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When Agnes has your back. On separatist methods in gender equality work

Anna Wahl and Charlotte Holgersson

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to develop our theoretical understanding of the transformative potential of separatist methods in gender equality work by studying a women-only programme at a male-dominated higher education institution in Sweden. The analysis explores in what way a separatist method, which has an interactive design and content with a power perspective, can support change leadership. Extant research has criticized women-only programmes for excluding men from gender equality work, and for placing the responsibility for gender inequalities and change efforts on women. This critique is based on analyses of women-only programmes that are intended to support women in their careers on an individual level. Findings show that the studied method supports the participants in their change leadership. They highlight that the common understanding, sense of belonging and agency that emerged within the programme were all a source of both emotional and intellectual empowerment, here labelled “collective empowerment”. Frustration emanating from increased awareness is also handled through “collective empowerment”. The study concludes that the critique against women-only programmes is not relevant for initiatives that conceive gender equality work as organisational change.

Keywords
Separatist method, women-only programmes, organisational change, collective empowerment, potential for change, gender equality work

Women-only change initiatives often face criticism based on the notion that men are excluded from gender equality work or that women are burdened with the blame for inequality and a particular responsibility for increased gender equality. Through the concept of *collective empowerment*, this article examines the change potential of separatist methods in gender equality work in male-dominated organisations.

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There is a lot of research that shows difficulties in pursuing gender equality work with lasting results (Wahl et al. 2018). Despite the launching of many projects involving the development of new methods and tools, several studies show how change work is progressing slowly. This has been explained partly by the fact that gender equality work entails complexity in relation to work for change, and partly by the fact that there is resistance to change for greater gender equality. The resistance often arises from the fact that the conducted problem analysis is perceived as challenging (Callerstig and Lindholm 2011; Amundsdotter et al. 2015). Lack of knowledge about inequality can also lead to perpetuating the superficiality of implemented changes (Benschop and Verloo 2006).

A common method in gender equality work is carrying out initiatives targeting women. These, however, often face criticism based on the arguments that men are excluded from gender equality work and that women are burdened with the blame for inequality and responsibility for increased gender equality. In research, criticism has been about initiatives focusing on women based on the underlying assumption that women, and not organisations, are seen as the problem (Ely and Meyerson 2000). However, there are organisational change programmes targeting only women, as well as research, which explores the conditions under which such separatist methods have the potential to contribute to change (see, for example, Pini et al. 2004; Peterson 2019).

The purpose of this article is to develop theoretical understanding of the change potential of separatist methods in gender equality work by analyzing interviews with participants in a programme called *Agnes*, an only-women programme with an interactive approach and content with power perspective. The term “separatist method” is used here synonymously
with descriptions of methods such as “women-only programmes”, “change initiatives with women” or “initiatives targeting women”. However, it is important to point out that the current programme is about a separatist method for change, and not about separatism as an objective or ideology.

Initially, research on separatist methods in gender equality work is introduced, followed by a section that briefly presents the programme Agnes and a section describing how the empirical material has been compiled and analysed. After that, there are three sections presenting the results of the analysis. Finally, the results are discussed in relation to the method's potential for change in gender equality work.

**Research on separatist methods in gender equality work**

Gender research has shown that gender inequality is created and recreated through our everyday interactions in organisations and is therefore something that we are all co-creators of, regardless of gender (Wahl 1992/2003). Our way of thinking and talking about gender in organisations, in practice as well as in research, further recreates the idea of man as the norm. As a result, men, especially in positions of seniority, prevail and are promoted as self-evident representatives of organisations. This seemingly neutral position means that, paradoxically, men are simultaneously made invisible as belonging to a gender category (Collinson and Hearn 1994). Women, on the other hand, become visible as just women, as gender. Compared to the norm, women are constructed as either equal to or different from men. Whether perceived as equal or different, they appear to be deficient, defined either as complementary or as different but subordinate (Wahl 1992, 1996, 2014a; Broadbridge and Simpson 2011).

The underlying assumption that women are deficient in relation to a male norm has influenced the design of gender equality work aimed at increasing the share of women in male-dominated workplaces or positions. A common method, especially for increasing the share of women in management positions, has been programmes targeting women with a gender-neutral approach (Wahl 1994; Höök and Wahl 2003). Their content is based on perceptions of leadership as gender-neutral and that women need to adapt to the male norm in order to become good leaders, which is also called “fix the women” approach (Ely and Meyerson 2000). The gender-neutral approach rests on the assumption that women are
deficient, as they need more knowledge and support to better fit into the organisation and make a career.

Another approach that characterises women's leadership programmes is called “value the feminine” (Ely and Meyerson 2000) or positive strategy (Wahl 1992). It is based on an analysis that what women do and stand for needs to be made visible and valued, for example, tasks perceived as female or associated with women such as care and listening. These approaches have also been criticised because there is an imminent risk of cementing stereotypes of women as different, rendering visible differences in conditions within the group “women”, and shifting the focus away from the organisation (Höök 2001). Ely and Meyerson (2000) argue that instead of addressing symptoms and consequences, change efforts need to focus on the underlying organisational causes of inequality by critically reviewing and revising the existing work culture.

Although programmes with gender-neutral approach can be rewarding on an individual level, they do not draw attention to organisational structures and cultures that hinder women (Höök 2001; Ely et al. 2011). The focus falls on women, not on organisations, and becomes stigmatising (van den Brink and Stobbe 2014). It is not uncommon for women not to want to participate in single-sex leadership programmes because they consider that this sends out a message partly that women are different or deficient, partly that the responsibility for creating more equal organisations lies with the women (Linghag 2014). Resistance to targeted initiatives can also be seen as an indication that, through them, women benefit in their careers, what van den Brink and Stobbe (2014) call the “support paradox”, that is, since it is not visible that men already receive support and help in their careers through mentors and networks, gender equality initiatives aimed only at women appear to be unfair. Women may even feel guilt that gender equality work is pursued, unless the management clearly takes a position that gender inequality is an organisational problem that needs to be addressed (Wahl and Linghag 2013).

However, there is research that indicates that depending on the design and approach, targeted initiatives may have transformative potential (Wahl 1994; Höök 2001; de Vries 2010; Wahl 2014b; Benschop et al. 2015). With a power perspective on inequality, the perspective of women as complementary or different management resources is shifted to women as a power resource in change management (Wahl 1996; Holgersson et al. 2014). The power perspective
shows that women are not the problem nor are they responsible for carrying out change. It makes it possible for the participating women to formulate how inequality is expressed in their organisation and to generate proposals for change. For example, in an analysis of a leadership development program for women with elements of the feminist awareness-raising method, Höök (2001) shows that women gained understanding that challenged prevailing perceptions of good leadership and successful career. This contributed to women perceiving themselves as “owners” of the organisation (Cockburn 1991) and legitimate interpreters of what good leadership stands for.

Another example is Peterson's (2019) analysis of a leadership development programme for women in the Swedish higher education sector. Peterson underlines that the programme had a “fix the women” approach with a focus on women's individual skills, but that women also gained knowledge of leadership from a gender perspective and of building networks. The participants particularly highlighted the importance of the network for support and learning, which may be similar to a community of practice rather than a career network. This can be compared to action-oriented gender equality work where interactive methods and co-creation of knowledge give rise to a combination of learning, exploration and initiatives for change (Amundsdotter 2009).

There is thus a shift in the focus of targeted initiatives from a previous focus on developing women to a focus on developing organisations. According to an interview survey with agents of change working with gender equality and diversity in Sweden, the purpose of having targeted initiatives with women has changed significantly over a 20-year period from 1994 to 2014. The agents of change agreed that the purpose of women-oriented programmes has changed over the years, primarily to strengthen the creation of strategies for work for change and the development of projects in organisations for increased gender equality (Wahl 2014b). Similarly, Bonebright, Cottledge and Lonnquist (2012) argue that leadership programmes for women should both confirm women's leadership and lead to systemic change. De Vries (2010) describes in a similar manner how leadership programmes for women with a so-called bifocal approach that combines a focus on women as leaders and a focus on organisational change can develop women as agents of change.
Framework for methods in gender equality work

Based on her own and other researchers' analyses of gender equality work, since the early 1990s, Wahl et al. have developed a theoretical framework of dimensions that affect the potential of change methods to challenge inequality in organisations (Wahl 1994; Holgersson and Höök 19976; Wahl 2014b; Wahl et al. 2018). Change methods may differ depending on how the dimensions vary and how they are combined (see Table 1). The main dimensions of the framework are: 1) participants, 2) content and 3) format. The first dimension, participants, describes how groups are set up by, for example, mixing majority and minority groups, or separating them. There may be other types of participant categories, for example if the programme is external or internal or if the participants represent the same or different industries. The content dimension describes the type of knowledge being conveyed and whether there is a clear approach to power, or not. The third dimension, format, concerns the approach and scope of the programme in terms of time. The approach can be individual (where the focus is on own development), interpersonal (with a focus on joint creation of knowledge) or interactive (where joint creation of knowledge is combined with process-oriented organisational change work).

Table 1: Change methods dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distribution by gender or other social categories</td>
<td>Knowledge content with or without power perspective</td>
<td>Approach and time scope</td>
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The theoretical framework has two different areas of application, partly as a tool in the design of programmes, and partly as a framework for analysing the change potential of methods. One example of the latter is the implementation of the framework in the analysis of training, networking and mentoring methods (Benschop et al. 2015). Using the framework, the analysis concludes that many programmes lack both a power perspective, and interpersonal and interactive approaches, which limits the potential for change, whether in the form of education, networks or mentoring programmes. With a power perspective, the interaction between structure and individual is made visible, thereby contributing to an organisational potential for change.
**Agnes – a separatist programme at a male-dominated higher education institution**

*Agnes* is a programme with a separatist method aimed exclusively at women. It has an interactive approach and content with power perspective. The purpose of *Agnes* is to strengthen women's influence in gender mainstreaming at a university (see Swedish Agency for Gender Equality 2019). The university is male-dominated, and disciplines are predominantly male gendered. The majority of efforts in the work with gender mainstreaming are aimed at existing groups, in particular, management and professional groups, such as associate lecturers, lecturers and professors, most of whom are men. Overall, there are, therefore, groups with different gender composition within the framework of gender mainstreaming at the university, which is part of a conscious strategy in the process of change. *Agnes* as a women-only group is therefore an important part of a whole where other gender compositions exist, many of them male dominated groups.

The selection of participants in *Agnes* is based on the idea of empowering women in leading positions in both faculty and administration to become agents of change for gender equality. The project management included three senior researchers in the area of gender, organisation and change, who also had the task of leading gender mainstreaming at the university. Two of the project leaders are the authors of this article. A nomination group consisting of the dean, a human resources manager and a senior female professor with long experience in gender equality work at the university, identified women who belonged to the formulated category. The identified women then had to apply to the programme themselves by describing and motivating their commitment in order to contribute to gender equality at the university. Based on the applications, the project management subsequently selected 20 women. The selection was anchored in the organization. Finally, 18 women participated in *Agnes*, and all 18 completed the entire programme.

*Agnes* started in August 2017 with a three-day workshop in a conference setting. After that, workshops of three separate full days was held in the autumn of 2017 and workshops of four separate full days took place in the spring of 2018. *Agnes* ended with a two-day workshop in a conference setting in August 2018. The programme is based on the following parts: 1) knowledge transfer based on theory of gender, organisation and change; 2) exercises, reflection and discussion; 3) the formulation of change initiatives at the university. The approach in *Agnes* is based on research about process-driven, interactive and reflective methods (Andersen 2003). Knowledge is alternated with reflection, tasks and exercises.
The process-oriented nature of the programme has meant continuous update of the structure in relation to the process in the group. During the programme, the project leaders participated in a learning and knowledge process together with the group. The change focus in Agnes aimed to ensure that the participants, in collaboration with the project management, created knowledge relevant to their own work for change at the university.

**Methodology**

The purpose of this article is to develop theoretical understanding of the change potential of separatist methods in gender equality work through analysis of interviews with all participants in a separatist method programme, which is aimed exclusively at women and has an interactive approach as well as content with power perspective. The purpose is thus neither to describe the programme's structure, nor the process or effects in the organisation.

The empirical material is based on group interviews with all 18 participants in Agnes, divided into smaller groups on four occasions, about a year after the end of the programme. One of the project managers led the interviews, notes were taken by another project manager and by another assistant. Prior to the interview, a 10-minute recap of the Agnes set-up was provided. Two open questions were then asked: *What are the most important events and insights you bring with you from Agnes?* and *How do you see yourself as a leader of change after Agnes?* After each question was asked, a few minutes of reflection followed before the round of answers began. Everyone was given time to respond and give their view without being interrupted. The speaking time was distributed fairly by the project managers so that everyone could speak on equal terms. Finally, there was a round where the respondents reflected on the interview. Each group interview, with 4–5 respondents, took about two hours.

In a first analysis of the interview responses, a number of themes emerged: a) common understanding, b) insights and lessons learned, c) belonging, d) being leaders of change, e) difficulties in change management and f) strategies to deal with difficulties. In a second step, these themes were analysed based on previous research on methods in gender equality work. The results of both stages of the analysis are presented below, where *collective empowerment* has been developed as a unifying concept. The quote selection is taken from all group interviews.
interviews and aims to illustrate statements representative of the material. The participants have read the text in its entirety and have approved the anonymisation.

One risk of group interviews is that the answers may be standardised as a result of the group dynamics. In the interviews, however, the participants not only sought to confirm each other's insights and experiences but were also keen to highlight and explore different perspectives. This approach was encouraged and continuously discussed throughout the programme aiming at creating a culture in which different experiences, opinions and feelings could be raised.

Furthermore, during the group interviews, it may have been difficult for the participants to criticise the programme, as the interviewers were also project leaders. However, the participants were open with different forms of experiences and reflections in the interviews, positive and negative alike. This can be seen in the analysis, which highlights the participants' perspectives on the opportunities and limitations of the programme. The joint problem analysis carried out in Agnes contributed to an openness to share both positive and negative experiences even in the interview situation.

**Common understanding and sense of belonging**

One recurring theme in the interviews is the common understanding of gender inequality at the university that was created within the group based on shared knowledge and joint analysis. This is particularly evident in women's memories of important events in Agnes. The event highlighted most often is the first three days kick-off workshop during which most of the time was devoted to exercises inspired by narrative method (White 2000) and memory work (Haug 2008; Jansson et al. 2008). Participants shared their own stories of their time at the university and experiences of inequality, and jointly analyse these based on theories about gender and organisation. Sharing stories and life events in the plenary and actively listening to each other were seen by many as basis for the common understanding that had been established early on. Analysing the stories together based on a new theoretical framework provided a system perspective. Several point out that this has laid the foundation for the confidence and closeness in the group that became crucial for the entire upcoming process:

The first three day workshop made a big impression, why we were there and that everyone had the same experience. We learned to separate person from
system. Agnes opened my eyes. It became easier to see when there is system failure, resistance and power play.

The first thing I think about is the first meeting during the kick-off workshop. It made one realise how bad it is. Strong bonds and loyalty were created in the first days.

The second important insight, was connected to the last two-day workshop, which gave rise to reflections around what can be interpreted as a shared understanding. At the workshop the group made a presentation, for parts of the management at the university, in which they conveyed a message about how the university can work for change. The presentation consisted of story reading and analyses alternated with reflection exercises, including reflective teams (Andersen 2003). However, several of Agnes's participants felt that they did not get the response they had expected from guests, and that these guests had not understood the message. Several interviews describe how the atmosphere changed and how there was a feeling of disappointment in the group. Later, several participants found it informative for future gender equality work to realise how difficult it is to convey all insights about inequality that have been jointly developed for a year in just a few hours.

The women also described other insights and lessons learned in the programme. Several chose to describe them as eye-opening or as a new ability to spot events and phenomena. The image that became visible was often described as worse than expected or as more complex and multidimensional. Even inequality in the form of what does not happen was made visible. The fact that women from the faculty and administration shared experiences also contributed to broader insight into gender inequality at the university. For example, several women working in administration expressed that they had gained new insight into the situation of female researchers. At the same time, it was mainly the similar experiences in the two categories that reinforced insights of gender inequality as structural. The methods used for a common analysis with the help of theory were emphasised as crucial for understanding gender inequality as a phenomenon:

Listening to others and hearing them speak gave me the insight that things are truly bad in some departments. It made a tremendous impression. I do not see it the same way within administration. The conversations we had,
and the scenarios that were shared about how one was treated because of gender, have been taken due note of. With Agnes, it became clear.

Other insights that were highlighted were about understanding change processes from a broader perspective, for example that not all problems need to be addressed simultaneously or at once. It is possible to refrain from acting in certain situations and to work with change in small steps. Another recurring insight in many interviews was about the difficulties of pursuing gender equality work in contexts where the level of knowledge is uneven. This insight showed, according to many, how important it is for senior executives and managers to understand the problem of gender inequality in order to be able to convince and lead others in the organisation. Some women described their insights as related to the method in Agnes. They underlined the importance of having enough time to share experiences, to listen to each other and to reflect, which was interpreted as the reason behind the impact of the programme:

The most important insight is that there is a tremendous amount of power in having such a programme to rally around such a complex issue. To learn about gender in order to make the university a better place, as well as the fact that it is women who gather together, it all gives us tremendous power. There are many experiences that need to be shared and heard. We were given the time to think and listen. The programme captured partly telling stories, partly giving space to talk. Everyone had the chance to speak, and all stories got coverage. The round we made initially was very important every time.

Greater insight gave an important confirmation in everyone’s everyday life. The intellectual affirmation of sharing experiences of gender inequality with others provided emotional liberation from devaluing oneself:

I felt incredible relief when I came into the room, to actually be in a group where people understood what I was talking about. I received affirmation by the fact that what I had experienced was not connected to me personally but was structural. This was an extremely huge weight that was being lifted off of my shoulders.
The interviews also described concrete lessons, for example in terms of having acquired a certain type of theoretical knowledge, a new language or a new skill in managing change processes. In-depth exercises in which experiences and stories gathered within Agnes were analysed together were highlighted as invaluable for increased understanding of how different phenomena are linked together:

Agnes allowed me to understand better, see nuances and perceive when it happens. Knowledge and voice, courage not to be alone anymore. I carry that with me when I do something else.

Having gained knowledge of managing processes from a gender perspective was also perceived as a new valuable skill. Literature, reports and presentations received in the programme have been useful in own initiatives and as an aid to contact others at the university. Being able to act to a greater extent than before, in situations that were perceived as diminishing or discriminatory, was also described as one of the acquired skills: “All the theoretical knowledge we have gained has been invaluable. It is only now that I can understand how it is all connected, and then it has become easier to act.”

Another recurring theme in the participants' descriptions of what they have acquired from Agnes is the sense of belonging. Agnes was described by many with the room metaphor, and that it is possible to enter the room regardless of physical location. To feel support in everyday life “when Agnes has your back” only through the knowledge that the group exists, was expressed by most of the interviewed women. The expression “when Agnes has your back” emerged in connection with a lecture and exercise on change management. The reflections during the exercise concerned, among other things, different meanings that Agnes has had for the participants, for example that it was an open and pleasurable place, that it brought with it feelings of duty and responsibility and that it offered a safe space and a free zone. The participants supported the expression “when Agnes has your back”, which one of them used, and which they believed illustrated how Agnes influenced them in their everyday lives with power and energy for their own actions in other contexts.

The expression illustrates how Agnes can be present even when a participant is alone in a challenging situation. And when opportunity is offered to meet, all or just a few of the participants, it is like stepping back into the room within seconds. The sense of belonging in
the room Agnes was described based on the shared experiences and time spent together in joint reflection:

The network is important, I know that someone has my back, others who understand. The insight that this is a system error and that Agnes has my back makes it easier to belong to my university. There is room for me.

Agnes has my back and I have received the tools to act differently, make a difference and leave my comfort zone. I dare to do more, I have been given room to manoeuvre.

Several respondents also described what happens when Agnes participants meet by chance in other contexts at the university. Then there is often a spontaneous feeling that can be seen in the room, for example in bodily expressions like hugs and laughter. Agnes becomes visible in the organization, and can arouse both curiosity and surprise:

Agnes was empowerment. This became clear when we met in different kinds of context at the university, especially in meetings with both men and women. The men come in and have the power, and then we come in and hug each other. The men get a little confused. When someone in the room is Agnes, then you have strength.

The fact that women get together and follow each other over time has created a special sense of belonging in the group, which has led to reflections on the method:

The method was important, the flexibility in listening. The insight that we meet and are burdened by so much resistance, that was constantly coming back. It is also important that it was such a long programme, which made it possible to follow others’ experiences and development over time. A feeling was created in the group that we had not realized, confessed or talked about before. When we noticed that we had opened up and started telling our stories, something which we had probably never done before. Sharing
moments when someone else discovers something and gains insight into something becomes a way to move forward.

The common understanding, which stems from knowledge and analysis, as well as the connection based on sharing stories and insights, creates both intellectual and emotional authority in the process of change.

**Power of action and ability to act**

The program aimed to develop the participants as leaders of change, and in the interviews, they gave many examples of activities and initiatives they have undertaken since the programme. When asked how *Agnes* has contributed to the participants’ acting as leaders of change, some women immediately answered that they see themselves as leaders of change, while others wanted to reason their way to what type of leaders of change they were. Even the women who initially expressed doubts, often changed their opinion when they were given room to explain their answers. They felt that in specific situations they had acted as leaders of change for gender equality. The perception of the extent to which one's own position has offered opportunities to continuously work for change differs among the interviewed women. However, all women were able to give examples of situations where they acted as change leaders through, for example, initiatives or support for others' work with change, both women and men. To most of the women, it was important to describe how they acted as leaders of change in everyday life, in small and everyday decisions and situations.

About half of the participants felt *Agnes* had influenced them to take on new assignments or positions at the university in order to be able to lead change for increased gender equality to a greater extent. Several of them felt that they had a great deal of room for gender equality work. The method in *Agnes* had become useful in different ways in one's own work and “eyes and ears were involved” to a greater extent in daily life, which strengthened their ability to respond and act. The knowledge was described as basis for the change work and as an authority in daily conversations. To operate where you are in the organisation and to be ready to act regardless of the situation was described by many as characteristic of change leadership.
The women gave many examples of concrete situations in which they have acted for change. One example of a situation, in which change management was exercised, was in recruitment, for example by monitoring the examination of applications or by finding suitable experts. Creating targeted activities on gender equality, integrating gender into leadership training, creating new training courses for staff and students, starting a book circle and proposing women for different assignments are other examples. Some new local surveys of gender inequality at the university have been initiated in order to obtain better basis for future gender equality initiatives. There are also several descriptions of partnerships between a number of Agnes women, for example initiatives where some have joined forces to promote change or in meetings where they have been able to jointly raise a problem. Some women have worked to incorporate a gender perspective into business plans and other policy documents. In addition, examples were given of how they have been leaders of change at other universities, at research councils or in connection with conferences. In a couple of cases, Agnes has also influenced one's own research through an increased element of gender perspective.

For both women in the faculty and in administration, it is a matter of acting from the platform that exists in one's own position. Participation in Agnes has created a visibility in the organisation for many, which often means that expectations have been created that they will contribute to the change in the organisation. Some women describe how they have been consulted in gender equality issues, for example, by male professors. One woman describes how her presence affects her environment since she no longer gets to hear “stupid comments” and she is no longer interrupted.

Finally, there are some descriptions of new strategies in gender equality work, which the women regard as part of the leadership of change. This concerns, for example, a more critical approach to when equality is done superficially, without being taken seriously. Another example of strategy is descriptions of initiatives by Agnes participants that have not on purpose been categorised as “gender equality initiatives”, although gender has been an important part of them. This strategy has been chosen to avoid resistance. The fact that the strategy is needed suggests that it is far from self-evident to work for greater equality in all environments at the university.

Another strategy was to create alliances and collaborations with women outside Agnes by being able to better read off agreement on gender equality issues. A woman shared a story
about herself, giving feedback to a man when he made an offensive comment to a woman in
the room. She had pointed out to him what she had observed and how his comment could be
interpreted as a violation. After the incident, the other women in the room, who were not
participants in Agnes, had given her a piece of jewellery with a clear symbolic meaning as a
sign of gratitude.

The participants' descriptions convey a perceived ability to act. They provide examples of
how they have been able to act as leaders of change in different contexts, together with other
Agnes participants, in alliance with other colleagues and on their own. The descriptions of
Agnes as a room and the expression “when Agnes has your back” resemble analyses of
empowerment experiences that are clearly linked to the common understanding and sense of
belonging within the group. This collective empowerment has contributed to a sense of
belonging within the organisation and to the ability to act in the ongoing organisational work
as a leader of change. This separatist method, combined with a power perspective and
interactive approach, results in a feeling of being able to act for change based on collective
intellectual and emotional support, a collective empowerment.

Perceived frustration
The women also reflected on difficulties in work for change. Working with organisational
change for increased gender equality was considered challenging, frustrating and tiring.
Furthermore, many were doubtful whether change management was the right term to describe
something that was sometimes perceived as “stagnant or impenetrable”. Many expressed the
view that the message of integrating gender equality into the organisation was far from
ubiquitous. Some research environments and management levels were described as relatively
unaffected by the ongoing gender mainstreaming efforts. Someone questioned whether minor
changes in everyday life, a perspective that had often been discussed as a possible path in
Agnes, was sufficient. She found it difficult to see how major advances could be made.

However, there seemed to be no contradiction between seeing oneself as a leader of change
and, at the same time, expressing frustration in connection with gender equality work. The
action and frustration experiences live side by side and go hand in hand. Seeing lack of
insight or resistance can also lead to greater understanding of why change is difficult to
achieve and how methods can be improved. When analysing the causes behind feelings of
frustration, the connection between one's own increased knowledge and awareness on the one hand and experiences of how inequality is reflected and normalised in the organisation on the other hand, have been highlighted. The most common effects of one’s own increased awareness that were described were partly better understanding of the existence of inequality and the need for change, partly increased awareness of shortcomings in problem insight and action in the organisation and, finally, greater awareness of the different forms of resistance to change in the organisation. One type of frustration that was described was therefore about a heightened sensitivity towards inequality coupled with increased desire for change and thus also increased frustration when change took time or failed to occur: “To realise that it is worse than what I thought is not exactly positive, it is hard. I am aware of that now.”

Another type of frustration was founded in the lesson of the importance of lack of insight in others. That the matter is not taken seriously or that it is difficult to get a message out if the recipients do not understand the problem: “It is frustrating when no one understands that the level of knowledge is too low. Examples of how women are discriminated against are given, and no one understands. Knowledge brings both power and frustration.”

Several women were frustrated by the fact that the matter was trivialised, and that a structural perspective was often missing. As a result, it was easy for them to consider themselves responsible that nothing was happening, despite their understanding of the structural causes. This created feelings of dissatisfaction and the situation was overwhelming.

A third type of frustration that was described concerned increased sensitivity to resistance to change, for example, paying lip service even though nothing is done in action. This type of resistance was more often described as common among men. Reflections on resistance among women were about a denial of the importance of gender equality or ridicule of the change work. Resistance was described as cultural when there was no shared understanding that gender equality is important in a specific context:

Not easy when people say it is important, but still nothing happens. They refuse to do anything.

How women make fun of gender equality and make it a non-issue. They are part of re-creating being diminished in order to fit in. It is truly hard to see.
Several reflections were therefore about the new strategies against frustration and fatigue, which were created within Agnes. One of them was that increased knowledge would allow more women to understand better than before how gender equality work had to be made more accessible. That a culture of inequality can be perceived as frustrating, but at the same time it can provide greater motivation to promote change. Several women reflected on the negative effects of their increased awareness, but at the same time noted that they would not want to go back in time:

It is painful to realise that the culture is one of inequality. But, it is also a lever to do something.

It is tough to see non-events, but I don't want to go back to being blind.

As described above, many related to the phrase “when Agnes has your back” in order to deal with frustration. This was confirmed when participants reflected on the interview, most women described how they easily could step into the context and immediately feel mutual understanding and gain new power. The interview was described as having offered an opportunity to reflect together from a certain distance in time how Agnes can live on with new power for change and for dealing with frustration. All women stated that they, to some extent, missed the time when the programme was on, and therefore asked for more continuity in reunions to replenish knowledge and gain inspiration for their change work. There was a difference in how much the programme was missed between those who had found arenas for change work based on their position, and those who did not think their position provided such opportunity. Those who acted based on their position had usually found partners among other Agnes-women but also other women or men in the organisation. The women who said that they had been “left out” were a clear minority, but their comments highlighted the importance of closeness to the group in order to have the strength to contribute to change:

It is not so relevant for me now and I do not remember what I have to say. A problematic situation occurred when someone made a sexist joke and I laughed along although I should not have accepted it. It was not funny. I could not take it but I do not walk on eggshells like I used to.
The lack of power to act experienced by women who did not have as much contact with the other Agnes participants, and that the participants missed Agnes as stated in the interviews, underline the importance of empowerment being rooted in the collective. This is what we need more of. Collective empowerment is important in order to deal with the frustration arising from increased knowledge and awareness.

**Change potential in gender equality work**

It appears that the participants in Agnes, after completing the programme, feel that they can act as leaders of change in gender equality work. The women went back to the common understanding, sense of belonging and power of action that arose within the programme framework as a source of both emotional and intellectual empowerment, here referred to as *collective empowerment*. It is also visible in the fact that the participants have missed Agnes and in the frustration expressed by the women who did not have as much contact with the network outside the reunions. Previous research on networks of under-represented groups suggests that a sense of isolation from the organisation could be intensified (Pini, Brown and Ryan 2004). Contrary to that, the results of this study show that women experience an increased sense of belonging to the organization as a result of collective empowerment. This is understandable given that the declared mission of the programme was to create leaders of change, and that the initiative had strong management support. Under different conditions, for example, if the programme had not had a declared mission to challenge inequality in the organization, or without the management's clear support, the programme could perhaps have contributed to creating or reinforcing a sense of isolation and hopelessness. This result confirms the importance of legitimacy in the organisation in order to contribute to the potential for change in gender equality work.

Previous research shows that women tend to highlight the network as the primary benefit of a leadership program aimed exclusively at women (Höök 2001; Ely et al. 2011; Bonebright et al. 2012; Peterson 2019). This is also something that the participants in Agnes bring out, but here the focus is on support and learning as leaders of change and not in one's own career. In addition, it creates a sense of belonging to the organisation that has not been there before. Connections can be made to the feeling of “ownership of the organisation”, from which women in male-dominated organisations often feel excluded (Cockburn 1991; Höök 2001). The context created by Agnes can therefore be compared to previous research on practice
communities (cf. Callerstig 2014; Peterson 2019). It is a group which has a common interest and which, by continuously sharing experience and information, can learn from each other and support each other in their practice, thereby contributing to the development of organisations (Wegner 1998). This method, with selected dimensions based on the initially described theoretical framework, has strongly contributed to the results, for example, that the participants applied for participation and that the programme included exchange of experience, knowledge acquisition and reflection on joint learning. One issue raised in the study is how this community of practice can be kept alive and developed further. Missing the programme and asking for greater continuity in replenishment of knowledge and inspiration in the process of change point to a lack of previous research on gender equality work. Better preparedness for a follow-up structure will perhaps strengthen the potential for change in programmes like Agnes.

The study shows that “when Agnes has your back” the majority of participants feel that they contribute to the change work in the organization, not least through how they are involved in others' work by making them visible as Agnes participants. This can be compared to Agnes making ripples on the water in the organisation, for example, through descriptions of being asked to contribute with expertise in the area of gender equality, to initiate new change initiatives or to be offered new assignments that involve opportunities to act as leaders of change. There are many examples of how new gender equality collaborations with both men and other women in the organisation have been created. The effect of the ripples on the water experience shows that the participants are not burdened with bearing all the responsibility for promoting change but can share this responsibility with others in the organisation. This phenomenon can be interpreted as ongoing and extensive gender equality work in the organisation, which strengthens the potential for change in a program like Agnes. The results are interesting in relation to previous research where criticism of programmes aimed at women has been demonstrated, where men have been regarded as excluded from gender equality work (Linghag 2014; van den Brink and Stobbe 2014) and women have been considered stigmatised as deficient or burdened with gender-specific responsibility for increased gender equality (van den Brink and Stobbe 2014). In light of this study, these risks seem to decrease in relation to the way the separatist method is designed in combination with other dimensions, i.e., in terms of format and content (Wahl 1994).
The purpose of this article has been to develop theoretical understanding of the change potential of separatist methods in gender equality work. One of the article's contributions is to clarify the difference between separatism as a method in change work, and separatism as purpose or ideology. Another contribution is to clarify the difference between separatist methods with a gender-neutral approach at individual level and separatist methods for gender equality work in the organisation. By examining a programme aimed exclusively at women, which has an interactive approach and content with a power perspective, the article shows that this combination of dimensions has contributed to collective empowerment among participants, made up of mutual understanding, sense of belonging and ability to act. Frustration that arises in connection with increased awareness, as demonstrated in several ways in the study, can also be managed through collective empowerment. The change potential of the method is thus increased in several ways through the creation of collective empowerment because it also acts on a mental level as a place of belonging, which is available regardless of the physical presence of other participants.

The analysis also shows the importance of organisational prerequisites in gender equality work. In this case, legitimacy by the management has played a role in the ability to act as a leader of change, and more ongoing gender equality work in the organisation has contributed to a demand for knowledge and initiatives among the participants. The theoretical framework therefore needs to be developed with the dimension “organisational prerequisites” in change work, which invites to more studies of these organisational prerequisites and to take these into account when implementing separatist methods.

References


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separatist method, women-only programmes, organisational change, collective empowerment, potential for change, gender equality work

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