2. Structure, culture and change processes in organisations

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This text is part of a series of publications on gender research and gender equality that has been produced by researchers at KTH as part of the efforts at KTH to integrate knowledge about gender equality, diversity and equal conditions in education. The purpose of the series is to disseminate, in an accessible way, knowledge from gender research in various subject areas that are relevant to students, doctoral students and teachers at KTH.

This text describes the way in which meanings of gender in organisations may be described, and how gender inequality is expressed in practice. This knowledge provides a basis for understanding the conditions for gender equality measures in working life and society. This section contains a presentation of theories and concepts that provide guidance in being able to perform an analysis of problems associated with gender inequality at organisation level. It also provides a background to change processes aimed at achieving increased gender equality and equality in organisations.

Meanings of gender in structure and culture

Organisations represent arenas where people interact with each other and where conditions exist that are of importance for the interaction between people. Gender is created and valued in these interactions. The terms structure and culture are analytical tools used to describe and analyse organisations and how gender is created in action. Structures can be described as routines and patterns that sort and value people. Women and men end up in different occupations and positions, with differences in their salary levels, degree of recognition and future opportunities. Structures may be perceived to be given, but they are created in people's actions in the daily activities and are influenced by the power relationships in organisations. Structures can benefit the scope for action for certain individuals while at the same time disadvantaging other people and their opportunities to act.

By studying how organisations are structured, meanings of gender can be examined, e.g. with the help of the concept of gender structure. This consists of three dimensions, namely numerical distributions between women and men, gender segregation patterns in duties, occupations and positions, and distribution of influence and power. Gender distribution is thus one of several dimensions that need to be examined. Patterns that entail divisions based on gender (gender segregation) are often the result of daily practices in organisations, e.g. when people allocate and perform work, recruit, promote and evaluate others, and set salary levels. It also has to do with situations in which people create and maintain rules for working hours, breaks and absences, and when they design and introduce new technology. Gender segregation is expressed in different ways in different contexts, e.g. in different industries. The practices that create and change the divisions and segregations may also vary in time and place, e.g. between different countries, or in a certain time period. It is also important to study the consequences of different gender structures in organisations in relation to work conditions for women and men, e.g. in the form of career opportunities, influence and different types of rewards.

The concept of culture is used to highlight how prevailing norms and values affect people's perceptions and behaviour in relation to both that which is visible and that which is not visible in organisations. This can be norms and values regarding what is deemed to be good and bad, important and unimportant, or normal and abnormal. An approach to organisations as cultures, makes it possible to question and analyse that which is taken as given, which we don't usually think about but which governs our actions and thoughts. There is often a dominant culture that influences people's perceptions and behaviour and their thoughts of what they need to do to fit in. A dominant culture may promote inclusion for certain groups but exclusion for others. Processes of inclusion and exclusion in organisations are part of everyday events and are sometimes difficult to see, as they are part of the normal way of thinking and acting in the organisation. Aspects of organisational culture which could lead to exclusionary effects for women may include, for example, the physical design of the workplace, a low level of gender awareness among employees and managers, a masculine style of leadership, working hours, a work ideology that requires a high level of flexibility, the use of misogynistic language, informal codes created in male-dominated contexts, and sexual harassment in the form of sexist slang. At the same time, there may be other norms than those of the dominant culture in certain parts of the organisation, and these are usually referred to as subcultures. In groups that work under different conditions, such as white-collar workers with individually negotiated employment contracts as opposed to workers who are subject to collective agreements, different norms and values may develop. Cultures in organisations look different depending on factors such as the industry, the nature of the business, the management philosophy, and groupings of different categories of people. The culture often appears to be gender-neutral, even if it is male-dominated in various ways, e.g.

due to an unequal gender distribution, or because a male norm prevails. This means that descriptions and analyses of gender are often not visible or are described as lacking significance in organisations, despite the fact that they are of fundamental importance.

The demarcation line between what can be perceived as structure and culture in organisations is ambiguous, and researchers may define these concepts somewhat differently. However, a common approach adopted in research is that structure and culture represent analytical tools that highlight various aspects of meanings of gender in organisations. In analyses of organisations it can be fruitful to highlight how structures and cultures are related, and how they impact each other in a certain context. The aspects of gender distribution and power structure at a workplace are important in determining which individuals are able to impart influence and therefore characterise the dominant culture. At the same time, through processes of inclusion and exclusion, the culture may also impact structures by reproducing or changing gender distributions and segregation patterns in organisations.

Gender structure and gender coding
The concept of gender structure denotes how meanings of gender are expressed in organisations. By studying an organisation's gender structure, it is possible to highlight what the gender distributions look like, how women and men are divided up into different tasks and work duties, their placement at different locations and levels in the organisation, and how influence and power are distributed among the group's women and men. Gender structures are created on the basis of perceptions of gender and what is deemed to be appropriate and suitable for women and men. At the same time, perceptions of gender are often reproduced when men and women act on the basis of the gender structure, in which case these perceptions may seem to be functional and natural. The concept of gender coding denotes how a position, a task or an occupation is associated with a certain gender and with femininity or masculinity. There is a connection between gender coding and segregation in organisations. When segregation patterns change in organisations, the gender coding also changes. Following changes in the gender structure, a task that was previously associated with masculinity may instead be associated with femininity. The reasons why a particular work duty or position is perceived to change gender, i.e. that the gender coding changes, could be the result of changes in the organisation or in the outside world. Economic and political changes, or new forms of organisation and new technology, may be behind a change in gender coding. Sometimes a change in gender coding is the result of a conscious change process aimed at achieving increased gender equality or equality. The concept of gender coding includes a power aspect, as gender coding entails coding the status of a task. The distribution of tasks between women and men may change, but the status of the task is usually determined in relation to gender rather than the actual task and position. What men do is often valued more highly

than what women do, regardless of the actual task. Gender coding thus expresses the power relationship between the genders in an organisation.

In studies of the male-dominated engineering industry, differences have been identified between the jobs performed by women and those performed by men. For example, a male-dominated work culture on the workshop floor may result in the artisanal skills and knowledge being defined as the exclusive professional domain of men. Norms and rules are often developed to maintain segregation between the genders, and the female gender coding is perceived as being subordinate to the male gender coding in terms of position. When women impose demands based on their experience, it may be perceived as behaviour that is divisive and lacking in solidarity, and could be described with a trivialisation of the problem. In male-dominated gender structures, the occurrence of both direct and indirect discrimination against women is common.

The token situation and the importance of numbers

Theories regarding organisation and gender show that structures and cultures contribute to women and men encountering different conditions. In a landmark study by Rosabeth Moss Kanter of a large multinational, male-dominated industrial company, the author analyses the effects of structure on the behaviour and placement of women and men in organisations. The behaviour of individuals in organisations can be understood on the basis of their position in the organisational structure. Perceptions of femininity and masculinity are built into tasks and positions, which are not a natural consequence of the work duties or of notions of typical characteristics of women and men. Male-dominated organisational structures limit women's opportunities for development. The fact that women primarily hold the most subordinate and powerless positions affects their behaviour. Explanations of the behaviour of women and men on an individual level, based on notions of general and observable gender differences, are criticised in the study. Unequal gender distributions, power differences and different opportunities for development in hierarchical organisations are factors that explain the different behaviour of women and men in organisations – not gender differences. The importance of the composition of groups, and what it means for an individual's performance to belong to a minority or a majority, is analysed. Women as managers in male-dominated organisations find themselves in a token position, that is a clear minority, which gives rise to three structural effects: visibility, assimilation and polarization.

Visibility means that women in a token position often act as symbols for women generally, while at the same time also trying to fit in with the culture as smoothly as possible. In such situations, women often try to adapt to the culture by down-playing meanings of gender. It is not unusual for women in a minority position to adopt a gender-neutral strategy in contexts where aspects relating to women and femininity

are devalued. Women in a token position are often acknowledged by the majority of men as the exception to the rule, i.e. as different to and better than other women. However, if something goes wrong, the token woman may instead be viewed as representative of her gender, which entails a devaluation of women and femininity. For the individual woman, this situation is often paradoxical, as she must adapt to being viewed both as an exception to, and representative of, other women. Visibility also entails high demands on performance. Women must achieve acknowledgement of their competence in order to prove that they truly belong in the organisation, and that they can live up to the demands of their position. At the same time, women who perform too well and to too great an extent are often viewed in a negative light, as this challenges the solidarity of the majority, i.e. men.

Polarization means that an already male-dominated culture may become even more pronounced when a minority of women enter the culture. The men unconsciously perceive that the culture is threatened and therefore defend it in various ways. One way of describing this is that the deviants activate the culture – in other words, it is only when women enter the culture that men discover that they have a culture to defend. One way of defending the culture is by testing the loyalty of the deviant, i.e. the woman, in the culture. The woman is expected to tolerate derogatory jokes about women in general, to not work with gender equality issues, to not demand changes, to not ally herself with other women, and to not perform too highly or be "too good" at her job. Her behaviour is interpreted as being more or less loyal in relation to the culture. The testing of the woman often takes place in social situations and may be perceived as more pressing and demanding than the actual work situation.

The third effect, assimilation, means that women in a minority position often adapt to stereotypes of how women should be and act. The majority's perceptions of women, e.g. that they are sensitive or that they cannot work well with others, affects and limits women's scope for action. This adaptation to the stereotypes entails, in turn, that they are strengthened and appear to be "true". The token position was found to be both demanding and stressful for women as managers, against a background of contradictions and dilemmas. The woman in such a position was often treated as both a representative of, and an exception to, other women; a visible member of the organisation who, at the same time, was excluded from important informal contexts. Women also tend to end up in managerial positions with little scope for action and only small opportunities for development, as these types of positions are deemed to be suitable for women. Interpretations of women's behaviour involve a mixture of that which is typical for persons in a token position and for those who hold positions lacking in scope for action or influence, as well as that which is viewed as typical female behaviour.

Change processes

Equality, gender equality and diversity represent something that is deemed to be desirable in democratic societies. The issue of the equal worth of all human beings has existed and been discussed for hundreds of years, and in the western world, various women's movements or feminist movements have driven the gender equality agenda since the 19th century. The term feminism was introduced in France at the end of the 19th century as a medical term, but was also used as a derogatory reference to women who argued for gender equality. The term was later adopted by the women's movement who demanded that equality between the genders be recognised by law. Today, feminism is a widely accepted and widely used term relating to a large number of movements, ideologies and theories, and as there are many different areas of focus and orientation, it has become increasingly common to talk about feminisms in plural form. Nevertheless, these movements, ideologies and theories have in common that they highlight and question differences in conditions between the genders, with the aim of achieving an equal distribution of power.

In organisational change processes aimed at achieving increased gender equality and equality in general, the first step often consists in a thorough mapping and analysis of the problem. Two common questions at this stage of the process are: what is it that is unequal in the context concerned, and how does this inequality arise? The answer to the first question can be obtained through mapping and other forms of studies of differences in conditions. The answer to the second question requires analysis involving a more in-depth knowledge and understanding. Here, gender research provides descriptions and analyses of how gender inequality is reproduced at individual, organisational and society level.

An important outcome of the activities undertaken by movements that have fought for gender equality is that, in many countries today there is legislation that prohibits discrimination on account of gender. In Sweden, the first legislation regarding gender equality in working life was introduced in 1978, and in 1994 the Swedish Act Against Ethnic Discrimination came into effect. Since 2009, Sweden has had a coherent Discrimination Act (SFS 2008:567), with the purpose to combat discrimination and in other ways promote equal rights and opportunities, irrespective of any of the seven grounds of discrimination that are covered by the act: gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age.

The Swedish Discrimination Act entails, inter alia, that employers are prohibited from discriminating against employees, job applicants, trainees, agency staff or consultants; that education providers are prohibited from discriminating against pupils or students; and that organisations representing employers or employees, or trade organisations, are prohibited from practising discrimination in relation to issues concerning membership or the benefits that such an organisation provides to its

members. In Sweden it is the Equality Ombudsman (DO) who exercises supervision to ensure compliance with the Discrimination Act. Discrimination is defined as:

- *Direct discrimination.* That someone is disadvantaged or treated less favourably on account of one of the grounds of discrimination.
- *Indirect discrimination.* That someone is disadvantaged by the application of a provision or rule, a criterion or a procedure, which appears neutral but is not so in practice.
- *Harassment.* Conduct that violates someone's dignity.
- *Sexual harassment.* Conduct of a sexual nature that violates someone's dignity.

The Swedish Discrimination Act also requires employers and education providers to implement active measures aimed at preventing discrimination. The active measures for employers focus on working conditions, wages/salaries, recruitment, education/training and development of skills and knowledge, as well as the possibility to combine employment with parenthood. The active measures for education providers focus on admission and recruitment, forms of teaching and the organisation of the programme/courses, exams and assessments and the study environment, as well as the possibility to combine studies with parenthood. According to the Swedish act, these change measures should follow a particular work method that includes the following steps:

1. Examine whether there are risks of discrimination or reprisals, or whether there are other obstacles to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for the individuals in the business/activity
2. Analyse the causes of the risks and obstacles that have been identified
3. Undertake the preventive and supportive measures that may reasonably be required
4. Follow up and evaluate the work performed according to steps 1–3

Change processes may be given various names and descriptions in organisations. Sometimes measures aimed at achieving gender equality and diversity are separated, and sometimes the issue of gender equality is included under the heading of diversity. In recent years, many organisations have added the term inclusion; for example, many companies use the term *Diversity & Inclusion* to indicate that the aim of the change measures is to increase the representation of different groups among employees, and to change the organisational culture so that every member of the organisation feels welcome, appreciated and respected.

Research regarding change processes aimed at promoting equality, gender equality and diversity shows that the work and measures undertaken often activate resistance. These measures aim at changing norms and redistributing resources and access to influence and responsibility. This may be perceived as difficult and sometimes even threatening, and such processes often spark strong feelings. Resistance may be

expressed in many different ways, but a common element is that resistance slows down change processes.

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