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The Postfeminist Paradox

– A qualitative case study critically analysing postfeminism through a
female student career network

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ABSTRACT

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The study analyses postfeminism in an organisational context from a critical feminist perspective by exploring the contemporary perceptions of gender and gender equality in a female student career network. Furthermore, the study aims to investigate how these perceptions are projected and how they relate to organisational values, principles and processes of the organisation. Hence, *How does postfeminism play out in a female student career network?* was formulated as the study's general research question. A qualitative case study design with a multi-methodological approach, combining focus group interviews and image and text analysis, allowed for an in-depth critical feminist analysis of postfeminism with an emancipatory ambition. The findings suggested that contradictory notions of gender and gender equality co-existed in the network, disclosed as four paradoxes which together made up the phenomenon postfeminism. The paradoxes further had bearing on some of the organisational values, principles and processes of the network. The feminist insights proved to be overshadowed by the complex postfeminist entanglement, limiting the network from contributing to the advance of women's career opportunities and improving gender equality. Hence, confirms that what has been proved to characterize postfeminist media phenomena also characterizes contemporary organizational settings, and that inserting postfeminism as a critical concept in organisational studies enables a captivation of contemporary perceptions of gender.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The next generation of female business leaders are met by a complex and ambiguous environment as they enter working life. On the one hand, success stories of women CEOs, innovators and entrepreneurs are becoming a frequent element in the media landscape (Gill, 2016). They come in the shape of best selling autobiographies (e.g. Simpson, 2019), empowering self-help books (eg. The Good Trade, 2020) and inspiring TV-series (e.g. Bright Side, 2020). Moreover, recently published Harvard research (Zenger & Folkman, 2019) claiming that women make better managers sparked a vast number of news articles, all emphasizing the potential of the successful career woman accompanied by “Girl Power” slogans, such as “The Future is Female” (e.g. VA, 2019) and “Who Run the World? Girls!”. The perception of women within the business landscape has evidently changed during the last few decades and the numbers are following. The amount of women in executive positions has never been higher (AllBright, 2018), there are more women in the boardroom than ever before (SCB, 2018) and salaries have never been more equal (Medlingsinstitutet, 2018). The women portrayed in the success stories are not only successful career women, they are also portrayed as caring mothers, loving partners, great cooks, fashion icons, beauty experts and spare time marathon runners. The successful career women indeed seem to run the world, and they appear to have it all.

On the other hand, even in what is considered one of the most equal countries in the world (EIGE, 2019), when diving deeper into the Swedish equality reports it becomes clear that we are still far from living in an equal society. The number of women in the boardroom is only 34 %, and in executive positions the number is even lower, 23 % (AllBright, 2018). In regards to the pay gap, women in executive positions end up working an average of 58 unpaid minutes per day, when their salaries are compared to their male colleagues’ (Ledarna, 2017). The reports of sexual harassment in the workplace following the #MeToo movement further reveals the not-so-pretty reality of women’s work life. In addition, women still bear the majority of the domestic

responsibilities (SCB, 2019) and reports of increasing stress and anxiety is following the unrealistic expectations on young women (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2019).

Consequently, two contradictory narratives of women in management can be distinguished: it seems that for some women the sky is the limit, while the bigger picture shows a continuing vast underrepresentation of women in top management positions and inequalities at the workplace. In turn, when looking at these contradicting narratives it is understandable that today's society is also characterized by an ambiguous view and role of feminism (Gill, 2007). Looking at the first narrative, feminism seems to be a done deal, a political force that has run its course and is no longer as needed. On the other hand, looking at the second narrative, feminism seems to be just as needed now as ever in order to improve possibilities to equal career opportunities for women to advance their careers. By drawing conclusions from both narratives, this has been argued to result in a contemporary kind of feminism consisting of a complex entanglement of contradictory ideas. Such an entanglement of contradictory perceptions of gender and gender equality has been recognized by several scholars and referred to as a postfeminism (Gill, 2007). While studies of postfeminism in media and popular culture are emerging, postfeminism as an object for analysis has remained relatively unexplored in other contexts, such as the business or academic worlds (Gill, Kelan & Schraff, 2017; Lewis, Benschop & Simpson, 2018; Rumens, 2017). In addition, several gender and media scholars have revealed how postfeminism dilutes the feminist movement, imposes traditional gender roles and eventually upholds patriarchal power structures (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007; Gill & Schraff, 2011). It is thus of utmost importance to investigate whether this is the case in other settings. This study aims to expand and contribute to studies of postfeminism, and to extend the limited research that inserts postfeminism as a critical concept in organisational studies (Gill et al., 2017; Kelan, 2018; Lewis et al., 2018; Rumens, 2017).

The explanations to why women do not advance in their career and are still underrepresented in top management positions have been many. One commonly heard explanation is that men usually recruit other men and that women lack valuable business relationships and formal/informal business networks (Laird, 2006). Thus, female student career networks have

emerged as a way for young women to build relationships with both peers and executives from the business sphere, to bridge the gender gap. The female student career networks often aims to improve women's career opportunities, reduce inequalities and sometimes have a feminist stance (e.g. WILMA 2020a; Vera 2020). To choose a female student career network as an organisational setting and inserting postfeminism as a critical concept can therefore arguably bring additional interesting layers to the study. First, building on the epistemological position that conceives gender as socially constructed (Butler, 1990; Lewis et al., 2018), the study of a female student career network allows to observe the negotiation of gender in the network and elicit where gender norms are either reproduced or disrupted within the organisation. Second, the female student career network highlights specifically interesting articulations of gender, such as women and career, women in management, gender equality and feminism itself. Thus, capturing postfeminism through a female student career network is alluring in two ways.

1.1 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of the study is to analyse postfeminism in an organisational context from a critical perspective. Thus, postfeminism is the object for analysis and the female student career network is merely the setting of where to capture it. More specifically, the study will explore the phenomenon of postfeminism in the sense of contemporary perceptions of gender and gender equality. Furthermore, the study aims to investigate how these perceptions are projected and how they relate to organisational values, principles and processes of a female student career network. Hence, the following research question has been formulated: *How does postfeminism play out in a female student career network?* This question is divided into three questions for further operationalization.

1. What perceptions of gender are expressed through a female student career network?
2. What perceptions of gender equality are expressed through a female student career network?

3. How does the perceptions of gender and gender equality influence the organisational values, principles and processes of a female student career network?

The motivation of the study is twofold. The goal of gender equality are not only argued from a human rights and ethical perspective. It is also argued from an economic perspective of organisational performance (e.g. Turban, Wu & Zhang, 2019). Although still debated (Dezső & Ross, 2012; Darmadi, 2011; Turban et al., 2019), a growing body of research points towards findings that a more diverse executive team bringing different cultural values and various life experiences can broaden an organisation's strategic perspective. It has also been argued that the more competent aspiring women leaders there are, the broader the talent base for recruiting (McKinsey & Company, 2012). Moreover, organisations that have diverse executive teams have proved to attain an average of 47 % higher return on equity and 55 % higher EBIT margins, compared to organisations with no women in executive committees (McKinsey & Company, 2017)¹. It is also proven that these organisations are better at other dimensions of organisational performance, such as innovation, motivation, capabilities, external orientation, work environment and values (McKinsey & Company, 2018; Turban et al., 2019).

1.2 *Research Limitations*

The study is limited to exploring postfeminism as expressed by the members and decision-makers of the female student career network (hereinafter the network). Mentors and other temporary lecturers or inspirational speakers invited to the network's events are not considered. This is due to the focus of the study being how postfeminism prevails within the network and how it is understood, made sense of and, in turn, expressed by the network's members and not the advice or lectures given in connection to the network as such. Moreover,

¹ A study of 300 organisations in 10 countries between 2007–2009. The comparison was made between the organisations in the top quartile for female representation in executive committees and the organisations with zero women in executive committees.

the network intended for the study is a female *student* career network. By studying a student network, it entails that understandings may differ from those prevalent in networks of women already working in the business world, experiencing its contradictions and challenges on an everyday basis. Further, the study only aims to portray findings in this particular point in time, the spring of 2020, to highlight the contemporary environment. It is not investigated what has been and why, but how previous actions and decisions are made sense of today. Last, the study is limited to exploring the perceptions of gender and gender equality as expressed by men and women who identify as cis-gender, which means “individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009:461).

1.3 *Outline of the Thesis*

The thesis is structured in seven chapters. Following this first introductory chapter, a historical background of gender and work and the emergence of networking is briefly presented in chapter two. The third chapter discusses relevant research within the field of gender and organisations as well as provide an in depth explanation of the concept of postfeminism. In the fourth chapter the setting of the study is described. The fifth chapter explains the qualitative case study design and the multiple methodological data collection used to enable the study’s purpose. In the sixth chapter the findings are presented and analysed, leading up to the last concluding chapter, namely the seventh chapter, where discussion and limitations of the study are presented.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

With the industrial revolution men became the majority of the workforce of the emerging factories, while women had the main responsibility for the household. However, many women from the working class began working due to the growing economy and the increasing demand for labourers. This resulted in a dilemma for the women – if they stayed at home they did not generate any income, but if they went to work they could not fulfil their domestic responsibilities. However, when married, the man was expected to provide for the family, while the woman was conveyed to domestic work – thus highlighting the separation of work and family life further and truly establishing the idea that work is accredited to men, and domestic responsibilities to women (Alvesson & Billing, 2009).

Around 1850, the first wave of feminism emerged in the US and UK, followed by Europe, particularly focused on women's voting rights (Kyle & Manns, 2019). As the economy grew, more married women entered the workforce (Alvesson & Billing, 2009) and the women started demanding greater admittance within the workforce, as well as equal pay. While legal actions were taken as a result of the first wave of feminism, cultural obstacles still remained. Women were still caught in the same dilemma, balancing work and domestic responsibility. Thus, the second wave of feminism emerged, originating in the US during the 1960s. The new women's movement worked to counteract what was considered to be structural discrimination against women, and aimed to ensure women's freedom on a societal and political level (Kyle & Manns, 2019).

The second wave of the feminist movement further helped demonstrate the difference between mens' and womens' social dynamics, and how mens' social privileges are a strong advantage when it comes to career opportunities, which in turn violates principles of equal opportunity. Throughout history, men have benefitted from personal relationships, family networks and

nepotism, i.e. “networking”, as the dominant group of the workforce. The concept of “networking” gained attention in the workplace during the second half of the twentieth century, and became a way of identifying and addressing the barriers that exist for minority groups within the workplace, in the sense of limited valuable social connections. By naming networking as a strategy in a business context, networking became further highlighted, and women and other minorities were encouraged to recognize and exploit such informal systems to help advance their careers (Laird, 2006).

3 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following chapter describes how gender is viewed as socially constructed and how organisational culture and processes has been proved to play a crucial part in both shaping and realizing perceptions of gender. Moreover, in this chapter we further develop how and why the concept of postfeminism can provide assistance in understanding the patterning of gender in contemporary organisational settings. Description of the main characteristics of postfeminism tying it to neoliberalism and individualism concludes the chapter.

3.1 Gender and Organisation

Previous research within the field of gender and organisation has been focused on gender representation in regards to numbers. For instance, counting the number of men and women in different industries or different positions within an organisation (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). However, focus has shifted from studying gender representations to studying gender perceptions. This builds on gender being perceived as socially constructed and something that is culturally created rather than something fixed (Butler, 1990; Lewis et al., 2018). Gender perceptions, personal traits and what it means to be a man or a woman is thus not seen as dependent on biological aspects, but constantly negotiated and enacted through social and cultural processes and institutions (Butler, 1990; Wahl et al., 2011). This approach towards gender has captured the interest of several scholars and is often referred to as “doing gender”, which by simply the semantics makes it easy to grasp as gender being an on-going activity in everyday life (Kelan, 2018; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Socially constructed gender perceptions have been seen as conforming both men and women into stereotypical gender roles (Alvesson & Billing, 2009;

Butler, 1990; Wahl et al., 2011). However, how gender is done can either reinforce or challenge current cultural norms and perceptions. Stereotypical notions of gender are divided into femininity and masculinity, each representing a certain set of traits and cultural perceptions ascribed to individuals depending on their biological sex (Tuana, 1993; Wahl et al., 2011). This is communicated in a variety of ways, for example as women and men having different psychological characteristics and therefore abilities (Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Wahl, 1992). These stereotypical characteristics include the notion of women as driven by emotions, while men are supposedly driven by logic. Consequently, women are regarded as irrational and in need of support and guidance by rational men (Tuana, 1993). Building on these notions, it is argued that current social power structures are patriarchal, meaning that women are dominated, oppressed, exploited and disfavoured, resulting in the fact that women are suffering various consequences as a result of this gender inequality (NSG, 2016; Wahl et al., 2011; Walby, 1990).

Both historically and today, the Swedish labour market has been identified as both vertically and horizontally gender segregated. The horizontal dimension refers to the fact that men and women are, to a large extent, working in different industries, while the vertical dimension refers to the fact that women are greatly underrepresented in managerial positions, especially at the top executive levels (Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Wahl, 1992; Wahl et al., 2011). Gender segregation can be derived from cultural perceptions of gender, meaning the built-in concepts and notions of femininity and masculinity. First, as women biologically bear children, parallels have been drawn between women and the domestic sphere and between men and the public sphere, i.e. making women perceived as less suitable for a business context (Wahl et al., 2011). Once in the labour market, feminine work has been identified as associated with lower salary and lower status, and a different emotional atmosphere compared to masculine work (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Furthermore, norms and ideas associated with leadership have an expressed undertone which considers men as more naturally fit to lead, or that it is easier for men to exercise leadership. This further obstructs the possibility for women to become leaders and make it to top management positions (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Hence, traditional divisions of labor have

proved to be based on stereotypical gender norms, and continue to determine who is recruited and/or promoted in the workplace, resulting in a disfavouring of women (Acker, 2006).

Gender notions have also been seen as deeply embedded within organisational culture and processes (Acker, 1990; Wahl et al., 2011). An organisation's culture is made up of a certain set of norms and values that forms the basis of how members of the organisation understands and creates meaning from the organisation's processes (Wahl et al., 2011). Since gender is socially constructed and continually created, the organisational culture and processes not only mirror the organisation's members' perception of gender, but also shape and conform the understandings of gender within the organisation. Hence, the culture and processes within an organisation can affect gender perceptions (Wahl et al., 2011). Building on the notion that organisations are gendered, this means that “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (Acker, 1990:146). In turn, this results in, as the feminine is regarded as subordinated to the masculine, women often being the ones disfavoured in organisations (Alvesson & Billing, 2009).

This oppression takes many shapes. First, the male-dominated power structure has resulted in a tendency towards homosocial reproduction in organisations, i.e. men prefer and seek companionship with other men (Kanter, 1977; Lipman-Blumen, 1976; Wahl et al., 2011). This has proved to play out in informal ways as senior male employees take on junior male protégés. In addition, homosociality has proved to create a male dominated culture. Thus, even if women are a part of the organisation, and not structurally excluded, they are culturally excluded – resulting in the fact that they do not advance within the organisation (Wahl et al., 2011).

Second, to explain why women to a much lower extent reach higher managerial or executive positions, the metaphor of the glass ceiling has often been used. The glass ceiling is not an individual obstacle based on personal shortcomings in skills or characteristics. Instead, it refers to the hidden obstacles that women meet as a category, precisely because they are women,

despite formal gender equality at work (Casini, 2016; Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1987; Wahl, 1992). On the contrary, the metaphor of the glass elevator has been used to represent the benefits and the invisible factors shown to facilitate the professional advancement of men in female-dominated jobs (Casini, 2016).

Third, it has been shown how female managers also experience another type of pressure within the organisational life compared to men – the pressure of being a pioneer as the deviant woman in a high position (Morrison et al., 1987). Moreover, as women often are the minority in male-dominated business spheres, individual women, due to their minority positions, are seen as tokens (Kanter, 1977; Wahl, 1992). This entails that the women present in the male-dominated contexts are perceived as representing all women as such. In turn, this results in what has been defined as the effects of assimilation, contrast and visibility. Assimilation means that the minority is homogenized, and not acknowledged as individuals, thus stereotypes and generalizations are seen as applied to the minority. Contrast entails how the differences between the majority and the minority have a tendency to be exaggerated. Visibility simply implies that as the minority is considered different, they become more visible and receive attention to a greater extent than those belonging to the majority, although this comes at the expense of the individual being reduced to a token (Kanter, 1977).

Last, another reason for women's underrepresentation in management positions is the still-relevant dilemma of the work life balance. Generally, women are still today bearing the majority of the domestic responsibilities, and thus have greater difficulties prioritizing their careers compared to men. They become less mobile and often feel a greater obligation towards the family, as well as in meeting societal norms, than to take a managerial job (Alvesson & Billing, 2009).

3.2 *Postfeminism*

The continuing oppression and discrimination of women characterizing the business environment has been one of the central topics counteracted by previous feminist movements (Kyle & Manns, 2019). However, a growing number of critical feminist scholars argue that the contemporary discussions of gender equality issues are characterized by a complex entanglement of sometimes contradictory feminist and anti-feminist ideas, referred to as postfeminism, obstructing feminist progress (Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017). Moreover, as women now have a given place within the workforce, in an environment where one equality programme is replacing another and organisations are competing in appearing gender equal, the discussion of gender and gender equality in business has arguably changed (Kelan, 2008; 2018; Lewis, 2014). Thus, this study subscribes to the scholars arguing that the concept of postfeminism can assist in creating an understanding of how gender is perceived and constructed in contemporary organisational settings (Gill et al., 2017; Kelan, 2008; 2018; Lewis, 2014).

Several conceptions of what postfeminism withholds currently co-exist. First, postfeminism has been used to explain feminism in regards to other “post”-concepts, such as postmodernism, poststructuralism etcetera. Second, the “post” in postfeminism have been used to state a historical shift, that the contemporary feminist movement has moved on from the second wave of feminism, and is thus sometimes equalled with a “third wave” of feminism. Third, it has been used to describe a contemporary anti-feminism, a reaction against the feminist movement, sometimes referred to as a backlash (Faludi, 1991). Contemporary expressions of the anti-feminist backlash have been pinpointed by several scholars, and include several contradicting notions, such as feminism being overly excessive radical and no longer needed; that men, and not women, are now the discriminated ones; that the strive for political correctness has gone “too far”; that feminism is to blame for women’s unhappiness; or simply that women have to accept the fact that everything cannot be equal, they “can’t have their cake and eat it too” (Gill et al., 2017). However, although the view of postfeminism as an anti-feminism highlights how criticism against feminism circulates in society, many scholars argue that when only

focusing on the expressions of how feminist achievements in various ways are forfeited, one risk to lose a very important aspect of contemporary gender regimes. In fact, alongside the anti-feminism, there are several strong expressions of feminist ideas. Thus, fourth and last, postfeminism is used to describe a distinctive sensibility characterized by a complex “entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (McRobbie, 2008). The entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas has further been described as a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2006). To use the concept of postfeminism in this way has proved to enable a constellation of distinctive features and themes, frequently recurring in contemporary gender regimes (Gill, 2006; Gill et al., 2017). Hence, this study will use the concept of postfeminism in this certain way, and the following section aims to explain these distinctive features and how they make up a postfeminist sensibility together

3.3 *Individualism and Neoliberalism*

Postfeminism has proved to be deeply intertwined with other contemporary beliefs, ideas and practices (Gill, 2006). Significant for our time is the emphasis placed on the individual, in contrast to the collective, thus also significant for postfeminism. The individualism characterizing society can be derived from many factors and is one of the cornerstones of neoliberalism and capitalism, originating in the core ideas concerning the free individual, individual ownership and the free market (Hall, 2011). Moreover, the shift from the collective to the individual has been explained as an effect of the diminished role which tradition and religion possess in today’s western societies, which in turn results in the fact that each individual is responsible for making his or her own choices concerning his or her life (Giddens, 1999). For the individual, this implies that the creation of one’s identity and life path is up to each and everyone, since it is no longer considered predetermined by tradition, but malleable. In this fashion, the identity, the physical body and life itself becomes a project. A project, which may constantly be changed, transformed and improved (Giddens, 1999). This self-reinvention has proved to be most visible for women, both regarding the physical appearance – which has always been more

important for women than men – and the identity, as women are now encouraged to “work on themselves” in order to take space and become confident in the workplace (Gill et al., 2017). To conclude, this makes notions of surveillance and self-discipline recurring topics and a distinction of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017).

As the individual is now seen as responsible for his or her life (Giddens, 1999) this further implies that factors such as class, ethnicity or gender are no longer considered determining the opportunities or limitations of the individual, but that each person is accountable for his or her own destiny (Beck, 1992; Dobson, 2015). In this manner, the individual becomes responsible for both failures and achievements (Beck, 1992; Dobson, 2015). Furthermore, this has been seen as reflected as a postfeminist tendency of denying the presence of structural oppression of women (Gill et al., 2017). For instance, research including interviews with pre-teen girls revealed a large influence of postfeminist ideas – the discussion displayed notions of structural inequalities that both de-power and undervalue women, while at the same time, both gender and racial barriers were ignored and replaced by a belief that women's success is universally available (Cossens & Jackson, 2020). Moreover, it has been noted that young women, although showing awareness of women as oppressed, do not want to acknowledge that they themselves are a part of a marginalized group (Dobson, 2015). Thus, it is evident how the responsibility of creating equal conditions is ascribed to the individual woman herself. If she fails, it is not because of disadvantageous social structures, but portrayed as her own fault. In contrast to what characterized the second wave of feminism, which strived to highlight the social structures and misogynist ideas collectively oppressing women, postfeminism is characterized by addressing issues on an individual level – which naturally results in an inability to discuss solutions on a collective level (Gill, 2016; Gill et al., 2017). This has also mirrored as a distinct change in discourse when analysing how the Swedish Women's Entrepreneurship Policy is phrased, earlier representing a radical feminist discourse promoting women's collective action, although now replaced by postfeminist neoliberalism encouraging empowerment and individualism (Berglund, Ahl, Pettersson & Tillmar, 2018). The withdrawal from structural explanations of inequalities in turn implies that there is no longer a need for feminism (Gill et al., 2017).

Moreover, research examining perceptions of gender inequalities at work, have determined a number of distinctive discursive repertoires that in turn revealed how gender inequality issues were repeatedly downplayed, or even completely rejected, as relevant in the workplace (Gill et al., 2017). First, gender inequalities were seen as linked to the past. Second, if any inequalities were acknowledged, these were displaced to other contexts or countries (Czarniawska & Calás, 1997; Gill et al., 2017). Third, women were presented as the advantaged sex, supporting a gender equality claim. Last, there was a way of expressing that the status quo was only to be accepted as there was no possibility for change (Gill et al., 2017).

The retraction from structural accounts of inequalities can also be seen in what has been described as the postfeminist ideal subject (McRobbie, 2007). She is pictured as strong, autonomous and unconstrained by any inequalities. She is empowered. Thus, it becomes evident that the reasons behind the replacement of the ideas and beliefs, which generated the second wave of feminism, into postfeminist ideas may be explained by the emergence of individualism and neoliberalism. With emphasis on individual responsibility, it becomes clear that postfeminism derives from contemporary ideological currents, thus replacing the second wave of feminism, as the latter is strongly associated with the recognition of structural oppression (Dobson, 2015). In other words, neoliberalism and capitalism can be argued to have co-opted feminism (Gill, 2006). Thus, it is not only changes in feminist ideology and/or gender regimes that have prompted postfeminism, but changes in society as such.

3.4 Choice and Femininity

Neoliberalism and individualism goes hand in hand with the elevation of the individual's unquestionable freedom to choose (Sørensen, 2017). Freedom has always been a central topic for the feminist movement, and the feminists of the second wave highlighted how social structures restricted women's freedom and choice by conforming women to narrow ideals (Kyle & Manns,

2019). However, this has been proved to take an unsuspected turn. Instead of criticizing society for limiting women into being stereotypically feminine, both in terms of appearance, career and lifestyle choices as during the second wave of feminism, research has shown how criticism is now directed at that criticism, argued to be limiting women from choosing the stereotypical feminine (Press, 2011). To use make-up, dress feminine and devote a great deal of time to one's appearance and body is described as a choice and not as an effect of patriarchal demands and oppression (Gill, 2006; Press, 2011). This has also proved to be the case in regards to life and career paths. For instance, when research analysing the work-life balance metaphor on women combining career and motherhood, choice was understood as a performative concept instead of as a notion of social practices (Sørensen, 2017). In a postfeminist manner, choosing the feminine has thus shown to be portrayed as both women's freedom and right (Press, 2011).

In addition to regarding stereotypical femininity as a choice, for instance “choosing” a feminine appearance, this notion has proved to be centred around the idea that stereotypical feminine beauty practices are to be regarded as something one should want to do for one's own well-being (Gill, 2006; Gill & Schraff, 2011). Beauty procedures such as waxing, make-up or breast enlargement are presented as a means for women to feel satisfied and good about themselves, as well as an individual choice which cannot be questioned. Moreover, women are portrayed as making themselves beautiful for themselves and not for any man (Gill, 2006). It is thus presented as entirely self-imposed and completely in line with the postfeminist conception of the woman as an autonomous, independent individual who is no longer affected by social power structures (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2006). The same goes for women who are portrayed in an objectified or sexualized way. This is also argued as something she does for her own sake, and the notion of sexism is repudiated. Since the ideas of structural oppression are disregarded and the woman is thereby imperturbable by patriarchal structures, the way she presents herself must simply be by her own choice and something she does for her own sake (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2006). This approach to the freedom of the individual results in a discourse about the woman's body as a form of self-chosen objectification, which becomes difficult – almost impossible – to question (Gill, 2006). In addition, it has also been proved that female top business leaders use

self-body-care as a strategy to secure credibility as a leader for continued empowerment, indicating that women's success is dependent on self-care, self-monitoring, and a demonstration of choice (Mavin & Grandy, 2019).

In summary, this reasoning leads up to the complete view of the postfeminist ideal subject. She is successful, "having it all", viewed as strong (often both in a psychological and physical sense), assertive, and independent, while she at the same time is in possession of a very traditional feminine appearance (Genz, 2010; Gill, 2006; Kanai, 2017; McRobbie, 2004). All by free will. The demands on the woman and her body, which have existed for centuries, have thus been masked in a postfeminist way as an expression of women's freedom (Press, 2011). To conclude, when the female business leader herself is responsible for her own success and conforms to stereotypical gender roles because she wants to, there is no need for feminism (Gill et al., 2017).

4 SETTING

The female student career network chosen for this case study is The Women In Lund Mentor Association (WILMA), which is a part of the student union LundaEkonomerna, present at Lund University School of Economics and Management. In the following chapter the career network is first described from its origin to its operations today, including a description of the student union along with relevant equality policies.

4.1 *The Network*

In 2002 a group consisting of five dedicated female business students at Lund University initiated a female network association aiming to organize a mentorship programme between female business students and women with business experience (Fredriksson, 2003; Sundén, 2002). The students had recognized that they had trouble finding female role models in the business sphere, and that they did not relate to the existing business stereotypes. The initiators felt a need for guidance as well as for a place to discuss what they regarded as important issues that were not discussed elsewhere (Sundén, 2002). Further, by initiating a female career network they sought to improve female students opportunities to create valuable business connections and to help bridge the gap between student life and working life (Fredriksson, 2003).

In 2015 a decision to open up the network for male students was made. This decision was made when the network became a part of the student union, and the argument behind the decision was that excluding male students was not in line with the union's policy to counteract exclusion and discrimination as explained by a previous board member (interview, May 3, 2020). Since then, the mentorship program has been open to students of all genders. However, the mentors are still solely women (WILMA, 2020a).

Six students referred to as *committee members* run all operational activities of the network (WILMA, 2020a). Today, all of the committee members are women, but male students are also welcome to apply, and have in previous years been a part of the committee. This was, however, not the case when the network was founded. At that time only female students were encouraged to participate in the project (WILMA, 2020b).

The network still strives to continue to create valuable interactions to facilitate the transition from student life to working life. Besides the mentorship program, there are networking events, interactive activities and inspirational lectures (WILMA, 2020c). The network currently consists of approximately 30 mentors and 60 students, (referred to as *adepts* by the network) five of which are men, according to the network's project leader (personal communication, 29 April 2020). The adepts apply via a questionnaire based on interests and future career ambitions, while the mentors are actively sought out and recruited by the committee (interview, May 3, 2020). The committee then matches its adepts with the available mentors, based on responses to the questionnaires and what they believe will be a good fit. There are always more students applying than the number of mentors available (personal communication, 29 April 2020). The number of students applying to the programme but not receiving a mentor was not disclosed to us, with reference to an internal student union policy. Since the students are usually paired with a mentor during an entire year, the relationship is characterized by a long-term focus with multiple meetings to ensure personalized guidance for the future entrance into the labour market (interview, May 3, 2020). The mentors are described as to "be found in different companies and areas, but they are all driven and successful women who want to inspire and develop others" (LundaEkonomerna, 2019).

4.2 *The Student Union*

The network is one of 27 projects and committees connected to a non-profit student union (LundaEkonomerna, 2020a). The union is for all students studying business administration, economics, systems science or business law at the university and currently has approximately 3300 members. The union is student operated and its mission is to ensure that the members of the union get the most out of their university experience. This includes creating opportunities for the students where they may impact their education. Moreover, the union provides a platform for students where they may “improve themselves and reach future ambitions as well as create opportunities to socialize and network professionally” (LundaEkonomerna, 2020a). The student union is run by a board consisting of ten students that oversees all operations of the union and functions as the union’s management team (LundaEkonomerna, 2020b).

4.3 *The Gender Equality Policies*

The union have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to discrimination, harassment and bullying, both within the union’s activities and at the university, which is stated to be worked proactively with. Moreover, the union states that they demand “all students are treated equally, regardless of age, disabilities, ethnicity, family status, gender identity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation and more.” Other than this, the union externally refers to the “List of Rights”, constructed by the university (LundaEkonomerna, 2020c). Internally, the union has an “Equal Treatment Policy”. Both the university’s list of rights and the unions equal treatment policy first and foremost refers to the Swedish Discrimination Act (LundaEkonomerna, 2020d; Lund University, 2020). The student union states that they are against: “That any individual gets exposed by offensive special treatment or gets treated differently due to their gender, ethnicity and/or sexual orientation. Discrimination is illegal under Swedish law (*Diskrimineringslagen, 2008:567*)”. It is further explained in the equality policy how the student union is working towards equal treatment and opportunity and against discrimination and harassment. For

instance, they state: “the Nominations Committee should work for an equal division of gender and diversity when nominating students to collegium or board.” (LundaEkonomerna, 2020d).

In turn, the Discrimination Act works to counter discrimination, and in other ways promote equal rights and opportunities regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation or age. Discrimination on any of these grounds is illegal, with the exception of special treatment of women in order to promote gender equality (Diskrimineringslagen, 2008:567). Furthermore, it is explicitly stated that the ban does not prevent an organisation from providing members of one gender with benefits, so called affirmative actions, in the quest to promote equality between women and men.

5 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the study's qualitative case study design and multi-methodological data collection is explained and argued for. Moreover, we highlight our critical feminist perspective and emancipatory ambition, as well as give an in depth explanation for why the case of the network was chosen for the study. To conclude, a reflection and discussion of the quality of the method is rendered through the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

5.1 *Research Design*

A qualitative research design was considered most suitable for the study, as the approach allows for interpretation of the empirical data through a critical feminist perspective (Bryman & Bell, 2005). Hence, the study builds on a qualitative and interpretive research tradition arguing for interpretation as necessary in order to gain a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), such as postfeminism. Moreover, as with most feminist research, the study has an emancipatory ambition and intertwines the research inquiry with an agenda to generate knowledge contributing to confront the social oppression and discrimination of women (Wahl et al., 2011). Furthermore, the study was conducted through a case study design, since this strategy allows a specific phenomenon to be investigated within its original context. Therefore the case study design was well suited for enabling an in-depth analysis of the complexity and many layers that characterize postfeminism. In turn, an in-depth analysis is required to illustrate and elucidate the underlying factors and understandings of the expressed perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam 1994), here in the sense of gender and gender equality.

5.2 *The Case*

The chosen research setting made an interesting case due to several reasons. First, as highlighted in the literature review, two interview studies of postfeminism in regards to work have previously been conducted. One with pre-teen girls and one with women who already had entered work life. Thus, there was an empirical research gap where a study of postfeminism and work in a context consisting of young men and women about to enter working life had not been done. A gap we decided to dissolve. Moreover, scholars have in previous research established that postfeminist ideas are distinctive amongst the younger generation of women (Gill, 2006). We found it interesting to explore if this also was the case in a network with a stated ambition to improve gender equality issues and consisting of business students who have a gender perspective stated as a part of their education (Företagsekonomiska institutionen, 2020). These students will arguably bring gender perceptions forth with them into their working life, which further on will lay the ground for the characteristics of future business settings, and thus may be considered an important phenomenon to understand. Hence, the research setting prevailed as an interesting bridge between a career and an educational context. The case was also considered of interest because of its broader context, namely Sweden. Sweden can be an interesting environment to conduct a critical feminist study in, due to several reasons. Swedish politicians and scholars produce a narrative of having a culture that indicates a strong norm of equality (Swedish Institute, 2019; Andersson, 2009). Sweden is also often described as an example of “state feminism” (Bourne, 2010), meaning that governmental policies promote gender equality (Hernes, 1987). And, last Sweden often scores high on gender equality indexes (EIGE, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2019).

5.3 *Data Collection Methods*

To ensure a representative, complex and varied material, the empirical material was collected and analysed using a multi-methodological approach, by combining focus group interviews,

observations and a text and image analysis. More specifically, the focus group interviews conducted consisted of discussions between adepts that have taken or are taking part in the network. The observational study performed consisted of a committee meeting of the network together with the text and image analysis that was performed on the network's Instagram account.

Additional collected material consists of the network's Facebook page and website, internal and external documents, as well as an interview with a former student union board member, complemented by email information from a current board member. Such additional materials had significance and filled the purpose of framing the context for the interviews and observations, and provided further information on the student union and the network. In other words: the focus group interviews, the observation and the Instagram account are the empirical material of the study. In this section, we will explain the motivation, characteristics and processes of constructing our set of data.

5.3.1 Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews were selected because of the method being particularly appropriate when exploring a certain phenomenon (Fern, 2001), when aiming to gain new insights regarding a social issue (Carey & Asbury, 2016) and being very effective in reflecting social realities of a group (Hughes & DuMont, 1993), such as the young men and women within the network. It is possible that group sessions could silence individual voices (Kitzinger, 1996), meaning that focus group interviews may miss the diversity of opinions. However, focus group interviews were deemed better suited for this study than individual interviews, since this is also the case in a work life context, where some individuals inflict their opinions on others while some take a more passive role in discussions. Moreover, expressions that the network projected as a whole was of greater interest than individual opinions.

The focus group interviews were moderated and semi-structured sessions in an informal setting, to better direct and stimulate the group discussion and enable collection of desired and relevant information (Dilorio, Hockenberry-Eaton & Rivero, 1994). Four focus group interviews of about one hour each were conducted. The focus group interviews were attempted to focus the discussion in various directions. The first interview focused on more general topics about the perceptions of women in business and their relationship with feminism, the second interview focused on the mentorship programme, the third interview concerned female adepts' perceptions of the network, and the fourth interview focused on male adepts' understandings of the above (see Appendix A, B, C, and D). Together with the observational study and the expressions found in the posts on their Instagram, and after four focus group interviews, the same expression was repeated, pointing towards saturation (Charmaz, 2006). The characteristics of the focus group interviews are illustrated below in Table 1.

| Focus Group Interview | Date | Time | Number of participants |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Interview 1 | March 30th 2020 | 10.00-11.30 | 5 |
| Interview 2 | April 8th 2020 | 14.00-15.00 | 4 |
| Interview 3 | April 16th 2020 | 17.00-18.00 | 3 |
| Interview 4 | May 4th 2020 | 17.00-18.00 | 3 |

Tabel 1. Compilation of the Focus Group Interviews

The total number of respondents taking part in the focus group interviews was ten (seven women and three men), and some respondents participated in more than one interview. Moreover, the committee members that took part in the observation also took part in the focus group interviews, since they too have mentors and thus are also considered adepts. The respondents are currently studying at Lund University School of Economics and Management and have sometime between 2018 and 2020 been enrolled in the network's mentorship programme, and were thus rather homogeneous in regard to age, occupation, and career ambitions. The respondents have been

anonymized and given fictional names in order to protect the interests of all parties. A list of the respondents can be found below in Table 2.

| Fictional Name | Age |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Angela | 24 |
| Betty | 22 |
| Claire | 22 |
| Doris | 21 |
| Edith | 21 |
| Frances | 21 |
| Grace | 21 |
| Henry | 22 |
| Igor | 22 |
| Jack | 22 |

Tabel 2. Compilation of the respondents

The focus group interviews were conducted with an exploratory approach. This means that the respondents' conceptions, explanations, attitudes, opinions, knowledge and beliefs formed the basis for the analysis (Fern, 2001; Wilkinson, 1998), and thus depended on interaction to generate necessary information (Kitzinger 1996). The smaller size and homogeneity of the group affected the focus group's cohesion, since it allowed relatedness and a clear common purpose between the respondents (Davis, 1969). The homogeneity arguably influenced the interactions between the respondents, since relatedness increases the dynamic interactions and as a consequence more personal information prevailed (Kitzinger, 1996). Thus, it enhanced the likelihood that the respondents interacted in a rich and personal discussion (Carey, 1994). It is

worth noting that the data collection was focused on the topic of the research, and not on the group interaction per se (Carey & Asbury, 2016).

Due to the restrictions following the outbreak of Covid-19, the focus group interviews were conducted digitally, by the use of the platform Zoom. The platform allows for built in recording, which mitigated the risk of respondents feeling overly observed and, as a consequence of that, withholding information. Moreover, one of us researchers was chosen as the moderator because of the relatedness between us researchers and the respondents, as we are close in age and are also studying at Lund University School of Economics and Management. This helped establish a non-threatening and supportive climate to encourage participation (Fern, 2001). Lastly, the chosen language for the focus group interviews was Swedish, since it is all respondents' mother tongue and thereby ensured a natural flow of discussion.

Prior to the interviews, an interview protocol and guide was established. The focus group discussions followed the steps of a recommended interview protocol: basic info regarding the upcoming interview, an introduction of the topic, the actual focus group discussion, and a closing statement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the interviews differed in purpose and topic the interview guides differed, yet they were all based on a preliminary list including the key concepts of the theoretical framework, to ensure transparent operationalization and that all aspects of the issue were covered. The questions were few and open-ended, with the aim to elicit views and opinions of the respondents' (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The introductory questions were of a more general non-threatening character, while the following questions progressed towards being more specific, in order to encourage early participation, as proposed by Kingry, Tiedje and Friedman (1990), and to establish a psychological safe space. The questions were memorized beforehand, to ensure a smooth progress of the discussion. However, the interview questionnaire only served as a guide and other questions or comments were allowed to stimulate the discussion.

The interviews were recorded both in audio and video through Zoom and notes were taken during the interviews, in order to help the future transcribing process. The transcription both organised and prepared the data for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and minimized biases and misunderstandings, thus enabling a deeper and more credible analysis (Heritage, 1984). The transcriptions were done to the necessary extent for the analysis, meaning that words, and not every pause or sound, was transcribed, since the analysis is of a content based character (Lundahl & Skärvad, 2016).

The respondents were sampled through a non-probability purposive sample (Bryman & Bell, 2005), meaning that they were selected because of their current or previous position in the network, either as adepts or committee members. The committee was reached out to directly by email, while the adepts were inquired via the network's Facebook page. After a couple of days, a Facebook message regarding different time slots for the focus group interviews was sent to everybody who had expressed an interest. All who were interested took part in at least one of the interviews, except one person who could not make it to any of the suggested time slots. By not excluding individuals wanting to participate, a possible selection bias was mitigated. Since no men answered the Facebook post, we decided to reach out to them directly, because we believed their opinions and perceptions would contribute to a more nuanced empirical material. Three men answered and became a part of the focus group respondents. The sampling strategy entails the possibility of only a certain kind of people being willing to participate, since people themselves choose if they want to participate or not (Bryman & Bell, 2005). However, the advantage of this is the likelihood to reach people who are more engaged in either the network or the topic and want to discuss them, implying a richer discussion. Since the response by adepts in the network were relatively low, this further inclined us to include both the text and image analysis and the observational study.

5.3.2 Text and Image Analysis

Since the network not only organises a mentorship program, but also has a goal to promote female role models and inspire young men and women, we felt compelled to also examine the network's Instagram account (@wilma.lundaekonomerna) where a new picture is posted approximately every week. The network's Instagram is open to the public and currently has 864 followers (May 4th 2020).

Since the purpose of the study is to create an understanding of how gender and gender equality perceptions are perceived, it is the underlying meaning of the network's Instagram posts that is of interest to bring forth. A qualitative content analysis was deemed appropriate for this segment, since the qualitative content analysis allows for a deeper reading of the material, such as text and image (Patel & Davidsson, 2003). Both text and image are analysed beyond what is on the surface, on the basis that they have a greater message – a meaning considered important for the study (Borgersen & Ellingsen, 1994). The material consists of 141 posts (the total number of posts published at this time) and five Story Highlights, and were collected on May 4th 2020.

Both the images and the texts of the network's posts were analysed. In regard to the image analysis, not only what the network shows or writes was analysed, but also symbols in the images. Thus, the approach involves a qualitative content analysis of both text and image on several levels. As with all material downloaded from the Internet, there is the risk of the material being changed or deleted and therefore snapshots of all Instagram posts were taken when they were collected on May 4th 2020. The posts described in the analysis are included as attachments to the essay, for full transparency. Other screenshots of posts are available upon request.

5.3.3 Observation

To contribute to a more holistic picture of the phenomenon, ensure that the data was as rich as possible and increase credibility, an observation of one of the network's committee meetings was conducted on April 22nd 2020. The intention of the observation was to observe the culture and the decision making within the network. Although language is an important part of the creation and recreation of gender perceptions (as studied using the interview material), interactions, culture and context also has a significant influence (Merriam, 1994; Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Thus, we wanted to include an observation of the decision makers within the network to shed light on, not only on how gender is perceived by the network's adepts, but also on how gender is portrayed and negotiated by the people running the network.

Previous to the observation of one of the network's committee meetings, some areas were formulated as a starting point for what was intended to be observed. The areas were:

- The environment surrounding the meeting
- The participants taking part in the meeting
- Language, symbolism, irony and jokes
- What the meeting focused on
- How the members approached problems
- How the members arrived at decisions

The first area, "the environment", focused on how and where the meeting was conducted, and since the meeting due to Covid-19 was digital, using Zoom, we focused on the participants' different surrounding environments. The second area, "the participants" focused on who took part in the meeting, who the committee members were and what role they had. The "language, symbolism, irony and jokes" area focused on how they spoke to each other. We tried to understand what they talked most about and what was causing strong emotions and reactions. With the area "what the meeting focused on", our intent was to understand what the participants

perceived as special, important and meaningful to them and the network. “How the members approached problems” focused on who took the lead, the consent between them and how or if they opposed certain ideas. Lastly, “how the members arrived at decisions”, focused on if they made decisions together or if one individual had the last say and, if so, who and why.

The meeting lasted for approximately one hour (16.00-17.00) and the entire committee, consisting of six committee members, was present. The fact that the meeting was held via zoom enabled us to deactivate our video and audio, thereby minimizing our presence as much as possible. Moreover, the observation was recorded both in audio and video. Notes were taken during the observation, in line with the pre-formulated areas and to help the future transcribing process. The transcribing process of the observation was performed in another manner than that of the focus group interviews. The observation focused on the discourse and culture in regards to the content expressed by the committee members, and thus the transcriptions included more than only words. We also transcribed expressions that could enrich our analysis later, such as laughter, emphasis, gestures and periods of silence. Such expressions may help in understanding underlying feelings or assumptions behind what is being said (Denscombe, 2010).

The intent was to conduct several observations, both in the form of additional committee meetings and lectures or other network events. However, this was not possible for two reasons. First, the outbreak of Covid-19 cancelled the network's events. Second, after some time, the student union decided to step in and restricted the possibility for us to conduct more observations of the committee meetings. Thus, after analysing the observation of the meeting that only lasted for one hour, we recognized that it was not enough to draw considerable conclusions. Because of this, this data collection method weighs less in our analysis than the other two.

5.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process began by sorting and coding the three sorts of data separately, in order to then compare and summarize them to reach a salient and comprehensive material. However, the coding processes for all three types of material essentially followed the same steps. Every coding process was first done independently, in order to compare codes and cross check the process to mitigate the risk of approaching the material too narrow minded (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There were several themes expected to be found, shown in previous studies of postfeminism (Gill, 2006). However, following an iterative method (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the emergence of new concepts was embraced when needed, to be able to interpret the material.

The material was first approached by reading through the transcripts and the Instagram posts multiple times, writing interpretations in the margins, highlighting quotes and sorting images in different colours that pinpointed various themes and underlining interesting quotes. At this point our intention was to find as many themes as possible. For the observation transcript the area in which we had found the theme was noted to highlight which context the themes were expressed, in order to try to pinpoint underlying influencing assumptions (Prasad, 2005). We then summarized our notes into different themes, with our interpretation of the quotes and images written next to it, in line with the technique of “cutting and sorting” proposed by Ryan & Bernard, (2003). Then, the notes were compared, discussed and summarized in identified salient themes that we divided into different and more general categories, both in line with the simple comparative method of “similarities and differences” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and by diving deeper trying to identify and understand the underlying assumptions (Prasad, 2005). These processes were summarized in three coding schemes that clarified how the quotes or images were interpreted and which themes were linked to which categories.

As a last step, all coded material was summarized by comparing the different coding schemes. The differences and similarities were discussed, some were merged together and some not. Eventually the different themes from the different analyses were divided into overall categories.

When comparing the different categories we realized that most of the categories directly opposed each other, which resulted in us dividing the categories in further general categories that could capture these contradictions. At this point, we had to select the themes that were most salient (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) and thus we were confronted with the challenges of “killing your darlings”, where some of the identified themes were discarded because other themes were deemed more worthy of further analysis. We ended up with an interesting and salient data sorted into contradictory categories. The data was further related to theory by continually writing down theory-related comments next to the different themes and categories. This comprehensive and systematic data analysis process allowed us to rather easily construct our analysis chapter, where the contradictory categories became our paradoxes. Throughout the chapter, it is as explicitly as possible distinguished between the description of different types of responses, and our own interpretations of these. Quotes will appear abundantly to allow the respondent’s own voices to appear as much as possible, and to make our interpretations understandable to the reader.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

When studying a topic that is sensitive it is especially necessary to take ethical issues into consideration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, besides analysing the respondents by assigned fictitious names, when presenting the findings of the study, quotes that in some way involve stories that risk individuals to be identified will not be used, and before including certain quotes we asked permission from the respondent. Moreover, previous to and during the data collection, the network and the respondents have been well informed regarding the study’s purpose and the respondents have also had the possibility to contact us afterwards if they had any questions or concerns. Worth noting, the power imbalance is minimal considering the similarity between us and the respondents.

5.6 Methodological Reflection

Instead of complying with the quality criteria associated with quantitative research methods such as validity, reliability and generalizability (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the methodological design is discussed in regards to trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is in turn divided into four areas: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

Several actions were taken to ensure credibility, meaning to assure that the research has been carried out in good practice and that the respondents' perceptions have been accurately understood. First, theory by multiple sources was reviewed to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as well as of the chosen case, in order to thoroughly prepare for the collection of data, and specifically for the focus group interviews. The interview guides as well as the moderator served as an assurance that all respondents were heard, later allowing for the comparison of answers between the respondents. Credibility was further enhanced by the choice of semi structured interviews, as the method allows for uncertainties to be clarified through supplementary questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Further, statements regarding the case setting made by the respondents were confirmed through additional sources, such as the interview with the previous board member. Moreover, the citations were sent to the respondents to allow for the respondents to verify or explain their statements. Further, by interviewing several individuals in a group context, as well as including three data collection methods, multiple perspectives were ensured, assuring a more comprehensive result (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fern, 2001).

Due to the limitations of generalizability, transferability is used to confirm the quality of the study. To allow the reader to determine the transferability of the findings, focus has been placed on using rich descriptions of the context and the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). More specifically, we thoroughly describe the research setting and use a great amount of citations in the analysis to allow for the reader to make their own interpretations. Moreover, the intent of the study is not to generalise findings, instead the value lies in that the findings contribute to a deeper understanding and illustrate patterns of a phenomena that can give insight to similar phenomenon

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lundahl & Skärvad, 2016). In regards to dependability, meaning the aim to have a consistent approach to establish merit (Bryman & Bell, 2011), records of every step in the research process has been kept. Moreover, this method chapter, which in detail describes our process, somewhat allows the reader to audit the research process. Conformability regards the researcher's ability to act in good faith and not allow personal values and opinions to affect the research and the finding too excessively (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To limit personal views taking over, both of us were present during the interviews and the observation. Further, by allowing the coding process to first be conducted separately and then compared together, we intended to increase conformability. Moreover, the concepts of our theoretical framework, which are the basis for our analysis, were defined beforehand, and are based in previous research to minimize subjectivity in assessments.

However, as the study is qualitative, we as researchers are the primary instrument for the interpretation of theory and empirical material (Merriam, 2002). This entails that the interpretations of the study's findings are inevitably to some degree biased by us researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To remain transparent we want to shed light on this fact. The influencing biases are both our own biases affecting how we interpret the data and the purpose of the study, where our feminist agenda is to critically investigate the perceptions of gender and gender equality in a female career network. Further, we have taken into account our relatedness to our respondents and our closeness to the female career network (Tracy, 2010), since we recognize that this can influence how we act during the interviews and how we interpret the data. It might make it more difficult to critically analyse the material in fear of upsetting the respondents or the network. However, we have been careful to ensure that participants have been anonymized and that the critical investigation of the network is focused on the overall expressions and not individual personal opinions. Moreover, the purpose of the study can further result in a bias since it can lead us to ascribe marginalization and inequalities to context where they perhaps do not occur. To avoid this we have been determined to look beyond individual comments regarding gender and instead view the perceptions as products of dominant discourse and expectations.

6 ANALYSIS

The analysis of the empirical material suggested that contradictory notions of gender and gender equality co-existed in the network. In the following chapter, these contradictions are disclosed as four paradoxes called the femininity paradox, the equality paradox, the political paradox and the feminist paradox. The paradoxes seemed to have a bearing on some of the organisational values, principles and processes of the network. The chapter therefore ends with how these paradoxes, that together are argued to make up a complete postfeminist phenomenon, have been realized within the network.

6.1 *The Femininity Paradox*

The empirical material showed an ambivalent relationship with traditional notions of femininity. On the one hand, femininity was embraced and expressed as something to be celebrated. On the other hand, a disassociation from being labelled as feminine was made. The following section is therefore called the femininity paradox, and digs deeper into the contradictory gender perceptions that prevailed within the network, aiming to reveal and explain how the underlying perceptions of femininity are built on a postfeminist understanding – which in turn forms the basis for how these seemingly contradictory expressions can co-exist.

6.1.1 Re-valuing Femininity

The respondents described what they recognized as a shift in the general view of women in business and top management positions. They described how stereotypical feminine traits are now regarded both as accepted to express and an actual strength. For instance, valuable feminine personality traits described by the respondents were: warm, soft, emotional, caring and focused on creating relationships. The stereotypical feminine traits which historically have been assigned

to women in a way that portrayed them as unfit leaders, managers or having a place in a business environment at all are now regarded as beneficial abilities for women in business life striving for top management positions. In other words, the respondents no longer consider femininity a restriction when entering the workplace.

In the past, I think if you were a woman in a male-dominated industry, you had to be a little manly, and act and behave in that kind of way. I hope and believe that today you are allowed to be more emotional. You are allowed to be who you really are, and people actually hire women because they believe that women are better in several ways, for instance at forming social relationships, which is today also considered a strength. As well as it is a strength to have ‘manly’ traits such as being straightforward.

Edith

The quote above exemplifies how the respondents reasoned regarding gender, and how the distinct categorization of the masculine and feminine remains. By comparing the two strengths, “forming social relationships” and being “straightforward”, and labelling the former as feminine and the latter as masculine, it is exemplified how gender separation and gender stereotypes are not questioned within the network, but that focus lies on re-valuing feminine traits and equalizing them with masculine traits. It is suggested that feminine traits, previously perceived as having a lower status than masculine traits, are now regarded as equally – or even more – valuable. Hence, it is explained that the feminine traits which previously had to be hidden are now allowed to be shown, because they have been re-valued. In addition to specific stereotypical feminine traits being re-valued and regarded as a favourable strength, there are tendencies towards embedding the notion of strength in femininity itself. This is expressed in the network’s Instagram posts, where parallels can be seen drawn between femininity and symbols of strength in several ways. For instance, “girl power”, is a reoccurring slogan. This is also visible in a picture of three women flexing their arms, as a symbol for female strength and power (see Appendix F). This could be interpreted as implying how the historical, stereotypical notion of femininity and strength as incongruous now is replaced by an idea that it is the feminine that *is* the strength, taking the re-evaluation of femininity one step further. The difference in how women are viewed in the business environment today compared to historically is thus not

portrayed as a result of freer gender boundaries, but as a result of re-evaluation of the existing stereotypical gender roles.

The respondents further highlighted how organisations can benefit from valuing diversity and the perspectives of minority groups.

I think women bring a different perspective, which is the case for all minorities. If you recruit different people, you get new perspectives and increased creativity [...] A lot of research shows that the more diverse a team is, the better they collaborate because they bring several perspectives which help them think outside the box.

Claire

The quote above exemplifies how the respondents argued that being a part of a minority group, as women in business contexts are, can bring valuable insights in the sense of a different perspective compared to what is usually presented by the majority, previously explained by the respondents as “middle aged men”. Here, the value of including women in business contexts is thus not ascribed to a certain inherent feminine personality or typically feminine traits, but to the differing life experience of women as such. Thus, this quote differs from the first, and points towards a move from an explanation of women as valuable because of their different personal traits as a result of their gender to a view of women’s behavioural differences because of their distinct life experience. Therefore, the quote in itself does not express a re-evaluation of femininity as the first quote does. However, the value of women’s minority perspectives were presented as an example of why typical female leadership abilities now are, or at least should be, as highly valued as masculine abilities.

The two quotes sum up and exemplify how being a woman in today’s business climate was argued to be a possible advantage. First, femininity is re-valued and argued to be equally, or sometimes even higher, valued than masculinity in various business contexts. Second, being a woman, with the life experiences it brings, is acknowledged as a benefit for organisations. This adds up to a point of view within the network where being a woman in business could be a

potential strength, both because of her life experience and because of what is implied as inherent feminine traits.

Moving on, it is not only feminine traits, but also a feminine appearance that is re-valued within the network. Traditionally, a feminine appearance, although often a requirement for women's social acceptance, has been deemed superficial. Thus, women have been regarded as unintelligent, as they are perceived as preoccupied by their appearance – resulting in a vicious cycle making it impossible for the women to do the right thing (Tuana, 1993). While second wave feminists tried to break free from stereotypical appearances and challenge existing gender norms by, for example, not shaving and burning bras, the strategy the respondents pointed at was rather to adopt and re-value the traditionally feminine appearance, as seen in other postfeminist studies (e.g. Press, 2011). To exemplify, this is seen in the network by highlighting a feminine appearance, described as beauty, along with a description of actress Emma Watson's engagement in gender equality issues at the networks Instagram.

One thing is for sure, Emma not only does have beauty, brains and grace but also uses them to help make a change in the world, especially making a difference in the fight for gender equality 💙🌟
@emmawatson.

The post implies that there is no divergence between “brains” and “beauty”, and that women indeed are able to possess both, and be both feminine and intelligent. Therefore, the stereotypical notion of women being unable to be intelligent *and* focused on their appearance is suggested to be discarded in the network.

Moreover, by describing how Watson “uses” her beauty and grace to make a difference in regards to gender inequalities, the post also exemplifies how the network expressed how a stereotypical feminine look and traditional beauty can also be leveraged in favour of the strive for equality and the feminist movement. Hence, it is perceived as not only possible to be both feminine and intelligent, but it also becomes clear that it is possible to be both feminine and a

feminist. The topic was also brought up and expressed by the female respondents during the focus group interviews.

I think that if you look like Zara Larsson then it is extremely important that you take [the feminist] debate, because you can do it in a different way. While the woman on Instagram [earlier described as ‘a slightly overweight, hairy, short haired girl with a nose ring’ that received hateful comments for her feminist actions] is angry and not at all feminine, I think Zara Larsson could take a lead in the debate in a different way.

Edith

As seen in the quote explaining the importance of women like Zara Larsson taking a leading role in the feminist discussion, it is not only perceived as a possibility to be a feminist if you choose to look feminine, but that it also may be understood as a matter of obligation or moral duty to take on the feminist discussion. Moreover, as the respondent compares Zara Larsson with the “not at all feminine” women, it is suggested that taking on a feminist debate is much more difficult if you are not feminine – implying that the best way to take on a feminist discussion is by maintaining a feminine appearance. This indicates yet another burden, besides grace, beauty and brains, placed on women.

The respondents also shared stories of women in general as nowadays being emotionally engaged in gender equality issues and therefore very eager to help each other on the path towards a successful career. Besides discussing the formal career network they are a part of, the respondents also discussed a kind of informal “community” which extends far beyond the network and is described as an unspoken bond between women. Since the community is described as united because of women needing each other's help in the “fight” for gender equality, it is implied that the presence and strength of the community is a reference to the fact that women have historically been, or to some extent even today still are, disadvantaged.

We as women have a larger community [than men] to turn to for support and to make our voices heard. There are many of us fighting together.

Grace

Yes, I think that it is a really big advantage for us, that we are many people who support each other.

Claire

As exemplified by the quotes above, it is perceived as an advantage, from a career perspective, to be a woman and a part of this community, as the respondents argued that this will help them move forward in their future careers. This illustrates the view of women as united in a strong community, a community which extends far beyond the network and “fights” for equal opportunities. Moreover, as shown in the first quote, it is implied that women not only have a large united community, but that their community is also larger than that of men. This sense of a female community is portrayed as a kind of informal network expected to grant the same, or even further, benefits than those previously seen by men and their male acquaintances, played out as male homosociality in organisations (Lipman Blumen, 1976). If this is the case or not lies far beyond the limits of this study, but the line of reasoning sets a clear example of how a postfeminist logic could play out: if a perceived female community is seen as having stronger effects on women’s career opportunities than male homosociality there is no longer any need for questioning or critiquing homosociality, and in the same manner no reason to look under the surface of gendered organisational life.

When speaking of women in business, the importance of a strong network is often mentioned. And in general, I believe that women are very good at ‘the social part’, forming relationships and making sure that everyone feels good. It is more personal on many levels so to say. It could be a stereotype I do not know, but what comes to mind is the emphasis on the social connections.

Edith

The strength of the community is also portrayed as derived from stereotypical feminine traits of women as social, warm and good at forming relations, as illustrated by the quote above. Thus, the argument for re-valuing stereotypical femininity has run full circle, illustrating that femininity is assumed as an advantage not only in the individual career or in the perspective of an organisation, but in building the community as a whole – understood as what keeps the “fight” alive, and in turn benefits the individual and her career. So, what united women in

previous feminist movement, the resistance against being limited to stereotypical feminine traits, is now overturned and seen as an opportunity for women, who may draw from their feminine abilities and traits to succeed together. At the same time, it is acknowledged by the respondent that it could be a stereotype, showing how feminist insights are intertwined with what would typically be regarded as an anti-feminist idea.

6.1.2 Celebrating Femininity

The statements above may be understood as various ways in which femininity is being re-valued, described as a possible advantage. It is with this in mind that it becomes possible to understand why femininity is perceived as embraced and celebrated within the network. To examine the notion of celebration further, it is possible to turn to the network's Instagram for several examples. On the 8th of March 2020, the network arranged an International Women's Day event at the university consisting of lectures, workshops and a dinner event. When marketing the daylong event on the network's Instagram profile, it was in several ways expressed that International Women's Day is a day for celebration.

On the one hand, without the network, International Women's Day would presumably not have been acknowledged to the same extent at the university. Moreover, one of the workshops promoted at the Instagram page, a collaboration with an external organisation on how to create equal and sustainable workplaces, suggests an expression of gender inequality as still being a relevant issue that needs to be taken action against. On the other hand, stating "Be a part of the celebration", "[The network] is celebrating IWD", and "Ladies, ladies, ladies. Let us celebrate ourselves and all other women out there! GRL PWR" or that International Women's Day is for "celebrating the achievements of women" on their Instagram story could be a sign of the network focusing the day on attempts to re-value femininity and women's achievements. These kinds of formulations could be read as a sign that being a woman should first and foremost be celebrated, rather than fighting against the narrow and very often limiting gender perceptions of women. By mostly focusing the day on celebration and not gender inequality issues, sayings like these imply

that the focus of the day is moved from bringing attention to structural inequalities towards the strategy of re-valuing femininity. These types of expressions and sayings appearing in the network's Instagram posts could be seen as trivializing both International Women's Day and feminism as a political movement. Hence, the various Instagram posts regarding International Women's Day could be seen as an example of the "double entanglement" of feminist and anti-feminist ideas that postfeminism constitutes (Gill, 2016).

6.1.3 Re-claiming Femininity

To summarize the discussion above, the unbeneficial feminine traits that historically have been assigned women are re-valued. Femininity is understood as – if not a necessity – an advantage that can make you a better suited manager, boost the individual career and make you a better feminist, a better feminist who in turn contributes to the upholding of the female community and can further assist in the quest for top positions. Stereotypical notions of femininity should therefore not be discarded, but embraced and celebrated. This line of argument shows how postfeminist ideas play out. Instead of trying to break free from stereotypical feminine traits, as feminists in the past often have aimed to do, the same stereotypical traits are emphasized and even recognized as a part of a feminist struggle.

Being traditionally feminine has never been something the woman has lacked the right to be, but has rather been a requirement for women's societal acceptance, as narrow frames and expectations of women and women's appearance have existed for centuries (Press, 2011). The emphasis on femininity is expressed in the network has therefore never been associated with feminist actions, as these stereotypical notions of femininity have rather been fought against. It is therefore evident that the network demonstrates a postfeminist theme, where femininity is presented as an essential component of both a successful career and of being a "good feminist". The network thus illustrates how the stereotypically feminine, both in terms of appearance and personal traits, is re-claimed, and how femininity plays a central role in a feminist discussion.

The effects of re-claiming femininity in this manner are many. It might lead to more women in top management positions and in boards of directors, as both individuals, organisations and society at large ascribe to this identification of feminine traits as valuable in business. However, one cannot neglect the fact that arguing for femininity in this manner reinforces stereotypical gender perceptions. Women might, to a greater extent, be allowed in the boardroom – but if the emphasis is placed on her femininity she will be included as a token for a large group of people that has been homogenized through the category, which the strategy of re-valuing femininity reproduces.

6.1.4 Balancing Femininity

As the network expresses how one can, and should, be both feminine and intelligent and both feminine and feminist (earlier exemplified via mentionings of Emma Watson and Zara Larsson), the network portrays the same postfeminist ideal woman as seen elsewhere (e.g. McRobbie 2004). Namely, as someone showing how stereotypical femininity, often a traditionally feminine appearance, is balanced with a trait that is not considered stereotypically feminine, such as strength, power, intelligence or being a feminist (as feminists have historically been accused of not being “real women”, in other words not feminine).

In the same manner one may understand how the respondents expressed it as both possible and desirable to both value motherhood, symbolizing femininity, and be a powerful business leader, symbolizing masculinity. To be both is evidently the preferred option, as suggested in the quote below.

On International Women's Day, there was a lunch lecture with Madelene Jonsson from Swedbank. She was 38 years old and has had a great career and three children in such a short time. So in that lecture the focus really was that as a woman you can. You can have a career and have children [...]
It was really inspiring.

Frances

This line of reasoning is further strengthened by implying that one should not be “not at all feminine” as the woman in a quote above described as a “slightly overweight, hairy, short haired

girl with a nose ring'. Neither should one be too feminine, exemplified by the respondents also acknowledging that, although stated as problematic, they themselves have a tendency to look down on women who do not want to focus on their career, but only engage in being a mother, as exemplified by the quote below.

If someone says 'I am a housewife', it upsets people. I know that even I can react and question why someone would ever want to do that. Even though it should still be just as acceptable.

Claire

Hence, digging deeper into the network's perception of gender, it becomes clear that embracing femininity does not come completely without restrictions. It is suggested that femininity needs to be re-claimed in a certain way, namely as carefully balanced with something representing masculinity – such as a successful career. This could further explain the emphasis on stereotypical femininity within the network, as the business sphere has a strong masculine connotation, highlighting feminine traits is necessary to mirror the postfeminist ideal balanced subject.

To conclude, on the one hand, the network exemplifies how women can break away from the professions that women traditionally have been expected to have. On the other hand, the importance of maintaining traditionally feminine ideals is implied within the network. The network thus exemplifies how complex postfeminism is; in one way it promotes and broadens the view of women's possible life choices, yet simultaneously it maintains traditional ideals of expected feminine traits and appearances (Press, 2011; Gill, 2006). As explained above, an inspiring woman can be both feminine and feminist, have a beautiful appearance and perform well at work, be a mother and have a career. However, it is suggested that you should not only focus on your career, nor be a stay at home mom. Rather, the postfeminist ideal is to be both, and that one does not exclude the other (Gill, 2006; Kanai, 2017; McRobbie, 2004). This ideal, in turn, lands in a kind of double claim on women where old ideals are mixed with new ideals, and professional achievements become as important as a beautiful appearance or being a good mother, thus increasing the demands on women.

6.1.5 Discarding Female Labels

At the same time as femininity is re-claimed, and therefore embraced and seen as something one should be proud of, the female respondents also expressed an anger against the tendency to label something as “female”.

When we look at women, we do not look at the individuals as such, instead all women are lumped together in one group. On the contrary, I feel that men are seen as an individual, while as a woman you are part of this group.

Frances

I dislike that my leadership is considered different because I am a woman.

Claire

The woman from the lunch lecture on International Women's Day highlighted that the only questions the audience asked was regarding her *female* leadership and how she as a *woman* took on a leadership position, while a man in her position would never get asked about what they thought about their *male* leadership.

Doris

I feel that although it is very important to celebrate and pay attention to women, I sometimes find that a woman who does a good job is recognized as a successful *woman* doing a good job, instead of simply being recognized for doing a good job [...] I can get tired of the fact that women are recognized simply because they are women.

Grace

This anger shows how the respondents expressed feminist insights, recognizing the fact that men are still considered the norm and women the deviators, especially in business environments and in top management positions. In the first quote, by stating her anger against the tendency to “lump” women together, the respondent shows how she recognizes women as homogenized, regarded as one group and not acknowledged for their individual efforts but instead becomes tokens representing women. The second quote, explaining a dislike of her leadership as

considered different, pinpoints how women's leadership is put in contrast with men's, showing an awareness of the tendency to exaggerate the differences between women and men. The quotes could therefore be seen as expressions of resistance against being seen as a token in a category which homogenizes women into a group, and thus forces stereotypical traits and behaviours on the individual.

Since the respondents recognized feminine labels as problematic and thereby disregarded these, it is understandable that the respondents expressed a dislike of the labelling of themselves and other women as *female* leaders. However, what is interesting to highlight is how this explicitly contradicts what the respondents over and over again argued that the network is all about, namely showcasing *female* leadership. This entails that the network in itself makes a clear example of how two very contradicting lines of reasoning co-exists without being further questioned.

I think the purpose and goal [of the network] is to promote and encourage *female* leadership. We have also set a long-term goal that there should be more women on corporate boards. But it is primarily about promoting *female* leadership, to highlight that women can be just as successful as men. The mentorship is really about having someone to look up to, to see that there can be female role models and not only male ones.

Claire

6.1.6 The First Paradox

To summarize, on the one hand the network is re-claiming femininity, while on the other hand distancing from it. On the surface, what seems to be happening is that the network is portraying a very paradoxical set of ideas. However, looking closer, it becomes clear that the network upholds the seemingly contradictory gender notions that are an expression of the postfeminist phenomenon that other researchers have identified in other contexts (e.g. Gill et al., 2017). The network is seen adopting the postfeminist strategy of re-claiming femininity in an effort to improve gender equality and the possibilities for women to advance in their careers. However,

while the re-claiming of femininity on the surface looks like a way to improve or achieve gender equality, it actually results in an enhancement and reinforcement of stereotypical gender perceptions. Moreover, as the network emphasises the postfeminist ideal woman, it further emphasises the additional burdens placed on women to be able to succeed in business today. Thus, we see how postfeminism not only makes it more difficult to question and break traditional gender boundaries, but also limits the strive towards gender equality from taking steps forward. Instead, it is almost a step backwards as it increases the demands on women. The feminist strategy prevailing within the network is therefore both reinforcing and extending the requirements and narrow ideals for women and women's appearances, strengthening patriarchal societal structures. As a result, the network, to some extent, reinforces the same issue it is trying to end. Hence, the femininity paradox sheds a light on the limits of the strategy of re-valuing existing gender categories, in addition to highlighting the lack of understanding of the extent to which the network is a part of reproducing the same gender categories that they regard as limiting. The femininity paradox hereby illustrates how feminist and cleverly disguised anti-feminist ideas are closely intertwined.

6.2 *The Equality Paradox*

The empirical material further displayed expressions of how today's gender inequalities were considered minor or unable to change, while at the same time several specific gender inequalities were pointed out by the respondents and highlighted as very important to counteract. The following section is therefore called the equality paradox and aims to explain how these seemingly contradictory expressions of gender equality issues can exist.

6.2.1 Gender Inequalities as Ambiguous

Although all of the respondents recognized that gender related issues are highly important, some statements by the respondents showcased a view of gender and the inequalities which follow as

very close to be solved, or, in some cases, as solved as they can be. First, the respondents distinguished that in today's business environment it is difficult for anyone to succeed, regardless of gender, further indicating that women are no longer the distinctly disadvantaged gender. As seen previously, the female respondents even argued that being a woman can in some cases actually be an advantage in business today, exemplified by the first of the two quotes below.

Many organisations today strive to be gender equal; it is even a recruitment policy for many organisations. If you as a woman enter a recruitment process that is fairly male-dominated, and the organisation wants to recruit an even amount of men and women, it might not be quite as many as women who have applied for the position and thus you can be favoured as a woman.

Angela

Historically, women have struggled a bit more to get there, and maybe a little bit even today. But it still generally requires persistence and ambition to really advance for all people, maybe somewhat more from women.

Claire

The second of the two quotes above shows how the respondent approached what is necessary to succeed in business today. While the respondent was straightforward when stating that "persistence and ambition is needed for all", she was vague and tentative when adding that it might be more difficult for women by adding the words "maybe", "a little bit" and "somewhat". This indicates that the respondents are unsure of to which extent women are or are not disadvantaged in business today.

Moreover, there were continuous references pointing towards a view of gender inequalities as more of a part of the past, something that is continuing to decline, and thus less of an issue today.

Now you do not have to be the best to suffice. Before, a woman needed to be the best, best, best to deserve the job. Today, you do not have to be ten times better than a man to deserve the job, it is enough that you are equally good, or maybe slightly better. I think that has definitely changed. Today there are reasonable requirements on how good you have to be to earn the job.

Claire

– I think that stubbornness can easily be interpreted in a negative way if you are a woman. If it had been a man who had been stubborn, it would have been considered something positive, that he was ambitious and determined. While a stubborn woman would be considered harsh or bossy.

– But I think that way of thinking is disappearing more and more.

Doris & Claire

The first quote describes that a woman previously needed to be “ten times better than a man” to be considered for a job, while in today’s business climate women and men who are equally competent have more or less the same opportunities. The respondent showed how she believes that it is *maybe* slightly more difficult for women even today, again indicating that the respondent was not sure if that is the case or not. The second quote illustrates, by stating that gender inequalities are “disappearing more and more”, that change in these areas are constructed as progressive. This implies that just by time passing society will inevitably become increasingly gender equal. This outlook also suggests that the possibility of gender inequalities worsening by time is neglected. Additionally, if change is perceived as happening by itself, proactive strategies counteracting inequalities may be understood as unnecessary.

There was also a discussion among the respondents concerning the biological differences of women and men, and that these differences may be what is “left” in regards to inequalities and therefore argued to be very difficult to do something about. Therefore, the respondents were questioning how far the strive for gender equality really can, or should, go.

How equal can we actually be? After all, men and women are different, biologically speaking and so on [...] Biologically speaking, we are the ones that are pregnant. Therefore, we will be away from our work longer than the men. [...] It is the biological perspective that limits the strive for equality. And that is damn hard to change.

Doris

The quote above exemplifies how the respondents sometimes turned to women and men’s biological differences to partly explain the presence of gender inequality. Moreover, as the

respondent stated that the biological differences may be what is limiting the strive for gender equality, the quote could represent a view of the feminist movement as now reaching a point where the only inequalities left can not be changed. Thus society is, if not now then soon, as gender equal as it can ever be.

Additionally, the quote implies that the respondent perceives gender as an effect of biological difference. By doing this, it is implied that the respondent accepts how femininity and masculinity is differently valued. By accepting motherhood as an explanation for the inequalities that is reflected in the lack of successful businesswomen, the respondent is simultaneously accepting the currently dominating view of what it takes to succeed in the business sphere – which is built on masculine notions. Instead of questioning these notions, it is the women who are perceived as not making the cut. So, in this aspect, the respondents neither questioned the gender boundaries, nor, in contrast to in previous discussions by the respondents, urged to re-value views of gender. Instead, the status quo was accepted. The acceptance of status quo in turn implies an inability to question or resist the way business is structured today.

Last, the respondents expressed a concern about how they identified that it is not the career women who suffer today, but the women wanting to stay at home, exemplifying the postfeminist tendency to direct a type of critique against feminist ideas limiting women's choice and indicating that feminism might have gone too far (Press, 2011).

Now, the norm is that you must have a career. And people look down on people who do not want that. And then those people experience the same difficulties that we have had.

Frances

To conclude, the statements above confirm the pattern of what other scholars interrogating postfeminism have found characterizing women's reasoning concerning gender inequalities at the workplace. Women sometimes are considered the advantaged sex now, while gender inequalities are seen as a part of the past and a resurgence of biological differences prevails (Gill et al., 2017). Hence, it becomes evident that these expressions also prevail within the network,

amongst young men and women who have not yet entered their professional lives. What these expressions have in common is that they in various ways point towards a view of gender inequality issues as almost solved, or even that feminism has actually gone “too far”. In turn, this indicates that feminism as a political force might no longer be needed, and could potentially even do more harm than good. Thus, the statements may be understood as examples of how underlying arguments of the depoliticising of feminism are built (Gill et al., 2017).

6.2.2 Structural Disadvantages

Intertwined with the respondents ideas of gender inequalities as almost solved is the notion that women in general, to various extents, are disadvantaged in the business sphere by mentioning some continuing inequalities. Further, they also expressed that it is very difficult to succeed and/or advance as a woman due to certain obstacles hindering women in today’s workplace.

We receive lower salaries and are less attractive on the labour market.

Doris

I think it is very inspiring and cool if you succeed as a woman today, because very few women have succeeded because of how our society is organized.

Frances

Women are often overshadowed in the business world, you more often hear about the men.

Igor

It is very difficult to succeed, especially in industries where there are many men at the top resulting in a difficulty to fight your way up.

Doris

The respondents also emphasized the continuing need for feminism in regards to such inequalities, as exemplified by the quote below.

To me, feminism is about helping those who do not have the same opportunities, precisely because feminism is about women not having the same opportunities as men, which is what needs to be improved.

Claire

One of the specific obstacles discussed by the respondents were the additional aspects women have to fulfil in order to fit into the expected role of women in business, unlike men. This touches upon the notions of a woman as “having it all” and the difficult “work-life balance” (Genz, 2010). The mentioned expectations were: beauty procedures, clothing choices, education and social status. Thus, the respondents acknowledged the fact that women may be scrutinized because of other aspects than their work effort, such as their personality, appearance and personal life, compared to men.

It is not just about clothes. I think in general you question a woman in a high position, like: is she nice, is she good enough, does she have the right education? [...] But you may not ask such questions to a man, while you examine everything about a woman. For example if she has the right fashion, if she has the right makeup, if she spends time with the right people and so on.

Edith

Further, the respondents also discussed the issue of balancing work and family, how to plan for having a career while not neglecting having children, and suggested this as an additional burden placed on women in comparison with men.

– I question if the guys in my class have thought about balancing both family and career. Obviously I plan for it.

–Yes, I have honestly reflected on whether I should freeze my eggs, so that I can have children but also have a career.

Edith & Claire

In other words, the respondents pointed out several inequalities, obstacles and additional burdens placed on women, implying that women are to some extent still disadvantaged – thus indicating that there are still some inequalities present.

6.2.3 The Second Paradox

To summarize, while acknowledging the presence of some specific gender inequalities and women as disadvantaged in various ways, this notion is simultaneously partly discarded. Hence, the network confirms the paradoxical findings that, despite an acknowledgement and awareness of continued gender inequalities in organisations such as lower salaries and status, gender inequalities are in various ways frequently downplayed (Gill et al., 2017). In turn, this results in overshadowing the recognition of gender inequalities as still relevant or, at least, in an unclear view of how extensive gender inequalities actually are, making the discussion of gender inequalities very difficult. Moreover, this result in an uncertainty of what actions should be taken to improve gender equality and in which direction feminism should move forward. The entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist expressions which characterize postfeminism is once again clearly realized in the network, here described as the equality paradox.

The equality paradox can be understood further in relation to the femininity paradox. By reclaiming and re-valuing femininity, it is suggested that femininity and masculinity should be perceived as equally valued. For that notion to hold true, gender inequalities must be perceived as non-existent or minor. The argument also goes the other way around. By perceiving gender inequalities as non-existent or minor, it is understandable how re-valuing femininity is seen as a well-working strategy. If there are none or only minor inequalities, it is implied that there is no reason to acknowledge that femininity and masculinity are valued differently. Indeed, one paradox is reinforcing the other.

6.3 *The Political Paradox*

The empirical material also showed contradictory ideas and opinions of the need for legislative and regulatory actions in promoting gender equality. The respondents showed how they recognized that legislative and regulatory actions could be beneficial, while they simultaneously discarded such actions. The following section aims to explain the political paradox and how postfeminist ideas push the suggested solutions for improving gender equality away from legislative and regulatory approaches towards individual solutions.

6.3.1 Gender Quota and Parental Leave

The discussion of whether or not to force gender equality, in terms of an equal number of men and women in organisations' boards of directors, through legally established allocation by gender quotas, brought up an interesting understanding. Although stating that being a woman in possession of feminine traits are to be valued and seen as an advantage in a career perspective, the female respondents did not themselves want to "take advantage" of being a woman via a legally established allocation by gender quotas. However, when speaking of women overall, a gender quota was not an unthinkable option, although it was pointed out as a very difficult topic.

You say men hire men and women hire women. [...] So, if you legally allocate one woman in, you give the younger generation a chance. At the same time, I would not be very happy if I got a job simply because I was allocated by a gender quota, because I have breasts, and not because I have a brain that makes me qualified for the position.

Doris

As exemplified by the quote above, the discussion of allocation by gender quotas were characterized by ambivalence. When discussing society at large, the respondents named benefits that allocation by gender quotas could bring. However, when speaking of themselves, to be hired

‘because’ of an allocation quota was not considered an option. The reason behind this ambiguity could be explained as a prevailing shift in opinion when moving from a societal to an individual level, a recurring expression of the postfeminist ideas (e.g. Cossens & Jackson, 2020), showing how there is a tendency amongst the respondents to both recognize that women are disadvantaged in several ways, and at the same time not consider oneself as a part of this oppressed group (Dobson, 2015).

Such an ambiguousness and shift from societal to individual level was also clearly illustrated in the discussion regarding regulated parental leave being mandatorily equally divided between partners. As exemplified in the quotes below, the respondents first recognized that there could be societal benefits of regulating parental leave in such a way. However, when relating the topic to themselves they discarded the idea, arguing that if they want to be on parental leave longer than their partner they should be allowed to do so, since all couples are not the same.

I can understand why you want to force fifty-fifty. But at the same time I feel that all relationships are so different. I mean, who wants to be home with the child and who makes the most money? Every couple is different. So I can not justify forcing everyone to share.

Claire

As seen in the quote above, the respondents have trouble justifying “forcing” a regulatory action. This was further highlighted in the discussion of the issue of allocation by gender quotas, where the respondents also stressed the possible negative consequences of “forcing” allocation by quotas, since upsetting the status quo was argued to most likely lead to resistance – and thus believed to oppose the purpose of achieving gender equality as explained in the quote below.

What happens is that when you force things on people, people automatically question it. It is not as inviting and I think that is where the problem lies. You want to open peoples’ eyes, but as soon as there is resistance people immediately react negatively rather than trying to be open about it. People are like that. After all, we dislike change and when people try to force opinions and ways of thinking on us, we resist.

Claire

This line of reasoning indicates how freedom of choice, both regarding how organisations run their business and individuals their life, is more prominent than legislative and regulatory actions for gender equality, which provides an additional argument to why the network does not promote such political actions.

6.3.2 The Power Woman

At the same time as the respondents discarded legislative and regulatory actions, the respondents showed that they were aware that women often have to put in additional effort compared to men. However, this prevailed as something they were more than willing to do since they have great confidence in their own capabilities. The respondents would therefore prefer to put in additional effort in order to prove themselves, rather than receive regulatory help. In other words, the respondents put great trust in individual accomplishments.

– I spoke with my mentor about it, [...] Today there are more women than men studying for a university degree. And that is the advantage with us women, we never stop fighting [...] we put in the extra hours, pushing it a bit further, and in the end, if no one else does, it will be us standing there on the top.

– Yes, we will be the ones who have all the knowledge.

Claire & Frances

In the same manner, the current inequalities acknowledged by the respondents were, to a large extent, discarded by instead ascribing success to the individual. If a woman succeeds, she succeeds because of her own fighting spirit – further implying that if a woman fails, she fails because she has not fought hard enough. In other words, as long as you fight hard enough and keep on pushing, you have every possibility of success.

You have to have courage and stand up for yourself to have a career. To constantly believe in yourself and know that you have what it takes is required to succeed.

Frances

[As a woman] you know that you may be discriminated against. Thus you make sure to work really hard to prove that you have what it takes and that you can be just as good as men.

Frances

I want to say ambition and stubbornness just because it feels like many of the women that succeed often have an idea themselves or an ambition to reach certain goals. And they do not give up. They do not care about everybody else, they just go their own way. [...] You have to stand up to those who are trying to push you down.

Claire

To understand where this belief comes from, one could turn to the attention and admiration placed on power women, which is continuously emphasized in the network. For instance, on the network's Instagram profile, an individual woman's success is highlighted and celebrated on a weekly basis. Amongst them is Michelle Obama.

Michelle reminds us that an African American girl from the poorer end of town has the potential to do and be anything. And not to simply become First Lady, which was a role forced upon her. By determination and hard work, she got into Harvard and Princeton and carved out a highly successful career in her own right. [...] With an impressive resumé including titles as: first lady, lawyer, mom, style icon and bestselling author, it is safe to say that Michelle Obama is a modern-day revolutionary woman. ✨💙@michelleobama

The Instagram post illustrates the possible benefits of putting in additional effort. It is suggested that, after all, if all these power women, such as Michelle Obama, can succeed no matter what background they come from, then so can you. Thus, it is expressed that you simply put in additional work, time and energy you will succeed, in turn indicating that whatever obstacles that may arise you can overcome them yourself. Therefore it can be understood as there being no need for any structural help such as legal systems or governmental help. Thus, we may

understand why the respondents suggested an individual solution to a structural problem, despite expressing the importance of the united “fight” to counteract gender inequalities.

6.3.3 Having It All

The identified pressure on women to “have it all”, was also expressed in a postfeminist way, namely as partly derived from the woman herself (Genz, 2010). This was played out in many ways, not seldom intertwined with women’s appearance, clothing and beauty practices, as exemplified by the following quote.

About dressing up and keeping up with fashion trends and so on, I think that a big part of it is definitely the pressure from yourself, and other women in society, perhaps even the men [...] But now, I think that it has gone over to wanting to impress women, and for you yourself to feel comfortable as well.

Doris

By explaining that a woman dresses a certain way for herself or to impress other women, before mentioning that it also might be to impress men, it indicates that the pressure of having a stereotypical appearance derives from oneself or other in the same “group”, rather than from the societal oppression of women. The pressure, here in the sense of “dressing up” is presented as the individual woman’s free choice, and focus is shifted away from societal expectations and towards the individual woman. Moreover, when the responsibility to feel comfortable is left to each woman herself, and thus depends on the woman herself and her own choice, it is very difficult – if not impossible – to question both societal and organisational cultures and structures. Once again, we see how the postfeminist line of argument is hard to critique. If she is the one who puts pressure on herself, then there is nothing anyone, for instance an employer, can do about it.

6.3.4 The Third Paradox

To summarize, the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist expressions which characterize postfeminism are once again evidently realized within the network, here described as the political paradox. While acknowledging that there still are some inequalities, that women as a group are somewhat oppressed and that both allocation by gender quotas and legislated parental leave would be beneficial for improving gender equality, these suggestions are simultaneously discarded by the belief that if you only work hard enough you will become successful. This further illustrates how the postfeminist entanglement of seemingly vague ideas once again play out in favour of current patriarchal structures, as actions holding the potential of change are discarded while demands on women increases. When success and failure is ascribed to the individuals, and not to women as a group, it is difficult to question gender inequalities on structural levels. It is perceived as if there is not much to do to change this – which also entails a move from the collective feminism that characterized previous feminist movements.

Furthermore, the political paradox can also be understood in the light of the equality paradox. The explanation for why there is a weak support of legal actions to address gender inequalities, such as affirmative actions, is strengthened by gender inequalities being implied as minor and the fact that women are sometimes even considered as the advantageous sex in today's business environment. Once again, the strive towards gender equality is limited by the postfeminist outlook.

6.4 *The Feminist Paradox*

Last, the empirical material showed that being a feminist was recognized as highly important, even though the respondents did not mobilize feminism as a political force, arguing that the feminist approach has changed. The following section digs deeper into this feminist paradox,

aiming to explain how the political abstract ideas and un-political reality co-exists, partly builds on findings presented in earlier paradoxes that in various ways imply that the political focus of feminism is no longer as needed.

6.4.1 Being a Feminist

All respondents clearly stated that they consider themselves feminists and stressed the importance of being a feminist today, agreeing that gender equality should prevail and that the topic of gender equality is very important.

For me, it is so natural that I am a feminist and I stand for it.

Doris

Yes, I could call myself a feminist, I have no problem with that.

Henry

It should come as natural, [feminist] are something everyone should be, and equality is something that should prevail.

Frances

Moreover, as explained in the first quote below, the respondents further see an importance of convincing individuals that if they agree with the notion of gender equality then they are, and should therefore call themselves, feminists. As the second quote illustrate, it is argued as important to indeed name oneself feminist, and nothing else, if one believes in gender equality.

I remember that I had a several discussions with both guy and girl friends, saying 'Yes, you are a feminist', and they said 'No'. And I asked 'Do you believe in equality and that men and women, or everyone in the world, should have the same rights? Political, social and economic?'. And they say 'Yes, yes, yes' and then I said 'Yes, then you are a feminist'. And then they say 'No, I do not want to be associated with that word.' And I just 'Yes but that's what it means.' Can't we who believe in gender equality take back that word and only state, this is what it means?

Claire

People just are not educated. I get annoyed when people say "I am not a feminist but I am for equality" I am like "Are you stupid?" That is exactly what it stands for. Ugh I get so angry when I think about it.

Doris

Furthermore, as the respondents expressed that as a feminist you can interpret the word somewhat as you like, as long as you call yourself a feminist. For example, it does not matter if you are both feminine and feminist, or opt for a more radical approach, as a feminist you have the freedom to interpret the word feminist somewhat as you like, as explained in the discussion between two respondents below.

– Yes, but then you were not allowed to be feminine if you are a feminist that way. But I think we are moving away from that kind of thinking. Because in 2015, being a feminist was linked to being radical and hating men. But now that has changed. That is what happens when influential people embrace the concept and show that I am a feminist and I am like this. Then people think it is more acceptable.

– Yes you can interpret [the word feminist] somewhat as you like.

– Yes I really think that is so much better.

Claire & Doris

The quotes above can further be understood as an expression for how it is suggested that it is not the underlying thoughts and ideas regarding how feminism should be interpreted that is important, what is important is that everyone calls themselves a feminist. In turn, this suggests how being a feminist have gone from a clear political position with a stated meaning to feminist becoming a diluted and very diffuse word, which in this case is argued to include all people in favour of gender equality, regardless their actual view and/or actions in regarding to promote such equality.

6.4.2 Being a *Contemporary* Feminist

Although the respondents pointed to the continuous importance of being a feminist, they simultaneously expressed how a new different feminist approach is needed today, resulting in a different view of what role feminism should play in order to reach gender equality. They acknowledged the need for earlier feminists to have a more radical approach to gain momentum, however, when discussing being a feminist today the focus shifted and the respondents distinctly disassociated themselves from being what they call radical. They further expressed their anger against the tendency to associate feminists with a radical approach and described how they constantly have to explain that they in fact are not “radical”, that they “do not hate men”, and although they are feminists, they are “not a witch”. Instead, expressions of a more dimmed feminism were embraced, for example by opting for inclusion. They further explained that because of the negative connotation of the stereotypical feminist (described as hairy with no makeup), people do not want to call themselves feminists, which further was suggested as a problem.

I think in retrospect [feminists] needed to be a little radical, for people to start talking about it.

Claire

The same thing again, it is argued that you have to be in a certain way if you are to be a feminist. You should not use makeup, you should let your hair grow under your arms for example. That it should be some kind of stereotype for being a feminist.

Angela

I can get annoyed that feminists are associated with the radical, to hate men and such.

Claire

You need to explain yourself, saying ‘Yes I am a feminist, but I am not this person who is a witch an so on’.

Edith

Moreover, when discussing solutions for achieving gender equality, all respondents with only one exception clearly opted for information and education as the best solution. Building on previous discussion of the political paradox, highlighting how the respondents did not see political actions as the preferable solution.

I also think education is the solution as well. [...] It is very difficult, but I think, and we already do that today, work more with culture, norms and perceptions. Also for the guys, it's about knowledge. I think [gender equality] will come when the values are right. After that comes the legislation, when you see where it is needed.

Edith

To conclude, the respondents argued that everyone should be feminists, while opting for a non-radical, apolitical approach, two expressions that could arguably be connected. As the respondents placed a large emphasis on everybody stating that they are feminists, allowing several meanings to what the word withholds, the definition of what makes a feminist can arguably neither be radical nor political since opinions on actions will inevitably differ. This can explain why the respondents think it is important to highlight the non-radical feminist view – to get everyone on board, which is suggested as the right and most effective way to reach gender equality according to the respondents. In turn, this could be seen as a sign of how a widespread feminism is preferred, although that type of feminism does not hold the political potential to overthrow the hegemonic structures.

6.4.3 The Fourth Paradox

To summarize, on the one hand, to be a feminist is embraced on more abstract levels, in discussions when focus lies on the word itself and the importance of people calling themselves feminists. On the other hand, when discussing how to in practice reach gender equality today, political actions are discarded. Thus, the respondents in this regard rather dissociated themselves from previous feminist movements that had a clear political meaning, to opt for a more convenient feminism. Once again we can see that contradictory ideas are prevailing in the

network as the respondents recognized feminist insights while simultaneously dismiss actions for change.

The difference between the approach of earlier feminists and the approach of these contemporary feminists, can further be understood in relation to the earlier described paradoxes. In regards to the femininity paradox, as femininity is re-valued and women are portrayed as not limited by structural obstacles, there is no longer a need for political feminism that tackles problems on a structural level. Hence, the respondents' line of reasoning, suggesting that a radical approach is not necessary becomes only natural. Moreover, when even implying that the non-feminine women who labelling themselves as feminists could give the word a negative connotation this indicates an additional argument for embracing femininity as it could be understood as being un-feminine could even hinder a feminist fight. What is seen in the feminist paradox therefore also reinforces the femininity paradox. Further, as expressed in the equality paradox, if gender equality is almost reached, and change is perceived as always progressive, then feminism is no longer needed in the same way, explaining why the network is seen to take a step away from previous feminists that focused on political change, to a more vague and convenient feminism.

Last, as mentioned, the political paradox highlighted a shift in opinion depending on the level of discussion. Similarly, the feminist paradox shows a shift in opinion in a comparable way. First, when moving from an abstract level to a practical level. On an abstract level the respondents emphasized the importance of being a feminist and however when discussing practical solutions the focus was rather on the importance of calling oneself a feminist however you want to define it. Similarly to the discussion regarding political actions that highlights the shift from political to individual solutions, the feminist discussion illustrates a shift in the definition of being a feminist, from a collective movement to an individualized expression. Several statements relate to the individual, such as the focus on their *own* definition, how they *themselves* take the discussion, and *identify* as feminists, while no reference to a "movement" or collective when explicitly speaking about feminism. This further highlights how a disassociation from the political second feminist movement is made. Following this argument, one can question the level

of substance in the discussions regarding “the fight” and the female community. From the “smorgasbord” of the second wave feminist movement, some segments were highlighted, such as the reference to the fellowship and the fight, while some were directly opposing, such as political changes and legislative proposals. The sense of the strong female community, that together fights for women’s equal rights, is rather suggested as merely an echo of past feminist movements and a nostalgic view of the strong collective. But when push comes to shove, it seems as it is every woman’s own struggle.

The above discussion brings up questions on whether feminism has been hollowed and on whether although widespread, the feminist movement has been diluted. We can understand the withdrawal from the political feminism that seems to be argued to be too clearly stated is seen to be made in favour of the "co-opted" vague feminism that suits everyone. As a result, one could argue that feminism runs a risk of, although being accepted by many, being diluted or even harmful. Harmful in a way that it may be perceived as striving for gender equality, while disguising the fact that it is actually continuing increasing the demands on women and the upholding of patriarchal social structures.

6.5 *The Network*

In aforementioned sections paradoxes consisting of contradictory ideas expressed within the network, complexly intertwined with each other have been explained and discussed. However, the last and final section of this chapter is focused on how these seemingly agreed upon contradictory perceptions of gender and gender equality forms the basis for some of the network’s organisational values, in turn affecting the network’s organisational principles and processes.

6.5.1 Organisational Values

Gender perceptions mirrors the culture of an organisation, and since the culture is made up of norms and values, gender perceptions arguably can be identified as organisational values (Acker, 1990; Wahl et al., 2011). Therefore, the contradictory perceptions of gender and gender equality expressed in the network are, as explained and discussed in the four paradoxes, arguably built on postfeminist understandings. Hence, identified as the network's organisational values.

These organisational values are seen to form the basis for four fundamental organisational principles regarding how to relate to gender inequality issues. Concerning the first organisational principle, it was clearly expressed that no one should be excluded or discriminated against because of their gender. This agreement further unfolded in an argument that even men can be discriminated against on the basis of gender, and should therefore not be excluded from any situation. The topic was discussed both in regards to the student union's internal gender equality policy but also as a fundamental value building on the fact that no one should be excluded. As the second organisational principle, there was a view of feminism, or gender equality actions, as supposed to strengthen and improve career opportunities for women, while at the same time in no way impair the opportunities for men. This argument was further strengthened by a view of women as not to treat anyone as bad as women historically have been treated.

It somewhat contradicts the [student union's] policy to not exclude people.

Claire

Since we are against women being excluded from the labour market, it would be wrong if we start excluding men.

Doris

It is not about pulling others down but strengthening everyone.

Claire

These first two organisational principles could be explained by highlighting the underlying understandings of the organisational values in the light of the equality paradox. The two principles can arguably be related back to the assumed view of gender equality indicating that women are not still clearly disadvantaged. In turn, if women are not clearly disadvantaged or gender inequalities are perceived as minor, then one can understand how one cannot risk “going too far”, giving women too great of an advantage.

Concerning the third organisational principle, there was a strong consensus including men in the strive for equality is crucial. Thus, it was argued of utmost importance to “raise awareness” amongst men in order to “make a change”. Without everybody willingly steering in the same direction (the same arguments were presented against forcing quotas and parental leave to avoid resistance), change would not happen, as suggested in the quotes below.

We have chosen to bring in guys because we want to "raise awareness" to female leadership. I hope that all women already understand that women can accomplish anything, and then it does not help that we sit around and admire each other. If we want to "make a change" we have to bring along the men as well.

Doris

I do not think that you should exclude guys because it is in many cases maybe guys who learn the most from seeing female leadership.

Jack

It is important that we discuss this *together* with men.

Grace

To further understand this organisational principle one can turn to the view of feminism. As argued in the feminist paradox, the respondents urged for a more vague and convenient feminism, instead of a political feminism, in regards to the importance of including everybody in the feminist movement. In the light of this, one can understand the respondents’ wish to include men in the network as well as in the strive for gender equality.

For the fourth and last organisational principle, as already touched upon several times, there was a strong consensus regarding the importance of having female role models and promoting female leadership. This was further argued to be especially of importance for young men. By increasing the “awareness” and normalizing successful businesswomen in top positions, this was believed to further promote gender equality.

I think it is especially great that guys get female mentors, who hopefully then can become role models, which I think may be a little more difficult otherwise, given how society is organized.

Henry

This organisational principle can further be understood as relating to the dominating feminist strategy that prevails within the network of re-valuing femininity, as described in the femininity paradox. Precisely as the network wants to embody the re-valuing of femininity through power women, the mentors could be understood to supposedly to act as power women to the adepts. As stated in the quote, it is arguably of even more importance to attract male students to the network to make sure that they too agree upon the notion that femininity has been re-valued. Hence, one can argue that the network aims at everyone to re-value femininity.

6.5.2 Organisational Principles and Processes

Moving forward, the four seemingly agreed upon organisational principles, which in turn build on the postfeminist organisational values, could explain some of the networks certain organisational processes. Beginning with the first three organisational principles – that no one should be excluded, that strengthening opportunities for women should not reduce the opportunities for men and that men need to be included in striving for gender equality – these principles can arguably explain why male students are included in the network and why there is a strong consensus of the importance of continuing to do this.

To explain further, if the belief is that even men can be discriminated, it is only natural that they are not excluded from a network under the flag of a student union that aims to reduce

discrimination and promote gender equality. Thus, it becomes clear that the unions equal treatment policy is interpreted as not allowing a women's only network since this is viewed as discrimination based on gender. In this aspect, it becomes interesting to highlight that these conclusion from the unions equal treatment policy are drawn despite it clearly being stated to build on the Discrimination Act. In turn, the Discrimination Act distinctly states an exception from the discrimination ban if it benefits women in a quest to promote gender equality. This can be understood as a sign that postfeminist ideas are so strongly present in the network that it actually overshadows what is stated in Swedish law. Once again, suggesting the substantial impact and force of postfeminism.

Moving on to the fourth and last agreed upon principle – the importance of having female role models. This could be understood as a way that the postfeminist power woman is embodied, and how ideas and perception of femininity are realized in an individualized, neoliberalist way. However, it is also expressed in the purpose of the network, stated as highlighting female leadership. Moreover, this is arguably why there is a strong consensus amongst the respondents that the network should only have female mentors. In fact, the respondents see no advantages at all of including male mentors in the network. The respondents believe that the network would indeed stray from its purpose if male mentors were included as exemplified below.

Just because we do not feel that it is [the network's] purpose because we want to promote female leadership and if we bring in a man then it suddenly becomes male leadership. But then of course it can be a mixed network with mixed mentors, but that is not what [the network] does. [...] We have never experienced that there is a demand for a male mentor either.

Claire

I do not think that would ever happen, then it would fall apart.

Grace

6.5.3 The Glass Ceiling

By excluding male mentors women are arguably denied the opportunity to access important male contacts in the labour market, contacts with the gender that dominate the business sphere and holds the majority of the top positions. Therefore losing the potential to contribute in the breaking of the glass ceiling. Thus, one can argue that this to some extent also counteracts the network's purpose of reducing the gender gap since this implies a continuing inequalities and upholding of current patriarchal business structures, instead of working to minimize male homosociality. As a result, the greater exclusion of women from top positions could arguably continue, counteracting their long-term goal of increasing the number of women on corporate boards. Excluding male mentors also seems contradictory to the network's argument behind including male adepts, namely broadening the pool or people contributing "everyone strengthening girls".

6.5.4 The Glass Elevator

Moreover, the effects of including male adepts in the network are many. For example, the respondents actively working in the committee described how it is difficult to recruit male adepts to the mentorship programme further stating that they "work a lot" with marketing the network. Further, as it is so clearly emphasized and agreed upon that male adepts are important for the network, this results in the male adepts who apply are very likely to be given a spot in the mentorship programme. In turn, as the mentorship programme has a limited amount of mentors, all female students who apply to the programme do not get accepted, and are instead urged to "apply again another year".

It is not a female network as such, but it is a network that promotes female leadership, and that is where we want to make the difference, because it is not just about girls strengthening girls but

about everyone strengthening girls. It is hard for people to make that distinction because all of our mentors are women and that makes it difficult to market it.

Claire

Well, as I remember it, I do not remember who we got the tip from, but I know we got a tip that there were not many guys applying and you were more or less guaranteed to get a mentor if you were a guy.

Jack

So, first, the female student committee members devoting their spare time to the network ends up putting in effort and working proactively with marketing to ensure recruiting of male students to the network. Second, the men who apply are stated as very likely to receive a given place in the network, meaning that female students risk being excluded. Hence, as found in many other female dominated industries or organisations, the male students are seen to benefit from “the glass elevator”, allowing men to vastly advance or reap benefits of being the minority gender. To conclude, by including male adepts, this means that a male student inevitably will take a spot from a female student who arguably is in greater need of the mentorship programme as the labour market is still gendered. Presumably, it is of course great that young men get a female mentor and in turn more female role models, but the question is if it should be done at the expense of a female student losing a valuable business contact.

In addition, none of the male adepts mentioned their mentor as a role model pointing towards the fact that female role models are, if found, found by the male adepts elsewhere. When asked about their female role models, the male respondents mentioned either world wide political figures Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel or their mothers and/or sisters. Further, there was a view amongst the respondents that only men who are already interested in gender equality issues join the network. Thus, their participation in the mentorship programme would arguably not significantly change the male students’ perceptions of women in business or stance in gender equality issues. One can thus question the capability of the network’s setup and processes in reaching their goal of increasing gender equality, promoting female leadership and eventually contributing to increasing the number of women in organisational boards.. However, this also

leads back to the perception of gender and gender equality, as gender inequalities are perceived as minor, it is understandable that the network acts in this certain manner. As it is perceived as gender inequalities today are almost done, it is arguably understandable that the line of reasoning is that society now has come so far in regards to inequalities that it is time to focus on the “small” topics, such as providing better possibilities for young men to have female role models.

6.5.5 The Disparate Career Advice

When including both male and female adepts, the underlying understanding of the organisational principle is arguably that everybody must benefit from the same support and that male and female students have the same opportunities and should be treated equally. However, by only allowing female adepts this would mean that women were given more support than men, indicating that the network would rather work to close the gender gap by trying to provide women the same opportunities that men already have, and thus treating them equitably. In other words, including both male and female adepts will arguably only continue the current inequalities, while only allowing female adepts will rather give women the support needed to level the playing field. This is based on the assumption that the male and female adepts are receiving the same kind of advice from their mentors. However, digging deeper, the respondents described the advice given by their mentors as focused very differently depending on their gender.

She says ‘make demands’.

Grace

My mentor says demand things and dare to take space, and I have heard this a lot before and tried to do something but I think it is very difficult because I do not always dare to. I am very careful and I like that advice but I have a hard time drawing boundaries between when to make demands and when not to.

Edith

She says it is very important to listen.

Claire

[The mentorship meetings] really challenged me, I got to reflect on my strengths and weaknesses, what I can contribute with, what my 'success factors' are so to say. There were three words in particular that I have taken with me and used during job interviews, that she and I came up with that would help me with my future career goals.

Henry

Initial findings suggest that while the female students received more advice on how to “build confidence” and other forms of personal development, the male students received strictly career advice focusing on tools to improve and help with their future careers. This entails that male adepts in the mentorship program are even further equipped in advancing in their future career, possibly expanding the gender gap further, while the advice to women once again individualizes women’s responsibility – if she does not get recruited or advance within her career, it is perceived as her own fault for not “daring” or “taking space”. Moreover, this highlights how the postfeminist notion of “working on oneself” is a constant project, to a greater extent emphasized for women (Gill et al., 2017). The organisational processes and setup of the network is thus not only limited in realizing the network’s purpose of enhancing women's opportunities on the labour market, but it is also counterproductive, since it rather reinforces gender structures and it also suggests male adepts actually benefit more career wise from the network compared to female adepts, both in regards to more explicit careers advice and in regards to the benefits linked to the metaphor of the “glass elevator” guaranteeing male adepts a mentor while female students might miss be overlooked.

To conclude, none of the respondents saw any disadvantages of allowing male adepts, and at the same time saw no advantage in including male mentors, all with the explanation that it would go against the network’s purpose to promote female leadership. In regards to male adepts they prompt for including men in the strive for equality, but in regard to male mentors including men means losing the purpose of the network. Thus, both male and female students can apply to

become adepts whereas only female mentors are included. Hence, the network's current processes and practices can be explained by the underlying beliefs of feminism and gender equality.

6.6.6 The Postfeminist Paradox

To summarize, the network has four agreed upon organisational principles that can all be understood in the light of the organisational values that are the four postfeminist paradoxes as presented earlier in the analysis. These organisational principles result in certain organisational processes, namely that male as well as female adepts are included in the network while the mentors of the network are still solely female. The male adepts thus have a given place in the network and are seen to receive a different kind of advice from the mentors more focused on specific career advice compared to the female adepts where discussions end up in how the female students themselves should build confidence and dare to take space in their future professional life. Hence, the processes and practices of the network result in an individualization of women's struggles while further extending male students' business networks and sharpening their career skills. The network is therefore an exceptional example of the postfeminism phenomenon. At the surface it is seen to be a feminist project aiming to improve gender equality, however, digging deeper, to the network's unawareness, it becomes clear that the network rather reinforces traditional gender roles and existing social structures or even amplify the oppression of women in business, thus showing how the postfeminist entanglement of seemingly contradictory ideas once again play out in favour of current patriarchal structures (e.g. Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017).

7 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

7.1 *Main Findings*

First, the network is seen adopting a strategy of re-claiming femininity, which on the surface looks like a way to improve or achieve gender equality, while actually resulting both in reinforcing and extending the requirements and narrow ideals for women and women's appearances, strengthening patriarchal societal structures. As a result, the network, to some extent, reinforces the same issue it is trying to end. Second, despite an acknowledgement and awareness of continual gender inequalities in organisations, gender inequalities are in various ways frequently downplayed resulting in overshadowing the recognition of gender inequalities as still relevant and an unclear view of how extensive gender inequalities actually are. This limits the discussion of gender inequalities resulting in an uncertainty of what actions should be taken to improve gender equality and in which direction feminism should move forward. Third, while acknowledging that there still are some inequalities and that women as a group are somewhat oppressed there is a resistance towards legislative or regulatory actions reducing the gender gap, these actions are discarded and replaced by the belief that if you only work hard enough you will become successful. Fourth, there is a withdrawal from a political feminism in favour of a vague feminism that suits everyone pointing towards a widespread but diluted feminism. Last, the networks organisational principles could be derived from the postfeminist paradoxes, and resulted in organisational processes that on the surface make the network appear as a feminist project that improves gender equality, while it actually reinforces traditional gender roles and existing social structures. All to the network's unawareness.

7.2 *Conclusion*

The analysis of the female student career network revealed four paradoxes existing within the network which together make up the postfeminism phenomenon: the femininity paradox, the equality paradox, the political paradox and the feminist paradox. The femininity paradox

involved traditional gender perceptions being reinforced while disguised as a feminist statement, while the equality paradox related to the lack of clarity of the magnitude and possibility for change regarding gender equality. The political paradox placed the responsibility for advancing gender equality on the individual woman, moving the feminist discussion away from collective political actions. The feminist paradox acknowledged that while contemporary feminism is widespread, it is also diluted. These paradoxes could explain the network's organisational values, principles and processes, as these mirrored the ambivalence inherent to the four paradoxes. To conclude, the feminist insights proved to be overshadowed by the complex postfeminist entanglement, thus limiting the network from contributing to the advance of women's career opportunities and improving gender equality.

7.3 Discussion

Indeed, the network is a clear example of the postfeminism phenomenon. The study's findings also shed light on the fact that this phenomenon not only prevails as certain perceptions of gender and gender equality issues, but it also suggests that postfeminist ideas actually play out as real decisions and actions, affecting the processes of organisations such as the network. This entails that it is not only postfeminist ideas that holds the potential to hinder the feminist movement, but as these ideas are now seen to be realized in the shape of organisational processes we are arguably also witnessing the creation of concrete structures that has practical consequences and obstructs gender equality proceedings.

The findings of the study also bring forth how very complex the contradictory entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas are, and how closely these ideas are intertwined with each other. It is precisely this close entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas that make postfeminism both so difficult to discover and to critique. It is also what provides postfeminism with its impacting force and makes it so very dangerous. It is therefore understandable that the network is unaware of the contradictory ideas expressed, blind to postfeminism and the practical

consequences that it brings. As the network is arguably aware of gender inequalities, taking an active part in aiming to increase the opportunities for women and reduce the gender gap, this further emphasizes how difficult the postfeminist phenomena and the consequences of it is to grasp. This also highlights the importance of drawing attention to the phenomenon postfeminism, increasing the understanding of today's perceptions of gender and gender equality.

There are certainly numerous ways to increase the understanding of the phenomena and its influence on today's society. Nonetheless, the specific setting of the network, having one leg in the organisational life and one leg in the educational life, highlights one natural and universal possibility – namely education. As education allows us to help develop perspectives and understandings and critique the world around us, it is undoubtedly important to update the curriculum to today's contemporary gender regimes. If social phenomena are not questioned, then the members of such a network will arguably carry the understandings with them into their professional life, limiting the strive for gender equality and reinforcing the patriarchal structures.

7.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study has contributed to expanding the body of studies of postfeminism, confirming that what has been proved to characterize postfeminist media phenomena also is seen as characterizing contemporary organizational settings. Thus, the study has also proved that extending the understanding of postfeminism, inserting it as a critical concept also in organisational studies, can be fruitful and enable a captivation of contemporary perceptions of gender.

7.5 *Limitations*

First, the study is, as mentioned, limited by a binary cis perspective of gender, compared to approaching gender as a spectrum. This, as well as conducting an intersectional analysis accounting for dimensions such as sexuality and ethnicity, would have provided the study with additional depth. However, as all respondents identified as cis and were of Swedish nationality the prerequisites of the case setting did not allow for that type of analysis. Last, the study has been limited by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, this has limited the study methodologically since it has constrained the ability to conduct interviews in person and hampered the possibility to have as many interviews and observations as initially intended. If discussions in person had provided the same material is however not possible to validate.

7.6 *Future Research*

We suggest, based on our findings, that postfeminism as the unit of analysis allows for significant opportunities to investigate how gender is constructed and played out within specific gendered contexts. Following this, we argue that postfeminist research is interesting, not only in media and cultural studies as previously seen, but also in organisation and management studies. Therefore, we see relevance in continuing to conduct research with postfeminism as a dimension, and our general wish is to invite future researchers to extend the studies of postfeminism within the organisation and management field. More specifically, as the context researched in this study is a female student career network, it would be interesting to further research if and how perceptions of gender and gender equality differed in career networks with members who are already a part of the labour force.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide 1

1. Make a list during 1-2 minutes on every word that comes up when you think of women and business
 - a. A discussion regarding the words.
2. Can you describe the typical career woman? How is she and why?
 - a. What are the opportunities and limitations?
 - b. Do you think there are any benefits to being a woman on the labour market?
 - c. How do you think she differs from previous generations?
3. What are the expectations of career women today?
 - a. Prompt for: health, appearance, body size, attractiveness/sexiness, relationships, family, and careers.
4. How do these relate to the expectations of women outside working life?
5. What are your dreams and plans for the future?
 - a. Prompt for: marriage, children, careers, hobbies.
6. Overall thoughts on feminism. Are you a feminist?
7. Do you think feminism touches upon limitations you previously mentioned?
8. The role of feminism in working life. What do you think of quotas?
9. Is there any aspect you do not think we have discussed, or do you want to add something else?
10. We would really appreciate it if you sent a picture of the word-list you wrote at the beginning.

Appendix B - Interview Guide 2

1. Would any of you want to describe your mentor?
2. Do you think it is important to have a mentor that is successful? (your definition of successful)
3. Would you like to describe the relationship you have with your mentor, or alternatively the relationship you wished you had with your mentor?
4. What do you usually talk about when you meet your mentors?
 - a. Have you received any advice from your mentor that you have thought of and taken with you?
 - b. Have you used this advice, by applying it to any specific situation?
 - c. Have you received advice that you think is purely bad advice?
5. How much do you discuss the fact that you are women in working life? Does your conversations with your mentors revolve a lot around it?
6. If you do not have a mentor, could you tell us about the network's other events, career lectures, etc.?
7. How much do you think your mentors have influenced you?
 - a. Both in your career but perhaps also as feminists?
8. What are your thoughts regarding the fact that you specifically have a female mentor?
9. Did you apply to the network because it had female mentors?
10. Would you have agreed to a male mentor as well?
 - a. Do you think there are any benefits to having a male mentor?
11. What are your thoughts regarding the fact that men are allowed to be a part of the network?
 - a. Do you see any disadvantages of having male adepts in the network?
12. Do you view your mentors as someone to give advice/be a role model or as a contact in the labour market?
13. Is there any aspect you do not think we have discussed, or do you want to add something else?

Appendix C - Interview Guide 3

1. Can you describe the network - what is the meaning of the network in your opinion?
 - a. What do you think the network contributes with? To the university? To society?
To the adepts?
2. Can you describe the culture in the network and between the adepts?
3. Can you describe your relationship with your mentor?
4. What will you bring with you from your experience in the network?
 - a. What advice will you bring with you from your time with your mentor?
5. Give an example of a situation when you have thought of something you learned from the network or your mentor
 - a. Prompt for: working experience
6. How do you think your time in the network will influence your upcoming career?
7. How important is it that the network is above all a female network?
 - a. Advantages/disadvantages?
8. Would you like to have a male mentor?
 - a. Advantages/disadvantages?
9. What are your thoughts regarding the fact that men are allowed to be a part of the network?
 - a. Advantages/disadvantages?

Appendix D - Interview Guide 4

1. Why did you apply to the network?
2. What do you usually talk about when you meet your mentor?
 - a. Have you received any advice from your mentor that you have thought of and taken with you?
 - b. Give an example of a situation when you have thought of something you learned from the network or your mentor
 - i. Prompt for: working experience
 - c. Have you received advice that you think is purely bad advice?
3. Have you been a part of another career network?
 - a. Have you ever had a male mentor?
4. Did you discuss any topics regarding the difference in being a woman or a man in business?
5. What are your thoughts regarding having a female mentor?
 - a. Advantages/disadvantages?
6. How important is it that the network has female mentors?
7. Would you like to have a male mentor?
 - a. Advantages/disadvantages?
8. What are your thoughts regarding the fact that men are allowed to be a part of the network?
 - a. Advantages/disadvantages?
9. How much did you attend the network's other events?
10. What are your dreams and plans for the future?
 - a. Prompt for: marriage, children, careers, hobbies.
11. Overall thoughts on feminism. Are you a feminist?
12. Who are your female role models?
13. Has the network changed the way you view female leadership?

Appendix E: General Prompts and Transcriptions Method

General Prompts

- Could you explain further....?
- Do you mean.....?
- What else.....?
- Is there anything else.....?
- Could you give me an example of what you mean....?
- Can you tell us more about that.....?
- What makes you say that....?
- Do you recognise.....?
- Is this familiar.....?
- Does anyone see it differently.....?
- What do other people think about.....?
- Do others agree with.....?
- Are there any other points of view on this.....?

Transcription Method

Cursive indicates words or phrases that were emphasised

– The dash indicates a conversation between two speakers, where the second speaker ‘latched’ onto the utterance of the previous speaker

[...] Three dots in brackets indicated that the speech tails off

Appendix F: The Instagram Image Picturing Three Women Flexing Their Arms

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-UIENYnHRf/>

