (O’Leary & Weathington, 2006). While there is seemingly nothing wrong with focusing on statistics and it gives the appearance of being a win-win situation for both organizations and employees, this is not the case (Harrison et al., 1998).

In the most recent 2010 ranking by World Economic Forum, Sweden lists as number four¹. Today sex segregation on a horizontal, as well as a vertical level still exists in Sweden. This

¹ <http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-gender-gap>

can be witnessed in so called gender labeled professions, i.e. glass walls, which shape common beliefs that certain professions are gendered, for instance there is still a majority of women working within healthcare and likewise, technical professions are male dominated. The sex segregation on a vertical level realizes the absence of women in top management positions, which by scholars and researchers is referred to as the glass ceilings (Kanter, 1977; Meyerson & Fletscher, 2000).

Opposing the benefits of diversity acknowledged by the business case is the research by Kochan, Bezruka, Ely, Jackson, Josh, Jehn, Leonard, Levine & Thomas (2003) on gender based and ethnic diversity. They found that “there were few direct effects of diversity on performance -neither positive nor negative” (2003:17). This is also in line with findings from Jackson, Joshi and Erhardt (2003) who conducted a SWOT analysis on recent studies regarding team and organizational diversity. It shows that HR practices might contribute to, rather than challenge, the gendering processes within organizations that give rise to gender inequalities”. An additional critique towards voluntary initiatives on gender equality in organizations stems from different aspects and from different directions. Eriksson-Zetterqvist and Styhre (2008) are skeptical towards intervention programs in general by stating that they tend to fail to recognize the difference between action and reflection. According to Eriksson-Zetterqvist and Styhre (2008) the heterogeneous groups of participants in these programs focus their time on communication in order to develop a mutual understanding, which detaches the program from day-to-day work, hence inhibiting the possibility for action.

Gender inequality in the workplace still exists despite being a major initiative in organizations for many years. We can see that despite numerous action plans, legislations, projects, etc, statistics still shows that inequality between sexes remains in Swedish organizations (For instance, women’s wages are still only 85 % of their male counterparts in the public sector, 87% respectively in the private sector²).

From a critical standpoint this suggests that the business case for diversity does not hold much, if any, emancipatory influence and but rather reproduces the discriminatory social structures it appears to oppose (Omanovic’, 2009). Scholars critical of the business case argue that in order for organizations to make a meaningful change e.g., transformational change, their diversity work is going to have to go beyond demographic statistics and include

² http://www.scb.se/statistik/_publikationer/LE0201_2010A01_BR_X10BR1001.pdf

significant attitudinal changes (Omanovic', 2009). This is however also in line with business case friendly scholars that say "the call to become a more diverse organization is an exercise in organizational change" (O'Leary & Weathington, 2006:288). Perriton (2009) takes a critical look at the business case for diversity discourse and concludes, "Its use can only maintain, not challenge, existing inequalities" (2009:220). Hoobler (2005) argues that many organizations pay lip service to multiculturalism and states that "diversity initiatives amount to surface aesthetics, with little if any chance of addressing significant issues of power and discrimination" (2005:54).

In order to put the business case for diversity in organizations in a different light we turn to outline how a more critical feminist perspective views gender and gender equality in organizations. Feminist research on gender inequality suggests alternative actions such as an alternative approach to gender as the way to achieve gender equality (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson & Kolb 2000; Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Gender equality has been a traditional issue on the feministic agenda with a main aim to create equal opportunities for women in society in general (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). Supported by their legislative rights, women have made progress, however slow, in terms of entering the workplace. Literature has conversely witnessed a shift in interest; what is in the best interest of females is no longer regarded and approached as an isolated feminist issue, in contrary, what's best for women is best for the organization as a whole. Research emphasizes that an increase of women in business will positively affect the business performance (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Rutherford, 1999).

Alternative Perspectives

Looking at gender equality from a critical perspective requires a look at discursive practices since they shape power structures (Foucault, 1993). Hardy and Phillips (2004) define discourses as "structured collections of texts, and associated practices of textual production, transmission and consumption, located in a historical and social context". Discourse is what shapes our understanding of what we experience (Parker, 1992). Hardy and Phillips (2004) argue that discourses not only describe the social world but uses categorization to make sense of an otherwise meaningless reality. Butler (2004) aligns with the foregrounding research of Foucault (1993), which accounts for the poststructuralist and discursive approach that also views gender as a practice. According to that approach, gender is seen as constructed through discourse (Kelan, 2010). Butler further (2004) stresses that gender is linked to a desire of

being recognized as a human being which highlights the crucial aspect of gender-orientated behavior in order for individuals to make meaning of their own existence. Butler (2004) argues the need for individuals to be readable within the norm, in order to be given the right to exist. Hence, being readable aligns with the discursive approach to gender logic suggesting that discourses influence and ‘create’ subjects (Butler, 2004).

Social construction of reality is the idea that people create meaning from interaction and that it is constantly reproduced (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This poststructuralist theory about meaning construction is central to gender and diversity research. The concepts of gender and diversity are not static truths; they are socially constructed phenomena (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Acker (2004) argues “gender is neither an essential attribute of individuals nor a constant in social life, but consists of material and symbolic aspects of existence, constantly produced and reproduced in the course of on-going social activities and practices” (2004:20). When these perspectives are taken into account scholars have been able to suggest alternatives to the business case. In order to understand these alternative solutions to gender inequality we will look at what the business case suggestively ignore.

Researchers and scholars who challenge the business case for diversity are skeptical because they argue that gender is difficult to manage. They argue that gender is as much ambiguous as it is shifting (Pechter, 2001; Powell, Bagilhole & Dainty, 2009). Within the field of gender studies in general, researchers account for the concept of gender logic. In sum, it implies that gender itself exists and applies to the concepts of sex and sex category (Kelan, 2010; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The former determines gender from a biological perspective generating a binary division. Sex category has created on-going discussions on identification of persons as either male or female. This adds complexity to determining gender, as gender is determined as the outcome of activities where individuals seek to manage situated behavior suitable for one owns sex category (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

West & Zimmerman (1987) broke new ground when publishing their article “Doing Gender”, as it is arguably one of the most important writings in the contemporary field of gender studies. According to them, gender should not be considered as a set of certain traits, roles or variables; it is constituted through social actions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, it acts as a rationale for various social arrangements and legitimizes essential divisions in society (Hancock & Tyler, 2007; Kelan 2010; Pechter 2001; Powell et al 2009; West & Zimmerman

1987). This social dimension relies on the general assumption that people choose to acknowledge existing norms by maintaining them (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Kelan (2010) places emphasis on gender not being a property of a person but a process which people enact in everyday life. However, West & Zimmerman (1987) argue that people are already categorized by sex when they do gender, therefore individuals act as agents who structure their behavior in order to express gender. The process of “doing gender” is an on-going emergent aspect of social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This suggests that individuals act with an awareness of recurrently being judged according to what is considered appropriate feminine or masculine behavior, which Kelan (2010) describes as the two-folded logic of gender from which social frameworks and contexts are created. Gender acknowledges accountable activities, which are placed within a social framework making them relative to the “other”, hence social members adjust to the fact that their doings are subject to comment. (Pechter, 2001) Gender actions are thus schemed in order to their accountability – how they might look and be characterized by others (Deutsch, 2007; Kelan, 2010). Research on gender in organizations has found how gender is reproduced in organizations, which only reinforces a commitment to conceptualizations of gender as a social practice (Alvesson, 1998; Czarniawska, 2006; Poggio 2006; Gherardi, 1994).

West & Zimmerman (1987) argue that “doing” gender is something unavoidable, so if “having” a certain gender is subject to social practices and contexts, than managing gender ought to look into how this practice is done, respectively how it could be possibly be “undone” (Kelan, 2010). If gender is a mechanism through which ideas of masculinity and femininity are produced and naturalized, then doing gender might as well be the device for undoing it (Hancock & Tyler, 2007; Kelan, 2010). Undoing gender therefore also stresses the impact of the social context and ethnomethodologists suggest that the “undoing” will occur when gender ceases its relevance within these social contexts (Kelan, 2010). However, when individuals attempt to forget gender or deconstruct its importance, research claims that this controversially is an act of reinforcing gender (Kelan, 2010). Poggio (2006) argues that it is empirically and theoretically difficult to imagine a society where gender has lost its importance in social interactions. Pechter (2001) & Kelan (2010) add that gender is not a given, it is a performance and we demonstrate our gender identity by the playing out of gender roles, which are learned – usually unconsciously. A poststructuralist approach to undoing gender would argue in favor of destabilizing gender by discursively enacting multiple forms of masculinities and femininities that would create “gender trouble” (Kelan,

2010). Deutsch (2007) concludes that “the language we use shapes what our minds are drawn to” (2007:122) Therefore she suggests to replace the phrase “doing gender” as a referral to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and instead use the phrase “undoing gender” to refer so social interactions that reduce gender differences, thus reducing gender inequalities (Deutsch, 2007).

However, “undoing” gender is not without difficulties. This is elaborated by Powell et al. (2009) as they introduce the concept of “dualism”. Dualism focuses on gender differences and similarities in relation to “undoing” gender and recognizes that gender is not economic, psychological nor biological. Elements that shape differences between men and women come from the fact that “woman” is socially constructed as “other” (Kugelberg, 2006). This is a binary positioning and according to Korvajärvi (1998) and Gherardi (1994) the interdependence of terms is tiered. It is considered to be a trap by a process of dual opposition whereby what is supported by one term is disaffirmed by the other Korvajärvi (1998). By “undoing” gender in a good way it is argued to simultaneously be “undone” in a bad way. Thus, “undoing gender” can easily become an act to ‘fit in’, which is an act of assimilation that reinforces rather than challenges the dominance of the majority group (Kanter, 1977; Pullen & Knights, 2008).

According to scholars in this area of gender studies, on-going work in organizations is still limited and will not offer sustainable solutions for keeping women and ensuring their career progress (Acker, 2000; Nentwich, 2006; Reskin et al.,1999; Rubin, 1997; Rutherford, 1999; Powell, 1987). We therefore move beyond aspects of gender as a trait or practice and explore what gender work currently looks like and the solutions that gender equality work at hand imply.

Research made by Ely & Meyerson (2000) presents an intervention strategy for changing gender relations in organizations. They offer a thorough account for how relationships between men and women have changed in the workplace as they introduce the process of assimilation which women have been subject to. Frames such as “fix the women” and “value the feminine” imply the stable binary of the gendered workplace and suggests that women lack certain skills and know-how, or that women’s skills are not valued as they are not recognized (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). These considerations, they argue, have remained unquestioned in discourses on equal opportunities. Therefore equal opportunity work has for long used these frames as a point of departure, thus re-enforcing debates around equality and

difference (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Rubin (1997) suggest that in order to move beyond these discussions, organizations need to challenge dichotomous thinking about gender arguing that treating gender as a difference that can be overcome through superficial changes will not ensure women's progress and gender equality. Rubin (1997) as well as Ely & Meyerson (2000) call for a longer agenda, to move beyond the debate about women's sameness or difference from men, including deeper understanding of organizational positions, structures, and practices, and as mentioned – revealing the surface to deal with the core where changes can take shape.

Rutherford (1999) underlines that the case for most organizations is how they once were built; by men and for men. The hegemonic masculinity is the dominant discourse at work and has created a certain norm (Rutherford, 1999). Women's problems have for long been treated as individual difficulties rather than organizational issues, arguing that it was the job, not the men, that made working life difficult for women. Rutherford (1999) further argue that even if discourses promoting equal opportunities are present, top management still heavily controls the practices in place. Rubin (1997) underlines that the danger of a business case approach is that problems can always be individualized, and as such, more easily managed by top management. Rutherford's (1999) findings show that within organizations that have adopted equal opportunities policies, employees are more aware of gender issues. However, the issues themselves remain to a great extent unresolved and companies are not doing enough to create pro-woman culture by just promoting equal opportunities through established gender equality policies (Rutherford, 1999). Rutherford (1999) suggest that women's articulation of gender issues act according to the discourses available, suggesting that women are more able to express their needs in an organization highlighting equal opportunity. An equal opportunity policy does not necessarily imply that opportunities are equal, but that it encourages women to discuss their needs (Rutherford, 1999). Equal opportunity discourses imply the liberal values of equality, working to develop a moral tone of should and ought (Rutherford, 1999). This tone can be espoused by both men and women (Rutherford, 1999). Nentwich (2006) as well as Barry and Elmes (1997) further emphasizes the importance of a discourse-oriented solution for gender equality work. Rutherford's perspective relates to the equal opportunity dilemma in relation to how organizations treat sameness and difference. Rutherford (1999) suggests that by executing equal opportunity practices, it only reinforces the need for them. Rutherford (1999) argues that by using discursive repertoires such as sameness, difference and deconstruction, organizations can construct and sustain gender equality. In addition,

Meyerson & Fletcher (2000) suggest a strategy referred to as small wins. Their research focuses on issues regarding the glass-ceiling that for years has illustrated women's struggle to climb the career-ladder. They suggest that it can be shattered by using a strategy aimed at biases so entrenched in the system that they are not noticed until they are gone. The strategy creates change through diagnosis and dialogue; again the emphasis on discourse is highlighted (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000).

Showing that there are different perspectives on gender equality and how to achieve it, the aspect of measurement through a gender equality ranking and award becomes relevant. As we continue to explore why gender inequalities still exist we will do so through the lens of an award for gender equality. This award is interesting because it is seen as a critical evaluation of organizations that actively work with gender equality, yet the award is still confined to the context in which the organizations operate. With the literature on gender equality in mind, we here present the facts about the gender equality award and relate it to research on rankings and awards.

Unpacking the Case

The award is organized by a Swedish business magazine which publishes weekly issues along with their 24 hour online magazine. They update their readers on business related issues as well as organize various awards according to current business themes in order to highlight best-practices within Swedish enterprise.

The award that has guided our study is named "Sweden's best workplaces – from a gender equal perspective" which is distributed on an annual basis since 2009. Historically the creation of the award was influenced by the contemporary magazine Working Mother³, an American periodical reflecting various aspects of work life balance with an aim to draw attention to issues that encourage corporate boards and committees to recognize the current circumstances in which women are struggling to perform; both at work and at home.

Companies who are concerned by getting the award will register their interest to the award organizer at the Swedish magazine. The following step is for the participants (mainly HR employees) to fill out an extensive survey, which requires large amounts of information in a wide range of areas. Parental leave figures, salary spreads, number of males and females in management positions are some of the areas of which the award organizer requires

³ www.workingmother.com

information on in order to conduct an evaluative comparison. Once the award organizer has compiled the data and conducted an analysis, the following procedure is to nominate those companies who meet minimum requirements. During 2010, 150 companies applied for the award and 40 were nominated. Amongst the nominees five large, respectively five small companies were awarded “Sweden’s best workplace – from a gender equal perspective”.

According to the award administrator at the magazine, the award’s aim is to promote gender equality by recognizing organizational efforts that attempt to equalize the power imbalance between men and women. The award determinants are considered by the award administrator to be unique compared to other gender equality appraisals. For instance, the award administrator noted:

It is extremely comprehensive and measures the metrics that are not measured in regular surveys. Very often you are just counting heads and you look at the median wages and you look at the spread and so on. I look at power, I am most interested in interested in how many are top earners, and who reports directly to the CEO, or other benefits such as golden parachutes and special health insurance, company cars and things like that. Things that are never included in regular wage surveys, it is always left out but it’s those things that give the overall impression of how they value competence within the company.

For the companies who wish to discuss the results of the application after the award has been handed out, the award administrator at the magazine offers a broad evaluation if requested. In the evaluation, the award administrator aim to locate and follow up problem areas and help out by providing guidance in order to improve gender equality in the participating organization. We would like to note that most companies do not utilize this offer according to the award administrator.

Measuring gender equality through surveys is criticized by Alvesson and Billing (2002) as body counting. In addition, Heckl, Enichlmair and Pecher (2010) question the impact that diversity awards in general has on the effectiveness of voluntary initiatives within European organizations. According to them, comparative assessments through awards and rankings primarily work as an instrument to recognize already made efforts with minimal risk involved for the participating companies (Heckl et al., 2010). They further argue that although rankings are based on “hard facts”, i. e. measurable outcome, it can overlook processes and development. They therefore conclude that gender equality rankings functions as a monitoring tool towards other companies in the industry (Heckl et al., 2010). Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly

(2006) conducted a study on the evaluation of practices of corporate affirmative action and diversity plans. Their research found that diversity training and diversity evaluation were least effective, followed by mentoring and networking that showed mediocre effect. They further found that initiatives that were set to establish responsibility for diversity in organizations were most effective in terms of increasing diversity at managerial level and in addition increased the impact of following diversity training programs (Kalev et al., 2006).

With the critical research of Alvesson and Billing (2002), Heckl et al. (2010) and Kalev et al. (2006) in mind, we continue to further explore how the participants in this study use recognition seeking for gender equality.

Contributions of our study

As shown by the literature review, significant amount of research has previously been done on how to manage and understand gender, gender equality and diversity. The research on voluntary initiatives for gender equality focuses on the effectiveness of them and argues either in favor or against these initiatives based on its effectiveness. Critical research on gender equality work and diversity management states that inequality in organizations remain in spite of the efforts made through plans, programs, rankings and awards since it tends to ignore the gendered power structures in place.

All of the organizations that have participated in this study have actively sought recognition for their gender equality work by applying for the award of becoming Sweden's most gender equal workplace. We would argue that the understanding of gender equality in organizations ultimately affects the strategic decision making of initiatives towards achieving gender equality. Our main objective is to find out how Swedish organizations use the award and how they understand gender and gender equality. This will provide an additional dimension to the research on gender equality work and hopefully contribute with an additional perspective on the possible reasons why ineffective gender equality initiatives remains within Swedish organizations.

Methods

This qualitative interview-based study explores how organizations seeking recognition for their gender equality work view gender and gender equality. Part of this exploration focuses on organizational member's purposes (motivation and desired outcomes) for seeking this recognition. This chapter is primarily concerned with outlining both our metatheoretical starting points and our actual methodological procedures. Therefore, we will start off by outlining the feminist, interpretive and critical paradigms guiding our research. Next we turn to our methodological procedures including interviews as our primary source of data, recruitment and participants, and data analysis. Finally, and with a focus on feminist research, we end by reflecting upon how our research matches our feminist aims as well as concluding with some critical remarks regarding the limitations of our study and elements of our methodological approach.

Paradigms guiding our research

We are conducting a feminist research study where feminist theory is the primary guiding framework. Within this framework we invoke both an interpretative and a critical understanding, thus our analysis will draw on both an interpretative perspective as well as a critical perspective on our empirical findings. In the following section we will explain how these perspectives are understood by us, how they can be linked together and how they influence our analysis.

Post-Structuralist Feminist Theory

Within the field of feminist theory there are multiple feminist approaches such as liberal, radical post structural, Marxist etc. (Calás & Smircich, in Clegg, Hardy and Nord 1996). As we are students writing in a post-structuralist influenced field of organizational studies, we are influenced by the notion that reality is socially constructed and discursive fields dictate how we view gender and gendered relations. Hence our feminist approach to this research project takes a post-structuralist direction. The current constructions of gender often marginalize women and femininity and this leads to the production of subjectivities which men and women must navigate (Reinharz, 1992). Post-structural feminism views sex and gender as discursive practices that constitute specific subjectivities through power and resistance in the materiality of human bodies (Reinharz, 1992.) Post-structuralist feminism regards language as

a way to systemize differences and it further demonstrates the instability of language as a representational form (Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1996). Therefore, it focuses on the discursive nature of a social reality. Emphasis is placed on language as a system of differences allowing the questioning of limits imposed upon 'knowledge' by certain privileged discourses. The post-structuralist feminist approach permits the articulation of 'politics and knowledge' which attempts to naturalize a system of exclusion for subjected position, for instance sex and gender (Clegg et al., 1996) The post-structural feminist approach offers a more pluralistic view of political engagement, where gender is one of many topics. Therefore, it stresses the acknowledgement of complex views of social location and structures of oppression (Clegg et al., 1996).

When studying organizational life, feminist theory aims to uncover apparent gendered structures, as well as determine the actual meanings of work and performance, regardless of gender or biological sex (Bryman, 2002; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Therefore, an acknowledgement of gender based structures and the dominance of masculinity in organizations will influence the analysis in this research project. A feminist perspective focuses on creating equal opportunities and uncovering the structural barriers to women's recruitment and management (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Hence, feminist research aims to create social change (Reinharz, 1992), which is in line with our decision of choosing gender equality awards for our study. Feminist research lends itself to be combined with multiple research methods depending on what purpose the research holds and lets the subject matter lead the method in order to answer the research question. It is important to point out that feminist research is a perspective that is guided by feminist theory and not a method (Reinharz, 1992). Other significant characteristics of feminist research are that it frequently involves the researcher as a person and tries to develop a more personal relationship to the informants in the study. Feminist research can often stem from the researchers own experiences or concerns (Reinharz, 1992).

Interpretative and Critical approaches to analysis

Chaffee (1985) discusses an interpretive idea of strategy, which suggests that organizational members interpret situations based on contextual, historical, social and political beliefs, hence organizational strategies are shaped through these 'interpretations' or understandings. An interpretative approach would argue that in order to understand strategies in organizations, one need to understand the particular understandings/interpretations of the actors within the

organization (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). We use an interpretative approach since we seek to explore understandings of gender equality in organizations that shapes strategic gender equality work. We think that an interpretative approach can be combined with a more critical approach in order to not just explore understandings but also add an acknowledgement to discourse that we believe shapes these understandings.

Critical theory understands reality as a social phenomenon and is suspicious to it. What seems self-evident should be questioned and problematized (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Critical theorists' primary goal is to understand and to overcome structures in society through which they believe people are dominated (Bryman, 2002). Aligning with our feministic stance, critical theory recognizes hidden meanings of dominance and it seeks to uncover prevalent biases, concepts and understandings which are regarded as suppressing (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Heracleous (2003) states,

Dominating strategic management approaches (...) tend to neglect social and organizational factors in the strategy process. In particular, the role of human agency, as well as the organizational paradigm within which strategic decisions and actions take place, are rarely seriously analyzed (2003:19).

By using a framework that combines an interpretative and a critical perspective to our study it enables us to look at the strategic decision making of the dominant coalition which sets the framework in which gender equality strategies are constructed (Heracleous, 2003). Critical theory is useful for our study as it clarifies relationships between empirically given social conditions and historical, political and social contexts (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; El-Sawad, Arnold & Cohen, 2004). By adding critical theory to our framework we allow ourselves to dig deeper in the understandings of strategic gender equality work and its consequences for gender equality in organizations.

Methodological Approach

Since our study seeks to explore understandings we used an inductive approach. In contrast to the deductive approach that aims to confirm/falsify a hypothesis, the inductive approach sets out to find patterns that can be related to and discussed with theory in order to provide a deeper understanding of phenomena (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000).

Sources of data

We conducted nine interviews with employees from six different companies that either were awarded the title of most Gender Equal Workplace or nominated for it. All interviews were conducted at the company's headquarters and took approximately 60 minutes each. One company requested that two employees were to be interviewed jointly. In addition to the awardees, one interview was conducted with the award-granting magazine to better understand the intended purpose of the award.

Recruitment and participant information

For this award, 40 companies were ranked (out of 150 that applied) and hence nominated for an award for best gender equal workplace. Our selection of candidates was made by contacting 31 of the companies (the ones that we were able to find an address for) by email, explaining our research proposal. We requested interviews with two-three personnel who had been involved in applying for the award or have an active role in other aspects of their gender equality work. Emails were sent directly to the human resource departments or, if we were not able to find a direct email address, we sent it to the general "info" mailbox. Additional phone-calls were made to some of the companies upon their request, in order to clarify any questions about the research purpose and the actual procedure of the interview. Out of the 40 companies that received the award nomination, 31 were contacted. We received a "no" from ten. We received 12 positive responses but we were not able to conduct interviews with all of the accepting organizations due to reasons outside of our control (e.g., time constraints, location of offices and lack of monetary support). Nine companies did not respond to our request.

Our selection of organizations all have the award in common, although they are found in a wide range of industries, namely: Dairy production, clothing/retail, pharmaceutical, beverage, financial/consulting and automotive. We interviewed nine organizational members, eight females and one male. Four of the interviewees were human resources managers; three were human resources generalists, one was a workplace environment specialist and one was a quality control manager. The participants that had not been active in applying for the award were all chosen by their HR managers as supplemental people to interview who had some role in the organization's gender equality work, such as a leadership role in the women's network. We also conducted an interview with the woman in charge of the award at the magazine.

Interview design & procedures

Interviews were conducted in both Swedish and English. We conducted most of the interviews in the interviewee's native language in order to acquire the richest data (Alvesson

& Sköldbberg, 2000). However, three interviews were conducted in English. Two of them took place at an organization where the working language of the organization is English and the last one was conducted in English only because one of the researchers conducting the interview is only English-speaking. The interviews were semi-structured in order for us to obtain richer data while still providing us with a structure (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). We received verbal consent from all the participants to audio record the interviews.

Out of the nine interviews, seven were conducted with two researchers present at the same time. Our main aim was to have at least two researchers present during the interviews. We believe that by having two researchers present it would enable us to reassure that all questions were asked without disturbing the flow of the interview, to gain as rich data as possible. Further, it would allow the researchers to reflect during the interview and ask additional questions. Due to circumstantial limitations only one researcher conducted the interview with the award giving organization as well as one of the interviews with a nominated organization. To start of the interviews, the questions evolved around the interviewee's position within the organization; to clarify in what way they were involved in the application process for the award or working with other areas of gender equality. The questions further looked in to understand the organizations view on gender and gender equality by asking them about routines and procedures involved in their daily work lives.

Data Analysis

This section will explain how we analyzed the data from the interviews and give reflections on how we used our theoretical frameworks in the analysis process.

Steps in data analysis

First, our interview audio recordings were transcribed in their entirety. Transcriptions were then printed on different colored paper, each color representing one interviewee. This was later followed by us each reading through the interviews. The six interviews that were in Swedish were verbally translated for the non-Swedish speaking researcher and later translated in Google translate for quick reference for the non-Swedish speaker.

In order to construct our overall story we had an interpretative approach when analyzing our data. This meant that no answers to any specific question were looked for, but rather patterns in our data. This made the analysis of our data in to a circular process of reading, analyzing, grouping data together, re-reading it and re-grouping the data. We went through several drafts of how to organize this data from the themes that stood out to us. Different "sign posts" were

created from these themes, starting with the way organizations understand gender, their gender equality work and how they use the gender equality award. Through the process of cutting out the different quotations regarding these different “sign posts” we started to make sense of the data. We then looked at the transcripts in their entirety again, which revealed the data in a new light. We were now reading specifically for new themes, contradictions and richer stories. This additional examination brought us closer to our data and thus we were able to draw different conclusions and new “sign posts”. From this point we chose quotations and edited them for readability, omitting placeholders (e.g. um, huh), correcting grammar and translating Swedish quotations to English, followed by writing the story that we wish to present.

Reflections

We have processed our data in a way that the story we tell aims to highlight the important area of gender inequity which is in line with the feminist researchers agenda of conducting research to impose change. By acknowledging power structures and discourses from a critical lens in our analysis, we allow ourselves to dig deeper into the contradictions surrounding gender inequality. Because we approach the data from an interpretative approach combined with a critical approach we try to show reflexivity, which we believe is important as feminist researchers in order to not get trapped in to one mindset. By revising our data several times we have tried to avoid being critical for the sake of being critical, but rather shed light on an important topic that has implications for peoples’ opportunities in working life.

Due to time constraints, combined with access, we conducted nine interviews. However, due to the aim of our study, we do not strive to reach a state of saturation, as we are not looking to generalize our findings. Rather, we aim to point out the multiplicity surrounding understandings on gender equality in organizations. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out that a greater amount of data could have refined our findings in terms of pointing out the ambiguous reasoning behind recognition seeking for gender equality in organizations.

Analysis

Our study was undertaken because of the obvious but perhaps often ignored fact that, despite all the research and initiatives to eradicate gender inequality, it remains an issue. Our interest in this project is rooted in feminist theoretical concerns and stems from the practical, frequently highlighted, issues surrounding a lack of women in top management, on boards of directors, etc. During our initial discussion and research around these topics, an award for the most gender equal workplace caught our eye and became the starting point for our study.

We anticipate that looking at understandings of gender and gender equality through the lens of seeking an award will allow us to study how award nominees navigate gender and gender equality in organizations. We also seek to understand how these organizations use an award for gender equality. Furthermore, we hope this examination sheds some light on why gender inequality is still a problem. Theoretically, these are the organizations that are “getting it right.” However, given the fact that gender inequality remains, even in some of these organizations, and that organizations often seek recognition in general for branding or advertising reasons, it is important to critically explore the context of awards for how they shape change initiatives.

In this chapter we will explore two main findings. Our first finding claims that when organizations seek recognition for gender equality they may be doing so to use it for branding, rather than social justice reasons. In other words, gender equality becomes a brand. We find it interesting to explore this finding in connection to the question of why gender inequality still exists. Making gender equality a part of their brand, these organizations demonstrate a strategic interest in controlling how gender and gender equality is viewed. Our second major finding argues that the organizations’ understanding of gender equality and gender fluctuates, making the pursuit of gender equality a moving target.

Gender equality is a Brand

Our first finding suggests that organizations seeking recognition for gender equality do so, in part, to build their brand. We argue this by showing how our participants explicitly or implicitly use the award nomination in various ways in order to strengthen their own or the organization’s identity as someone that are “getting it right”. We identify several examples

that help illustrate how organizations seek to use recognition for external validation and to keep up with the competition.

The participants below (HR managers, generalists and other organizational members who were involved in applying for the award) show the confidence these organizations have in the award and the award organizers' ability to accurately evaluate their work. They appear to feel assured of the quality of their work because someone external to the organization is judging them. One manager explains, "We did it because we thought it would be interesting to see what it really looks like (...) from an outside perspective." And another notes that, "It's always good to let someone external to do it." The "objectivity" of the award is understood as an assurance that they are doing the "right" work and potentially that their gender equality work is complete.

Our findings suggest that seeking recognition for diversity work is often a way to gain external "weight" that can then be used as part of building a "diverse" or "gender equal" brand. This external weight allows for various claims to be made, such as: this is a good place to work. The most obvious advantage to receiving recognition for being a gender equal workplace includes benefits to recruitment and suggests adherence to claims of morality. One case of this is illustrated by the following comment: "These awards are fantastic for us. We usually include them when we advertise. It makes us as an attractive employer." Another manager remarked, "I am part of the ones that enters the information and try to bring up information simply so that we can show how good we are in these areas, how attractive we are as an employer." These examples account for the award's central use: the external classification as an organization doing good work. This is further exemplified by another participant explaining it by stating:

We want to communicate to the world that (the company name) is working with the issue and what we stand for. We are, for example, participating in Diversity Challenge (another Swedish diversity competition) partly because we believe in giving attention to those issues and we feel that it's really important that people know what (the company name) stands for.

The quote above also signals that "believing" in diversity is only a part of why they work with gender equality, the other incentive seems to be that it is important that outsiders know what

the company stands for: their values. In that sense, being gender equal is about having the “right” or “good” values. As one participant from the female dominated organization affirms:

It (the award) is a motivating factor, I think, in order to continue working with these issues in a positive way. It's always nice to receive a prize; you want to be the best. There are certainly companies that are really super talented, but nevertheless we have been given attention for our good work, that we are very, very talented.

Furthermore, another manager blatantly verifies this view, “It is clear that our work on gender equality is a piece of the puzzle to our company brand.” Again these reasons reaffirm our finding that gender equality is considered good for business. The actual benefit diversity has on the organization’s bottom line is debated by scholars, yet as the above demonstrates, it is regarded as an influential force to create profit through branding.

Beyond seeking and using external validation, awardees also view the award as a way to keep up with or excel over competition. The award’s role to organizations is to support external branding by offering competition between organizations. Competing to be the best gender equal workplace allows the organizations to brand themselves as good employers, ethically sound and morally responsible. “We did it (apply for the award) to benchmark with others,” stated one manager. A different manager offered:

It is good for ourselves to be aware, it becomes like an annual audit of ourselves so it's pretty good, it becomes a bit of a serious moment...It is always important to see what others are doing.

Interestingly, this same manager contradicts the previous statement later on stating that,

I have an idea about such a program that especially would be an internal tool. I am not entirely convinced of the need to compare with others.

Although this manager acknowledges that they are seeking recognition in order to appraise their own behaviors or confirm their brand, he goes on to say that it is essential to maintain the same standards as other organizations. However, he then questions his own reasoning behind rooting internal assessments of gender equity on the work of others, this suggests that he views gender equality work as something that is organization specific.

So far, we see that organizations seeking recognition for gender equality often do so in order to garner external and/or to compete with others to develop a branded identity as the ones

“getting it right.” One explanation of this idea is found when comparing two organizations that have dramatically contrasting gender make-ups. One organization is female-dominated, the other male-dominated. Depending on the type of gender make-up of the organization, their views of how to utilize the gender equality award differ. While the ultimate goal seems to be to show that they are organizations “getting it right”, the strategic aim behind this varies because of the different issues they face. While the female dominated organization understands the award as certification that their gender equality work is acceptable, the male dominated organization appears to use the award to reduce stigma surrounding a lack of diversity in their organization.

The following manager at the male dominated organization alludes to this:

It was funny because in many studies, they look at how many women are in management, etc., and if you don't have as many women you are really bad and if you have it then you are good. But nowadays when there has been a few other studies that go a little deeper and look at culture and the work environment for employees, then we start getting nominated for the prizes and get attention so it feels great. And I think that is fair, because it can be a bit hard because we do actually...I know everything that happens and the efforts that we do and then we get undeserved bad reputation in the press. Ok if you choose not to write anything at all, but to portray us as if we are bad at something that we actually are not bad at feels a bit hard actually.

The female dominated company explains that while they have no problem encouraging men to apply for positions within the company they are often not hired because they lack the right experience. This “right” experience is defined by this organization as familiarity with the industry, which is traditionally female dominated, thereby disqualifying most of their male applicants. Despite this practice, they have received an award that has attested to their acceptability of their work.

Our discussion above indicates that organizations seeking recognition for their gender equality work do so for different reasons such as external validation and keeping up with competition, which suggest to us that diversity is a brand, a brand signifying fairness, awareness and good business. Labeling an organization as gender equal offers a strategic advantage. However, branding does not seem to be in line with the purpose of the award, nor does it appear to encourage the reduction of gender inequality. One of the participants' states

that they are not seeking to apply for the award this year; they are seeking to receive another award instead. This suggests that the award helps stabilize the target of gender equality long enough so that it can be ‘hit’, in order to then move on to chasing other targets. This example, along with the static way all the participants talk about branding, tells us that the aim of receiving the award is to use it for branding that ‘stabilizes’ gender equality ambiguity - not to create transformational change. To further explore this we will shift to our second major finding to emphasize the confusion and contradictions of understanding gender equality and gender in these organizations.

Gender Equality is a Moving Target

To this point, we have highlighted that organizations seek recognition for gender equality in part to build a branded identity as an organization who is “getting things right.” Although seeking external recognition for good work is certainly ubiquitous, our analysis suggests that seeking the award brings forth a tension that organizational members must navigate. Namely, the award helps organizational members to construct a static story of gender equity (in the spirit of communicating the brand), which masks the fluid, shifting - and often tense - realities of both understandings and “doing” gender at work.

Our second major finding is that participant’s understandings of gender and gender equality fluctuate, hence making gender equality a moving target for gender equality workers to pursue. Of note, and in line with an interpretivist perspective, we view concepts such as “gender” and “equality” as constructs that are moving targets and not fixed categories. However, we also recognize that the award paints the constructs as if they are static and may encourage participants to view them as such. In this following chapter we will account for how our participants understand gender including how they ‘do’ gender, followed by how they understand gender equality.

Understandings of Gender

Our participants have provided us with stories surrounding gender that describes a confusing and contradictory positioning towards the way they try to grasp a cohesive understanding of gender. In this following quote one HR-generalist argues that women and men have different traits that affect how we behave towards one another.

Maybe we can put more work into how to really get women to take on an assignment and because sometimes I think we ladies aren’t really nice to each other. I’m not the only one that thinks that. I think but sometimes if you get an assignment and I’m kind of jealous. Men are more like ‘good for you ‘and you get a pat on your shoulder and

‘good, go for it’. And women are like ‘why didn’t I get it’. And we go and sometimes don’t say it, just smile and kind of not encouraging each other.

This story suggests to us that women are considered different from men when it comes to helping our colleagues and not be willing to take on assignments. Stating that she is not the only one who thinks this then defends her expression of stereotyping women. It also suggest that women, in contrast to men, act in a way that is to their disadvantage, hence arguing that ‘women’ need to change this presumed behavior in order to climb the career ladder, contradicting the notion of a glass ceiling. This adheres to the theory by Ely and Meyerson (2000) where they argue that ‘fix the women’ is one of the predominant perceptions of how to achieve gender equality in organizations. This suggests that these participants view gender inequality as an individual problem within the ‘female’ group. In order to understand this frame of reference we will continue to delve into how our participants understand gender.

Throughout our interviews the reoccurring contradiction about gender, in relation to gender equality work, was that our participants seemed to struggle with celebrating differences of diversity, meanwhile trying to downplay gender by strategically ignoring or minimizing its relevance to the day-to-day work in the organization. The next quote exemplifies the contradiction of gender equality initiatives that tries to ‘strengthen’ women who are considered to need support when they are a minority, while trying to maintain a position of not separating women from men.

We have not had a lot of women's networks previously since we think that we should not special treat any group but we shall create a working environment where everyone is welcome and we shall not keep separating girls from boys more than that we would separate Egyptians, Syrians or Swedes from each other. (...) But then we have seen that in some places it has been a greater need, for example in the production site in Luleå, they have very few women so they have a women's network in order to strengthen them a bit.

In the next example, a discussion between two participants in one interview reflects on how their strategy of gender equality work is to emphasize the way they create a story of the ‘unimportance’ of gender in organizations.

Participant 1: - I thought you put it so well before when we talked about our work on gender equality...

Participant 2: - Yes we do not work with it at all.

Participant 1: - Right! We don't want to work with it (gender equality); it (gender) does not matter.

The quote below touches upon this contradiction and suggests that this female HR-manager recognizes a dilemma between downplaying differences and ignoring gender power structures:

Because they won't face that there are differences (in how women are treated). They are not aware that there are differences, that we treat, and everybody treats men and women differently. You have to be open-minded and most companies are not, I would say. They say 'Well, I don't see any differences, I don't make a difference between men and women' but in general there are, and you have to, you have to recognize that you have to agree upon that.

This is in line with the acknowledgement made by the woman at the award-giving magazine, saying that women struggle to not be noticed as women; meanwhile she recognizes that the award highlights the women. Since gender seems to be something that the organizations try to downplay, we see it as a conflict between acknowledging gender differences through the award and downplaying the significance of gender.

Several of the participants talk about the profit aspects of diversity and gender equality, which is in line with the arguments of the business case for diversity. Being convinced that gender does not matter while adhering to the business case for diversity opens up for a discursive conflict that results in confusion since the logic according to the business case would rather be to emphasize the strengths those differences suggestively provide. This is illustrated by this following quote by an HR-manager:

(...) and that we have a climate where we see possibilities with differences, you know, it's good with differences and good with diversity because it's enriching. (...) And as I said I think that's why we do well here with our equality work, we are trying to see everyone as a group, to not separate them.

The language in use supports an idea of celebrating differences although the 'proper' action seems to be to not highlight differences.

How Organizations "Do" Gender

From a post-structuralist feminist perspective we see that organizations exist in a context dictated by dominating discursive fields where our historical time and space is gendered and, therefore social actors are expected to behave in line with the gendered 'scripts' within organizations. These 'gendered scripts' are shown in the way gender is being 'done' in organizations. As outlined in our literature review, gender can be viewed as a practice that we 'do' in order to fit in to society. In order to 'do' gender, certain traits that are considered male and female need to be performed. In the following quote by an HR-manager in a female dominated organization, gender performance is described.

We are very happy, it is a fun atmosphere and then if it is because we are so many girls or because it is the type of personalities, that is really hard to say. But yes, the kind of guys who we employ, many of them are of course, so what should I say, do have a softer side.

The organization creates its' identity and behavioral norms according to the dominant coalition, in this case valuing a 'softer side' that is often ascribed as a 'female' characteristic. In that sense the organizational identity as 'female' is reflected upon the identity of the workers, perhaps this suggests that the way you act needs to fit how they do gender within the organization. When asked what gender the organization would have if it were a person, another participant answered:

It (the organization) is like an androgen. My first thought is a man absolutely, but changing, getting more female I would say. It's more focusing on the soft values, so to say, which you often associate with a woman.

This shows how even the organizational values are perceived as gendered, which in this case might lead to the reproduction of inequalities. Another aspect of 'doing' gender in organizations is also found in relation to the application for the award where one quality control manager responsible for the women's network in the organization describes:

Since I have these meetings with him (boss), he thought this (applying for the award) could be a work for the women's network, so that's why he signed me for it.

This demonstrates how the application for the gender equality award itself could be viewed as a gendered practice, as gender equality work is assigned to the women's network, insinuating that gender equality is a 'female matter'.

By showing that values, practices and identity in organizations 'do' gender, the issue of gender equality as a moving target becomes predominant. We show how the participants struggle to navigate their identity as members of organizations "getting it right" while simultaneously accounting for gendered practices and unequal realities. This female HR-manager says that:

A CEO may hire people who he knows is more like him, and that's why it looks like it does in many corporate boards. I presume that it happens a lot. I commit to those who believe in that theory anyway. And it's not like that here. Rather, we try to employ as I said, the best, the most qualified for the job, not the one who is most alike someone else.

Here the participant acknowledges an understanding of gender inequality as stemming from masculine homogeneity in organizations in general. However, she sees her own (male dominated) organization as an exception, illustrating how she tries to make reality coincide with a perception of being an award nominee for gender equality.

Another example of navigating gender and gender equality is the following quote where this HR-manager explains her view on why their organization is so heavily female dominated:

Participant: But if you look at a controller position, I would say that it is almost 50/50 when we look at who is applying. We have a lot of male applicants (to controller positions).

Interviewer: But not many who are employed (male controllers)?

Participant: No, not in the end. Many times because we take, we require... If we are to find a really good specialist we prefer someone who has experience in the same field and so it will be from one of our competitors and our competitors are also female dominated.

In this quote the participant sees experience from the female dominated industry as an unchangeable variable when navigating gender equality. Here recruitment of the underrepresented sex becomes constrained to circumstantial factors, which indicate that the aim for gender equality becomes subordinated to the gendered power structure of the industry.

Understandings of Gender Equality

So far we have shown that the participants views on gender is fluctuating and contradicting. In this next section we show that the ‘target’ of gender equality is also fluctuating, contradicting and ambiguous which makes us conclude that not only gender, but gender equality is a ‘moving target’. The view of gender equality as equal gender representation was shown to be consistent throughout our scholarly work. A perception of numeric gender equal representation of men and women largely seemed to be considered as the ultimate objective for their gender equality work. All of our participants mentioned percentages of the division of men and women in vertical and horizontal levels of the organization. They use statistics to confirm stage and evolvement of gender equity as represented in this quote by an HR-manager: “Our distribution center, (...), there it is roughly fifty/fifty men and women so that is the most gender equal department.”

The proportion of the underrepresented sex was also frequently compared to their representation in management positions. This suggests that there is a perception of gender equality present when the underrepresented sex on management positions is equivalent to the total percentage of the underrepresented sex in the organization, which is shown in the following quote: “So we look at the proportion of managers who are women in relation to women in the company, we have 21% women in total and 19% of them are managers, so that’s still pretty good.” This was also one of the indicators of gender equality measured by the award survey, suggesting that this is a widely spread conception of gender equality evaluation. However, we can also see that using percentage comparison can help legitimize the current state of unequal representation between men and women as shown in the following quote by an HR-manager in a heavily female dominated organization:

(We have a) low proportion of men... And we will try in all cases to have the same proportion as we have percent of women in leadership positions, because it would have looked strange if we have 90% women in the store organization and (only) 50% of store managers were women, for instance, so we are very good in that matter. And it feels good, even if we would like the number to drop a bit so that we will have some more men, we want to continue to let the existing numbers to be reflected here at the head quarters, as it is very important that there are equal opportunities for both sexes to develop within the company.

One of the participants describes equal numeric representation of men and women as the tool in itself to achieve gender equality by making sure that they present one man and one woman when they are externally representing company. This differs from the way that they use

numeric representation as a measurement tool in the sense that it is understood as a token of equality, supposedly affecting mindsets through its outspoken presence. As numeric representation is perceived to reflect gender equality it also seems to reflect the self-image of the gender equality workers. A female HR-generalist explains this by stating that: “It would be great to have at least one woman as a board member...It would feel very good, it would provide visible proof for our ongoing gender equality work.”

However, as frequent as the numeric argument is from our interviewees, there are just as many arguments suggesting that gender equality is about equal opportunities from a justice standpoint. Providing equal opportunities is connected to being free from discrimination as described by this HR-specialist:

I would say that I think it's to make sure that men and women have equal opportunities. That they don't feel, and not only women, different groups like if you're of different origin or whatever you have to feel that you have the same equal opportunities.

By simultaneously talking about the objective for gender equality as numeric representation and equal opportunities is not necessarily contradicting. One could argue that the even proportions of men and women in management positions symbolizes open career paths, hence symbolizes equal opportunities for men and women. However, trusting that equality is achieved when proportions are equal does not take power into account, which leads to conclude that numeric representation, as gender equality objective, might be deceptive.

The description of ‘female’ and ‘male’ traits is reoccurring in numerous ways throughout our interviews as we have shown in the way our participants understand gender. While one of the participants expresses stereotyped practices of male and female, she also indicates a hesitation to break these norms, suggesting that the “target” of achieving gender equality is not only moving, but also questionable whether it is a target at all.

Yes, or should we oblige Eve to cut the grass only because it may not be typical? No, but there are things like in the nursery school too, the girls have to absolutely sit down and do woodworking although they all want to do beading. Is it the right way to go?

She expresses a standpoint where ‘female’ and ‘male’ interests differ even from a young age and a concern that one should not force a change in this ‘natural fact’. This hesitation to break norms indicate that there is a perception of given differences between men and women that she is not comfortable to challenge in pursuit of gender equality. Her colleague fills in: “We can’t force people to be equal either, it has to come from themselves” supporting our statement that gender equality work is not seen as actions that should challenge norms and structures.

In sum, our analysis has shown that gender and gender equality are fluid concepts that the participants in this study struggle to navigate. When doing so, seeking recognition for their gender equality work is used as a way to create a branded identity as organizations that are “good” or even “getting it right”. This leaves a window for discussion surrounding what consequences using the award for branding purposes have on gender equity in organizations, and this is what we will present in the following discussion chapter.

Discussion

This study has yielded two main findings; first we have shown that seeking recognition for gender equality work is often used to brand the organization as good companies that care about gender equality. Since organizations seem to use gender equality as branding this becomes the main objective of the award. We seek to problematize this in the discussion below. Second, our analysis further shows that gender and gender equality are fluctuating concepts that our participants struggle to navigate and control. To further explore these findings, we will discuss how seeking recognition for gender equality work could function as a way of making sense of gender and gender equality work, therefore making it appropriate to question what impact an award *really* has on gender equality. Finally we will discuss the implications of our findings in relation to the current research field on gender equality as well as to practitioners of gender equality in organizations.

As illustrated in the analysis chapter, organizations seek recognition for strategic reasons. By branding the organization as good and attentive to gender equality, they are creating a strategic purpose that encompasses aspects central to good business (i.e. marketability and profitability). These aspects include external recognition, which allows the organizations to claim they are doing the “right” kind of work, in turn enhancing their brand as an attractive employer. In our analysis we argue that organizations seek gender equality as a way to create a brand of an organization seemingly “getting it right”. Organizational branding seems to create a static and automatic response between the organization and their desired image or identities. Therefore, when organizations seek to brand themselves as organizations that are “getting it right” they are attempting to stabilize and solidify this image in the minds of stakeholders. However, our empirical material shows that regardless of one’s desire to craft a static image, organizational actors still struggle to make sense of gender and gender equality. The relationship between gender and gender equality seems to fluctuate between, She/he is a competent individual *regardless* of difference to she/he is a competent individual who will contribute with a unique point of view *because* they are different. Since seeking recognition for doing good work has shown to be used for branding, this suggests to us that gender equality in organizations is regarded for its potential to aid business purposes rather than address gender inequality. Effectively, we question whether an organization can serve two

masters, meaning that if they view gender equality as a brand and not as goal it is very unlikely that they will be able to contribute to the advancement of gender equality.

An organization's understanding of gender inevitably shapes which gender equality strategies are considered legitimate, true and effective. If gender were a fixed concept, gender equality would be an easily measurable entity, and awarding "good" gender equality work simply a matter of comparison and verification. The presence of tangible equality such as equal pay and equal numbers of male and female employees would indicate the "right" kind of work is being done. We see branding as something that organizational members can control in contrast to gender equality and gender, which are constantly in a fluid state. Our finding that organizational members might not have a clear understanding of gender and equality suggests a second implication. By creating a branded identity around gender equality they are using gender equality as an attempt to pinpoint what gender equality means by constructing a definition of it as something achievable and static. Therefore, we argue that gender and gender equality are moving targets, and seeking recognition can be understood as an attempt to pin them down. Understanding recognition seeking as a way to make sense of gender equality is not necessarily a bad thing but it should be acknowledged for what it is.

As our analysis shows that gender and gender equality are not static, the shifting nature of gender and gender equality create a need for sense making. Perhaps because sense making is not about arriving at the "right" answer but about arriving at an answer that makes sense, the award might not merely be a branding tool but also function as a sense-making tool. Seeking recognition for gender equality work helps organizations make sense of gender and gender equality. Recognition seeking by Swedish organizations for their gender equality work is not about identifying the "right" approach to gender equality work, nor is it about advancement of gender equality; It is about making sense of something that is shifting, yet not necessarily perceived as such. Outside recognition allows organizations to receive a nod of approval for *their* work because their work is significant to *them*.

The fact remains that gender inequality is still a problem and we believe it is necessary to look at recognition seeking and awards for gender equality from a critical lens. The discussion around recognition seeking rarely calls into question the validity of the recognition medium. General wisdom seems to be that awards are good - and we are convinced that at times they are; they draw attention to important issues, promote advancements and are usually given in the spirit of rectitude. However, the implications of our study indicate that the award creates

an illusion of measurement while rewarding gendered practices that are currently reproducing gender inequality. While it might seem like an oxymoron, awards are not without negative aspects; they can validate current structures (such as inequality), encourage complacency and imply mastery where there is none.

When we unpacked the case of the award we showed how the award-giving magazine aimed to measure gender inequality by looking at power. As depicted in our literature review, research scholars normally address issues of power through methods such as observations and interviews and oppose body counting when examining gender equality (Alvesson & Billing, 2002). As gender and gender equality are intertwined with concepts such as culture, power and structures, it suggests to us that measurement of gender equality might require a different methodology than provided by a survey, in order to more accurately evaluate gender equality in organizations. Although the award giving organization has a self-proclaimed aim to look at power, the chosen method of examining power through a survey does not stretch beyond body counting.

As stated by Deutsch (2007) “doing” gender is reproducing gender differences while “undoing” gender is reducing gender differences, thereby we see “undoing gender” as the way to achieve gender equality. In effect, seeking recognition for gender equality work is a way of “doing” gender and since gender cannot be “undone” while it is being practiced, it shows that the award is ineffective. This is not to say that the award is part of some kind of nefarious plan to disrupt the progress of gender equality but simply to point out that in its’ current state the award does not serve as a catalyst for change to gender inequality; rather it may in fact hinder change by validating everything and in turn transforming little.

We align with Lane (2005) when she says that good gender equality work should be recognized for the potential it implies to make sustainable organizational changes. However, what seems to be a huge driver in the issue of increasing awareness of and improving gender equality work does not always stem from doing the “right” thing. Feminist scholars suggest that gendered practices need to be challenged through an alternative approach to gender in order to create transformational change (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). From that perspective, the award should focus on rewarding practices that challenges the predominant way of viewing gender and gender equality. This would mean that gender equality workers would need to think about their work in a new way, making challenging norms the main objective of gender equality work instead of branding. For the organizations that are truly interested in changing

gender inequality, the focus needs to be on the practice and understanding of gender equality within the organization and not reliant on measures that only serve their branded identity.

This suggests that in order to create meaningful change for gender equality, the current view of gender needs to be deconstructed. From a post-structuralist perspective, language creates discourses that reproduce inequality. From this point of view, we see that the business case for diversity can never “undo” gender in organizations to create equality since it suggests that gender should be highlighted, which reinforces gender differences through language. Nor can we see how downplaying gender can “undo” gender in organizations since it does not challenge power structures in place. This leaves us in a state where we have to align with Ely and Meyerson (2000) in suggesting an alternative approach to gender by changing language and challenging gender norms. How such an approach would look in reality and how it should be played out in organizations is a question that this study leaves unanswered.

Conclusion

In this study we have attempted to shed light on why gender inequality is still an issue. Our qualitative inquiry began with the case of an award being granted. We sought to learn how organizations seeking recognition for their gender equality work understand gender and gender equality, adhering to our research questions guiding this study. By looking at how practitioners of gender equality work use an award for best workplace from a gender equality perspective we sought to give answers to how they use the award and how they understand gender and gender equality. Methodologically we carried out interviews with an inductive qualitative approach to this study. Through a poststructuralist feminist paradigm we incorporated influences of interpretative and critical theory to our analysis. As feminist - as well as critical - research aims to challenge taken for granted assumptions of gender aspects, so have we in this study. In our analysis our findings reveal that companies who receive awards for gender equality work are using it to create a branded identity of “getting it right” and we therefore conclude that the award does not necessarily reward work that creates gender equality. The most important implication of our study is the need for illumination of recognition seeking and the importance of carefully scrutinize awards as legitimate appraisal for gender equality.

Our findings breed several scholarly and practical suggestions. As current understandings of gender and gender equality struggle to navigate the contradiction by highlighting differences while downplaying the relevance of gender in organizations, this calls for scholars to investigate how this could be explained through a critical perspective on the effects of the business case for diversity. This also calls for future feminist research to explore how gender equality practices could be reframed in order to address an alternative approach to gender. Since gender equality workers are constantly forced to validate their work, in regards to how it affects the businesses bottom line, this means that changing the objective will require a shift of focus that moves away from a business perspective. How this shift should be done in reality is not something that this study cannot answer, nor can we say how the ‘reframing’ of understandings of gender equality could be done since this requires a thorough examination of how to achieve transformational change in practitioners’ understandings of gender and gender equality.

Looking at our data we are limited to further contribute to discussions on how gender equality as a brand functions. For instance, further aspects of how branding purportedly could be utilized as a proactive gender equality tool might be examined. If organizations are sticking with the business perspective on gender equality, we suggest that scholars should look into whether or not gender equality branding can function as a tool to increase gender equality, and if so, how. Further, our study also carries limitations in terms of using our data in a comparative way. We believe that a comparative study could be useful both in order to compare how organizations understand their own incentives for seeking recognition through various competitions addressing many different organizational topics, as well as comparing between industries in order to get a more nuanced insight on the relationship between branding and gender equality.

Even though we take a critical stance to recognition seeking for gender equality work, we acknowledge the complexity of the reality for gender equality practitioners. Our aim for this project has been to shed light on aspects of gender equality that are rarely debated. As feminist researchers we aim for this study to have a practical impact in terms of improving gender equality. Therefore, practical implications of our findings suggest to us that human resource professionals should perhaps self-reflect more on their ability to address gender inequality and diversity problems. Conceivably, the complexity of these issues requires insight and preferably knowledge of gender theory in order to work with gender equality in a pragmatic way that challenges gender norms. As discussed, we argue that if gender equality is achieved by ‘undoing’ gender, practitioners of gender equality will need to be required to challenge gender norms and transform traditional ways of understanding gender. On a personal level, this study has given us insights to carry with us into working life regardless of profession and should be considered in all aspects of organizational strategy work.

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/ Anna Fahlgård, Rebecca Gustafsson & Sarah Massengale

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Attachments

Intervjuguide (Svenska)

1. Berätta lite om dig själv i form av yrkesbakgrund, din utbildning och hur det kom sig att du började arbeta här.
2. Vilka är dina huvudsakliga arbetsuppgifter och ansvarsområden?
3. Berätta om just din roll i arbetet med jämställdhetsfrågor
4. Hur var det när du började arbeta på företaget, var jämställdhet på agendan vid den tiden? Har det utvecklats under din tid här?
5. Berätta lite mer om företagets jämställdhetsarbete, praktiker, aktiviteter?
6. Varför har ni valt att arbeta just på detta sätt? Vad är dess styrkor/svagheter?
7. Berätta om nomineringen från tidningen. Berätta mer om dagen ni emottog den. Hur löd diskussionerna då?
8. Hur kommunicerades/offentliggjordes/diskuterades nomineringen?
9. Skulle du säga att nomineringen/utmärkelsen uppmärksammades internt eller externt av andra medarbetare eller organisationer?
10. Vilken betydelse har den för dig/företaget? Är den viktig? Varför/varför inte?
11. Anser du att utmärkelsen har påverkat ert arbete med jämställdhet? Några särskilda aspekter?
12. Utifrån ditt perspektiv, vad är syftet med ert jämställdhetsarbete?
13. Vad skulle hända om man inte bedrev något jämställdhetsarbete?
14. Vad tror du är anledningen till att organisationer generellt sett har problem med att vara jämställda?
15. Finns det några typer av åtgärder man ska undvika när man arbetar med jämställdhet? Varför/Varför inte?
16. Finns det områden som du anser är särskilt viktiga att nå jämställdhet inom (tex. föräldraledighet, kvinnor på ledande positioner, jämn fördelning inom org. etc.)?
17. Om du ser på din egen organisation, Har ni haft några särskilda utmaningar hos er (t.ex. balans arbete/fritid)? Vilka kan vara de bakomliggande orsakerna till det? Hur har ni adresserat det?

18. Har ni märkt av några effekter av ert jämställdhetsarbete? Ökning av arbetssökande, fler jämställdhetsfrågor på agendan, extern eller intern respons
19. Hypotetiskt sett, om ni det skulle visa sig att ert nuvarande jämställdhetsarbete inte får det genomslag som det var tänkt, vad skulle ni göra då? Varför?
20. Utifrån dina egna erfarenheter, i vilken utsträckning belyser man normer och stereotyper när man arbetar med jämställdhet i organisationer? Varför gör man det?/ varför gör man inte det?
21. Om vi avslutningsvis återgår till jämställdhetspriset, Strävar/hoppas/förväntar ni få utmärkelsen i år? Varför? Hur ska ni nå dit?
22. Hur ser det framtida jämställdhetsarbetet ut? Vad är er vision?

Interview guide (English)

1. Tell me about yourself in terms of professional and educational background, how did you end up working here?
2. What are your main work tasks and responsibilities?
3. Tell me about your specific role in the gender equality work in this organization
4. How was it when you started to work here, was gender equality an issue at that time? Has it evolved during your time at the firm?
5. Tell me more about the actual gender equality work in terms of practices and activities.
6. Why have you chosen to work in this particular way? What are the benefits and limitations of that approach?
7. Tell me about the nomination you received from the magazine, do you remember the day you received it? How did the conversations go around that?
8. How was it communicated? Was it announced or celebrated?
9. Would you say that your award/nomination was paid attention to by internal or external individuals/organizations?
10. What meaning does this award have to you? Is it important to get these types of nominations/awards? Why/Why not?
11. Would you say that this award/nomination has had any impact on your gender equality work afterwards?
12. From your perspective, what is the purpose of your gender equality work?
13. What would happen if you did not pursue any gender equality work?
14. What do you think are the reasons that organizations in general have difficulties achieving gender equality?
15. Are there any types of actions to avoid when working with gender equality? Which? Why? / Why not?
16. Are there areas of the org where there are particular importance to achieve gender equality? Such as parental leave, women in management positions, overall proportion of w/m, the 'voice' of women etc.

17. If you look at your own org, have you had any particular area that's been a challenge? Why do you think that is? What have you done to address it?
18. Have you noticed any effects of your gender equality work so far? Internal or external response.
19. Hypothetically, if it would show that your gender equality work would not have any effect on gender equality, what would you do? Why?
20. Based on your experience, are norms and stereotypes addressed in relation to the gender equality work within the organization? Why do you think that is?
21. Ok so if we conclude by referring back to the gender equality award, do you hope/ strive/ expect to receive it this year? How come? If yes, how will you get there?
22. What does the future gender equality work look like in your organization? What is your vision?