



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET  
HANDELSHÖGSKOLAN

# **The role–play of worklife**

– a study of gender equality work in  
knowledge-intensive organizations

Bachelor thesis in Business and Management

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## **Abstract**

In general, Sweden is considered to be a role model in gender equality work. And it is true that Sweden is able to offer among the most favorable conditions in the world for a gender equal work environment. But in organizational practice, it is not. Doing better than other countries is not the same as doing well.

From a social constructive point of view, this study combines Swedish gender equality research with the thoughts and reflections of six people, working in knowledge-intensive organizations. Three of them are in decision-making positions and the other three are co-workers within these organizations. The purpose is to create an understanding of what kind of roles leaders and co-workers respectively take in the gender equality work processes. The results show of a need amongst co-workers in knowledge-intensive organizations to have the competence and capability to recognize and handle social structures related to gender. This is necessary in order for the leaders to fulfill their role – as providers of the right opportunities. A combination of the leaders expanded awareness, a recognition of the complexity regarding gender equality work, and co-workers who take care of these opportunities, shapes a role-play suited for the creation of a gender equal practice.

## **Foreword**

With all its ups and downs, challenging reflections and clarifying insights, conducting this study has been the highlight of my time as a student at the School of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University. I would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed. Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist, you asked the annoying questions necessary for every step forward. Struggling with you has been very valuable and every meeting something to look forward to. You are a source of inspiration! Torbjörn Stjernberg, your ability to provide useful general discussions to our meetings, helped me to raise my sight and realize what I actually wanted to do with this study. All six respondents – the importance of your contribution cannot be stressed enough. Thank you for your sharing your time and thoughts with me.

.....  
Oscar Lindow

Gothenburg, June 2011.

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## 1. Best – not equal to good

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**This introduction provides a quick walkthrough of modern Swedish gender equality work, which has put Sweden on a pedestal as one of the most gender equal countries in the world. Yet, organizations are not equal, especially not in terms of gender. This section includes a presentation of the main questions, as well as the purpose of the study.**

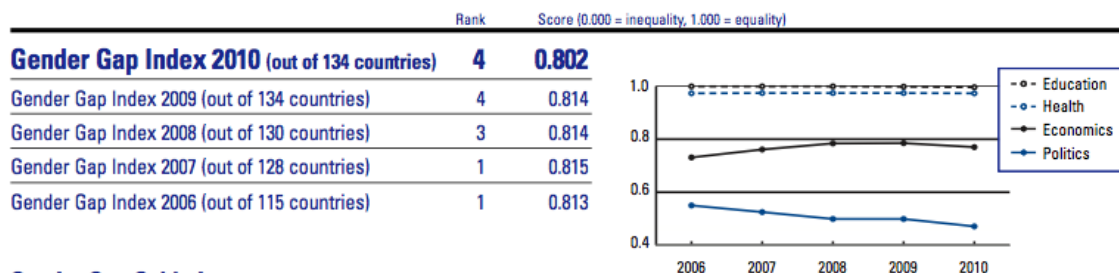
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### 1.1 Putting Sweden in its place

Author Eva Moberg first coined the concept of gender equality work in Sweden, in the early 1960's (the term in Swedish is *Jämställdhet*). It was established in the political discussion that would lead to gender equality legislation in 1979 (Norrbin & Olsson, 2010). The law prohibited discrimination and called for active measures in the workplace. This legal imposition was a part of the first phase of three which Swedish gender equality work has been subdivided into since then. The first phase also included efforts to provide equal rights regardless of sex. But when reviewed after ten years, the first phase was criticized for not supporting active measures of gender equality work enough, and the second phase was introduced (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2011). A quota system in Swedish politics, investments in education, earmarked money and other types of campaigns were used as tools. The third phase has led to what is known as *gender mainstreaming*, which mainly is about including women in decision-making work and developmental questions. By making decisions with a gender equality perspective to begin with, the hope is to achieve more tangible results (Norrbin & Olsson, 2010; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2011).

Sweden is considered to be a pioneer country in gender equality work. As shown below, these phases have taken Sweden to the top of ranking lists and there are no legal or other formal obstacles for gender equality work. The

overall goal of today's gender equality politics is for men and women to have equal power to shape society and their own lives. In order to reach the overall goal, intermediate governmental goals such as equal opportunities regarding work, education and economic independence, along with the right to avoid sex-based violence, have been set up (Norrbin & Olsson, 2010). In 2006 and 2007, Sweden was ranked as number one in World Economic Forum's annual Gender Gap Report. Over the last couple of years, equality figures have remained high in terms of access to healthcare and education, small changes has been reported in economic differences between sexes, but in comparison, there has been a quite drastic negative change in politics. The reason is that there are fewer women in ministerial posts now compared to 2006 and 2007 and it has resulted in Sweden's drop from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> place in the Gender Gap Report, where fellow Nordic countries Iceland, Norway and Finland are currently ahead (Gender Gap Report, 2010).



Picture 1. Gender Gap Index for Sweden, 2006-2010. © www.webforum.org 2010.

Based on figures alone, The Gender Gap Report is of course a blunt instrument. Soft data, such as general attitudes in society, unpaid work and so on, do not show at all. But it is still helpful when it comes to placing Swedish gender equality in a context. While it shows that Sweden is at the front edge in some aspects, the Gender Gap Report also uncovers less flattering sides. Access to basic healthcare and education is what puts Sweden in its place, but relations on the labor market is still to discriminating and segregated to be called out as equal. For example, in 2006, the average monthly salary of women amounted to 83 percent of men's and gender segregation was bigger and more powerful in Sweden then in many other western countries. Women are also in large extent double working as responsible for their households (Wendel, 2006). So, even though Swedish gender equality figures seems to be

in better shape than most countries, they also convey the story of the exaggerated – almost mythical – Swedish gender equality.

## **1.2 What is the problem?**

The aspects mentioned above describe a country with favorable conditions for gender equality work. At the same time, they raise more ambiguous questions that can be summarized in one; with all these good circumstances, why is Sweden unequal in terms of gender? Wendel (2006) described the situation as gender equal in principle, but not in practice. The reason, she claims, is the view of men's contribution in the workplace as more valuable, a kind of hierarchization. What's masculine and what's feminine varies over time but tends to place men as more technically oriented and women as caretakers. Technically oriented professions are better paid, and this segregation of men and women is continuously defended, with arguments based on assumptions that this reflects certain natural characteristics. The expression *doing gender*, launched in an article from 1987 by West & Zimmerman, described this behavior as a part of a normalization of people as social beings. When fulfilled by a majority of people, certain masculine and feminine characteristics appear to be something natural and congenital. For instance, this is manifested in worklife by a higher proportion of male managers (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2011).

Gender equality work costs time and money for organizations in Sweden. Except for small organizations, a certain amount of work is unavoidable because of legislation. Every now and then, gender equality work also becomes fashionable and a management priority – until something else, more urgent, takes over (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2011). It conduces to the difficulty of creating a long-term gender equal practice.

According to Alvesson (1995), human capital is the very foundation of the knowledge-intensive organization. Since “human” includes both male and female workers, gender equality at the workplace should be desirable for these types of organizations, in order to get the full potential out of every co-worker. The knowledge-intensive organization is, for example, characterized by high



educational level among employees and that they operate in a complex environment. Time's change, and these types of organizations with them; it's pretty safe to say that they are the modern organizations of today. But, as this study will show, they do not tend to be gender equal either.

### **1.3 Problem & purpose**

The purpose of this study is to create an understanding for what type of roles leaders and co-workers have in the process of creating gender equality within knowledge-intensive organizations.

As Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark (2011) points out, the complexity regarding gender equality is, among else, a product of attitudes and social heritage. This study is focused on *how* leaders and co-workers participate in creating a more gender equal environment. On basis of this, the main question of this study is: in a knowledge-intensive organization, who needs to do what to achieve a more gender equal practice?

### **1.4 Disposition**

Chapter 1, pp. 6–9 has served as an introduction to gender equality work and research as well as to the knowledge-intensive organizations, leading to a definition of the problem and purpose of this study. Chapter 2, pp. 10–18, presents the theoretical base developed from the literature study that has been conducted. Chapter 3, pp. 19–24, describes the methodology used to perform the study. Chapter 4, pp. 25-35, combines the presentation and analysis of the material collected and chapter 5, pp. 36-37, contains the conclusions of the study.

## **2. Same and different – a tacit skewness**

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**This section presents theories about gender equality work, leadership and knowledge-intensive organizations. Gender as a research area has grown considerably since it was acknowledged in the 1970's and has spread both geographically and scientifically. The parallel development in different cultures has led to a wide research area that is difficult to summarize or even compare (Wahl, 2001). Along with ambiguities regarding translations, this led to a focus on Swedish literature, with a few exceptions.**

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### **2.1 Overview of Swedish gender equality research**

As a result of the historical, recent and ongoing public debate in the gender equality area, many researchers have shown interest to the subject and many studies have been conducted. Even so, this study has potential of contributing with something new by combining the two specific areas of knowledge-intensive organizations and gender equality work within them.

Wahl (2001) discussed gender and organization on a basic level with many historical references and provided a good understanding for the subject as a whole, as well as a few more specific areas such as leadership and symbolism. She also stated that:

“Gender equality is /.../ not just a organizational phenomenon. It is a societal phenomenon that has impact on an organizational level.” Wahl (2001), pp.166.

It captures the spirit of this study by implicating that people within organizations, and the social structures they live by, has a great impact of the prevailing practice.

In the book “*Jämställdhet i organisationer – hur förändring görs hållbar*” (2011), Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist and David Renemark follows up on an investment called ”Women to the top”, led by the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman (JämO). The study combines Swedish research of organizational changes with gender equality theory and also includes knowledge-intensive organizations but does not claim to be applicable on those only.

Mats Alvesson has written about both knowledge-intensive companies and the role of gender in organizations (e.g. *Knowledge work and knowledge-intensive firms* (2004) & *Kön & Organisation* (2011)). His research is of great use for this study since it provides the opportunity to connect the two, often separated parts, even though this has not yet been fully explored by Alvesson himself.

## **2.2 The concept of gender as a social construction**

When studying gender equality work, such a basic matter as translations becomes a difficulty. Swedish literature rarely matches literature from other countries, especially non-european, when using certain expressions or concepts. The literature study has been focused on Swedish research because of these cultural differences within the concept. But since the study have contained the work of a few important non-Swedish researchers, a minor glossary is appropriate.

### **2.2.1 Gender – a creative process**

American anthropologist Gayle Rubin coined the terms of *sex* and *gender* in 1975 where the former had a biological meaning and the latter referred to the historical, social and cultural parts (Eriksson-Zetterquist et.al. 2006). West & Zimmerman published “Doing gender” in 1988 where they state *sex* as the

“... *determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males.*” West & Zimmerman (1988), pp. 4.

And they state *gender* as

“... *the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category.*” West & Zimmerman (1988), pp. 4.

*Sex category* is application of one’s *sex* in everyday life (West & Zimmerman, 1988).

The term *gender* has since the 1980’s often been translated into the Swedish word *genus*, which at some points becomes problematic. Researchers have had many different reasons for using *genus* as a concept, and it has been criticized for drawing on ideas of biological art. Part of the critique has also been about not being a translation good enough. Gender in English and *genus* in Swedish does not have the same relation to the biological meaning of sex in respective language (Wahl, 2001; Eriksson-Zetterquist et.al. 2006). The distinction between sex and gender in the English language is clearer. This study has taken note of this and the term *gender* is used to describe a person’s socially constructed sex and behavior that is believed to being related, independent of what term that is used in Swedish literature. The term *Gender equality work* (*Jämställdhetsarbete* in Swedish) refers to activities aimed to promote a gender equal environment, whether or not it is active or passive, voluntary or mandatory.

### **2.2.2 Different truths about the same creation**

Nentwich (2006) discussed three different approaches to gender equality theory: sameness, difference and post-equity. *The sameness approach* is a mix between the two feminist theories of liberal individualism and liberal structuralism, based on beliefs that gender differences are a result of sex role-socialization and not something natural. The socialization process is believed to make women less capable of asserting themselves in male-dominated areas in worklife. In order to make a change from this point of view, women first of all have to adapt to the current climate and thereby be equipped with the right tools to cope in the male-dominated world, while “change-agents” at the same time works against structural barriers to help women achieve gender equality.

*The difference approach* is closely related to standpoint feminism, and highlights special female skills, how they contribute to society and worklife in a way that men can't. The importance of noticing these differences and making sure that they are valued equally is the challenge for "change-agents". By treating differences differently, levels of gender hierarchy are supposed to be ruled out (Nentwich, 2006).

The sameness approach is criticized for the risk of treating men and women in the same way even though they might differ in some aspects. The difference approach is criticized in just the opposite way. If being treated differently, even though men and women are the same, there is a great risk of reproducing false conceptions of what's masculine and what's feminine. There is a fine line between glorifying womanliness and strengthening stereotypes (Nentwich, 2006).

The third approach, the social constructive perspective on gender and feminism, post-equity, is somewhat of an alternative. From this perspective, gender is

*"... the organizing principle that shapes social structure, identities, power and knowledge, and is no longer something individuals 'have'."* Nentwich (2006), pp. 5

With "no longer" Nentwich (2006) suggested that sameness and difference approaches are developed from certain political, economic and social structures that are based on a gender system, which differentiates women and men. To challenge these assumptions is an important part of deconstructing gender as a concept and the ability to do so is a great advantage of using a social constructive approach. There is no need to decide whether or not men and women are different. The ruling discourses and social practices within organizations are believed to set the scene for gender exertion and in order for "change-agents" to work their way, discourses and practices have to be identified. Even though criticized for not being studied enough and still taking the existence of gender for granted, the post-equity approach is used in this

study because of its usefulness in analyzing social practices within the organizations presented in the material section (Nentwich, 2006). In fact, the organization as a whole can be seen as a social construction (Wahl, 2001).

### **2.3 Organizing knowledge**

The reason for placing knowledge-intensive organizations in a key category of its own is, according to Alvesson (2004), an effect of the assumption that they are truly different from other types of organizations. In order for knowledge-intensive organizations to exist, there has to be a contrary part – organizations that do not develop, share and use their knowledge in a systematic way and do not profit as much by hiring students from elite universities. Because that is what knowledge-intensive organizations do. But with this important distinction made, it is dangerously easy to mark these organizations in such a simplistic way. There is more to them than the level of knowledge intensity.

Roughly defined, knowledge-intensive organizations contribute sophistication in their field of expertise. Alvesson (2004) sums this up with a few specific circumstances regarding their work environment. They:

- have highly qualified individuals who perform knowledge-based work, thereby using their intellectual and symbolic skills
- have high level of autonomy and the organizational hierarchy is toned down
- use adjustable and often ad hoc-like types of organization
- need extensive communication for coordination and problem solving
- provide idiosyncratic services
- use subjective and uncertain quality evaluation
- have information and power asymmetry

This means that knowledge-intensive organizations focuses on the knowledge built on the cognitive skills of the personnel, who also have operational authority to a large extent. The organization is flexible, have close relations to clients and tasks are often solved in groups. Due to the complexity of the tasks, clients are often in a dependent position, and might find it hard to evaluate the

service given. Alvesson (2004) points out that the concept of knowledge-intensive organizations is not just valuable, but also problematic due to the high risk of creating false certainties. Instead he describes the knowledge-intensive organization as ambiguous. The need for knowledge-intensive organizations can be based on many different reasons, such as inability to make decisions or a way to shirk responsibility for decision-makers. Combined with subjective thinking and uncertainty in work methods within knowledge-intensive organizations, they appear as ambiguous.

## **2.4 The man**

### **2.4.1 Characterizing perfection**

Leadership is a process where the leader exerts influence in a specific group, in order to reach a certain goal. A large share of leadership researchers has been able to agree upon these three criteria's. Beyond this, many different situations and phenomena's have been studied and many different interpretations have been made (Wahl 2001). Leadership as a concept is just as ambiguous as the knowledge-intensive organization. Combining these two concepts to find a model for leadership within them is not easy. Alvesson et.al. (2009) identified a few characterizing features of leaders in knowledge-intensive organizations that are all based on the idea of co-workers in such organizations work independently flexible and demand a higher proportion of perceptive leadership rather than traditional strategic planning:

Leaders in knowledge-intensive organizations:

- creates social coherence and a shared identity through marking boundaries and arouses a sense of common objective
- work with normative control and tries to impact the organizational culture in order to strengthen mutual values
- make sure to maintain important relations through client orientation
- creates and develops a organizational image to guide co-workers
- recruits, motivates, and mobilize with the aim to bring forth knowledge
- use knowledge management to develop knowledge further
- stimulate co-workers by combining different types of skills

Overall, a leader in a knowledge-intensive organization is a visionary person who designs social structure, educates co-workers and is a servant of learning and development. The leader might be, but is not necessarily, a manager or director. It is possible to possess responsibility as a decision-maker and administer and perpetuate the existing orientation without being a leader, as well as its possible to be a informal leader without being involved in decision-making activities (Alvesson et.al., 2009).

#### **2.4.2 Gender politics**

To some extent, accessibility to certain types of jobs is dependent of what Alvesson & Due Billing (2011) referred to as Gender politics. Through systematic practice in the workplace, the conduct of employers and employees produce, or reproduce, organizational patterns that becomes structural. The effects are often sex-segregated workplaces, because of the space given for perceptions of the features needed for a certain job, but also because of the fear of altering these perceptions. For example, studies have shown that the work of women who performs equal to men in a male-dominated line of work, might frighten male co-workers who believe that their job will lose some of its prestige. This can of course apply to men in female-dominated sectors as well, and becomes a silent reason for recruiters to maintain a homogenous work force.

However, since leading positions in most organizations and sectors are male dominated, gender politics forms a barrier, particularly for women aiming at top positions. In the social creation of femininity in a male-dominated area, leadership is a contradistinction, since perceptions of masculinity and leadership are related. Femininity is a complement to what is described as real leadership (Wahl 2001). One of the main keys to change, if desired, is in the hands of organizational governance – top managers and recruiters – the “gatekeepers” as referred to by Alvesson & Due Billing (2011). They are in control of who does what, a tool of power which is largely influenced by gender stereotype perceptions and organizational culture and traditions.



## 2.5 How they are suppose to do

The Swedish Law against Discrimination (Diskrimineringslagen), introduced January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, is addressed to employers and they are required to make sure that it is complied. It requires that every employer with more than twenty-five employees establish a gender equality plan, which is to be updated every third year. The plan has to contain a statement of planned wage adjustments in order to provide equal pay for equal work efforts (as described in 3 kap. 11§). It also has to include an overview and a statement of actions to meet the criteria's mentioned in the Law against Discrimination 4-9§§, which are:

4§: actions to provide a suitable workplace for all co-workers, regardless of sex, ethnicity, religion or other religious belief.

5§: actions to facilitate for the unification of parenting and worklife, for both men and women.

6§: actions to forestall and prevent co-workers to be subject of harassment and reprisals related to sex /.../ or sexual harassment.

7§: promote the equal opportunity of individuals, regardless to sex/.../ to apply for vacant jobs

8§: through education, competence development and other suitable measures, employers are bound to support an equal distribution of men and women in different types of work and categories of co-workers.

9§: when equal distribution does not apply, employers are required to perform special efforts to receive applications from the underrepresented sex, and also to continue to even out distribution (SFS 2008:567).

Not just prohibiting makes Swedish gender equality legislation innovative in an international context. The third chapter of the Law against Discrimination is titled "Active measures" and explains what is required of employers, in terms of activities (Wahl 2001). The Equality Ombudsman (DO) was established January 1<sup>st</sup>, and the mission of this governmental agency is to ensure compliance with the law and impose fines when organizations fail to do so. Believing in legislation to put an end to gender equality problems is of course naïve. But since the Law of Gender equality (discontinued in favor of the Law

against Discrimination in 2009, just as the Head of Equal Opportunities Ombudsman, JämO, was replaced by the all-embracing Equality Ombudsman, DO) was instituted in 1980, Swedish organizations have been obliged to pay attention to gender equality issues. This is important to address, especially in this study that will discuss the effect of gender equality plans (or equivalent for organizations with less than 25 employees) in section four.

## **2.6 Summary**

The secondary material of the study, presented in this chapter, contained a discussion of gender as a social construction and how it affects organizations. Nentwich's (2006) post-equity theory described the need of identifying ruling practices and discourses rather than comparing women and men and their abilities. The high autonomy and power asymmetry characteristic for knowledge-intensive organizations, as well as the need for a customized leadership with key expressions such as inspirational leadership and cultural imprinting, creates an organizational arena with endless possibilities and soaring demands. The relation between the leadership discourse and perception of masculinity causes gender politics, a way of explaining female suborder in the workplace, guarded by recruiters and top managers. Swedish legislation provides a framework for organizations to work in relation to, but is to be accounted for as a minimum level of performance and not too reflective of reality.

### **3. Constructing this study**

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**This section is focused on the primary material collection, including preparations, compilation and the analyzing process. It also contains a discussion regarding the credibility of the material collected.**

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#### **3.1 Overall approach to the subject**

As the purpose of the study highlights, this study claims to create an *understanding* for gender equality work in knowledge-intensive organizations. The attempt to achieve this was made by conducting a consistent qualitative approach. The social constructive perspective on gender, which Nentwich (2006) refers to as post-equity, is a key setting. It provides the opportunity to analyze literature and empirical material in an ad hoc way, without letting restrictions and inhibiting discussions take the upper hand (Fejes & Thornberg, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). For instance, definitions of women and men and their biological differences have been able to leave outside the study by using a social constructive approach to the subject.

#### **3.2 Interviews**

The interviews were conducted with people from the following organizations:

- 1) Public sector, highly specialized health care, employees < 10, turnover: 20-50 MSEK
- 2) Private sector, consulting firm in communications, employees 10-15, turnover < 20 MSEK
- 3) Public sector, technical research institute, employees > 1000, turnover > 500 MSEK

##### **3.2.1 Sample selection**

These organizations were chosen on basis of certain criteria's. The diversity in their cliental offer was desirable to avoid the risk of receiving too much branch specific material. And the fact that they are all to be considered as knowledge-

intensive organizations made them well suited for this study. Two people from each organization were asked to participate, one person in a decision-making position and one co-worker. Two CEO's, a HR-director and their co-workers participated. The CEO of organization No. 3 turned down the request and mediated contact with the HR-director. The other five said yes and the interviews were carried out separately with each person, on the premises of each organization.

The respondents made it possible to compare perceptions of gender equality work within the organizations from different point of views and different levels in the organizational hierarchy. When discussing their private life, the co-workers also made it possible to make comparisons between the organizations, since they were all in more or less the same phase in life: 30-40 years old, living together with a partner whom they have biological children with. Comparisons in leadership approaches between the three persons in decision-making positions have also been conducted.

### **3.2.2 Meeting people**

Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) and their half-structured worldview method of interviewing have been an important part of the fundamental structuring and design of the interviews. A number of headline questions were asked, followed by secondary questions, all in purpose to make the respondent talk as much as possible, and thereby provide the opportunity to make interpretations from a wide range of material. All respondents were aware of the gender equality perspective of the study, but not given any further information about the use of their contribution before the interview was over. The interviews revolved around areas that the respondents' found interesting to discuss.

To facilitate the analyzing process, the predetermined structure of the interviews was kept intact to the largest possible extent (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2011). The length of the interviews ranged from approximately 40 to 55 minutes in order to keep the amount of collected material on a reasonable level. Headline questions were asked in the same order to ease up the sorting

work (less relevant for the study → relevant → less relevant) and notes were taken to maintain the sense of patterns that spontaneously showed up.

### 3.2.3 Respondents

ORG: NO	SEX	AGE	FAMILY	EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	JOB TITLE
1:1	Female	48	Married, two kids aged 16 and 18	College	CEO
1:2	Female	39	Married, three kids aged 3, 6 and 8	University	Administrator
2:1	Male	39	Married, two kids aged 2 and 4	University	CEO
2:2	Male	42	Married, two kids aged 5 and 10	Tertiary level	Works in Sales/ Customer relations
3:1	Female	54	Married, two kids aged 26 and 20	College	HR-director
3:2	Female	33	Married, one kid aged 3	University	Communicator

Picture 2. Sample scheme © Author 2011.

## 3.3 Analyzing

Rennstam & Wästerfors (2011) described three main problems with analyzing qualitative material, which were all recognized and solved in the analyzing process.

### 3.3.1 The chaos problem (sorting)

The collected material needed to be sorted out in order to make it foreseeable and manageable. This was made easier by the structure of the interviews (as mentioned above). By using the same arrangement in every interview, it was quite easy to recognize where a certain part of the material were to be found in relation to other sections. But the core work in solving the chaos problem was of course to listen to the recorded material, over and over again.

### 3.3.2 The representation problem (reducing)

The reduction part of the analyzing process was also facilitated by the interview structure. By starting off and finishing with socializing, yet

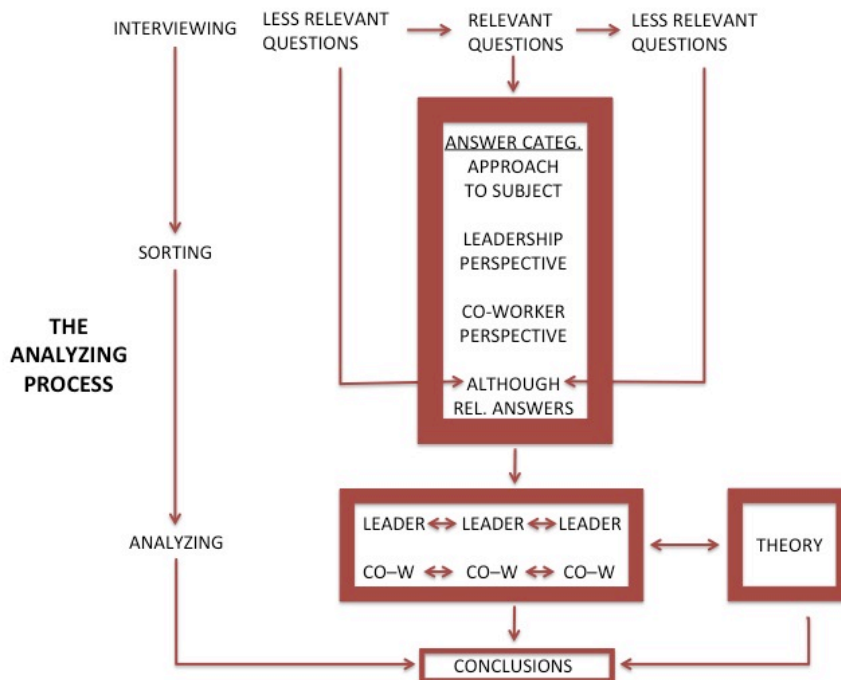
interesting, small-talk, the representation problem was to some extent solved by sharp sifting of the material in the less relevant parts of every interview. Left over was mainly the important part – a sense of the answers to affect the analyzing process, rather than full-scale material.

### 3.3.3 The authority problem (arguing)

In order to contribute with an analysis of academic interest, the empirical material was used in relation to the theoretical frame that the study is based on, and its self-sufficiency is derived from similarities and differences detected along the way. One of the goals of this study has been to provide innovative ideas and reflections by questioning previous research, but still use generally accepted concepts, such as *the social construction of gender* and the *knowledge-intensive organization*.

### 3.3.4 The analyzing process

The picture below shows how the analyzing process was carried out.



Picture 3. Model of analyzing process © Author 2011.

The interview structure provided a concentration of gender equality related material in the middle section of each interview. These were divided into three main categories: *Approach to subject*, *Leadership perspective* and *Co-worker*

*perspective*. Even though questions were not necessarily related to gender equality work, relevant information from the respondents was collected from some respondents during the initial and finishing parts of the interviews. This information was compiled in a section of its own, called *although relevant answers*.

In the next step, answers from the respondents were compared and set against each other in order to find characteristic features for the leaders and the co-workers view on gender equality issues and their role in the work related. During this part, the material was also put into context by using the theoretical base from section two. Together, they resulted in a combined section of material presentation and analysis, followed by the summarizing and reflecting section of conclusions. The quotations in section four are all presented in context to the analysis. Sometimes they are commented, sometimes they are meant to speak for themselves.

### **3.4 Credibility**

*“Interview results are not credible, they are biased.”*

Kvale & Brinkmann (2009), pp. 186

A saying like this might raise more questions than it provides understanding, since it makes quantitative studies appear as more credible than qualitative. But apart from that, their statement is still interesting, since the social constructive perspective of this study stated above is an indication of the author’s standpoint regarding gender as a phenomenon. Questions and answers during the interviews may have been affected by this, it is important to keep that in mind. Nonetheless, empirical analysis is related to prominent research in each area, and without a standpoint it is hard to contribute with something else than repetition. As Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) points out: if aware of the bias, and this taken into account, the researcher’s results are still very useful, when highlighted in a context that is appropriate for the purpose of the study.

The organizations studied are operating in very different branches but the study is by no means comprehensive enough to generalize upon. Gender equality

work is to large extent related to organizational culture and is as ambiguous as any other cultural variable, and distinguished between organizations. The results of this study are to be seen as a contribution to the ongoing debate, and a source of knowledge for those interested in leader and co-worker relations to the subject.

Also taken into account is the author's relation to the organizations studied, through earlier and ongoing consultant services. It provided some knowledge and impressions of the organizations before meeting them for the interview sessions, although gender equality work in specific had not been discussed with any of them before.

### **3.5 Summary**

The methodology used in this study is related to both grounded theory and phenomenography, but does not fully correspond to any of them. In agreement with grounded theory, a statement was made regarding what gender equality work is and what the focus of the study is, but not exactly what was desired to find out from the collection of material (Corbin & Strauss 1990).

The half-structured interviews that has been conducted during this study is well corresponded with the phenomenographic approach of collecting, describing and interpreting the respondents ideas and opinions of a certain subject, in this case gender equality work within knowledge-intensive organizations. But instead of just describing the respondents' perception of the subject, this study tries to clarify effective ways of working with gender equality in knowledge-intensive organizations (Dahlgren & Johansson 2009). The two methodology schools have been helpful in their function as guidelines and inspiration in developing and performing this study.



## 4. The role-play of worklife

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**This section contains the presentation and analysis of the empirical material collected during the study. With help from the respondent's stories, the intention is to describe how the leaders and co-workers think and act in relation to gender equality work – what roles do they take?**

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### 4.1 How they actually do

To create an understanding for what type of roles leaders and co-workers have in creating a gender equal environment, it was necessary to find out how the organizations in this study have worked with gender equality questions up until now, and how the respondents felt about their organizations (see section 3.2.1 for information about the organizations). Every sub-section begins with a quote from the respondents, briefly describing their thoughts on gender equality work related to their organizations.

#### 4.1.1 Organization No. 1

*“There is nothing that prevents us from being gender equal /... / we have no diversity and are more women than men, but we have the conditions necessary for a gender equal organization, as described by the law. Resp. 1:1.*

In their budget for 2011, organization No. 1 has a passage called *Gender Mainstreaming*. It states the organizations' strive for a more equal workplace in terms of numbers, since (as of when this was written) eighty percent of the employees are women. According to the budgeting section, low employee turnover makes sure that this is not subject to any dramatic changes in a short-term future.

In theory, Gender Mainstreaming is a contentious area, mainly focusing on supporting gender equality by making decision-making areas more reachable

for women. It is often criticized for not addressing active measures enough or providing distinct goals (Norrbin & Olsson 2010). Regardless of how much the original terminology has been taken into account, the same critique could be addressed to No. 1, since active measures only extends to the ensurance of both male and female representation in future recruitment processes.

#### **4.1.2 Organization No. 2**

*“Implementing a gender equality plan wouldn’t really change anything for us, ‘cause in the end it is all about a state of mind.”*

Resp. 2:1.

Organization No. 2 does not have any formal documentation regarding their gender equality work. During the interview with respondent 2:1 he instead stressed the importance of provide favorable conditions for a gender equal workplace, such as encouraging parental leave and creating an opportunity-focused climate instead of turning to the restrictive safeness of legislation when handling such questions. In coherence with Alvesson (2004) respondent 2:1, as the formal leader of a knowledge-intensive organization, finds value in creating an ad-hoc, flexible and confidence-based climate in order to get the best out of every co-worker. A side effect of this is that gender equality work formally becomes a non-issue.

#### **4.1.3 Organization No. 3**

*“When we ask our employees in co-worker surveys if they think that we are gender equal, most of them say yes ... but that might be because most of the answers come from men.”* Resp. 3:1.

Organization No. 3 is the only one with more than 25 employees and thereby required to have a gender equality plan established (SFS 2008:567). During the time for this study the plan was being revised, and had been for six months due to lack of time. Even though a non-completed document was studied, it became clear that the document is kept in a very general way. The organization takes gender equality work into account as an organizational necessity and follows legislation, but does not want to put a crisp tone around active measures.

#### 4.1.4 Formality failure

Gender equality work on a decision-making level seems to consist of the unhealthy relationship between uncertainty and unconcern: uncertainty due to lack of knowledge and unconcern due to low demand within the organization. On a personal level, all three respondents on a decision-making level recognized the need to keep gender equality questions in mind, and were able to highlight a few reasons to why it is important. At the same time, they had a hard time defining what gender equality really means, and since their co-workers rarely expresses any need to have formal documentation of the gender equality work, it is to a large extent neglected.

The reasons differ, but formalities regarding gender equality work are not something of high priority on an organizational level in any of the three studied. The question is recognized, but the complexity of the subject is handled by generalization and writing “the right things”, and thereby without sting, e.g. the absence of distinct active measures and follow-up work in gender equality planning. The uncertainty regarding gender equality work makes it difficult to achieve a gender equal practice. Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark (2011) described a situation in modern Swedish organizations, where gender equality work has been activated but not integrated in everyday practice. They relate the difficulties to the vagueness regarding how such an environment would affect one’s everyday worklife. As a solution of this, a certain rhetorical discourse have developed to explain the desire of more gender equal organizations in terms of benefits and profitability. A discourse that seems to have been adopted by respondent 2:1 already:

*“It [gender equality] is a matter of business strategy for us / ... /  
It is something that you just cannot afford to miss out on today.”*

Resp. 2:1.

Relating gender equality work to financial decisions has become somewhat of a pretext to work with such issues amongst those who do not have the knowledge, or will, to make distinct value-based decisions.

## **4.2 Expanded awareness – the role of a leader**

In discussions regarding gender equality, the respondents in decision-making positions were consistently questioning in a much larger extent than the co-workers. This comparison is further developed in section 4.4, but needs to be mentioned since it is the foundation of the role of a leader in a knowledge-intensive organization. The term Expanded awareness captures the leader's personal experiences and critical reflections regarding gender equality.

### **4.2.1 Providers of equal opportunities – not equal environments**

Alvesson et.al. (2009) described how leadership more and more has become a model of explanation to the doings of organizations. Leadership, or lack of leadership, is held responsible for as well ups and downs, particularly in knowledge-intensive organizations where leaders needs to be supportive and inspiring rather than all through rational (or where being inspirational is being rational). Not only has this created a burgeoning scene for management writers to profit on, but it has also raised questions of where responsibility within organizations really lies. Alvesson et.al. (2009) also points out that leadership only can be assessed from actions related to leadership, and its effects within the organization.

On basis of the ambiguous knowledge-intensive organization (discussed in section 2.3) and the ambiguous role of the leader as stated above, large parts of the interviews with the respondents came down to discussions regarding the liability issue, i.e. whose job it is to make sure that an organization is gender equal. Respondent 1:1 described the relation between leader and co-worker in terms of creating a gender equal environment like this:

*“... We have different roles. I, as a leader, have a great responsibility in not working against gender equality and allowing people to take responsibility whether it's a man or a woman. That is where the individual's driving force becomes significant /.../ When they take responsibility, I help them to channel that force.”* Resp. 1:1.

All three respondents in decision-making positions argued that providing the conditions necessary for a gender equal organization is in the hands of the leader, but not making it actually gender equal. The rest is up to the co-workers. Attitudes towards what that responsibility includes differed and respondent 1:1 was the only one who talked straightforward about discharging people who do not act in accordance with the what is stated in the organization's core values.

*“A management writer said something about removing those who do not contribute from the boat. That's what its all about – having the right people on the boat /... / my responsibility as a leader is to help people develop. And if they do not want to, I have the responsibility to ask them to leave.”* Resp 1:1.

Although 2:1 and 3:1 did not talk about discharges in a direct way, they were very clear regarding the importance of finding the right people to begin with. Discharging co-workers on basis of them not contributing to the core values of the organization is difficult in a legislative sense, and the organization might face other consequences if doing so, such as impaired work ethic, splits and fear among those who remain. Dependence of competence provided by these co-workers is also taken into account and might be reason enough to let them stay. The respondents pointed out that going the other way around, by recruiting new blood, is the best possible way to create a more gender equal work place.

#### **4.2.2 Recruiting the right people**

*“I very much believe that a prosperous organization needs to be gender equal, but gender equality is so hard to influence /.../ the greatest opportunity to influence is definitely in the recruitment phase”.* Resp. 2:1.

All respondents in decision-making positions are involved in the recruitment processes of their organizations, and they all described a need to have a wide

range focus. Top managers and recruiters have the power to affect organizational culture in the recruitment process. By looking further than at core competence, weighing in social skills and relating them to the needs of the organization, gender politics can to some extent be avoided.

*“Recruiting the right person is very much a question of gut feeling. I’ve had team leaders recruiting for me, with help from a recruiting agency, by the book, and it has turned out to be crap.”*

Resp. 1:1.

When discussing Gender politics, Alvesson & Due Billing (2011) referred to managers and recruiters as the “gatekeepers”. While this means that they are in an indirect position to affect the gender equality work within the organization, it requires a certain awareness to do so. The expanded awareness shown by leaders in this study, supported by Alvessons (2004) description of skills needed to be a successful leader in knowledge-intensive organizations, gives the impression of favorable conditions for recruitment that promotes gender equality work. But recruiters are not always leaders, and the risk of them (and of course leaders in some cases) selecting people on basis of how the organization already is composed, rather than what it lacks, is a hotbed for a homogenous organization. The “gut feeling” might just as well work the other way around. Hence, an active role of a leader is preferable in the recruitment process.

*“We [HR-division] have seen a need for us to participate in the recruiting process /... / we can’t assess their core competence, but we can assess their ability to function in a group and so on.”*

Resp. 3:1.

Basic knowledge of gender equality issues has to be included in the recruitment process in order for it to have such an effect. Respondent 2:1 described his attempts to create a gender equal workplace as a result of negative experiences throughout his career, for instance related to him and his wife’s two pregnancies and when he worked in a sex-segregated workplace, which in the

end became unbearable for the now dissolved organization. This experience is the foundation of what he again described as a business strategy, not only for the sake of co-worker's well being, but also as a competitive advantage towards clients.

*“... that is why I am consciously trying to recruit people with different social and cultural background /... / it has been effective, especially with clients that we do not really know what to do with in the beginning /... / we have many different perspectives in every project.”* Resp. 2:1.

#### **4.2.3 Branding**

A perennial expression of respondent 1:1 was *branding*. The expanded awareness expresses itself in different ways, and does not necessarily include specific knowledge of the gender equality subject (although it does in the case of 1:1), but contains a certain awareness of business benefits where a strong brand overall and employer brand in particular, is a key part of a successful modern organization. A brand is closely related to image, which is something created to radiate credibility, and some organizations are more image-dependent than others. The difficulty in measuring skill and competence in knowledge-intensive organizations (e.g. consulting firms) makes them more image-dependent (Alvesson 2004). Respondent 1:1 have a history of working as CEO for a medium-sized consulting firm (communications) and is very familiar with branding issues, just as 2:1 of course. But during the interview with 3:1 (who has worked within the research institute since 1976), the recognition of branding issues turned out to be a very distinct mutual factor of importance to the respondents in leading positions.

*“This is the second year with a focus on us as potential workplace and we work hard with these employer brand-issues.”* Resp. 3.1

This was interesting due to the sharp connection between branding and gender equality work, made by the respondents. It symbolizes an even greater complexity surrounding gender equality work than one might expect since it, in

the same way as the sustainability and environmental work of modern organizations, has become a branding issue and health factor for the outside world to judge from. Since it is not just recognizing and solving a problem, activities used to promote a gender equal work might just be a branding tool, or at least a solution with an ulterior motive.

### **4.3 A definition of difference – the role of a co-worker**

The co-workers never really minded to talk about the definitions of gender equality – they all had their own perception of the subject, and they were quite separated from each other's.

#### **4.3.1 Different definitions**

Q: *“Do you work in a gender equal organization?”*

*“Well ... yes, given the conditions. We always have been more women than men.”* Resp. 1:2.

*“Not yet.”* Resp. 2:2.

*“I think that we can work a bit more with it.”* Resp. 3:2.

All three co-workers in the organizations studied came up with a distinct answer to the question. The following question was *“How do you define gender equality?”* and that was when it got interesting. All three had their own definition, more or less separated from the others. Respondent 1:2 said, in agreement with legislation, that it is about being treated the same regardless of sex, in terms of wages, benefits and how tasks within the organization are allocated. Respondent 2:2 talked about overall respect between women and men, while respondent 3:2 also mentioned respect when talking about her private relation, but as an organizational issue, she mainly defined gender equality in terms of women in top positions. No one of them consciously referred to legislation, and to some extent, they have all made up their own ideas of gender equality as a subject.

#### **4.3.2 What would Nentwich say?**

The co-workers approach to the subject of gender was conspicuously related to Nentwich's (2006) ideas of sameness, difference and post-equity. Respondent



1:2 frequently recurred to her own inhibiting way of thinking, which she referred to as a female way of thinking. For instance, she described a lack of belief in herself as a future leader, even though she has experienced inferior leadership earlier and thought that she can do better. Regarding present leadership within the organization, she said:

*“Now that we have a female CEO we have the womanly elements that we didn’t have before / ... / there is a higher capacity to listen.”* Resp.1:2.

At the same time as she was describing a typical socially constructed way of female thinking, relating to her early years in school and so on, she highlighted skills that she considered to be exclusively feminine. Respondent 2:2 did not think much of social constructions at all. He described the combination between male and female skills and abilities as the key to a successful organization, very much in agreement with the difference approach, as described by Nentwich (2006).

*“If we were to hire another person, I would definitely prefer a girl. There is much that they do not know, but they are very capable /... / girls have a broad-mindedness that guys do not have.”* Resp. 2:2.

He stressed the idea of having a gender equality perspective in the recruitment process but also talked about the difficulty in getting a truthful first impression. He said:

*“... in six months time it might be Mr. Hyde sitting there,”*  
Resp. 2:2.

In his opinion, that is what makes gender equality work a leadership issue. If co-workers do not share values with the organization as a whole, 2:2 believes that it is up to the leader to ensure a functioning environment, mainly by educating the co-workers within the areas necessary.

Respondent 3:2, who works in a large organization where newly recruited individuals do not affect the overall workplace climate to the same extent as in organizations 1 and 2, said the same thing about education as the best way to influence co-workers. 3:2 was somewhat of an exception to the rule – she has educational experience of gender equality issues and further overall knowledge of the subject in comparison to 1:2 and 2:2. She related personal experiences to her current life situation, at work as well as in her private relation, and assessed her workplace from a post-equity view (Nentwich 2006).

*“Men are extolled for solving technical matters that are pretty basic, that I know the answer to. But they [women] do not ask me about such typically masculine things. It is frustrating.”*

Resp. 3:2.

However, she used different factors of assessment when discussing her private relation and her workplace. Along with a lack of experience from decision-making positions, she did not quite fit into the Expanded awareness role as described in section 4.2.

#### **4.3.3 Satisfying no one**

Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark (2011) described the difficulty of achieving a gender equal practice when directing work efforts towards a group of individuals with such a wide range of perceptions about the subject.

*“It [gender equality work] is all about communication. People interpret things in different ways.”* Resp. 2:2.

In combination with the co-workers lack of experience from decision-making processes, it is hard to win their gathered acceptance and will to work with gender equality issues. Different perceptions along with generalized formalization provide a big scope for different interpretations, thus a situation characterized by uncertainty and widely spread dissatisfaction regarding the gender equality work efforts conducted.

#### **4.4 Approaching difference – a leadership challenge**

Gender equality is ambiguous, not only to the respondents in decision-making positions, but to co-workers as well. But regarding co-workers, the ambiguity passes for all the different approaches within a group. The most obvious difference between the decision-makers and the co-workers in this study is the decision-makers admission of not feeling all too confident with the subject, while the co-workers on an individual level, expressed their opinions in a clearer way. They were less diplomatic than the respondents in, the more exposed, decision-making positions.

The complexity of this, a group of people with very different approaches to the same phenomenon, is another factor in the decision-makers expanded awareness. And it seems to be, as stated in 4.1.4, handled with generalization and thereby without sting, resulting in skepticism and dissatisfaction in gender equality related organizational efforts. As in some cases when sensitive topics are handled, attitudes towards the liability issue are separated. Leaders and co-workers in the study agreed upon a shared responsibility, but as the co-workers thought of decision-makers as the most important contributors, the leaders expressed a feeling of limitation in their ability to make their co-workers re-think about gender equality work, even if they do not believe in it themselves.

## 5. Getting to work

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**The purpose of this study was to create an understanding for what roles leaders and co-workers take in the creation of a gender equal practice in knowledge-intensive organizations. This section wraps it all up by concluding reflections.**

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Employers are required to provide a gender equal environment according to Swedish legislation. However, there is a gap between generalized, often neglected, formal documents and practice. Stating that formal documentation of gender equality work is unnecessary would be drastic. But, in terms of change work, it is not nearly as important as the human factor. The expanded awareness shown by the three decision-makers is manifested through ulterior motives behind important decisions, such as recruiting with a gender equality perspective. Alvesson & Due Billing's (2011) view of recruiters as the gatekeepers of organizations, is consistent to the results of this study. The decision-makers use recruitment processes as a tool in gender equality change work. Alvesson (2004) described the complexity in being a decision-maker in a knowledge-intensive organization but did not mention branding in plain text. The results show that gender equality activities might be used as branding tools that have inhibitory effects since the activities are carried out for not only the core reason.

The three approaches to the subject of gender equality described by Nentwich (2006), sameness, difference and post-equity, all appeared when talking to the co-workers. This study has, in roughly the same way as discussed by Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark (2011), shown signs of the difficulties to initialize more gender equal practices, caused by differences in basic definitions that leads to different interpretations of gender equality activities. Wahl's (2001) definition of gender equality as a societal phenomenon, with implications on an organizational level, is also concordant with the results of this study. Decision-makers as well as co-workers have a hard time to distinguish gender equality

issues in private from the workplace related. Gender equality pitfalls such as pregnancies and parental leaves are typical examples of private matters that affects worklife and the organizations.

This study has presented a rather unconventional view on what roles may look like for a functioning change work, providing a more gender equal practice. The responsibility of the co-workers is more stressed then what legislation and the current leadership discourse claims where the leader is congested with a responsibility beyond reason. But since the liability issue, who is responsible to do what, has proven to be hard to define, decision-makers needs to provide themselves with the tools necessary to handle gender equality questions in agreement with the core values of the organization – in this case further education. By adding further knowledge to their expanded awareness, decision-makers will be better suited for handling tough decisions, working against gender politics and using their knowledge in a branding purpose. Decision-makers still have to able to motivate their decisions from an organizational profit perspective, but might be able to gain better effects from their work efforts, both from a branding and a gender equality point of view, by providing themselves with further knowledge.

This means that the role of a leader, as provider of the right opportunities, includes recruiting people that contributes to such an environment. When working with existing employees, a clear organizational statement regarding gender equality is preferable in order to minimize friction due to co-workers different definitions of the subject. Leaders who fulfill their role, as stated above, have to work with employees who are able to recognize social structures related to gender and know how to handle them. It might be difficult to find people who possess the core competence needed, combined with social skills and a gender equality perspective, but it is most definitely easier than finding a decision-maker who is able to create a gender equal environment without the right help along the way.

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