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**OVERT AND COVERT PRACTICES OF GEN-  
DER (IN)EQUALITY AT THE WORKPLACE IN  
SCANDINAVIAN COMPANIES IN UKRAINE**

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Scientific Supervisor: Christopher S. Swader

## **Abstract**

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Based on ethnographic data, this study sheds light on gender (in)equality in Scandinavian workplaces in Ukraine. More specifically, the study aims to investigate how managers in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine present and legitimize company-practices in relation to gender equality. The study is within critical management studies and takes a Butlerian, performative approach to knowledge production. The main data consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 managers in 10 Scandinavian companies in Kyiv. This data is triangulated with participant observation of a networking event and office environments, interviews with NGO's and a Scandinavian business association and website-analysis. In the analysis of the managers' performativity, the strategically overt and covert practices within the companies are analyzed along with the managers' unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation. The results of the study show that the performance of Scandinavian culture is productive in embedding gender equality in the company practices. However, the companies' moral self-image inhibits the managers from identifying structural inequality within their workplace, and covertly, several policies and emancipatory programs are not implemented. Due to the managers' unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation, they have gendered skill-perceptions, and they do for the most part not consider gender equality a pressing issue in the Ukrainian labor market today. Based on the results of the study, I argue that combining strategically (c)overly company-practices with unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation lays the ground for more nuanced studies of cross-cultural company-practices.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural business, gender inequality, labor market, critical management studies, corporate practices

### **Popular science summary**

In this study, I investigate gender (in)equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. The study is based on interviews with managers in 10 Scandinavian companies in Ukraine that present themselves as socially responsible. With an emphasis on hiring practices and working environment, I analyze how the managers present and legitimize practices of gender (in)equality within their companies. I analyze the interviews from the perspective of *performativity*, which means that I see the managers as performers that want to convey a positive message to me as an observer. However, I also see myself as a performer, because I affect the conversation and act in ways that make them feel comfortable to speak openly about their practices. Through in-depth interviews, I encourage the managers to share not just the practices they are proud of (the *overt* practices), but also the practices that are illegal and unethical (the *covert* practices). Overall, the study shows that the managers' performance of Scandinavian business ethics enforces practices that are relatively positive for gender equality. For instance, the managers present work-life balance, law-abiding practices, flexibility and gender equality as overt qualities that benefit their employees. However, simultaneously, the Scandinavian self-understanding keeps the managers from addressing gender inequality any further, because they believe that equality has already been established in their companies. As a consequence, covertly, some of their women's programs and written policies are not successfully implemented. Such covert practices are mostly legitimized by pointing to how Ukrainian enterprises are more unequal than Scandinavian. On top of these covert practices, many of the managers have opinions that maintain inequality. Firstly, according to many of the managers, gender equality is not an issue in Ukraine. Secondly, many of the managers have very gendered understandings of men's and women's skills. Women are described as emotional, creative, careful, charming, open, beautiful, extroverted, diplomatic and attentive. Men, on the other hand, are described as rational, calm, closed, professional, ambitious, efficient and organized. Such stereotypes may lead managers to covertly hire people based on their gender rather than based on their skills. Thirdly, there is a tendency for the managers to see men as more professional than women, whereby men are seen as better workers. In Scandinavian companies in Ukraine, there is thus a need of educating managers in gender awareness, for instance through gender sensitivity trainings. Also, culture-sensitive communication between the Scandinavian headquarters and the Ukrainian offices could lead to a more impactful implementation of gender equality programs.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the globalized market economy, states are not the only actors responsible for ensuring gender equality and welfare (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, p. 899). Companies have an increasingly big impact on gender equality as employer practices oftentimes set the overall framework for both the working- and the private-lives of the employees (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, p. 899). While Scandinavian companies are well renowned for their gender equal approach to business, Ukrainian companies are notorious for the opposite (Schramm-Nielsen, 2018, p. 26; Polegkyi, 2018, p. 131). This cultural clash is at the center of attention in this study, where I investigate overt and covert company-practices related to gender equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine.

In the context of Ukraine, the legislation ensures only a minimum of rights for workers, and new regulations are continuously passed that allow more flexibility for employers and less protection of employees (Laurenson, 2020). The protection of employees is not only limited; it is also poorly reinforced (Chepurko, 2010, p. 29). The International Monetary Foundation estimates the Ukrainian shadow economy from its independence in 1991 until 2015 to an average of 44.8 percent of GDP (Medina & Schneider, 2018, p. 75). Moreover, though gender discrimination is illegal in Ukraine, accusing an employer of discrimination in practice is a bureaucratic dead-end (Libanova et al., 2012, p. 99; Chepurko, 2010, p. 29). With the current legal framework in Ukraine, establishing fair working conditions and opportunities for career-advancement for both men and women highly depends upon the morals of the global and local companies operating in Ukraine. It therefore becomes sociologically relevant to investigate how different types of companies address gender inequality.

In Ukraine, different actors speculate on the positive impact of Scandinavian companies on the Ukrainian business environment and praise Scandinavian business models for their transparency and ethical standards (Henk et al., 2016, p. 56). Though Scandinavian companies in Ukraine are thought to be the highpoint of responsible business conduct, there is a lack of critical sociological research about the actual practices and mindsets of Scandinavian companies in Ukraine in relation to gender. This study contributes with nuanced knowledge on gender (in)equality in such companies. In addition, as business ethics vary cross-culturally (Sanchez-

Runde et al., 2013, p. 700), investigating Scandinavian-Ukrainian companies sheds light on the challenges within cross-cultural companies in relation to gender equality practices.

In studies within corporate sociology, many researchers divide company-practices into overt and covert practices (e.g. Lennartz et al., 2019; Uldam & Hansen, 2017). In this study, I consider *overt* practices to be the explicit, cherished elements of the workplace culture that are strategically shared with people in- and outside of the company, for instance anti-discriminatory policies, health insurance and work-life balance. *Covert* practices are the elements of the workplace culture that are strategically kept hidden to protect the reputation of the company, for instance cases of harassment, tax-evasion, the firing of pregnant employees, etc. In addition, I argue that many company-practices related to gender are not strategic, but rather naturalized to a degree that make them invisible to the members of the organization (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 50). According to Pierre Bourdieu (2001), these so-called *unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation* are based on the historical structures of the masculine order, and thereby shape human practices in accordance with patriarchal structures (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 5). I would argue that considering both strategically (c)overt company-practices and unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation lays the ground for more nuanced studies of cross-cultural company-practices within the corporate sociology of gender.

Whether the unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation are good or bad for gender equality is a question of normativity. However, women's lives are at the center of attention in this study, and although I abstain from declaring how things should be, my normative claims are derived from existing studies on female empowerment in the labor market. Through an ethnographic study of Scandinavian businesses in Kyiv, I will analyze and discuss the following question.

## **Research question**

*How do managers in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine present and legitimize company-practices in relation to gender equality?*

The empirical base of the study is within qualitative methodology. During the autumn and winter 2019-2020, I conducted an ethnographic research on gender equality in Scandinavian businesses in Kyiv. The main data consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 HR-managers and/or CEO's in 10 Scandinavian companies in Kyiv. This data is supplemented with

participant observation of a networking event, observations of office environments, analysis of company websites and interviews with a representative from Swedish Business Association and from two NGO's that promote women's chances in business, Fulcrum and W-Tech.

The study is methodologically inspired by a performative branch within critical management studies (Riach et al., 2016). I consider performativity to be productive, whereby the companies are shaped and reshaped through performative acts (Ford et al. 2008, p. 5). To ensure reflexivity, I consider my own role as a researcher to be performative as well. As the purpose of the study is to critically examine how managers present overt and covert company-practices, I take a so-called anti-narrative approach to the data-collection (Riach et al., 2016). By talking about abstract concepts of gender equality and concrete daily practices, the managers' rehearsed performative narratives are deconstructed, which reveals (c)overt practices as well as unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation.

To understand how managers legitimizes company-practices and reason about gender equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine, I theoretically lean on the concepts of (c)overt practices and unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation. The strategic (c)overt practices are analyzed using the theoretical concepts of *gender equality*, *gender equity* and *affirmative action*. Furthermore, the strategic ideal-typical arguments for employing women, *meritocracy* and *special contribution*, inform the analysis of (c)overt practices. The unconscious schemes are investigated by drawing on sociological theory on *gendered skill-assessments*, *female tokenism* and *choice-terminology* related to women's career-interruption. This, along with contextual knowledge of *gender roles* in Ukrainian society, forms the theoretical background of the study.

The aim of the study is thus to shed light on overt and covert practices of gender (in)equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine through the lenses of performativity theory. Furthermore, with an emphasis on the challenges of cross-cultural business relations, the aim is to explore how Scandinavian business-ethics in relation to gender equality are embedded in the Ukrainian office-environment. In Chapter 1, I present the theoretical grounds of the research and position my study in relation to existing research. In Chapter 2, I provide a transparent overview of my methodological approach. In Chapter 3, I analyze how managers present and legitimize overt and covert practices of gender (in)equality in Scandinavian companies in Kyiv. In Chapter 4, I discuss the results and present the main conclusions along with perspectives for further research.



# CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF PERFORMATIVITY AND GENDER EQUALITY PRACTICES

In shedding light on gender (in)equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine, I use theoretical concepts to reach a greater understanding of the practices and perceptions exposed in the interviews. In this chapter, I will firstly position the study within existing research in the field. This includes an introduction to gender inequality in the Ukrainian labor market and insights in the characteristics of Scandinavian companies in Ukraine, which are at the center of attention in this study. Secondly, I will define how I interpret performativity and (c)overt practices. To inform the analysis of strategic practices, I will introduce the terms of *gender equality*, *gender equity* and *affirmative action* along with two ideal-typical strategic arguments for hiring women: the *meritocratic* argument and the *special contribution* argument. Thirdly, I will move from the strategic elements to the Bordieuan concept of *unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation*. After arguing that perceptions of skills can be gendered and unconscious, I will explain two concepts that make inequality less visible in the workplace, *female tokenism* and *the female choice of opting out*. In addition, I will characterize *gender roles* in Ukraine to understand unconscious schemes of perception related to gender.

## 1.1. Existing research on gender equality in cross-cultural businesses

In the following, I will motivate and delimit the study through a review of existing literature about gender equality in cross-cultural companies. Firstly, to outline the relevance of the study, I will introduce key statistics about gender inequality in the Ukrainian labor market and provide the most important characteristics and conditions of Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. Secondly, I will position this study in relation to existing research within the field.

### 1.1.1 The relevance of studying gender equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine

In the Global Gender Gap Report from 2018, World Economic Forum ranks Ukraine as number 65 of 149 countries (WEF, 2018, p. 10). 60.4 percent of working-age women and 72.9 percent of working-age men were employed in Ukraine in 2018 (WEF, 2018, p. 281). According to UNDP Ukraine, women in the Ukrainian labor market earn 21.2 percent less than men, on average (UNDP 2019). Women's low expected earnings are related to the fact that women tend to be employed in the low-paying public sectors, such as teaching, care work and service work

(Dutchak, 2018, p. 16). In Ukraine, 41.1 percent of managers, legislators and senior officials are women (WEF, 2018, p. 281). Though this is a comparatively high percentage, Ukraine is improving at a slower pace than other countries in mitigating the gender wage gap and increasing female presence in management positions (WEF, 2018, p. 22). Also, though women are numerous in assisting management in Ukraine, there are very few in top-management. Furthermore, due to family responsibilities, women are more vulnerable to being fired in case of downsizings or economic downturns, and they statistically have more difficulties finding a new job thereafter (Kalev & Deutsch, 2006, p. 263; Libanova et al., 2012, p. 13). Women are thus structurally disadvantaged in the Ukrainian labor market. Studying the dynamics that produce inequality in the labor market is an important step towards addressing this issue.

Doing business in Ukraine is becoming increasingly popular amongst Scandinavian companies due to the positive developments in Ukraine towards a more stable economic and democratic situation (Henk et al., 2016, p. 19)<sup>1</sup>. The implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in 2016 has eased bureaucratic trade barriers between Ukraine and the EU (Henk et al., 2016, p. 13). Also, the Ukrainian workforce is highly competent, which, combined with a low salary-level, makes it economically attractive to do business in Ukraine (Henk et al., 2016, p. 16).

Local as well as foreign companies in Ukraine must pay taxes and provide employee benefits in accordance with the Ukrainian taxation system and labor law. However, it is not uncommon for local Ukrainian companies to pay unofficial salaries to avoid taxation (Uvarova, 2019, p. 13). In 2015, Ukraine was rated 130th out of 168 countries in level of transparency, and Ukrainian companies are often characterized as corrupt and discriminatory (Henk et al., 2016, p. 40). Though it has improved massively over the past few years with new anti-corruption initiatives, bribery is normalized as a way of moving past bureaucratic processes (Henk et al., 2016, p. 41). Companies are obliged to pay full salary during 18 weeks of maternity leave and guarantee workers to return to the same position after maternity leave (ILO, 2014, p. 138). All further

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<sup>1</sup> As of 2019, there were about 100 Danish, 100 Swedish and 50 Norwegian companies in Ukraine (Danish Trade Council, Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kyiv; Bonner 2019). Scandinavian companies operate in different sectors in Ukraine. Yet they are most numerous in the IT-sector, the energy sector and the agricultural sector (Henk et al., 2016, p. 13).

maternity leave, up to three years per child, is funded by the state. Women accumulate work experience while on maternity leave. All companies must follow The Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, approved in 2005, which prohibits gender discrimination. However, the law is not sufficiently enforced, and especially indirect discrimination is not accounted for (Chepurko, 2010, p. 4).

According to Henk et al. (2016), Ukrainian and Scandinavian companies are culturally different. For instance, work-life balance is not a priority in most Ukrainian companies. Also, unlike Ukrainian managers, Scandinavian managers seek to downplay the importance of their powerful position and encourage democratic processes (Henk et al., 2016, p. 51). In Scandinavian companies, women and men are thought to have similar traits and skills, whereas men and women are seen as inherently different in Ukrainian companies. Finally, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is poorly integrated in Ukrainian companies in comparison with Scandinavian companies (Henk et al., 2016, p. 56).

The influx of Scandinavian companies to Ukraine thus raises questions about what business ethics and values will prevail in a cross-cultural setting. How are the Scandinavian business-ethics in relation to gender equality embedded in the Ukrainian office-environment? And how do the managers in these companies present and legitimize company practices in relation to gender in a Scandinavian-Ukrainian business environment? These fields of tension are analytically investigated in this study.

### **1.1.2 Positioning the study in relation to existing research**

In researching practices of gender equality in Scandinavian-Ukrainian workplaces, I place myself in a rich field of existing research within gender studies and corporate sociology. In the following, I will mark how this study relates to existing research.

Feminism and the market economy are often seen as highly conflicting belief systems, because the capitalist system is built on values and structures that systematically favor men (Grosser & McCarthy, 2019, p. 1104). However, corporate codes of conduct and CSR are a means of moving beyond the limitations of minimal legislation (Grosser & McCarthy, 2019, p. 1105). For this reason, I consider it fruitful to make feminist inquiry about capitalist systems. Several scholars have studied the transition from socialism to capitalism in the former Soviet states. Stark and Bruszt (1998) investigate how capitalism develops distinctly in post-socialist

societies. In Sztopka's (1996) analysis of the transition, he distinguishes between *institution-building* and *culture-building*. He argues that though institutions are changing, the culture may not immediately follow (Sztopka, 1996, p. 117). Though Sztopka's article dates back to 1996, I would argue that it is still relevant in today's Ukraine to investigate such divides between institutionalized practices and cultural beliefs, especially with the increased influx of foreign companies.

In their study of global business ethics, Sanchez-Runde et al. (2013, p. 700) find that business ethics vary cross-culturally. They argue that no matter how clear the legal framework may seem, company managers interpret and apply business ethics in accordance with their cultural views (Sanchez-Runde et al., 2013, p. 692). By shedding light on cross-cultural management ethics in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine, this study contributes with knowledge on the processes of negotiating gender equality practices across cultures. Furthermore, this study recognizes Ukraine as a state in its own right with its own cultural specificities. It thus adds nuance to the Western portrayal of Eastern Europe, where local specifics of the post-Soviet states are often overlooked (Vucinich, 2020).

Studying gender dynamics within companies through interviews and observation is nothing new. For instance, Arlie Russell Hochschild (1997) observed how employees in a Fortune 500 company in the U.S. handled the, often conflicting, demands at home and at work. However, Hochschild does not consider her own role in the field with much care. In an ethnographic case study of company culture, Fayard and Maanen emphasize how their research influenced and shaped the company-culture (2014, p. 12). I similarly consider my performative role in this study. However, for Fayard and Maanen, performativity was complicating their original research purpose. In this study, performativity is part of the research design and contributes positively to the knowledge generation.

In investigating practices, this study is inspired by other studies that analyze (c)overt company practices. In a case-study of oil-companies in the U.S., Uldam and Hansen (2017, p. 151) describe how oil-companies overtly express great compliance between their business interests and environmentalist initiatives, whereas they covertly try to silence environmental activists. In studying practices, I draw on Uldam and Hansen's definition of overt and covert practices as predominantly strategic. However, I mostly focus on practices related to the companies' internal practices rather than their external advertisement and lobbyism. The internal company-

practices are also at the center of attention in Lennartz et al.'s quantitative study of (c)overt racial discrimination (2019, p. 135). The study shows that by overtly sharing the successful implementation of an anti-discriminatory policy, companies risk augmenting the level of covert discrimination in daily work-situations (Lennartz et al., 2019, p. 129). Though the study fails to clearly define overt and covert practices and overlooks positive effects of overt anti-discrimination, it contributes with an interesting hypothesis; that an "increased moral self-image" increases the risk of discriminatory practices (Lennartz et al., 2019, p. 137). In this study, I therefore qualitatively investigate *how* the narrative of being an ethically responsible Scandinavian company contributes to *and* inhibits the occurrence of gender discrimination. In the following subchapter, the theoretical concepts I use to analyze (c)overt company practices are introduced.

## **1.2 Strategic company-practices and logics of equality**

In the following, I will define the terms (c)overt practices and performativity within this study. To inform the analysis of (c)overt practices, I will introduce three theoretical terms related to how gender inequality can be institutionally addressed; gender equality, gender equity and affirmative action. Furthermore, I will present *meritocracy* and *special contribution* as two opposing strategic arguments for employing women. All of the above are important for understanding the strategic logics behind different company-practices related to gender equality.

### **1.2.1 The performativity of (c)overt practices**

In this study, I take the approach that performative acts of speaking and writing can cause things to come into existence (Ford et al. 2008, p. 5; Callon, 2007, p. 315). I thus see performativity as an act of creation. Though I am methodologically inspired by Butlerian performativity (see Chapter 2), I draw inspiration from Goffmanian theory in my approach to analyzing the managers' performative presentation of company-practices (Goffman, 1959). Goffman defines a performative front as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers" (Goffman, 1959, p. 49). It is thus the activity of the managers that is at the center of attention in this analysis. However, I do not consider the managers to be performative and myself to be an observer. I am performative too, which I will discuss further in Chapter 2.

In the analysis of performativity, I include both the office-setting and the actions of the individual interviewees. The office-setting is considered, as I pay attention to décor, background items, etc. (Goffman, 1959, p. 49). The interviewees' performativity is analyzed with a special emphasis on their gestures, greeting forms, clothes, speech and interaction style (Goffman, 1959, p. 50). All of these elements convey a deliberate message about the mindset and atmosphere within the company.

In their presentation of the company, the interviewees seek to establish a coherent, positive narrative about the corporate culture and practices (Goffman, 1959, p. 53). In this study, I consider *overt practices* to be positive elements of the workplace culture that the managers enhance to put the company in a good light, for instance free health-insurance for employees, codes of conduct, education programs or anti-discriminatory initiatives. To gain access to covert company-practices, I seek to rupture and challenge the overt performativity of the managers by asking questions about several aspects of the corporate culture. I consider *covert practices* to be the negative elements of the workplace culture that managers seek to hide to avoid putting the company in a bad light, for instance cases of harassment, low salaries, tax-evasion, etc.

I would argue that performativity and (c)over practices are a productive combination of theories, because it underlines how overt practices are performatively emphasized, whereas the covert practices are performatively downplayed. The performative approach thus brings forward the covert practices that are else way hidden. Similarly, the notion of (c)over practices directs the analysis of performativity, which else way risks being an empty term, as everything can be considered performative.

### **1.2.2 Gender equality, gender equity and affirmative action**

In the sociology of gender, gender inequality is defined in various ways. Some primarily focus on the number of men and women in an organization, whereas others problematize the favoring of masculine values within and across social institutions (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 56). However, as an overall definition, gender inequality is the sum of structurally unequal conditions for gendered subjects to participate in, and attain power within, social institutions. Gender can thus be considered a social structure that permeates all institutions, making the gender structure rigid as well as complex (Risman, 2006, p. 31). Overall, there are two different perceptions of equality, which have consequences for how inequality is strategically addressed: *gender equality* and *gender equity*.

*Gender equality* is often defined as treating everyone the same, regardless of their gender (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 2). This definition of gender equality is criticized for not considering the unequal starting points of different individuals in relation to the patriarchal structures in the labor market (Chafetz, 2006, p. 10). Grosser argues that the rigid symbolic order presupposes that women are involved in private, domestic reproductive activities, and men are engaged in public sites of production (2011, p. 33). This means that even though women have long entered the realms of productive labor and though organizations proclaim gender neutrality, organizations are inherently male (Acker, 1990, p. 147). Consequentially, women are structurally disadvantaged in terms of employment, remuneration and professional advancement in patriarchal, capitalist organizations. From this perspective, being treated equally does not lead to equality of outcome.

*Gender equity* is thus defined - in contrast to gender equality - as equality of outcome, which is typically sought through differentiated treatment or *affirmative action*. Affirmative action is an equity-measure that seeks to level the playing field (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 40). Affirmative actions are thus practices aimed at making organizations more accessible for those who are discriminated against because of age, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, disability, etc. Affirmative action related to gender could be regulating the minimum number of women in decision-making positions through quotas. Other affirmative initiatives common to workplaces are flexibility and work-life balance. According to research, these initiatives are beneficial for all employees, but particularly for people with care-responsibilities, who are often women (Wayne & Casper, 2016, p. 467). However, within companies, affirmative action in relation to hiring is often seen as “lowering the bar” (Rivera, 2015, p. 207). For instance, research shows that asking questions about work-life-balance in a job-interview makes the recruiters question the candidate’s motivation (Rivera, 2015, p. 205). Sabbatini and Crosby therefore note that work-life balance policies are not likely to be used unless management actively promotes the initiatives and unanimously supports the workers who use the offered initiatives (2009, p. 210).

### **1.2.3 Two arguments for hiring women: meritocracy and special contribution**

In business relations, gender equal practices seldomly stem from a moral wish of improving women’s conditions (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 167, 180). Actively including women is rather a strategic way of enhancing the company’s profits, efficiency and competitiveness (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 167). Alvesson and Due-Billing present two ideal-typical

arguments for workplace organizations to use women as a means of organizational success: The *meritocratic* argument and the *special contribution* argument<sup>2</sup>.

The meritocratic argument for hiring women consists in a desire to fight the “irrational social forces” that prevent workplaces from utilizing the full potential of the qualified pool of workers (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 167). Proponents of meritocracy argue that gender, class, background, race, religion and other characteristics irrelevant to career patterns are outdated in a modern, meritocratic system. Recruiting women to occupy previously male-dominated positions is thus a natural result of the dissolution of sexual work-divisions in post-industrial societies (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 167). There is thus a technocratic motive for fully utilizing the work force, regardless of gender (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 169). For meritocrats, perfect gender equality is less of a priority than finding a qualified candidate who is fit for the job. A woman’s inability to work overtime or go on business trips would thus be considered a private concern, even though some companies may be willing to support the integration of work and private life for key employees.

In the special contribution argument, female experiences and traits are thought to contribute with a certain softness and willingness of compromise (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 171). From this perspective, it is problematic that women are encouraged to act like men, because organizations would benefit the most from utilizing the different skills and traits of men and women. Some organizations indicate that they are looking for values such as flexibility, social skills and team orientation, which are thought to be more prevalent amongst women (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 172). Though the special contribution argument considers women to be an asset for their inherent skills and values, women often end up being complementary to men and taking up management roles that are assisting and female-typified (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 173).

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<sup>2</sup> Alvesson and Due-Billing’s ideal types describe the value of having women in *management* positions. However, with some modifications, the two approaches to the value of having women in an organization are arguably relevant regardless of the position of the female workers within the organization. The above descriptions are thus taken out of a management context and applied to the female labor force in general.



### **1.3 Unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation**

Besides the strategic company-practices, the naturalized norms and perceptions of gender within the company are important to analyze. For instance, viewing men as rational and women as emotional is a viewpoint that shapes the gender dynamics in the workplace, even if it is not granted any major importance by the members of the workplace. In Bourdieu's terminology, these naturalized views are termed *unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation* (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 5). He argues that these schemes are shaped by the historical masculine order, whereby women are structurally undervalued by such schemes (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 5). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that "the division between the sexes appears to be 'in the order of things', as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable" (2001, p. 8). Gendered schemes of perception are thus both biased towards men and deterministic in terms of maintaining men and women as fixed entities. In the following, I will present relevant research on gendered perceptions of skills. Subsequently, I will introduce female tokenism and choice-terminology, which make structural gender equality seem irrelevant in today's labor market. Finally, I will give some insights in Ukrainian gender roles, as they may influence the managers' unconscious schemes of perception.

#### **1.3.1 Gendered perceptions of skills**

One of the pioneers in theorizing the gendered perceptions of skills within workplace organizations is Joan Acker (1990), who coined the term *the ideal worker*. According to Acker, the ideal worker, especially for high-level positions, is typically male, white and middleclass, because they have more time to invest in their work (Acker, 1990, p. 149). The ideal worker is often described as rational, authoritative, aggressive and self-sufficient, which are traits considered stereotypically masculine (Kalev & Deutsch, 2006, p. 262). Acker adds that workers who need to divide their commitments between work and family are particularly likely to be considered ideal for assisting positions in the lower end of the organizational hierarchy, despite their working efforts (Acker, 1990, p. 150). Acker's theory about men being ideal workers is empirically supported by the horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the labor market, where men are employed in the most prestigious fields and hold the most powerful positions (Acker, 2006, p. 179).

Acker thus states that although workers are thought to be abstract and disembodied in organizational theory, workers are deeply gendered and bodied (Acker, 1990, p. 150). Eagly and

Sczesny (2009, p. 23) argue that some abilities are more expected as well as more desired in one sex than the other. Men are typically seen as agentic, while women are considered communal team-players (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009, p. 23). They argue that both skill-sets are sought-after in most organizations. However, stereotypically male traits are prescriptive for management, whereas stereotypically female traits are prescriptive for assisting roles (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009, p. 25).

### **1.3.2 Tokenism and the female choice of opting out**

Though gender inequality in modern day workplace organizations continues to be an issue, the importance of the matter is often downplayed discursively or simply not considered an issue (Schmitt et al., 2009, p. 52). Though inequality is still an issue, the slightest progress in gender equality becomes a blockade for addressing inequality (Schmitt et al., 2009, p. 57). The term *female tokenism* describes how women holding top positions in the labor market are used as proof that gender equality has been established (Schmitt et al., 2009, p. 52). The women who excel in their professional careers thus become symbols of gender equality, even though women continue to be structurally disadvantaged and often have to adapt to male-dominated business-environments and perform better than male managers to receive recognition (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 147; Bourdieu, 2001, p. 67).

According to research, choice-terminology is similarly used to downplay structural gender inequality. It is a common understanding within companies that women *choose* to *opt out* of their career aspirations due to a *preference* of prioritizing family obligations (Kalev & Deutsch, 2006, p. 260). Refusing to pay “the price of success” by spending less time with family, is thus seen as women’s personal choice and used to present gender segregation in the labor market as a natural consequence of men’s and women’s different priorities and interests. However, Kalev and Deutsch (2006, p. 206) as well as Sørensen (2017, p. 299) argue that women’s so-called choice of opting out is structurally conditioned. Pedulla and Thebaud also note that what seems like hardwired gender differences are in fact institutional constraints (2015, p. 118).

### **1.3.3 Gender roles in Ukraine**

Knowledge of gender roles in Ukraine is important to understand the unconscious schemes of perception that Ukrainian managers may be influenced by. When asked personally, a high share of unemployed women in Ukraine mark family responsibilities as the key reason for their

unemployment. 45.7 percent of all unemployed women mark 'Housewife-status' as their reason of unemployment. This goes for about 80 percent of women below the age of 40 (Libanova et al., 2012, p. 16). In a survey, 69 percent of Ukrainian men stated that a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family (UNFPA, 2018, p. 66). 24 percent of men agreed that if there are children in the household, women should not work (UNFPA, 2018, p. 66). Women's role in Ukrainian society is thus tied to family responsibilities and not to wage earning, which is considered a more masculine playing field. 81 percent of women and 84 percent of men believe that a man should be able to provide for his family, completely (2018, p. 64). In the UNFPA-survey (2018, p. 66) one fifth of Ukrainian men state that a woman with the same qualifications cannot do as good of a job as a man, and two fifths believe that men make better businessmen than women. There are thus clear signs of discriminative views of women's skills in Ukrainian society.

According to research, it is a common understanding that women in Ukraine are more costly and unstable employees than men due to their family responsibilities (Libanova et al., 2012, p. 99). According to Ukrainian law, women are not allowed to go on business trips, work night-shifts, etc. while their children are under the age of three (Koriukalov, 2014, p. 38). Such regulations, that are instated to protect women, can be harmful for women's likelihood of being hired for certain positions (Koriukalov, 2014, p. 38). For protective reasons, Soviet legislation prohibited women from performing 450-500 professions up until 2017. This includes some driving professions, mining, military service, etc. (Libanova et al., 2012, p. 156; Shandra, 2017). This legislation thus supports and reproduces gender roles in Ukrainian society and impacts women's access to paid labor.

The gender roles within the family in Post-Soviet Ukraine are often explained as a return to neo-traditionalist, pre-Soviet family values (Zhurzhenko, 2001, p. 39-40). While Western cultures tend to see the private sphere, the home, as a locus of gender inequality, Post-Soviet cultures consider the private home a locus of resistance towards the communist regime (Metcalf & Afanassieva, 2005, p. 398). Gender roles and inequality are therefore often considered a "non-issue" in Post-Soviet Ukraine (Metcalf & Afanassieva, 2005, p. 401).

## Conclusions to Chapter 1

To sum up, the theoretical base of the study consists of two parts: 1) the performativity of strategically covert and overt company-practices and 2) the unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation. I consider overt practices to be positive elements of the workplace culture that the managers enhance to put the company in a good light. Covert practices, on the other hand, are negative elements of the workplace culture that managers seek to hide to protect the company-reputation. The (c)overt actions are analyzed from a performativity-perspective, considering both the office-setting and the actions of the individual interviewees (Goffman, 1959, p. 49-50). The analysis of strategically (c)overt practices is informed by the two definitions of equality, *gender equality* and *gender equity*. Furthermore, I will use the two ideal-typical arguments for employing women, the *meritocratic* argument that men and women are alike, and the *special contribution* argument that women contribute with something different than men. The unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation as defined by Bourdieu, are naturalized norms and values that shape practices. The analysis of the unconscious schemes is informed by research on stereotypes about men's and women's skills, the ideal worker, female tokenism, the female choice of opting out and gender roles in Ukraine.

## **CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDS OF STUDYING GENDER (IN)EQUALITY AT THE WORKPLACE**

In order to investigate overt and covert practices in Scandinavian businesses in Ukraine, I have conducted an ethnographic study, generating data based on observations and interviews with managers. In this chapter, I will first outline my methodological approach alongside my epistemological and ontological starting points. This is followed by my methodological choices in terms of methods, sampling criteria, etc. After presenting my choices in relation to data-treatment, I will discuss my ethical considerations and my performative role in the field.

### **2.1 Critical management studies**

In order to best explore the performative behavior of the companies, I have leaned on a methodological branch of Critical Management Studies that is inspired by Judith Butler's understanding of performativity (Riach et al. 2016, p. 269; Butler, 2007, p. 34, 190). Critical management studies offer a broad range of approaches to research that are critical towards management and systems of domination, such as patriarchal structures and capitalist systems (Alvesson et al., 2011, p. 1). Critical management studies thus differ from classical management studies in being critical towards their immediate subject, management, and in some cases towards their own methodological practices (Alvesson et al., 2011, p. 2). Riach et al. (2016) are some of the critical management researchers that have taken measures to be critical towards their own research practices through a Butlerian methodology. This methodology entails that both the researcher and the interviewees are performative actors that shape the data. According to Butler, performative acts of speaking and writing cause things to come into existence. (Butler, 2007, p. 34; Ford et al., 2008, p. 5). Butler (2007, p. 190) thereby suggests that performativity is not merely an act of expressing oneself but also an act of creating – both on the part of the researcher and on the part of the interviewees. Data is therefore not gathered but generated (Riach et al., 2016, p. 2072). According to Butlerian methodology, openness towards the interviewees ensures nuance and room for reflection, which ultimately reveals the structures that are present within the organization. On this basis, Riach et al. argue for an anti-narrative approach that seeks to challenge the rehearsed, coherent, tight-knitted narratives of interviewees. By asking questions that range from widely abstract to very specific, the managers are forced to move outside of their common narrative and the coherence becomes difficult to maintain. In the lack

of coherence, in the ambiguity, the inner workings of the organization become visible. While being critical of management, I seek to approach the interviewees with openness in order to understand the workplace that they run (Alvesson et al., 2011, p. 7). My purpose is thus not to reveal dishonesty or problematic behavior in the managers, but rather to explore the gendered structures that they shape and are shaped by.

My orientation towards *women's lives* may be slightly conflicting with the Butlerian term of performativity, as she argues for studying gender as performative and non-static, whereby she encourages a decomposition of gendered norms in society without imposing other norms (Butler, 2007, p. 18). As this study builds on existing knowledge of what is *beneficial* for *female employees*, I risk presenting women as a coherent group with inherent qualities and common interests, which may constitute men and women as the logical subjects of analysis (Butler, 2007, p. 6). Though I do claim to address female challenges in the labor market, I have sought to explore different female truths by bringing up examples of women of different ages, family relations, job-positions and sexualities in the interviews. Furthermore, by mapping the managers' binary perceptions of gender, the totalitarian structures they are subject to become visible through research and thereby easier to critically address and decompose (Butler, 2007, p. 18).

I take an ontological and epistemological stance that leans towards critical realism (Danermark et al., 2005). I take the approach that society consists of complex networks of structures and causes that are only partially accessible to us through their observable symptoms, for instance oral expressions and behavior. It is thus possible to investigate the different structures that shape and are shaped by the company's performative practices (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 43). With a critical realist approach, I recognize that gendered structures are rigid without denying the possibility of mobilizing change, for instance through performativity. Human actions are not *determined* by structures, but merely *conditioned* by them (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 56). Societies are open, non-static systems that can change as a result of human agency (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 187). However, societies are highly unlikely to change randomly, and they never change unconditionally (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 187). Besides the emancipatory potential in human agency, I see an emancipatory potential in revealing structures and power relations in the labor market (Jackson, 2011, p. 93, Abbott et al., 2006, p. 379).

## **2.2 An ethnographic approach to data generation**

Through an ethnographic study, I have come to explore overt and covert gender equality practices and perceptions amongst managers in Scandinavian businesses in Ukraine. Coming into the field to study gender equality in Scandinavian businesses, I didn't know how to go about it. I was curious about what ambiguities and opportunities would emerge from the merging of Scandinavian and Ukrainian business culture, but I had limited knowledge about Ukrainian society and the world of business, and I couldn't find any former research on Scandinavian businesses in Ukraine. An ethnographic approach has allowed me to stay open and follow different leads during the first few months of my exchange in Kyiv (September 2019-January 2020). Entering the field, I lived with a Ukrainian family, studied at the university, met with the Ukrainian-Scandinavian Center, wrote e-mails to the Scandinavian embassies and sought to approach the topic of Scandinavian companies through conversations with Ukrainian colleagues and gender studies scholars. I also joined Facebook groups for business expats in Ukraine. This gave me insights in Ukrainian society and Scandinavian communities. Yet I had trouble gaining access and pinning down my specific interest.

The breaking point came when I managed to get myself invited to a CSR-networking event for the members of Swedish Business Association, an organization that enhances business relations between Sweden and Ukraine. It became my primary gateway to the field. After an awkward half hour of mingling, the coordinator calls our attention and introduces the three female and three male presenters. He ends his speech with an: "...And as you can see, we have gender equality in the panel". He laughs delightedly and looks towards me. The presenters take turn presenting their CSR-initiatives. The self-praise at the event is evident, and their self-presentations intrigue me, especially because I become curious as to know what is beneath the polished surface of declared gender equality and elevated business ethics. This interest, I later pursued through semi-structured in-depth interviews.

### **2.2.1 Moving beyond corporate shields - semi-structured in-depth interviews**

In order to understand the complexity and ambiguity of the gender equality approach of Scandinavian businesses in Ukraine, I found it fruitful to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with CEOs and HR-managers.

The semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed me to have context-specific and nuanced conversations (Packer, 2011, p. 43). It gave me the chance to adapt to the specificities of the individual interviewee, and it gave me the freedom of asking explorative and clarifying questions. For a more intersectional approach to gender, I also use the explorative questions to include age, poverty, sexuality, ethnicity and different life-situations in the reflexive practice (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 48). In these detailed conversations, the covert elements of the corporate practices are revealed, as the narratives are deconstructed and questioned. In line with Riach et al.'s anti-narrative approach, the managers are thus encouraged to move beyond the official corporate statements and reveal ambiguity within an otherwise coherent organizational narrative (2016, p. 2077)

My interview guide is a mix of abstract discussions about gender equality and more specific discussion of working environment, hiring practices and corporate policies<sup>3</sup>. I adapted the interview-guide to fit the individual companies based on their websites and elements in their codes of conduct. Also, I made alterations depending on whether I was interviewing the CEO or an HR-manager. In developing the interview-guide, I found inspiration in sociological literature about gender equality in the labor market and gender stereotypes in hiring (Acker 1990, Rivera 2015, Alvesson & Billing 2009). Questions related to corporate policies are based on existing research of what is important to women's career opportunities, for instance work-life balance and flexibility (Wayne & Casper, 2016, p. 470). All of the interviewees signed a contract in which I specified how the data is used, kept and anonymized. Furthermore, the contract informed them about their right to withdraw during and/or after the interview<sup>4</sup>.

### **2.2.2 Interviewing managers as carriers of corporate culture**

I have chosen to interview managers, because there is a need for in-depth case studies of how managers contribute to creating, reproducing or disrupting gendered practices and perceptions in the workplace organization (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 187). Though I recognize the importance of the collective in creating a corporate culture (Brewis & Jack, 2011, p. 240), I believe that the decisions of management set the framework for the formal and informal culture

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the specific questions, see the standardized version of the interview-guide in Appendix B

<sup>4</sup> The interviewees were given a 2-month period after the interview to withdraw completely. One interviewee requested to see the quotations used. He had no remarks.



within companies. I have chosen to interview CEO's or HR-managers, specifically, because they are normally the ones making decisions regarding new hires and working environment, which according to research are quite defining for the degree of gender equality within a workplace (Pyle, 2006, p. 85).

I have abstained from interviewing employees about discrimination, because I would have too little control over the consequences hereof. By not interviewing regular employees, I do not gain knowledge about how discrimination is experienced within the companies. However, I come to understand some of the norms that shape the conditions for the employees in the companies. Conducting focus group interviews would have shown gender dynamics, interaction and potentially conflict within the company. However, focus groups within workplaces are for the most part ethically irresponsible, because anonymity is hard to ensure and employees' critical utterances may provoke sanctions from their superiors (Smithson, 2008, p. 9, 20). However, when companies have chosen for me to meet with two or more managers, I have accepted. Making extensive observations in the offices would have given me more insight in collegial interaction in daily life. However, with my lack of Ukrainian and Russian language skills, I would risk misunderstanding situations of interaction.

Forcing managers to reflect upon gender, even if it is normally not on their radar, implies a risk of overreporting the importance of gender within the companies. In order to avoid such biases, I approach the topic from different angles during the interviews, which leads some interviewees to reveal their skepticism towards gender equality and modify the importance of the matter. Being the primary decision-makers, I see great emancipatory potential in encouraging managers to reflect upon gender, because they have the power to change company-policies and practices.

### **2.2.3 Sampling Scandinavian companies with socially responsible profiles**

I interviewed managers in a total of 10 companies. By the last few companies, I experienced a certain saturation, as patterns and themes were repeated across the companies (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1898). After interviewing a few managers from the networking event based on spontaneous, opportunistic sampling (Patton, 1990, p. 114), I did a stratified purposeful sampling, looking for companies with a social profile above average (Patton, 1990, p. 110). To identify these companies, I conducted a simple content-analysis of the websites of 170 Scandinavian

companies in Ukraine<sup>5</sup>. 42 companies lived up to all four of my sampling criteria, and I invited them all to participate in the study, first by e-mail, then by phone-calls<sup>6</sup>. In the following paragraphs, I describe and motivate the four criteria:

*I have chosen to interview companies from Denmark, Sweden and Norway*, because Scandinavian companies have a positive and homogenous reputation in Ukraine. The Norwegian, Swedish and Danish labor market models may not be completely alike, but they are very similar, and the nuances are not part of the Ukrainian debate (Schramm-Nielsen, 2018, p. 4). Also, focusing on all of Scandinavia makes it easier to secure the anonymity of the companies. If I remove country-affiliation, it allows me to report their actual field of business, which gives a stronger understanding of the companies' specific points of departure (e.g. software, industry, service). Investigating differences within Scandinavian is beyond the scope of this study.

*I have chosen companies that claim to have a socially responsible conduct*. This was done through an analysis of website-content, identifying companies that *formally* and/or *informally* show concern about gender equality and diversity<sup>7</sup>. Formal social responsibility refers to official policies and CSR-practices related to gender. Informal social responsibility refers to the mentioning of flexibility, the importance of employees' wellbeing, etc. I thus only included companies that overtly consider themselves good employers. Based on their profile, the companies *should have* some reflections on gender and diversity, and they are more likely to be willing to discuss and improve their current practices.

*I have limited my sample to companies that work mainly business-to-business (B2B)*, selling their product or services to other companies. I have chosen to investigate B2B-companies, because they are in direct contact with other company-practices, which makes them able to reflect on their own practices in comparison with others in the market. The B2B-focus hence makes it possible to learn about the challenges that arise when different business-standards meet.

*I have solely included companies that are based in Kyiv*. Research shows that there are quite big regional differences in business regulation and business culture within Ukraine, making it more sensible to compare companies that operate in the same region (Diez et al., 2016, p. 640). Furthermore, I had my base in Kyiv during the data collection, and only contacting companies

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of my approach to the content analysis of websites, see Appendix D

<sup>6</sup> See recruitment letter in Appendix A

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of my approach to the content analysis of websites, see Appendix D

locally allowed me the flexibility of scheduling and rescheduling interviews with very short notice, which was relevant in multiple occasions, because my informants are busy people.

In sampling these companies, there are certain biases that should be considered. Firstly, the success of a company is closely tied to its reputation, wherefore it is assumable that any company with impressive corporate culture would make it publicly known. However, older and more established companies are often more advanced in terms of written policies, which might have made me exclude young, small companies. I have sought to compensate for this bias by not excluding companies that do not have an official code of conduct and also paying attention to the informal message they convey through their company descriptions. Secondly, I only managed to get in touch with companies with international profiles and highly educated English-speaking staff. When calling companies, the secretaries would often hang up at the sound of an English speaker. One even greeted me with a careful “goodbye please”. This means that companies with non-English speaking staff are not included in this study. Besides this skewed selection in the sampling, the types of companies I have interviewed are typical for Scandinavian businesses in the Ukrainian market.

#### **2.2.4 Decolonizing data through reflexivity**

To ensure validity and ethical integrity, I seek to make my knowledge production transparent, critical and situated by avoiding colonizing tendencies and universal truth claims (Lykke, 2010, p. 41). This means that I reflect upon my position in the field and ensure intersectionality in the knowledge production (Lykke, 2010, p. 157).

Reflexivity is a central element in anti-narrative methodology as well as in most other feminist approaches to knowledge generation. Donna Haraway suggests that it is crucial that researchers are conscious of their own position in society and how this affects their interpretations and previous knowledge of a field (Abbott et al., 2006, p. 381). Coming into a post-Soviet field as a white, middle-class, educated, able, Danish woman, it is key that I reflexively explore my own position and situate the knowledge’s point of origin (Lykke, 2010, p. 136; Danermark et al., 2005, p. 83). Looking at myself as a performative actor is a means of ensuring reflexivity on my part. In the following I will present my performative role in the data generation.

To reduce suspicion and skepticism on the part of the interviewees, I openly told companies that I wanted to talk to them, because they were socially responsible and hence an inspiration

to other companies. Telling them this and presenting myself as an uncritical admirer of their work is a pragmatic, performative attempt of gaining enough trust to be allowed to visit the companies and to ensure that they feel safe to reflect upon their organization and show vulnerability. Throughout the data generation, I attempted to act professionally, both in writing polite and formal e-mails and by wearing elegant, simple clothes. However, I sought to show integrity and relatability by looking casual and avoiding business clichés such as blazers and briefcases.

During the interviews, I play quite a lot on being an insider to Scandinavian culture, and as they talk to me as a fellow Scandinavian, it becomes clear how they interpret Scandinavian culture. Being Scandinavian was also my key of access in many situations. The people who heard I was Scandinavian or had a connection to Scandinavia were more willing to meet with me or to help me set up an interview. Though the interviewees reveal ambiguity in their gender equality approach, I do not confront them with it directly. I performatively pretend that I do not notice the ambiguity, staying friendly and asking more wondering questions. In this regard, I also play on being an outsider to Ukrainian culture and law, because this allows me to ask critical questions disguised as a lack of knowledge about Ukraine. I acted neutrally and responsively without criticizing their views or showing strong skepticism of their practices (Packer 2011, p. 49). Downplaying my critical angle may seem deceptive. However, this approach was necessary to have an open conversation about their practices. I listened to the interviewees with care and genuine wonder, allowing them to present their position. Though critical of management, I am not out to hit managers in the head. Rather, the purpose is to reveal the structures and cross-cultural dynamics that they are subject to. The kind of nuance that I seek to bring forth is simply not achievable through attacks.

In order to ensure the intersectionality of my approach, I attempt to take on the standpoint of various groups in society. Though I am not myself a mother, I have forced myself to reflect upon the needs and challenges parents have, both by talking to parents in Ukrainian society and by reading existing studies about such aspects. Furthermore, I use supplementary interviews to gain nuance and look for alternative explanations within the field. By not forcing Western explanations upon the Ukrainian context, I thus use these supplementary expert interviews to *decolonize* the study. Drawing on the analytical capacity of two local NGO's working politically with gender equality in the labor market, W-Tech and Fulcrum, helped me define the discriminatory problems and to assess the viability of different solutions in a way that is more grounded

in the cultural context. I also interviewed a representative from the Swedish Business Association to gain some perspective on their role and broad knowledge of Scandinavian and Ukrainian business culture. Fulcrum, W-tech and Swedish Business Association have all agreed to share their perspectives non-anonymously. The main data is further supplemented with observations from a networking event and from the company offices<sup>8</sup>. The data triangulation thus decolonizes the data, as it keeps viewpoints multiple and non-hegemonic (Lykke, 2010, p. 154). Moreover, the supplementary data serves to confirm tendencies in the main data (Small, 2011, p. 63).

## **2.3 Data-treatment**

In order to ensure transparency, I will introduce and argue for my choices related to data-treatment. This includes my transcription-strategy, my coding-strategy and my anonymization-strategy. Along with this, Table 1 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the companies in the study.

### **2.3.1 Transcription style**

In order to gain in-depth familiarity with the interviews, I have transcribed all of the interviews. Though some details are distorted and potentially lost in the transition from audio to text, for instance tone of voice, processing the interviews in this manner increases awareness of the word-by-word content of the interviews (Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1277). In addition, text-versions are more amenable for coding and data-analysis. My decisions regarding transcription are made with the research purpose in mind. I have put content first, meaning that I have not transcribed the spoken language exactly as spoken (Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1277). Linguistic mistakes and unintended sounds - such as clearing one's throat or using fill-words - have thus not been included in the transcribed interviews. However, it is included whenever performative words or sounds, so-called response tokens, are used intentionally to indicate doubt, understanding, etc. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 272). In order to minimize the risk of misinterpretations, the table below shows how certain elements have been denoted in the text-versions of the interviews<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> An example of my fieldnotes can be consulted in Appendix C

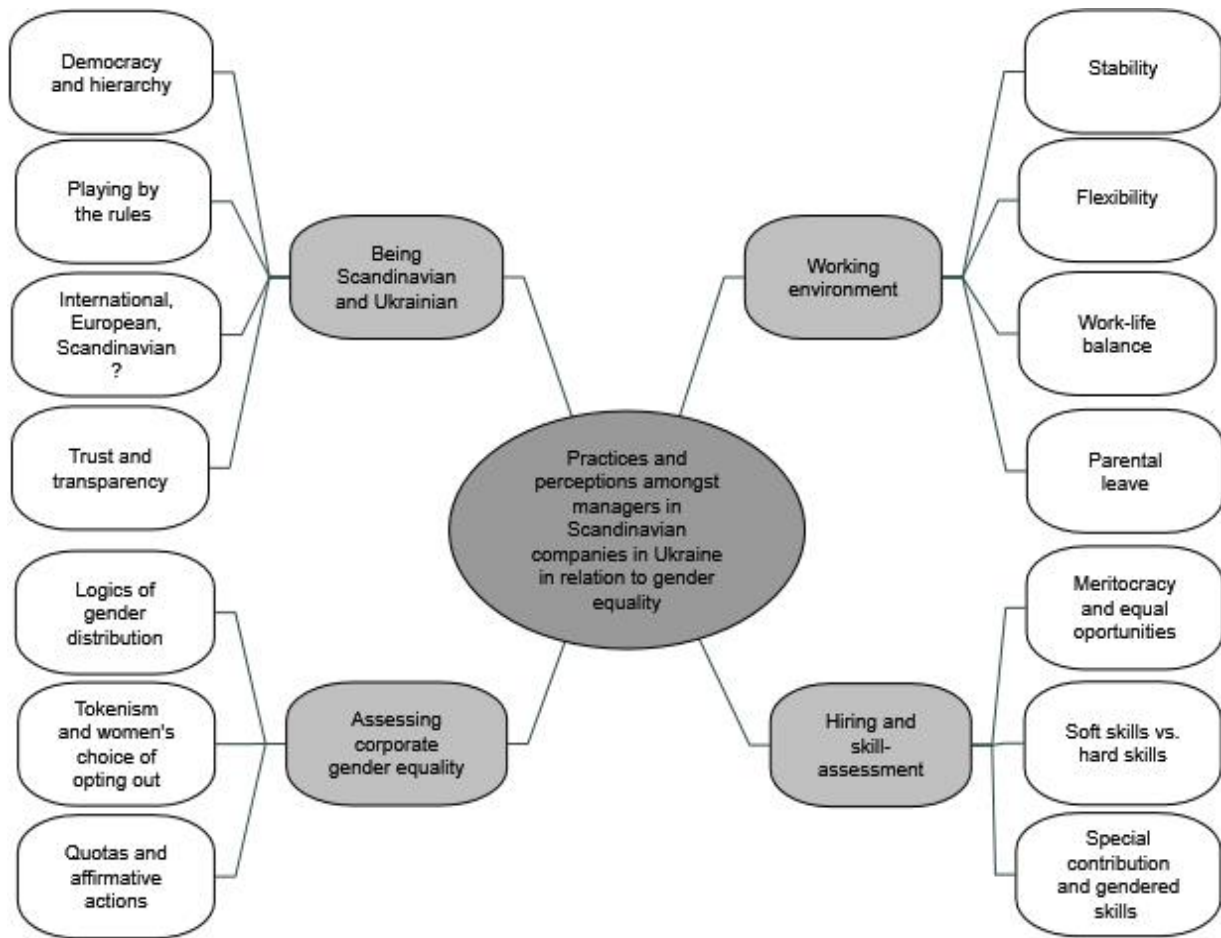
**Table 1 Transcription overview**

<i>Occurrences in the interview</i>	<i>Notation style in the transcribed interview</i>
Interrupted speech	-
Pause	...
Sounds indicating doubt	Uh, Eh
Sounds indicating agreement	Mhm
Sounds indicating understanding	Ah, Oh
Indication of laughter	(laughs)
Distractions or interruptions	(Phone rings) (Phone buzzes) (Person enters)
Clarifications of implicit points	[clarifying note from the author]

### **2.3.2 Thematical coding strategy**

In order to see connections and tendencies in the data, I have coded the transcribed interview using the data analysis software Nvivo. As the research purpose is to investigate ambiguity and nuance, I have taken a thematical approach to coding (Mason, 2002, p. 166; Saldaña, 2009, p. 139). I have made a few theoretical codes such as ‘tokenism’ and ‘meritocracy’ (Saldaña, 2009, p. 163). However, I have been careful not to force the data to fit into theoretical frameworks (Mason, 2002, p. 166). I have created codes to match the content as I read through the data, and for the most part, the same coding categories were relevant for all interviews. The figure below shows the most dominant categories and subcategories in relation to the research question.

**Figure 1 Coding map**



### 2.3.3 Anonymization of interviewees

All the participating companies and interviewees have been promised anonymity. The anonymity of the companies is important, because it allows them to admit things that would else way be damaging for the company to share with outsiders (Ryen, 2002, p. 208). In order to protect the interviewees and live up to my ethical commitments as a researcher, I have carefully anonymized companies and interviewees. All names of managers, companies, country of origin, customers and locations of company offices have been changed or removed. The companies' year of entry to the Ukrainian market and the number of employees has been altered slightly to ensure anonymity. However, the numbers still reflect the approximate size and seniority of the companies. The work-positions and gender of the managers and other employees have not been changed as this information is important to the research and does not threaten the anonymity of the companies. Company products and technologies are left out, as this information is highly specific and of little relevance to the question of gender.

**Table 2 Presentation of interviewees**

<i>Company</i>	<i>Interviewees</i>	<i>Code of conduct</i>	<i>Company characteristics</i>
Industry A	CEO (M) Sales-manager (F)	Yes	An industrial company (2005) with both Ukrainian and international customers. They have 50 employees, excluding drivers and warehouse-workers. 35 percent of the employees are women. The company has a low turnover of employees.
Industry B	CEO (F)	Yes	An industrial company (2006) with Ukrainian customers. They have 50 employees in Ukraine. About 40 percent are women. The company has a low turnover of employees and they pay official salaries. The CEO oversees HR-tasks.
Software A	CEO (M) HR-manager (F) HR-manager (F)	No	A software company (2011) with 400 employees across multiple Ukrainian offices. Approximately 40 percent of the employees are women, and there is a low turnover. The company works with international customers. All employees are hired as independent contractors, but the company provides social benefits and was started as a social enterprise.
Software B	CEO (M) Marketing-manager (F)	No	A software company (2012) with 50 employees in Kyiv. All employees are hired as independent contractors, but the company provides some social benefits. There are a few female developers in the company. More than 50 percent of the managers are women. There is a low turnover of employees. The company works with international customers. The CEO oversees hiring processes.
Software C	Office-manager (F)	No	A software-company (2002) with 1000 employees across multiple Ukrainian offices. According to the Office-manager, maybe 40 percent of the employees are women, and the company has a low turnover. All employees are hired as independent contractors, but the company provides some social benefits.
Software D	HR-manager (F)	No	A software-company (2007) with 300 employees in Kyiv. Almost 50 percent are women. There is a low turnover of employees, and the group of employees is older than that of the average software-company. The company works with international customers.
Software E	HR-manager (F) HR-manager /board-member (F)	Yes	A software-company (2003) with 2000 employees across multiple Ukrainian offices. All employees are hired as independent contractors, but the company provides social benefits. About 32 percent are



			women, and there is a low turnover of employees. The company has international customers.
Software F	HR-manager (F)	No	A software-company (2007) with 200 employees in Kyiv. All employees are hired as independent contractors, but the company provides social benefits. Approximately 35 percent are women, and there is a low turnover of employees. The company has international customers.
Service A	HR-manager (F) Project manager (F)	Yes	A service-company in customer-support (2014) with about 400 employees divided into two Ukrainian offices. About 70 percent are women, and there is a high turnover as the work is stressful and often overseen by students. The company is complacent with the terms outlined in Ukrainian legislation.
Service B	CEO (M) HR-manager (F)	Yes	A service-company in tourism (2004) with 200 employees in Kyiv. Approximately 70 percent of the workers are women, and there is a high turnover of employees. Offers social benefits better than or complacent with Ukrainian legislation.

## Conclusions to Chapter 2

To sum up, the study is methodologically inspired by Riach et al.'s Butlerian methodology within critical management studies. Ontologically and epistemologically, I have taken a critical realist stance, whereby I see social structures and gender structures as rigid but also subject to change through performative practices and perceptions. In order to explore gender equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine, I have conducted an ethnographic study. The main data consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 managers in 10 Scandinavian companies in Kyiv. The interviews are conducted in an anti-narrative fashion, where I seek to break up the coherent narratives that the managers have about the company in order to explore both overt and covert practices. The companies are B2B-companies that overtly showcase a people-oriented, gender equal approach to business. In order to get a thorough insight in the field, I have triangulated in my analysis by supplementing the interviews with participant observation of a networking event, observations from the office environments, content analysis of about 170 company websites and interviews with representatives from The Swedish Business Association and two NGO's that work to promote women's chances in business, Fulcrum and W-Tech. The data has been transcribed and coded in accordance with the research purpose.

## **CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS OF GENDER EQUALITY PRACTICES IN SCANDINAVIAN COMPANIES IN UKRAINE**

In this chapter, I will analyze how the managers performatively present and legitimize company-practices in relation to gender equality. In the analysis, I focus on the construction and rupturing of impressions that performatively plays out between me and the managers. It is thus the performativity of (c)overt equality-practices that guides the analysis, in which I theoretically draw on the concepts of gender equality, gender equity and affirmative action as well as the ideal-typical arguments for hiring women; meritocracy and special contribution. When analyzing the unconscious schemes, I draw on sociological theory of gender-stereotypes, tokenism, women's 'choice' of opting out and gender roles. The analysis is divided into three subchapters. Firstly, I analyze the managers' performative presentation of the working environment within the company, which is highly influenced by their interpretation of Scandinavian culture. Secondly, I analyze how the managers performatively present and legitimize the companies' practices in relation to local labor legislation and internal policies. Thirdly, I analyze the managers' views on gender in relation to professionalism and skills.

### **3.1 The Scandinavian working environment**

When asked to characterize the working environment in their companies, most of the managers start by overtly announcing the qualities that they find admirable about their workplace. In some of the companies, company values are plastered onto doors, walls and windows, overtly showcasing the company's ethical approach to business. The admirable assets are a wide palette of Scandinavian business ethics; including gender equality, anti-discrimination, work-life balance and democratic management. However, in some circumstances, the seemingly overt assets have flip sides. Covertly, they are not unanimously supported nor easily implemented. In the following, I will analyze how the managers performatively present their working environment in relation to Scandinavian culture and work-life balance.

### 3.1.1 Fika and Scandinavian business ethics

Scandinavian culture and internationality are central when the managers describe the working environment in their companies. According to the HR-manager in Software E<sup>10</sup>, “there are some specific Nordic attitudes and approaches that we also somehow integrated”. Many of the managers tie strong company-ethics and gender equality to their Scandinavian roots. In Software F, the HR-manager says that “for us, it is more like common sense this ethical stuff. No tolerance to corruption or some discrimination, this is part of our culture”. When presenting the working environment in Software F, the HR-manager emphasizes Scandinavian management style.

“I: What are people's motivations to work here, can you talk more about that?”

HR: Yes, selling points. Scandinavian management style. And what do we mean? That we have a healthy work-life balance. We don't encourage overtime. (...) So usually we promise that you will have high standard management, so it means that you will be treated with respect, you won't get more jobs than you can finish, and what else? This possibility to travel, some interesting projects of course, and our internal culture. We usually conduct this survey where we measure the satisfaction of people, and one of the highest scores is regarding peer relations. It means we have a good, healthy environment in our organization. And people know there is no place for competition, conflict or something like that.”

The HR-manager places Scandinavian management as a key selling point, an overt quality, involving high quality, respect for the employee, work-life balance and collaborative work-organization. Many of the other managers also overtly point to the fact that they are Scandinavian or Scandinavian-Ukrainian. The HR-manager in Software D says that she thinks it is a “strong selling point” that motivates candidates to work with them, “because all Scandinavian companies are known for their approach to work-life balance”. When asked about the importance of being a Scandinavian company, Industry B replies that “it is core. It depends very much on corporate culture, the way of doing business, the way of communication, the way of communicating between each other, the corporate behavior”. She also notes that being Scandinavian “means premium quality”, whereby Industry B uses the Scandinavian roots of the

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<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the company profiles, see Table 2, pp. 26-27

company to boost their reputation. The companies thus overtly play on their Scandinavian roots when they present themselves to partners, customers and job-candidates.

The Scandinavian roots are also performatively enhanced in informal daily interaction. For instance, Swedish Business Association served *fika*<sup>11</sup> at their networking event and used Swedish words to greet the guests. Some of the companies in this study also practice *fika*, and all the companies, except Service B and Industry B, mentioned social events as an important part of their culture. The social events span from yearly parties and running clubs to weekly breakfasts and Friday bars. Drawing on such elements of Scandinavian culture thus becomes a way of emphasizing a Scandinavian community. Similarly, many of the offices performatively demonstrate the companies' Scandinavian roots in the interior design. There are books about Scandinavia in the reception, pictures of Scandinavian nature on the walls, polaroid pictures from the latest business trip to Denmark on the fridge and little flags from the company's country of origin in the meeting rooms. The flags and Scandinavian sceneries are used performatively to make the Scandinavian roots visible in the physical space (Goffman, 1959, p. 49). The elements of Scandinavian culture lead insiders as well as outsiders to think of the company as Scandinavian, with all the business ethics and practices it entails. They are overt symbols that the companies pertain to a broader set of Scandinavian values and ethical business conduct.

Scandinavian identity is thus used performatively to present and shape the culture of the company and create a sense of a Scandinavian, international working environment. In line with this overt Scandinavian performativity, some of the companies structure their working environment after principles of work-life balance.

### **3.1.2 Work-life balance**

Work-life balance in the form of little to no overtime is presented as part of the working environment in four out of six software-companies (Software A, Software B, Software D, Software F). When asked if the employees appreciate the work-life balance-initiatives, the HR-manager of Software F says that "a lot of them have family, children, and to work in a very high pace is good for a short term project or a very ambitious project, but for people who want to have a long term assignment and look for stability and some predictability in their lives, they prefer

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<sup>11</sup> Term for a typical Swedish tradition of socializing over coffee and sweets

companies like ours”. Work-life balance is thus described as a stable and family-friendly way of organizing work. In a society where family-obligations primarily rest on women, work-life balance initiatives help to level the playing field for men and women, because being able to work overtime seems to be a competitive advantage. The main feature making men *ideal workers* is compensated for through the affirmative action of work-life balance (Acker, 1990).

Work-life balance, which is also closely tied to the managers’ perception of Scandinavian business culture, is also shown in the office space. Especially in IT-companies, where activity rooms, cozy kitchens, exercise equipment and lounge areas bear witness of a fun, stress-free environment (Goffman, 1959, p. 49-50). In one of the IT-companies, entering the office resembles entering a private home, taking off your shoes, chitchatting in the kitchen and feeding the hamsters. The performance of stress-free, family-atmosphere - that is effortlessly conveyed in many of the IT-companies - is a struggle for Service A to implement. In this quote, the HR-manager in Service A describes how she struggles to make her colleagues adapt a positive European work-spirit.

“HR: We see it when we come to Europe. We see people smile everywhere. You can smile, and it is fine for you. In Ukraine, do you see people smiling in the streets? (...) By the way, we try to cultivate that from the very first day, because we also have that problem. People come here, and every day they come to the office like, ‘hi’ [deep, monotonous voice]. And no smile, nothing. And we have to talk to those people to give them a clear understanding that you are working in an international environment - you have to be polite, you have to smile, it is important.”

The HR-manager wants her colleagues to be happy and polite, though she thinks it is unnatural for Ukrainian employees. She would like the employees to act the part. They should take part in the European performativity to obtain the international, positive culture that she would like the company to have. The HR-manager thus seems to believe that the overt *performance* of happiness makes the company more European *in practice*, much in line with Butlerian performativity (Riach et al., 2016). However, her overt performance of being European is disturbed by the employees, who reveal the company as non-European - or covertly Ukrainian – through their behavior. Service A thus wants to be European. However, encouraging employees to perform happiness may make the company seem more European on the surface, but it does not address the poor working conditions that may cause unhappy workers in the first place.

In many of the companies that do not offer work-life balance, including Service A, stress is an issue. When I start inquiring about why people quit their job, the managers of Industry A, Service A and Service B reveal that the employees experience a lot of pressure and stress in the workplace, causing them to quit. Stress is thus a covert element of the working environment in these companies. In Service A, this covert fact is legitimized and excused by presenting how management is about to take care of the issue. For instance, the HR-manager is considering offering stress-management courses and education in handling agitated customers. However, the HR-manager of Service A notes that stress is considered “silly” in Ukraine. She thus legitimizes the company’s challenges by stating how *she* has a Scandinavian perspective on things, but she is challenged by the unconscious scheme of perception *amongst the employees*, whom do not consider stress to be a serious issue due to their Ukrainian mentality.

There is thus a tendency to use Scandinavian business culture as an overt demarcation of ethical conduct. The companies are inspired by work-life balance initiatives and Scandinavian traditions. Though the managers admit some challenges related to establishing a Scandinavian workplace in Ukraine, the Scandinavian traits are part of overtly conveying a good, gender-equal working environment, where people are respected.

## **3.2 Playing by the rules?**

Following local law is a key-element in all the companies’ overt self-presentation, and they use it actively to explain how they are different from local Ukrainian enterprises. In the following, I will analyze how the managers perceive the local legislation and how they build their own social systems. This includes an analysis of their approaches to parental leave and policies from the Scandinavian headquarters.

### **3.2.1 Constructing a social system**

The Scandinavian companies’ law-abiding practices make them providers of stability, which they overtly express. In Industry A, the official salaries are the first thing the CEO mentions when asked about the benefits of working in the company. All contracted workers in Ukraine are entitled to job security, vacation, parental leave and sick-leave according to Ukrainian law, but *de facto*, following labor law is not a given in Ukraine (Chepurko, 2010, p. 29). The two

industrial companies and the two service companies therefore take great pride in following the law and offering fair, stable employment. The CEO of Service B describes the benefits like this:

“CEO: With us, you have orderly conditions – you have a contract that is respected to the point, you have health insurance that covers up to two children. You don’t have that in the café down the street. But you might get more money. And they [the workers] might need that, but I can’t do anything about the salary. Money is more tangible. Especially if you get a low salary. 20 percent is a lot, if you are trying to make ends meet. But there are also those who say ‘I want orderly conditions’. When a child has a sick-day, it is in accordance with local regulation”

The CEO thus covertly admits that the company cannot offer competitive salaries, which is also the case for Service A. The CEO legitimizes this covert practice by emphasizing the company’s overt practice offering orderly, lawful conditions. He thus legitimizes the low salaries by pointing to the many other benefits of working in Service B. He thus performatively downplays the importance of the low salaries by emphasizing the social security that the company provides.

In the IT-sector, where salaries are five to seven times higher than the average salary in Ukraine, the situation is different. As “the entire IT-sector is evading the taxation system” (CEO, Software B), the IT-companies do not have to provide social benefits for their workers. Even so, most of the software-companies in this study offer extensive social benefits. The CEO of Software A describes it like this: “IT-companies in Ukraine usually work in a bit of a parallel world, including us, which means that everyone is contracted as consultants. So basically, we are not part of the normal labor legislation, which also means that in a way, we construct our own social system”. Software A and all the other IT-companies in this study have hardly any legal obligations in relation to social benefits, but they choose playing by an extended set of rules. They construct their own social system, providing health insurance, etc. for their consultants<sup>12</sup>. The HR-manager in Software D says that “we work according to our (Ukrainian) legislation, and all the good stuff from Oslo is just on top of that”. The companies thus present the Ukrainian

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<sup>12</sup> Health insurance is not a legal requirement for companies in Ukraine. However, it is common amongst international companies.

legislation as a baseline, and they overtly present how they provide better conditions and benefits than the labor legislation demands, even though they do not have to offer anything at all.

Even so, only two of the IT-companies work with principles of gender equity and affirmative action in their 'social systems'. Software A offers parental leave directed towards both men and women, whereby they actively try to push men to also take an active part in parenting. Furthermore, they target women in their educational programs. In Software E, social benefits are distributed depending on the social group.

“HR: Part time is divided by two types. The first type is contractors who choose to work part-time. They have no benefits from the company. The second type of part-timers are mostly two categories: Students and working mothers - or in case if it is the working father also, so the person taking care of the children. And these two categories get a full compensation benefit package, for instance vacation, illness, etc. Because in my opinion working mothers are doing extra work, because when she comes from our job, she is still on the job if she has kids”

The company thus overtly recognizes studying and parenting as work. Overtly considering home obligations as actual work shows awareness of the structural conditions for mothers in the tension field between family and work, unpaid work and paid work. Mothers do not simply *choose to opt-out* and work part-time out of preference, but out of a necessity to carry a double burden. By distributing services depending on the needs of certain groups, the company follows principles of affirmative action and gender equity. The “powerful social benefits” help the company to hire women, the HR-manager adds. Affirmative actions and awareness of women’s structural challenges are not too common in the 10 companies as most of the managers consider equal treatment fairer than differentiated treatment. This is further analyzed in subchapter 3.3.

### **3.2.2 Parental leave**

In most of the companies, parental leave equals maternity leave, because: “in terms of paternity leave, I think you know that it is not really common in Ukraine to take a paternity leave (laughs)” (HR-manager, Software C). Though some of the managers state that they are open to sending fathers on paternity leave, “if it happens”, most of the managers consistently speak of women as the users of parental leave (Software C). The HR-manager in Software F notes how maternity leave is more of a “case by case situation”, because it does not happen very often,



considering that 65 percent of the employees are men. The unconscious scheme of perception that women take care of children thus seems to prevail in these companies as a naturalized norm, though they show awareness that paternity leave is more common in Scandinavia. The CEO of Industry B notes that “it is a kind of mindset, it is not so popular”. She thus shows awareness that gender roles are a matter of mindset rather than a natural division of labor. However, the company does not address this division. As the only company in the study, Software A offers parental leave for both men and women and advocate for men to take parental leave. The HR-manager further states that this arrangement has been used by a few men in the company. This information is overtly shared with me during the interview, but the CEO reflects upon how the company would have more social influence in Ukraine if they were more overt about their parental-leave system outside of the company itself to inspire others (Software A).

In the other software-companies, Software A included, financial bonuses, flexibility and part-time work are rather common ways of offering women good conditions after maternity leave. According to the HR-manager in Software D “this company is a quite good place for mothers. There is flexibility, a good salary, and in the environment, there are a lot of kids”. The CEO of Industry B also describes how she personally benefitted from the company’s flexibility, when she was on maternity leave. She describes these policies as “quite progressive”. A gradual return to the workplace after maternity leave is presented as a standard procedure in all the IT-companies. However, flexible arrangements for mothers are not a given in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. According to the CEO of Service B, people need to work full-time by law, wherefore “they have to reintegrate themselves”. Most of the companies guarantee that mothers can have their job back after maternity leave. A few of the IT-companies and one of the industrial companies cannot guarantee that she can return to the same position. This is legitimized by pointing to the brief nature of certain IT-projects and the difficulty of hiring a temporary replacement. Simply offering women to come back to the workplace after maternity leave is considered high standards in a Ukrainian context, whereby the covert fact that the women cannot return to the same position is presented as a minor detail.

### **3.2.3 Legislative cherry-picking**

Though all the companies overtly emphasize that they act in accordance with local legislation, some of the companies admit interpreting the law a bit freely in some circumstances. According

to the CEO of Service B, his company lives up to the minimum requirements and oftentimes more. However, he also reveals a willingness to bend the rules.

“CEO: (...) We follow the regulations of the country, as a minimum. It might be that we do more in some regards, but that is up to us then.

I: As I understand it, some of the rules are completely insane. Can't you be forced to ignore the legislation, if it is completely out of sync with reality?

CEO: If we do ignore it, then it would be because we maybe do something that is better for our employees or better for the company”.

This passage shows that the company overtly sells itself as an employer that provides ‘orderly conditions’ in accordance with Ukrainian law or even better. However, when I performatively position myself as a criticizer of the Ukrainian legislation, the CEO becomes comfortable enough to admit that if it benefits the employees or the company, the company might be a bit loose when it comes to following the labor legislation. This covert admitting of not doing what is *right* is legitimized by doing what is *best*. The company thus feels entitled to make judgments of what is best in a given situation. The extent of the legal offenses cannot be derived from the interview, and it must be considered that I performatively made it seem okay to break the law. However, single-handedly deciding what is best for the employees is a slippery slope. And if what is best for the company is *not* what is best for the employees, whose interests will have priority? In Software D, the HR-manager reveals that the company ignores the seniority that women accumulate during maternity leave.

“HR: Yes. It is still work experience according to our law. I would say, it is probably not fair, but it is our law, even if you are out of the office for a whole year, it is your employment history. I think in this way, our law tries to protect women, and it is good. (...) I agree, when mothers were promoted after maternity leave, usually they have to work one year in the office, and then they might get promoted.

I: Yeah, so you don't come back and immediately gain a new position.

HR: No, no, no, no, no.”

On paper, women on maternity leave in Software D accumulate seniority. In practice, the company ignores the work experience accumulated during maternity leave and promotes women long after they have returned to the workplace. She thinks that accumulating seniority without having to work is skewing the opportunities of men and women, whereby the gender equality is compromised. However, the laws are instated to ensure gender equity, because maternity leave places women in a structurally weaker position in terms of building a career (Libanova et al., 2012, p. 16). This covert practice again shows a sense of entitlement within the company to do what they personally think is fairest. Furthermore, it shows an opposition towards differentiated treatment of men and women. The affirmative action of accumulating seniority during maternity leave is seen as lowering the bar rather than leveling the playing field.

### **3.2.4 When internal policies fall short**

Many of the companies overtly present their codes of conduct, internal values and education programs to performatively underscore their ethical business conduct in terms of gender equality. However, when asking specific questions about the usage of the policies, it becomes apparent that they oftentimes fall short or are difficult to implement. For instance, the CEO of Industry B overtly presents a program for women's development, but as it turns out, the program is not used in Ukraine.

“CEO: Now within the company we even have a program for women's development. For instance, if you are working in customer support, but you would like to be a salesman or a technician. If you don't have the required background, we have a special training program which allows you to transfer and to be more integrated in the business.

I: Do they then come to you and say, 'I would really like to get another position, can you help me get there?', or how does it work?

CEO: Uh, here in Ukraine, I don't have such cases where someone came to me and said: 'I would like to change', because they understand that the profile is completely different. When you are working in the front office, in sales, you need to travel a lot, and you need to drive. It is very exhausting, I mean, and it is not so natural for women to drive hundreds of kilometers. That is quite exhausting.”

In this situation, the CEO overtly presents a program for women's development, to performatively underline how the company is gender equal and takes affirmative action. However, once I ask how the program functions, it becomes apparent that the program is covertly not implemented. The CEO of Industry B demonstrates an unconscious scheme of perception and appreciation, where driving is viewed as a male activity. To protect women, several driving professions were prohibited for women by Soviet legislation up until 2017, which may have shaped driving as a masculine field in Ukraine. Women's so-called "natural" skills and preferences are thus used to legitimize the failure of the program. Similarly, the HR-manager of Software D overtly says that the company has communities of mothers and fathers. However, when I ask if there are fathers involved in these groups, the answer is no. Officially, there are thus programs instated to protect women and ensure gender equality. These are used performatively to present the company as gender equal. However, covertly, the programs may be without much effect.

Similarly, initiatives against discrimination are often poorly implemented. According to the CEO of Industry B, the code of conduct "is a mandatory rule for any and all employees working world-wide". However, when I ask if the code of conduct looks exactly the same in all countries, she admits that the Ukrainian board makes local adaptations of the global code of conduct.

"CEO: It varies, you know? So, for instance for us, discrimination by nation is not so relevant, because the color of skin for us doesn't matter at all, because you see the majority is white. So, for us it is not as sensitive as for instance for France. But for us, it is more important and sensitive is gifts. What we are able to accept and what is not acceptable".

In this quote, the CEO of Industry B reveals that she thinks racial problems are irrelevant in Ukraine, because the majority is white. Anti-discrimination in their code of conduct is thus deemed irrelevant, whereas rules related to corruption are emphasized. Anti-discrimination is thus overtly presented as part of the company culture. However, in the CEO's priorities, the rights of the majority are considered more important than the rights of minorities.

According to the HR-manager in Service A, harassment and discrimination is "not so popular" in Ukraine. She notes that "the problem is when people are not very happy living in a country, they don't think about sexual orientation, racial discrimination, some disabilities, they don't mind - they want to buy food". She thus points to poverty and unhappiness in Ukraine as the reasons why anti-discrimination is not of a high priority within the company. "We live more in

a simple way, still. And we are fine with that. And we don't mind", she adds. Though the managers generally state that it wouldn't be a problem to have LGBT-people in the company, most do not consider it an issue that the company should actively address, and some express unconscious schemes of perception that sexuality is a private matter that should not be discussed with colleagues (Software C, Software D). The HR-manager of Software D explains that regarding diversity, "we work with our managers explaining them that it is a modern world. We are a modern company, so we need and want to follow this approach. However, I think that if we take sexuality, I am not sure we are ready for that yet. This is a fact" (Software D). Only Software A presents sexuality as part of their diversity-aspirations. The values of anti-discrimination in the companies' codes of conduct are thus not always implemented successfully in the Ukrainian offices, which is legitimized by denying the existence of minorities or a lack of understanding of what discrimination is. The majority is at the center of attention, and the majority is "fine" with living in a "simple way".

To sum up, although the companies all play by the rules or by an extended set of rules, some of the companies covertly follow their own rules and philosophies, even when it is somewhat in conflict with local legislation related to gender equality. Furthermore, in several cases, the companies' internal policies turn out to be covertly useless or poorly implemented. Even so, they are overtly presented as impressive examples of gender equality within the company.

### **3.3 Yin, yang and the non-issue of gender equality**

In this third part of the analysis, I will analyze how the managers measure gender equality and how important they consider it to be. This is followed by an analysis of how the managers perceive male and female skills and how they argue for gender balance. Gendered understandings of professionalism and unawareness of structural inequality are also analyzed.

#### **3.3.1 Measuring gender equality**

Many of the companies strive for having men and women equally represented in the workplace. Gender equality is thus measured as the number of women compared to the number of men

(Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 56). Many of the managers use their Key Performance Indicators<sup>13</sup> on gender to overtly present how they have a high percentage of female employees.

Especially in the IT-companies, they overtly take pride in having more women in their companies than the average IT-company in Ukraine. Though these Key Performance Indicators are overtly shared and presented as a positive feature, the managers of the IT-companies show awareness that women are still underrepresented. This is legitimized by pointing to the lack of women in IT-educations in Ukraine (Software C, Software D, Software E, Software F).

The Key Performance Indicators that the companies bring forward do not show the gender distribution within specific groups, such as management, HR-teams or software-developers. The horizontal and vertical inequality in the labor market thus remain covert as the overall numbers draw attention away from the task-specific gender-divides (Acker, 1990). For instance, many of the IT-companies have quite female-dominated management teams, except for CEO-positions and board members. However, developer-positions are for the most part held by men. Such horizontal and vertical divides are important to identify, because the way of measuring equality has implications for practices. As Software D has 50 percent women in the company, they decided not to implement a female program from the Scandinavian headquarters.

“HR: A few years ago, there was a female program from the head office focused on developing our creative pipeline for women. And actually, we didn't present this program to our employees, because some of our men think that we should take care of them (laughs).

I: Of the men in the company? Because there are few of them?

HR: Yes. Here, the percentage of female managers is quite high compared to men”

In this situation, the company decides not to develop their creative pipeline for women, because the men in the company think the company should “take care of them”. Though the company has 50 percent women, allegedly because the company’s rather old technologies will “not be learned by ambitious guys”, there are horizontal and vertical gender divides within the company. From this perspective, working on ways of mitigating gender inequality in the hiring-

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<sup>13</sup> Key Performance Indicators are numerical values that demonstrate and evaluate how well a company is doing in achieving certain business objectives.

process might still be a relevant goal. However, the Key Performance Indicators focus on the sex-distribution in the company as a whole and not in different occupational groups within the workplace. Also, affirmative action is considered unfair, and the men feel disadvantaged by such initiatives, though affirmative action is meant to level the playing field. The company is encouraged to adapt programs from the head-office depending on their reality, and it may have been a good decision to focus on something other than the creative pipeline for women. However, the manner of measuring gender equality within Software D and many other companies seems too simplistic to rule out initiatives that promote gender equality and give women equal access.

### **3.3.2 Establishing gender balance**

When discussing hiring-strategies with the managers, skills are at the center of attention, and they emphasize how they always attempt to hire the person with the best qualifications. As expressed by the HR-manager of Software F, “our main goal is to provide high quality, and we hire based on professional qualifications first of all”. However, the companies all express that they value having both men and women in their organizations. More specifically, “gender balance” is mentioned as a quality - something to strive for. However, balance is strived for in different ways and for quite different reasons. In many of the companies, women and men are thought to bring different qualities to a workplace. In Service A, the HR-manager looks for gender balance to reach harmony:

“I: Why is it that you want more guys?”

HR: Because we are all the time in the women's collective. And I think there should be harmony in everything, like yin yang, black and white, day and night. For me it is important that we at least try to have 50-50. Now we have like 70-30”

In this quote, women and men are seen as each other’s opposites, like day and night or yin and yang. She thereby leans towards a special contribution argument when arguing for gender balance, as she believes that men and women have two sets of qualities in their own right. In Industry B, the CEO considers men and women to be an efficient combination, because they are of “a different nature. It’s an emotional part and a rational part, and it is very nice to have this combination”. From this perspective, hiring women is presented as a strategic move, because it enhances efficiency. These views are also clear expressions of an unconscious scheme

of perception and appreciation that sees gender as static and binary, leading the managers to see men and women as distinct groups.

The CEO of Software B states that being open towards female applicants is being competitive. The demand on the Ukrainian market is “so big that you cannot allow yourself to have a square mind – you have to take the talent there is”. From a meritocratic stance it is thus necessary to eliminate “square” conservative mindsets to utilize the full potential of the qualified pool of workers (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009, p. 167). Though this approach is normally associated with the meritocratic argument, the CEO of Software B is willing to hire women over men, because having both men and women in a team implies balance:

“CEO: I personally hold the opinion that if I have two equal candidates, I would always seek for us to employ the woman. Simply to achieve balance, to have as much balance in our daily day as possible.

I: What do you mean by balance?

CEO: (...) Well, it gives a more balanced approach to things. You bring more dimensions into it. Both in the peer-relations, but also when one makes solutions, right? That you have different perspectives on things.

I: Do you have an example of a situation where it was fruitful?

CEO: ... Well, we have an eight-man team who just got a girl in, and it has the effect that things become calmer, and you talk better to each other, and it is simply a more comfortable climate”.

The CEO of Software B thus argues that women, who currently apply in such small numbers that he calls them “spearheads” and “pioneers”, should be hired over male candidates with similar skills. This is not to promote women’s position as such, but because he finds gender balance to be an organizational asset. He mentions that the solutions become better, and that the perspectives, for instance on the development of a product, become more manifold. From this special contribution perspective, women’s perspectives are considered important when developing IT-projects. However, when asked to give an example, women’s professional skills are no longer at the center of attention. Instead, he describes how women contribute to a comfortable climate. How women make the male teams less rude and agitated. In line with this, the HR-managers of Software E mark that “when there are a lot of men working together, it is very



useful to have leverage of women among them, because that makes them a little bit more careful about a lot of things, like details, communication style, etc.”. In these companies, the unconscious scheme that men and women have inherently different skills also prevails. However, the HR-manager in Software E modifies the idea that women have a shared nature by stating that “actually, women are also different. Some are calmer or some are more emotional. Still, women think a bit similarly, even if we are different”. Such modifications of men’s and women’s inherent skills are not mentioned by any of the other managers. Drawing on descriptions from all ten interviews, women are described as emotional, creative, strong, careful, charming, nice, open, beautiful, extroverted, diplomatic and attentive. Men, on the other hand, are described as rational, calm, closed, professional, ambitious, efficient, organized and planned. These are similar to the gender stereotypes described by Eagly & Sczesny (2009) and Acker (1990).

Software A, Software C and Industry A are the only companies that do not present any gendered perceptions of skills during the interviews. In Software C, balance and diversity are not goals in themselves. It is important to hire the best fit, be it a man or a woman.

“I: How about building teams. Do you think about the diversity of the teams? Or the composition of men and women? Is it even important?

HO: I wouldn't say it is really important, but sometimes when there are only boys in the team, they ask: Can you hire some girl? Much more fun... Me personally, and I am not sure anyone thinks about diversity. It is not a rule for us. If the person fits, the team will definitely hire him or her no matter if it is a boy or a girl”

In this quote, the HR-manager shows a meritocratic approach to hiring as she states that gender does not matter. However, there is a perceived gender difference within the team, as the “boys” in the team would like for the office-manager to hire “some girl” next. The lack of diversity is thus felt in the employee-group, and surface-level diversity in the form of more women is desired amongst the primarily male employees. Even so, Software C aims for a meritocratic hiring style without official rules related to diversity. Fitting in is what matters. The question then is, whether the criteria for fitting in are skewed towards male employees, as they currently make up the largest share of the employee group. This is unclear from the interview. However, the informal atmosphere in the company suggests openness towards different people. Like Software C, Software F and Software A do not have gender balance as an ideal. Instead, all are

welcome regardless of gender, etc. In this quote, the CEO of Software A explains their approach to diversity-hiring.

“CEO: We try to choose objectively who is the most competent for the role. And I think because the working environment in general looks like it does, I think maybe women often tend to be undervalued in the job market, which means that simply by being open and equal, we are more attractive to women employees, I think. I think so.

I: And how does it benefit you? I mean, it is great for these women...

CEO: You get more competent people. If you imagine the opposite, a traditional classical man-dominated management team, it would mean that we would be limited to a narrower category of people. Yes, and based on being more open to everybody, you attract good people.”

According to Software A, not limiting yourself when looking for candidates leads to more qualified hires and a more open, diverse environment. He thus leans towards a meritocratic approach as men and women are thought to be mostly the same, though women are structurally undervalued. Except for the HR-managers in Software E, the CEO of Software A is the only manager to emphasize how women are structurally disadvantaged in the labor market. Though Software A has an overall meritocratic approach to hiring, the company is a social enterprise that generally puts social impact over profits. For instance, the company actively seeks to help women enter tech-educations. Even so, being open and equal – in contrast to the otherwise unequal Ukrainian labor market – is presented as a sufficient tool to attract talent regardless of gender.

### **3.3.3 A masculine playing field**

In many of the companies, the interviewees make sure to speak of both men and women, “he or she”, when they talk about hypothetical candidates and employees (Software E, Software A, Service B, etc.). Though most of the managers try to present themselves as gender equal by overtly naming both men and women as possible candidates, when they forget to do so, only male pronouns are used. For instance, the HR-manager of Service A, whose colleagues are primarily women, says: “We don't have any discrimination of disability and age, so if the person is 60 years old and *his* English is fine, we can hire *him*”. In many of the companies, it thus seems that there is an unconscious scheme placing men as the natural subject in the workplace.

In Industry A the sales manager corrects the CEO for using male pronouns about a non-gendered, hypothetical candidate.

“I: When people apply to work here, what is typically their motivation to become part of this company?

CEO: Once again, we divide that question into two parts, because if you are talking about sales, we check his experience -

SM: Or her.

CEO: Eh?

SM: Or her.

CEO: ... experience, and for us, it is very important to know about his background, and it is very difficult to communicate with people who used to work in local companies, because they think very narrowly.”

In this situation, the sales-manager who has lived in Norway shows consciousness of the fact that I am there to study gender equality. When she sees the company’s Scandinavian credibility cracking, she comes to the rescue by throwing in female pronouns. Her attempt fails, and he continues saying ‘he’ about the fictitious candidate, untouched by her interruption. Though not exactly succeeding in preserving the company’s overt narrative of having no gender bias, the fact that she interrupts her boss demonstrates non-hierarchical dynamics within the workplace. She can criticize her male boss, and she does so repeatedly. Though the structures in Industry A are rather non-hierarchical, it is still worth noticing that the people in the very top of the hierarchy are men. This is the case in eight out of ten companies in this study.

Industry B has a female CEO, and she describes how she sometimes meets resistance from customers because of her gender. I ask her if she ever seeks to downplay her gender in meetings:

“I: But can you bring your whole person to such a meeting? Or is there like a professional... Okay, this is a very direct question, but do you sometimes have to take away some of the womanness, in a way?

CEO: Yeah... I think that is a very professional approach. So, you should be a professional person. And the way you communicate and the way you behave and the way you present, they don't want to see a woman. Yeah, it is exiting, of course, I think, eh? It works so, yeah, they see it, it can be helpful in some cases, to be

charming, nice, beautiful, yeah? But in the majority of cases, you just need to forget about your gender and be constructive and as much efficient as you can be - and very professional”

In this quote, the CEO describes how she seeks to avoid behaving and communicating like a woman. She describes *forgetting about one's gender* as a professional approach to business. She interprets “womanness” as sexualized, as beauty, charm and excitement, which can be strategic and helpful, but should mainly be downplayed. This reveals an unconscious scheme of appreciation that is skewed towards character-traits that are considered male. Stereotypically female behavior is considered unprofessional, and once women act professionally and efficiently, they are no longer considered women, they are ungendered, they are business-people. I performatively shape her line of thinking, as I mention professionalism and then decide to pose the question differently and more directly. Even when taking this into consideration, she could have questioned the premises of the question.

Similar to the CEO of Industry B, the marketing manager of Software B says that she thinks about what to wear and how to act, “not as a woman, but as a business person”. For her it is thus also an unconscious scheme of appreciation that women should act like men or business people in the context of work. When asked if she thinks it is important to have both men and women in the workplace, she answers based on her personal preferences:

“I got used to working in a male environment, because I started in a company with 90 percent of men. Also, I worked in another IT-company, so I just got used to men, and men they are more rational, planned, no bullshit, you know? So, maybe I am more comfortable with men. But I think it is good to have a mixed workplace.

I: Those are male qualities, what would female qualities be?

MM: Uh... it is a hard question. I think it depends on personality. Maybe only because of my experience, I had more mature male colleagues than female. And that is why I have this experience. There also are professional women, but... Just maybe because of my experience and young age.”

In this quote, the marketing manager expresses a preference of working with men, because she sees them as more professional and rational than women. However, when asked to characterize female qualities, she is conflicted, because while she may have stereotypical schemes of

perception about women's traits as opposite to those of men, she sees herself as rational, planned and 'no bullshit'. Therefore, she describes women's traits as a matter of personality. She reflects on her experience and notes that maybe, she simply met more professional men than women. However, she currently works in a primarily female team. It is thus part of her unconscious scheme of perception and appreciation to think of men as more professional than women, even though she considers herself to be competent and professional.

### **3.3.4 The non-issue of gender equality**

While the companies claim to treat men and women equally, it becomes clear over the course of the interview that the importance of gender equality is debatable for many of the managers. When asked what she thinks about gender quotas, the HR-manager of Software D says that:

“I would vote for equal opportunities for both, and probably because I am not from an originally Scandinavian company, sometimes I even don't understand what is the reason for quotas, you see? For me it is just like, some men would like to be in a top-position, and some don't, and it is the same about women”.

She thus believes that who gets top positions depends on who shows interest in such positions. She thereby does not consider that women may have limited access due to family-obligation, gender stereotypes, etc. Instead, she sees gender equality as a matter of equal opportunities. It is thus up to women's preferences and free choice whether they want to opt out or build a career. Similarly, the HR-manager in Software F says that from her personal point of view, “in Ukraine, we don't have such a problem regarding making a successful career to women. You see, they are really free to choose the career path they want”. Similarly, the office-manager describes how gender inequality is not felt within Software C.

“It depends on your experience, because for me personally, I work all the time in an environment where there were no such problems at all. I never heard about them, I mean within the company, I never experienced them on myself. A community called W-tech has a study of two similar companies, where the women in the board get lower salaries than the guys. Me personally, I don't know where they have found it. I haven't seen it, because for example our Deputy-CEO is a lady, our CEO is a lady. Our manager of marketing and PR are ladies.... Who else are ladies?”.

The office-manager thereby does not feel affected by gender inequality herself, and on this basis, she shows disbelief of gender inequality altogether. Though she points to a substantial number of women in management positions, this does not change the fact that there is gender inequality in the IT-sector (Business Ukraine Magazine, 2019). The women in management positions thus become tokens of gender equality that steal attention from the structural issues that still prevail, if not in this company, then in other. The manager of Industry B also does not see any structural challenges for women to occupy top positions in the labor market.

“CEO: So, I have small kids, and for myself I think that it is a matter of your organization. If you would like to be in the business, you need to organize and arrange in a way to be able to combine your family sphere and business. Because, well, if you are ready for that and if you would like that, based on my example I can tell you, there is no issue with that. (...) I am passionate to work in business. I am passionate to manage the business. (...) It is a matter of planning, it is a matter of organization. It is a self-management - it is achievable. It depends on person's ambition. It very much depends on that.”

Based on her own experience, the CEO thus describes how motivation, passion and organizing one's time to combine family life and business is all that is needed for a woman to have a successful, ambitious career. This draws on the meritocratic perspective that whatever struggle women may have in organizing their personal life and their business commitments should not give them any special advantage (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009). It is not the responsibility of the company, except there may be willingness to help key-employees organize their time (Alvesson & Due-Billing, 2009). If a woman does not advance in her career, it is thus none of the company's concern. The CEO supports this argument by pointing out that she has female colleagues without children who do not want to advance their career, and female colleagues with children who are building impressive careers. She thus draws on choice-terminology to present a labor market where women choose their career-path independently of family-obligations. Furthermore, she uses herself and other women as examples of women who manage to ‘have it all’ and juggle between family-obligations and work-obligations (Cottom, 2017, p. 554). This is thus another example of how female tokenism comes to hide and undermine the overall, structural issue of gender inequality in the labor market.

The analysis of the managers' view on gender shows that though a few managers view men and women as similar, most managers consider men and women to have distinct, gender-specific skills. Men are overall considered more professional than women, and in order to gain power within the organizations, women have to act in stereotypically masculine ways and independently figure out how to dedicate sufficient time to their work despite family obligations. Affirmatively improving women's conditions of reaching top-positions is considered unfair. The women that do reach top positions often become tokens of gender equality, and several of the managers in this study do not consider gender equality an issue in the context of Ukraine.

### **Conclusions to Chapter 3**

The analysis shows that the managers present company practices in relation to gender equality by performatively underlining and enhancing the overt practices of the company and by downplaying and legitimizing the covert practices of the company. The managers overtly present the companies' gender equality practices with an emphasis on their internal policies and Scandinavian roots. They also point to women in management within their organization as tokens of women's possibility of reaching management positions. Equal opportunities are considered quite important in all of the companies, and within their respective companies, they state that everyone has the same conditions. Most consider gender equality to be fairer than gender equity, as only two companies address structural gender differences through affirmative action. The overt performance of ethical conduct is further strengthened by the office designs and company-traditions, which are often inspired by Scandinavian culture and lead one to associate all aspects of the company with Scandinavian standards as opposed to Ukrainian standards. An English-speaking, international environment with work-life balance and orderly conditions is thus shown in the interviews and conveyed in the office-space. Following local legislation and offering social benefits that surpass the local requirements are also shared as overt practices that establish an attractive workplace, with flexibility, stability and respect for all.

However, when asked about specific procedures, some covert practices meet the light of day. For instance, one company admits to having a loose approach to local legislation, which is legitimized by stating that it is in the interest of the company or employees. Another company admits to ignoring seniority accumulated during maternity-leave, because they do not consider it to be actual work-experience. Furthermore, some companies share how they have ambitions

of building an international and anti-discriminatory environment, but they do not think the employees care about such things, either because “the majority is white” or because Ukrainians only care about being able to put food on the table and live in a simple way. Some internal policies and programs targeting women turn out to be without impact or simply not implemented, because the managers assess that there is no discrimination by race or gender within their organization. The unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation that gender equality is a non-issue prevails, and the awareness of inequality is scarce. The covert practices within the companies are thus legitimized by pointing to issues within Ukrainian legislation, the mismatch between Scandinavian and Ukrainian business ethics, the Ukrainian mindset of the employees and the lack of resources to provide good salaries and social benefits. The managers further legitimize covert practices by relativizing the issues of inequality by comparing themselves with local companies. Similarly, when presenting their gender percentages, they compare themselves with Ukrainian companies to mark that they are being relatively gender equal.

Most companies believe that gender balance is good for business. In several cases, the idea of balance rests on a gendered interpretation of personality-traits. Women are described as emotional, creative, strong, careful, charming, nice, open, beautiful, extroverted, diplomatic and attentive. Men, on the other hand, are described as rational, calm, closed, professional, ambitious, efficient, organized and planned. These views, which form part of the managers’ unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation, present static and stereotypical understandings of women’s and men’s roles in the workplace, and though both stereotypes are desirable, women are often described as assisting and as the person in a team who ensures harmony and motivates male team-members to work better and pay more attention to details. In line with this, some of the female interviewees describe how they, as managers in a male-dominated environment, forget about their gender and work as business people rather than women. There is thus an underlying scheme of perception that women are less professional than men. By some of the managers, building a career as a woman is seen as a matter of motivation and priority – a choice. There is thus a tendency of using tokenism and choice-terminology to explain why gender equality is already established. In the next chapter I will discuss the implications of the results, reflect on the overall approach and conclude on the study.



## CHAPTER 4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The knowledge that I have generated in this study contributes with knowledge about how Scandinavian companies in Ukraine deal with gender inequality, and it can inform and inspire various bodies of research, both in terms of research design and hypothesis building. In this chapter, I will discuss the main contributions of the study. Subsequently, I will discuss the transferability of the results and reflect upon the overall approach. Lastly, I will conclude on the study with an emphasis on its contributions to the field and perspectives for further research.

### 4.1 Implications of (in)equality practices in Scandinavian companies

The results of this study point to important dynamics in relation to gender equality within Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. From the perspective that performativity shapes and constitutes subjects and institutions, the trends and dynamics investigated in the study are both positive and negative for gender equality. On the one hand, the performance of ethical employer-practices sets actual marks in the company culture, as work-life balance, codes of conduct and fika-meetings are used to establish an environment that is inclusive, comfortable, stable and relaxed. On the other hand, simultaneously, the performativity of Scandinavian business ethics and equality somewhat comes to conceal the continued existence of gender inequality within the companies. The downside of the overt performance of gender equality is thus that many issues related to gender equality are overlooked and unaddressed.

Lennartz et al.'s (2019) finding that overt anti-discrimination increases covert discrimination in companies is therefore also relevant for cross-cultural business-settings. However, as a much-needed supplement to Lennartz et al.'s findings, this study shows how overtly performing gender equality also encourages gender equal initiatives and sets high standards in relation to gender equality within the company-culture. While Scandinavian companies in Ukraine *do* seem to get caught up in their own performativity of gender equality to an extent where discriminative actions can go unnoticed, the companies' overt performativity is part of establishing gender equality. The overt performance of gender equality is thus productive for embedding gender equality in the company-culture.

One of the most concerning findings in this study is that most of the managers show very little understanding of structural gender equality and hold stereotypical views on men's and women's

skills. The lack of understanding of structural gender inequality shows in the managers' unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation that include strong gender stereotypes and devaluation of women in business, in some cases. The consequences of such unconscious schemes are that men and women are hired - to some extent - on the basis of the qualities that are expected of them as gendered subjects. Such gender biases in hiring practices inhibits the existence of alternative gender identities and maintains the status quo of vertical and horizontal gender segregation. Critically questioning these unconscious schemes could lead to less gendered hiring practices and management styles.

It is unclear whether the lack of awareness of gender equality stems from the Soviet narrative about gender equality as a non-issue or from the Scandinavian narrative of being progressive in relation to ensuring gender equality (Metcalf & Afanassieva, 2005, p. 401). However, the outcome is the same; despite being companies that overtly claim that anti-discrimination is important, it oftentimes does not translate to the opinions and priorities of the people running the organization. Sztompka suggests that institution-building and culture-building do not always happen simultaneously, whereby there can be incoherence between policies and mentalities (1996, p. 117). In this study, such incoherence is seen in the gap between the official Scandinavian values and the way these values are administered and perceived locally in Ukraine. Whether this gap between paper and practice is becoming wider or narrower is beyond the scope of this study. I also do not reject the opportunity that a similar discrepancy between institutional values and cultural practices could be found in the Scandinavian headquarters. However, the cross-cultural factor is not insignificant, and I would argue that an alignment of institutional frameworks and cultural frameworks related to gender could be reached by actively addressing these frameworks through dialogue and cross-cultural learning.

In line with this, some of the findings in this study raise questions about how gender equality policies can be implemented across national offices. The study shows a few examples of how the local managers prioritize between policies from the headquarters depending on what issues they find more pressing in Ukraine. Anti-discrimination and gender equality were not top-priority, and though I recognize that local management knows the Ukrainian context best, it does not mean that they have sufficient knowledge about the severity of gender inequality in Ukraine to make such prioritizations. According to Kalev and Deutsch (2006, p. 264) involving managers in processes of change is a good way to improve gender equality within an organization. However, if the Scandinavian headquarters simply produce equality policies without

encouraging dialogue across their international offices about the meaning and importance of gender equality, the policies and programs targeted at gender inequality risk being put in the desk-drawer, because local managers simply do not see the need. On these grounds, informed dialogue about gender equality or courses in structural gender inequality would make the managers better equipped for identifying gender inequality. The managers all show great willingness to build the best possible company, and they take great pride in being part of a Scandinavian company. However, addressing women's rights in the Ukrainian labor market requires for the managers to first recognize gender equality as an issue of importance.

Another structural issue in relation to recognizing gender inequality is that the companies' Key Performance Indicators related to gender do not provide a full picture of the gender inequality within the companies. Measuring the gender distribution within specific groups, such as management, IT-developers, cleaning-personnel, etc. would thus give a better idea of the vertical and horizontal gender segregation within the companies. Though this way of measuring gender equality is very oriented towards to number of men and women rather than the well-being of employees, Key Performance Indicators across employee-groups and salary-levels would give the managers a clearer view of gender inequality in their organizations. However, information about inequality is not enough to mobilize change. The managers frequently compare themselves with Ukrainian enterprises, and as they are performing *better* than Ukrainian companies, the managers tend to consider themselves sufficiently competitive in relation to gender. If the company-vision is to be comparatively equal, they may have succeeded. However, being *better* is not the same as being *good enough*. It would seem that capitalist companies competing for relative gains tend to forget this.

This study is developed with an aim of generating knowledge that somewhat facilitates female emancipation in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine and in similar cross-cultural business-settings. As I have oriented the study towards managers, the emancipatory potential of this study rests on the premise that directing criticism towards the top mobilizes change in the institutional framework that benefits employees. As the managers all show willingness to provide good working conditions for employees, I would argue that they are susceptible to adapt policies and approaches to gender equality once made aware of gender issues within their organization. For the study to have impact, I will share the results of the analysis with all 10 companies from the study, the Swedish Business Association in Ukraine, W-Tech, Fulcrum and other organizations in Ukraine that work with gender equality.

Though these findings may evoke change and emancipation within the Scandinavian companies, it is important to keep in mind that most of these companies primarily employ well-educated workers from the upper-middle class. This group of workers is less vulnerable to gender inequality, as they can afford nannies, etc. It is thus a valid critique that improving gender equality in the richest companies may not have repercussions in the lives of the less privileged groups in the labor market (Foster, 2016). Though I agree that the issue of gender inequality cannot be solved through trickle-down feminism (Foster, 2016, p. 45; Cottom, 2017, p. 555), companies are inspired by each other's practices and the companies in the study sometimes require their business partners to act ethically, pay official salaries, etc. These companies can thus create a competitive motivation for other Ukrainian companies to provide better conditions for female workers. However, from this study, it is clear that the male-dominated, wealthy IT-sector has more resources than the less wealthy service-industry. It is thereby an almost ironic issue that companies with primarily female employee-groups cannot afford to offer the female-friendly working conditions that are often provided in male-dominated companies.

## **4.2 Reflections on the overall approach**

It is crucial for researchers to not just think *with* the theoretical concepts, but to also think *about* them (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 41). The research design thus effects the quality and scope of this study. The combination of performativity and (c)overt practices as a theoretical framework has been productive, because they supplement each other analytically. The divisions into overt and covert practices guides the analysis of performativity, and clearly marks what is perceived as positive and negative, important or irrelevant, in a business context. The theoretical lens serves well to investigate how managers navigate between their ideals of ethical business conduct and the limitations of their companies and near surroundings. Furthermore, approaching the presentation of practices with an emphasis on unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation has allowed me to move beyond the immediate, visible, cross-cultural challenges and explore the schemes of perception that lay the grounds for the managers' approach to gender.

The triangulation of data has allowed me to cross-check information and gain perspective, making the results recognizable for people in and around Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. Also, the theoretical concepts were chosen with the data in mind, whereby theoretical interpretations

arise out of the data and not vice-versa. This ensures that I stay true to the data and present practices in a way that echoes inside and outside of academia (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 195).

The Butlerian methodology has allowed me to look critically at management without being uncritical about my own performative role in the study (Riach et al., 2016). As a Scandinavian researcher interviewing companies on the basis of their Scandinavian origin, I create a community of Scandinavian companies that may not perceive themselves as part of such a formation. However, as the companies gather in Scandinavian business associations, I would argue that the Scandinavian business community in Ukraine exists independently of this study.

In this study, I present equity-measures as emancipatory in the context of Ukraine. However, some scholars argue that equity-measures are repressive for women. By some post-feminist scholars, work-life balance is criticized for being gender inequality in disguise, because work-life balance reinforces the gendered roles, where women engage in both *paid* work and *unpaid* care-work (Sørensen, 2017, p. 298). Work-life balance allows to place a double burden on women, it is argued. However, for a Post-Soviet context where women are typically faced with a double burden either way, I would argue that work-life balance is a pragmatic starting point for female emancipation in a highly unequal neo-traditionalist society.

### **4.3 Transferability of the results**

The results of this study are transferable across sectors and geographical borders. I consider *transferability* rather than *generalizability* to emphasize that the results of the study cannot uncritically be used to describe other organizations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 241). I would argue that the results of this study can inform and inspire research and hypothesis-building in a wide range of studies within the corporate sociology of gender.

In Scandinavian companies in other parts of Ukraine, I would expect to find similar tendencies, because issues in terms of employment relations are found across the Ukrainian regions (Libanova et al., 2012, p. 29). However, there are local specificities that may impact the severance of cross-cultural differences (Diez et al., 2016, p. 639). For instance, the mentality in Western Ukraine is more European, whereby some of the cross-cultural challenges would expectedly be less dominant in Western Ukraine. Furthermore, I would expect to see similar tendencies in European or international companies in Ukraine; both because many of the companies in this

study describe themselves rather as international or European than Scandinavian, and because the managers' performances are often based on *not* being Ukrainian. This study thus contributes with valuable knowledge on how Ukrainian companies are perceived by foreign companies.

The companies are sampled on the basis that they are more socially responsible and gender equal than the average Scandinavian company in Ukraine. It is thus likely that the inequality-dynamics are different and more severe in companies that do not emphasize their socially responsible approach. It is therefore necessary to investigate the less socially responsible companies and look into the (in)equality practices on production sites in the low-paying sector. Though more research is necessary to assess gender equality in other Scandinavian companies in Ukraine, it is a sensible hypothesis that other Scandinavian companies in Ukraine are less gender equal than the ones in this study. This is concerning, considering that most of the overtly socially responsible companies in this study only scarcely recognize and address gender inequality. Based on the results of this study, it is thus critical to demand better gender equality practices from foreign companies. A socially responsible Scandinavian reputation may contribute to embedding practices of gender equality at the workplaces in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. However, this reputation of gender equality should not become a free-pass for the companies to act as they please – nor should it become a free-pass *not* to act.

### **Concluding remarks and further perspectives**

Through the lenses of performativity theory, this study describes how managers of Scandinavian companies in Ukraine present and legitimize overt and covert practices of gender equality. The results of this study were reached through the prism of critical management studies and Butlerian methodology (Riach et al. 2016). By combining the theoretical concepts of performativity (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 2007), (c)over practices (Uldam & Hansen, 2017) and unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation (Bourdieu, 2001), this study sheds light on the dynamics of gender (in)equality in cross-cultural companies.

The analysis shows that though the companies overtly offer fairly good conditions for women by insisting on flexibility, work-life balance and law-abiding practices related to maternity leave, etc., some of the managers express unconscious schemes of appreciation that consider men to be more professional than women. Furthermore, some explain how they do not believe

that gender equality is a problem in Ukraine. Most of the managers show little awareness of structural gender inequality and dynamics of discrimination, leading them to down-prioritize the matter. While a few companies actively address gender equality by encouraging paternity leave or by recognizing the double burden of mothers, most companies believe that affirmative action or special programs targeting women result in unfair competition rather than a level playing field. The managers legitimize covert company-practices by pointing to issues within Ukrainian legislation and to the Ukrainian mindset of the employees. Furthermore, they present their companies as *comparatively* transparent and gender equal, because they provide official salaries and support basic human rights unlike some Ukrainian enterprises.

These results have consequences for the further development towards gender equality in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. On the one hand, the performance of ethical conduct actively works to embed principles of gender equality in the culture of the company. On the other hand, the managers' experience of running a morally superior company inhibits them from seeing structural gender inequality within their organization. The results of the study suggest that implementing courses and trainings in gender sensitive management and structural gender inequality may make gender inequality more visible to the managers. Furthermore, Key Performance Indicators that consider both the horizontal and vertical gender segregation would make structural gender issues more visible to the managers.

Communication between the local office and the Scandinavian headquarters has shown to be quite important for how the companies operate. However, it is outside the scope of this study to characterize the relationship between the headquarters and the local offices in depth. It would thus be fruitful for future research to investigate the communication and cultural negotiations between headquarters and local offices. Furthermore, knowledge about how employees in Scandinavian companies in Ukraine perceive and experience gender (in)equality would be a valuable extension to this study. As a final remark, I would like to emphasize that combining strategically (c)overt practices and unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation is a fruitful theoretical approach when studying cross-cultural companies, as it lays the ground for more nuanced studies of gender (in)equality practices within the corporate sociology of gender.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A Recruitment letter



#### Regarding participation in a study of Scandinavian businesses in Ukraine

To whom it may concern,

As your company is well-known for having a responsible approach to business, I would like to offer you to participate in a sociological study of Scandinavian businesses in Ukraine. Collecting knowledge from companies that are known and acknowledged for their social awareness and responsible behavior can serve as an inspiration for others. The study investigates the working environment and hiring-procedures of Scandinavian companies in Ukraine. Furthermore, the study seeks to systematically map the challenges that Scandinavian companies face when doing business in Ukraine.

For the study, I am looking to interview one of your company managers – preferably someone who is involved in your hiring procedures. The interview will last at most an hour, depending on your time, and the data will be treated with full confidentiality. Bringing your perspectives and experience into the research would be of great value, and I am sure the study will lead to useful knowledge for you as well as for others. In case you have any pressing questions about the study or want to discuss the terms of your participation, please feel free to write or call me.

Best regards,  
Ane Kristiansen

The study will be published as my final degree project (master thesis) for these educations:  
MSc of Sociology, Lund University in Sweden  
MSc of Gender Studies, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

## Appendix B Interview guide

Practical information	Introduction to the study Anonymity, recording, purpose
About you	Education, connection to company, tasks
Working environment	How would you describe the working environment? What are people's motivations to work in this company?
Creating a good working environment	What kind of working environment are you trying to create? How do you organize work? Is part-time possible? What does your employee-group look like? (Gender, age, ethnicity, education) How long do people normally stay in the company? What type of interaction do you want to see between employees? How do you deal with parental leave? Illness? Do you have official policies or written rules? What are they?
Hiring procedures	What is the most important for you when you assess job applicants? How do you look for candidates? Are the applicants aware that the company is Scandinavian? Does it mean something to them? Is it something you mention to them?
Gender and diversity	Confrontation with diversity and anti-discrimination in their code of conduct. Is it important that there are different people in the company? What is the value of having both men and women in a team? Are quotas a good approach? Why/why not?
External limitations/ Challenges	What are your biggest challenges for creating a good working environment? Economic aspects? Culture? Rules? Mindset clashes? How should Scandinavian companies act? How do you think other people see your company? If you could change one thing about your company, what would it be?
Round off	Is there anything you would like to add/ask?

\*This is an example of an interview-guide used when interviewing HR-managers specifically. However, all interviews were conducted based on the specifics of each company.

## Appendix C Fieldnote, Networking event

I arrive at 18.33. My hair looks flat and greasy from a long day at the university. I have been nervous about this meeting. Both because I don't know what to expect from the event or my studies as such and because I am afraid of business. I don't fit in. Even today, where I tried to hit the nail on business-casual as recommended in the information e-mail, I look terribly unpolished and amateur-like amongst these women, all dressed in skirts and dresses of quality material, sharp make-up and shiny black leather shoes – either flats or heels. I shrink, but I am also not there to play theater. I must look somewhat myself, I figure.

The coordinator of the business event meets me at the door, eager to grab my coat and welcome me. He bends over in an awkward manner as though considering kissing my hand and not just shaking it as a welcome. He sticks to the latter. I thank him for letting me participate. After all, he gave me a call, when I wrote them, probably to check my intentions. I assured him that I was interested in going for inspiration and contacts, and he accepted. Today, every doubt seems to have vanished, and he smiles and laughs and guides me to the first victim of my terrible mingling skills. The first woman I talk to is from an industrial company, which has been in Kyiv for seven years, she tells me. She is not easy to talk to. We are interrupted by the coordinator. 'Red or white?', he asks me, leading me to a table of pre-poured glasses of wine. I grab a glass of white wine like most of the other women in the room, and I enter the next room that has more of a coffee-lounge feel with home-baked cinnamon-rolls and blue teacups. I shake the first available hand. It belongs to an employee from the Swedish embassy. He is wearing a suit and a necktie with one of those pin-needles on it. Again, I feel out of place, but he is maybe slightly overdressed. We talk about Kyiv and my project and his work at the embassy. He wants to meet more important people, I sense, and so should I, though I don't feel at ease talking to all these people. I go back to the first room with all the wineglasses. The power point show is being set up. Another coordinator introduces me to a woman who turns out to be a friend of the house. She is in charge of the catering tonight. Besides the cinnamon rolls, she prepared ryebread with herring, crackers with pear and blue cheese and vegetable-snacks with dip. She doesn't speak English, but we smile and laugh nervously, best as we can. I turn to a Ukrainian man next to me. He is here to hear about some new technologies. The coordinator finally calls for everyone's attention – totally in accordance with the time scheduled on the itinerary. He points to five CSR-related themes that the companies in the network are currently promoting. None of them are related to social issues, whatsoever. There is one slide left blank. It is for a potential partner to fill with their personal interests, he says. I cannot help but hope that one of the companies will suggest gender equality or diversity. They do not. The coordinator points out that the panel is gender balanced. Three men and three women. He laughs, but no one else really does. Not a lot. At least not in the panel. I wonder if he said it in honor of my presence. He then welcomes the first presenter.

The first presentation is done by the woman from an industrial company. She presents the company in English and gets all excited about the company's technologies. She uses big words and I somehow don't feel convinced that she is convincing even herself. It seems dishonest, filled



with clichés. One of their CSR-pillars is actually people, and one of the slides says something about inclusion. The images in the power point are of both men and women, and it doesn't seem forced. The only non-white people shown are a bunch of black children on a slide about the company's donations to health projects around the world and in Ukraine. She doesn't raise a concern or present a challenge. It is about the strong Scandinavian business with a good reputation. Strong. She sits back down, and the coordinator starts asking questions. I don't remember any of the questions, but she pulls a small flyer from her handbag which contains the business' code of conduct. She says that they give it to all their partners and offices and 'local people for them to read and follow'. The booklet contains photos of behavior, which she describes as simple and even stupid, but they are effective in showing desired behavior, she says. Is that talking down to people? I don't know. Probably not. But this company has a reputation to protect, and they enforce the same rules no matter where they are working. One size fits all. That cannot always be easy or possible, I figure. I want to ask her about this. About how it is to 'follow the same principles everywhere'. The second speaker talks about trucks or something – in Ukrainian – and my mind starts to wander. I think about how almost all the women are wearing skirts or dresses, except for two, and then me. The men differ much more in their interpretation of the business-casual dress-code. The embassy-guy in one end of the scale and jeans, dirty sneakers and a t-shirt in the other. I am trying not to make noise as I shift my weight from one foot to another. We are all standing throughout all six presentations. I really want to sit down on the floor, but no one else seems to need to sit down, and I don't want to act weird. Both for this presentation and the next three, I sense a lot of bullshit and self-praise. Most of them have clear policies and ambitions when it comes to energy-efficiency and climate change. One company displays a 25000\$ sign in a large font across a power point slide. Something about a donation. I wonder if the companies are each other's customers. Then I understand why you don't have an honest talk about challenges and just give your sales speech. A man asks too many questions and the event is running very late. One of the presenters shows a picture of his office-team. A good seven people, two of them women. The women are placed, hips out, on the sides, holding a massive placard with the company name on it. Again, the coordinator makes a remark about gender balance, but in Ukrainian, so I don't know about the exact wording. Again, everyone refrains from discussing this theme. The last presentation is by a woman who talks about how having a relaxed, chill environment, where everyone can feel safe is super important. She also says that they have different initiatives targeting gender inequality. She doesn't go into detail. Sensing the impatience in the room, I decide not to ask. I will find her afterwards, I figure, but she leaves the minute after. After the presentations, I rush to the first presenter, and I tell her about my project and get her card. I am welcome to visit their office. She leaves straight after that. It is already 8.45pm. After that, I am introduced to a woman with cool hair and a great laugh. I think she snugs in after the presentations had started. She is a manager in a software-company, which is apparently quite big. I tell her about my project, and she says that they are pretty evenly distributed, gender-wise. 35-65. I express that I am surprised that there "isn't a gender-gap" in software. She elaborates. Men are often in the programming jobs, while women are hired as managers and analysts. Women have analytical brains, she says. Systematic, in a way. They like to collect information. Honestly, here in Ukraine we don't care if it is

a man or a woman, she says. She is curious about where I got this idea of gender inequality from. I ask her if she is in touch with the office in Scandinavia, and she is. Of course. She then talks about fika, trying to relate to me, and I try to pretend that I have a strong relationship to fika, though I disclaim that I am Danish. She attempts to make people have fika together. I'm not sure why. I ask if partners also don't care about gender. She says that with customers from the middle east you can sometime sense that they prefer a male representative. It is better for business, "as we say", she says. But they don't always do that. They send women too. She goes to get her card and hands me one.

I move back to the coffee-lounge to try out a cinnamon roll. "Do you think the herring is in honor of Ukraine or Sweden", I ask a woman, who also looks indecisively at the buffet. She doesn't know, she says. She asks me about Sweden, and she is clearly fascinated by Scandinavia. She works for a Norwegian corporation, and she has visited Norway and studied English there. She praises Scandinavian work-life-balance. People work too long hours in Ukraine, she notes. No time for spare-time and family. She asks me questions about my experience in Kyiv, and we also end up exchanging contact information to go for coffee. She clearly would like a speaking partner, in English, that is. It turns out she is an HR-manager in the company. I ask her about this job, and she says that she always asks candidates what a good team looks like to them. And they are never ready to answer. They only know things about themselves. To me, a good team is about being able to look past your own needs, she says. She says that her boss says, 'please, can we hire a guy soon'. Because really, the best candidates are women. And she read that women are more educated than men, statistically. The coordinator comes to me again, grabbing his female assisting coordinator by the arm, saying 'look, we have gender balance in the team'. We all laugh, me included – I've got to build rapport, you know. He says something semi-apologetic and I don't go into it. I announce that I am meeting interesting people and chitchat a bit. After this I grab my coat and thank them both for their help and hospitality.

## Appendix D Content analysis of company websites

My selection of informants is based on the results of a simplistic content analysis. I based the analysis on two large coding categories: *formal social responsibility* and *informal social responsibility*. Formal social responsibility refers to the programs and policies used to enhance gender equality. Informal social responsibility refers to the mentioning of words and themes that indicate an anti-discriminative and people-oriented mentality. Below is a list of what showed in each category.

### Informal Social Responsibility

Diversity  
Anti-discrimination  
People-oriented  
Gender  
Age  
Sexuality  
Equality  
Work-life balance  
Part-time arrangements  
Employees are important  
Considering the needs of each employee  
Care  
Transparency  
Scandinavian conduct  
Scandinavian working environment  
Good mood  
Nice atmosphere

### Formal Social Responsibility

Official code of conduct  
CSR-program(s) for gender equality  
CSR-program(s) for social sustainability  
Whistleblower-policy

Type of content analysis:

- Qualitative

Medium:

- Company websites

Criteria for inclusion of website:

- Scandinavian companies
- Based in Kyiv
- Working B2B

**170** websites met the criteria of inclusion. **42** companies were assessed to show social responsibility formally and/or informally. These were invited to participate in the study.

