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Still Blaming the Women? Gender Equality Work in Academic Organizations

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the article is to explore, through comparative analysis, how different objectives within the universities influence the process when implementing programmes with a gender-theoretical orientation for women researchers and leaders. In the Nora programme, with an individual objective, gender theory is repeatedly rejected by the participants, as the structural perspective in the theories collides with the participants’ idea of themselves and their organization. In Svea, with a structural objective, gender theory instead becomes a useful tool for the participants. The objective also has a significant effect on the participantsability to cope with resistance from the academic environment. In both programmes, participants experienced resistance that triggered frustration. In Svea, the frustration that arose could be repaired by connecting to gender theory, whereas in Nora the participants could not interpret the resistance from a power perspective and were trapped in frustration. When objectives focus on the individual, the problem of inequality is interpreted at the individual level, i.e., that the problem is women, and that women are still to blame. With objectives focusing on the structure, inequality is interpreted as stemming from a gendered organization which opens up for organizational change.

**Background and Aim**

Despite studies showing that academic culture is characterized by masculine ideals, often disguised as being gender neutral (e.g. Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Ekman Rising & Vänje, 2013; Ø. Holter & Snickare, 2022), improving gender equality (GE) in academia has often been interpreted as merely a question of increasing the proportion of women, especially in senior positions (Bergman & Rustad, 2013; EU, 2021; Husu, 2015). The cause of the poor representation of women has, in these initiatives, been defined as lack of required competence or visibility, and the solution being that women improve their skills and adapt to the prevailing requirements (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Meade et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2017; Van den Brink, 2011; Wahl, 2013). Powell (2018) find that two of the three most common GE initiatives within academic organizations are projects targeting women, aimed at improving their competitive edge, such as mentoring schemes and affirmative action in recruitment. Both types of initiatives are based on the notion that academia is completely meritocratic and academic careers are gender neutral. The main problem, identified in gender studies, is...
not connected with the fact that the projects are targeting women, but with the absence of a power perspective (Benschop et al., 2015; Meade et al., 2023). Initiatives that lack a power perspective, whether they be women-only or mixed-gender groups, and both competence-enhancing or awareness-raising, are easy to implement as a matter of individual development without challenging the organization’s structure, culture or power dimensions (Acker, 1990; Ainsworth et al., 2010; Drange et al., 2023; Nelson & Zippel, 2021; Wahl et al., 2018). Initiatives that apply a critical perspective on how structures and the prevailing culture in academia favours men and discriminates against women have become more common, especially in the Nordic countries (Drange et al., 2023), but they are still in minority compared to projects that prioritize increasing the proportion of women (De Vries & Van Den Brink, 2016; Honkanen, 2008; Jordansson & Peterson, 2022; Meade et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2018; Wahl & Holgersson, 2021). In this article, we look at the consequences in practice of these two competing ideas, by comparing two initiatives to promote GE in academia, where Nora in Norway represents the norm of increasing the number of women, and Svea in Sweden, represents challenging the organizational structure and culture. In both countries, GE policies have contributed to increased GE in several sectors of society. Governments and research councils have, for example, issued assignments to the university sector to increase GE in academia (Gender mainstreaming in higher education in Sweden and BALANSE in Norway). The two initiatives we are analysing are results of these assignments. They were both defined as programmes for women in senior positions, researchers and leaders, based on a framework of gender studies in the field of organization and organizational change, and are similar in design. They share the same overall goal: to contribute to increased GE in academia, but the objectives for each university are formulated and operationalized differently.

In Nora, the objective is set at the individual level: to increase the number of women in senior positions and research management. Nora represents the most common approach of GE work as giving women the opportunity to improve their skills and adapt to the prevailing organizational conditions. The other programme, Svea, has an objective at organizational level: to train women to become leaders of change in the university’s GE work. Svea represents the idea of work aimed at challenging a male-coded academic culture. The formulation of goals is representative not only of the specific programmes but of GE work in general at the two universities respectively. In the university where Nora was initiated, the aim of GE work focused on improving the gender balance in senior research positions. The university where Svea was initiated had a documented standpoint from the university president and top management that GE work aims at changing the organizational structure and academic culture. The programmes were thus in line with the strategies for GE work in both universities.

Scientific studies of GE initiatives in academia often focus on the overarching level of the projects and rarely analyse their implementation. Instead, this is described in project reports (Powell, 2018). A review of literature on gender and academic careers in the Nordic countries Silander et al. (2021) shows that the main areas of research interest are publication patterns, gendered career trajectories and studies on the influence of new public management on GE. The only study focusing on project implementation in the review describes the resistance towards the project. Studies of the implementation of GE work outside the Nordic countries similarly concentrate on the overall level of the project; the effects of the projects compared to the goal (Stepan-Norris & Kerrissey, 2016), the reception of participatory design in GE work (Iivari et al., 2023), practices that micro-change agents find most useful (Dahmen-Adkins & Peterson, 2021), interpretations of the individual focus in GE projects (Meade et al., 2023), or how awareness-raising initiatives can prevent real change (Nelson & Zippel, 2021). Researchers have not monitored or analysed how the participants in various concrete initiatives for change act and experience the initiative. The aim of this article is therefore to explore, through comparative analysis, how different objectives within the universities influence the process in programmes with a gender-theoretical orientation for women researchers and leaders. To limit and guide our comparative analysis of the two programmes with an individual (Nora) and a structural (Svea) objective respectively, we have focused on two research questions:
• How is gender theory received and applied by the participants in the two programmes where the objective of increasing GE is defined at the individual and organizational levels, respectively?
• How do the different objectives affect the participants when coping with resistance from the academic environment?

The article is structured as follows: We begin with a short description of the background and design of the two programmes. Next, we describe the article’s theoretical frame and how the empirical material is gathered and analysed. The main focus is on describing the processes in the programmes, concentrating on the two research questions. Finally, we analyse and discuss our results.

Nora and Svea—Short Descriptions of the Programmes

Nora was part of a larger GE project implemented at a STEM faculty at a Norwegian university. The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council’s programme BALANSE, with the objective of improving gender balance in Norwegian academia. The heads of the faculty’s nine departments were asked to nominate women associate professors and full professors, whom they believed had the capacity to obtain major research grants and lead large research teams, something the university defined as being a top researcher. The nominees were interviewed by the project manager to ascertain whether they wanted to participate, and if so, what they hoped to gain from the programme. Nora was planned as various measures to enhance the participants’ skills. Interviews with the 18 nominees revealed that none of them felt that they needed this form of upskilling, but everyone wanted a qualified network with other women researchers. Nora began with a two-day workshop to set up the network and to design a two-year development programme based on the group’s needs. The individual perspective in Nora was reinforced by the description of the programme as a management development programme for women top researchers. There was a shared notion in the organization of what a top researcher meant, a definition based on the discourse of excellence in academia.

The Svea programme was initiated by the management at a Swedish university of technology, where the initiative was a key part of the government assignment to gender mainstream the organization. The strategy was to train a group of women in leading positions to become leaders of change aiming at increasing women’s influence in the ongoing GE work. The criteria for participation in the programme were formulated in line with the objectives by requesting that participants wanted to contribute to GE at the university. A nominating committee proposed women associate professors, full professors and administrative managers. A number of women were invited to apply, with a description of their motives. A selection was approved by the organization, and 18 women participated in the programme, which began with a three-day workshop in August 2017. This was followed by three full-day workshops in autumn 2017 and four full-day workshops in spring 2018. The programme concluded with a two-day workshop in August 2018. With strong management support, information about Svea was communicated at the university as a programme at strategic level to develop leaders of change in the organizational work towards a gender equal, diverse and inclusive university.

The two programmes had several similarities: Most importantly, they were both the result of policies to improve GE within academia and had the support of management. The programmes both took place between 2016 and 2018 at STEM faculties that were male-dominated both numerically and culturally. Also, all participants had volunteered for the programmes, and agreed to participate in a single-gender initiative with other women. They had expressed a willingness, albeit in different ways, to contribute to improved GE in their own organization. The two programmes also had several methodological similarities. The knowledge base consisted largely of gender and organization studies, and the approach was process-oriented and interactive (Cecchin, 1987; Jordansson & Peterson, 2022). The primary difference between the two
programmes lay in their objectives, which were representative of the respective general standpoints and strategies for GE work at the two universities. The Svea process relied on the president and senior management giving their full support to a structural perspective on gender inequality. The project managers had the mandate to design the programme in a way that could challenge the dominant academic culture. Nora, which had strong support from senior management, was funded by a research programme with the aim to increase the proportion of women in senior positions and research management focusing on individual measures. The objective for Nora was in line with the aim of the funders.

Theoretical Frame of Reference and Methodology

This section begins with a presentation of the theoretical frame of reference used in the comparative analysis. We then go on to describe the methods used for this purpose.

The analysis is based on theories on organization and gender, with a special focus on change and resistance and a scientific understanding of people creating and constructing their reality in dialogue (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1994). Phenomena can be understood in the contexts where they exist; thus, one prerequisite for achieving change is to raise awareness of people’s subjective perception of the world. Gender researchers describe, interpret and problematize the implications of gender in organizations (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Wahl et al., 2018). Everyday experiences are impacted by our frame of references. To think, we need concepts, and these are founded on context. Notions about gender are culturally created and constructed. A power perspective where gender inequality is defined as being manifested in the organization’s structure is central to organizational research with a gender approach (e.g. Acker, 1990; H. Holter, 1986; Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984). It also implies an understanding that changing the behaviour of individuals in an organization requires the organization itself to change. From a feminist point of view, therefore, GE work involves challenging gender inequality on several levels simultaneously (Acker, 2006; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Benschop et al., 2015; De Vries & Van Den Brink, 2016; Snickare et al., 2022; Wahl et al., 2018).

Since GE work aims at changing the organization’s structure and culture, thereby influencing power relationships of individuals and groups, it often encounters resistance (e.g. Ahmed, 2012; Cockburn, 1991; Jordansson & Peterson, 2022; Lindholm, 2012; Powell et al., 2018; Wahl & Holgersson, 2013; Wahl et al., 2008). This can be active or passive (Pincus, 2002), adapt to the process of change (Amundsdotter et al., 2015; Benschop & Verloo, 2006, 2011; Kirton & Greene, 2016) and be enhanced in certain groups within the organization while receding in other groups (Powell et al., 2018). Common forms of resistance are highlighting GE work as important, but shelving it in favour of more urgent tasks (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013), or launching a project without understanding where and how gender inequality arises in the organization (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010).

Theories on organizational processes of change are reflected in the data of both programmes, which were based on process-oriented, interactive and reflective methods (Andersen, 2003). The descriptions of personal experiences of gender inequality are based on exercises inspired by narrative techniques (White & Taket, 2000). Giving words to critical events in life by building a story can provide a degree of detachment from the problems that enable reflection. Sharing stories also offers an opening for seeing new interpretations (Lantz & Portnoff, 2016), which is reflected in the data. In feminist method development, techniques for sharing experiences through storytelling are a key element. By sharing individual experiences, women can discover common patterns and thus become more aware of how social structures and gender order affect their lives.

The authors of this article were project managers for one programme each, together with one additional project manager for Nora and two for Svea. In both programmes, the action research perspective meant that the researchers engaged in a learning and knowledge process with the participants (Coleman & Rippin, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) where the participants’
experiences, observations and thoughts were explored through the theoretical perspectives from gender studies provided by the project managers (Andersson, 2009; Haug, 2008; Ø. G. Holter, 2008; Maguire, 2006). The programmes were not planned or carried out jointly. The comparative analysis in this article was performed after the programmes were completed in line with the action research perspective, and followed a thematic qualitative analysis (e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The first step of the analysis was that the project managers separately reviewed the material they had gathered from their respective programmes, and wrote a chronological and cohesive account of the programme’s structure and contents from start to finish. The description of Svea was based on the project management’s own material, e.g. agendas for structure and PowerPoint presentations from the sessions, texts submitted by participants and material collected from group projects, such as flipcharts or photos of whiteboard notes from the classrooms. The material also included the project managers’ and one assistant’s field notes from events and processes in the programme. Similarly, the description of Nora was based on qualitative material from the workshops. The project managers took notes by hand and ended each workshop day by processing their individual notes and combining them into a joint field diary. Flip charts and other material produced by the participants jointly, along with the project managers’ preparatory material in the form of schedules and presentations, were also collected and documented in the field diary. The summary of Nora was also based on the interviews with participants before the programme started, one individual interview mid-programme, and one group interview at the final workshop.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of data</th>
<th>Svea</th>
<th>Nora</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workshop agendas, PowerPoint presentations, group exercises etc.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project managements fieldnotes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flipcharts, photos of whiteboard notes and other material produced by the participants jointly</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texts submitted by participants</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A second step followed, where the authors identified similarities and differences in the processes of the two programmes (e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1994) by means of a common analysis. By combining and dividing themes, several patterns in line with the theoretical framework could be discerned. In the third step of the analysis, the discovered differences were discussed and examined in relation to the aim of the comparison. Two themes were chosen as research questions because they stood out as specifically relevant in relation to how the difference in objectives influences the process in the programmes. The two chosen themes that influences the process are: 1) how gender theory was received and applied by participants, and 2) how participants dealt with resistance from the academic environment.

The fourth step consisted of identifying and comparing the elements in the two cases that referred to 1) how participants received and applied gender theory and 2) how they dealt with situations where they encountered resistance. Other parts of the cases were not studied in the analysis in this article.

Ethical guidelines for data collection were followed by acquiring the informed consent of all participants. The Norwegian study was ethically approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (NSD) number 54541. For the Swedish study, ethical approval was not required at the time. The participants in Svea have nevertheless consented to the use of texts submitted by them, material collected from group projects and field notes from events and processes in the programme. We have carefully ensured that participants cannot be identified from the extracts quoted in this paper.
Gender Theory Perceived as Limitation or Relief (RQ 1)

Starting with the first research question focusing on how gender theory was received and applied by the participants, some accounts from the Svea and Nora programmes will follow, starting with the former.

The participants and project managers of Svea first met at a conference centre outside Stockholm for a three-day workshop. The atmosphere was expectant and nervous but soon became engaged and relaxed. After an introduction on contents and purpose of the programme and confidentiality among participants, an exercise ensued where the group agreed on a common approach. Being self-critical and courageous, helping one another to move on and showing trust, respect and loyalty were key aspects of this agreement. A team spirit was established from the start, as a basis for the subsequent process. The rest of the day was devoted to a major exercise that was not completed until late that evening. The participants individually wrote about three critical life events prior to Svea, to provide some background on why they wanted to promote GE in their organization. When the participants were done, they presented their stories individually. Many of the stories contained experiences of discrimination, harassment and other painful situations. All participants listened intently to each other’s stories. Everyone was noticeably affected and moved by this exercise. On day two, one project manager lectured on the research field Gender and organization (e.g. Cockburn, 1991; Jeanes et al., 2012; Wahl et al., 2018). The participants formed groups to reflect on the lecture and relate it to their own stories from the day before. Specific concepts were listed to help interpret yesterday’s stories: gendered structure (Wahl, 1992/2003), minority situation (Kanter, 1977), and homosociality (Holgersson, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Participants were instructed to find examples of whether, and how, these concepts were illustrated by the stories. After several hours, the groups shared their results. The project managers gave feedback and expanded on the participants’ theoretical interpretations (Haug, 2008). Next, the participants returned to their groups to take the analysis further by classifying the concepts theoretically. Discrimination was classified as action/non-action (Husu, 2020) minority situation as expressions of either visibility, assimilation or contrast (Kanter, 1977). Based on the overall picture of the gender structure (Wahl, 1992/2003) in their organization, the importance of culture in reproducing this structure (Acker, 1994) was discussed. A plenary session followed, where the image of gender inequality in their organization transpired from the discussions in small groups. The groups collaborated on listing their observations according to the theoretical concepts. The plenary went on to analyse the stories in multiple stages for the rest of the evening. The participants were enthusiastic about the stories and how they could analyse and interpret them with concepts and theories from gender research. A team spirit had been created by the collective process of interpreting their stories, and the participants felt an even greater commitment to working with Svea. Throughout the programme, several similar exercises were constructed, alternating between lectures and reflection. Learning was integrated, and the collective analysis from the introductory workshop formed a background that the group could refer to and develop when needed. Svea proceeded for a year, and in addition to continuous learning, several projects for change were set up, based on the problem analysis in the organization’s plan for integrating GE. The participants converted the initiatives into concrete action plans, guided by the project managers, who helped to channel the participants’ new knowledge into actual measures for change at the university.

Nora was presented as a programme for women top researchers, with a focus on “learning about and exploring your own faculty with regard to gender and equality”. Moreover, the programme was described as an opportunity to share experiences and research-based knowledge on the significance of gender in academia. The first workshop in Nora started off with the project managers and participants introducing themselves, before agreeing on a few rules to establish an open and trusting climate in the group. The project managers described the programme as part of a project to improve gender balance in senior research positions. They explained that the participants interviewed prior to the programme all agreed that they did not
wish to take part in a training programme, but to participate in sharing experiences in a qualified network for women researchers. Therefore, the purpose of the first workshop was to start building a network, and to plan the rest of the programme, according to the group’s needs. After a reflection exercise in smaller groups, the afternoon session began with a lecture given by one of the project managers on the subject of Gender and organization (e.g. Cockburn, 1991; Jeanes et al., 2012; Wahl et al., 2018). The lecture started with a description of the gender imbalance in academia and then proceeded with how this can be understood according to various, mostly Scandinavian, gender studies (e.g. Drew, 2013; Henningsen & Liestøl, 2013; Husu, 2015; Nielsen, 2016; Vabø et al., 2012; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). The presentation immediately met strong resistance in the group. The studies cited were questioned. Due to this resistance, the lecture ran late. Instead of an exercise where the participants could reflect on their academic careers using the theories that had been presented, the workshop leaders called it a day. Day two began with reflection on the previous day. The participants continued to express resistance against the gender research that had been presented. They explained that they did not recognize themselves or their reality in the studies. The discussion prompted the project managers to change the agenda for the day, and instead of using gender theory in an exercise, participants were divided into small groups for collegial supervision. The day ended with the participants presenting their ideas on how the programme should proceed. Everyone stressed that they wanted to keep on meeting in the network, but they wanted to choose the workshop themes themselves.

After the introductory workshop in Nora, a programme was developed with a total of seven workshops over a two-year period. These consisted of short lectures on themes chosen by the participants, accompanied by dialogue tools (e.g. Haug, 2008; Lindén & Bjerring, 2011), for a qualified sharing of experiences. At the penultimate workshop on the theme of academic leadership, the theoretical input was presented as gender theory. This time, the group’s response was totally different from the first workshop. They wanted to know more and claimed that the gender theory models and concepts, e.g. minority situation (Kanter, 1977), homosociality (Holgersson, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 1976) and gender coding (Silius, 1989; Westberg-Wohlgemuth, 1996) were tools they could apply to understand events in their everyday working life.

The final and concluding workshop for Nora was devoted to discussing the programme. The participants repeatedly stressed how important it was to share experiences with other women researchers in similar situations. However, where the project managers saw this as a means of visualizing the organization’s gendered structures, the participants focused on learning from each other as individuals. When the project managers mentioned the previous strong resistance to gender theory, several participants responded that they had initially felt that the theories were limiting when thinking about their everyday reality. The fact that Nora was part of a project aimed at improving the gender balance for top research positions had an impact on the participants’ reaction. They interpreted their participation as an indication of being considered to have the potential for this kind of position, and that they had agreed to pursue such a career. The lecture on gender and organization prompted them to focus exclusively on the obstacles for women. The theories and models did not offer useful tools but locked them in a subordinate and discriminated position (e.g. Ethelberg, 1985; Wahl, 1992/2003). One participant explained that her resistance to theories, models and concepts at the first workshop was due to the strains she experienced in her current work situation. Using gender studies to analyse the obstacles as part of a gendered structure rather than as her personal problem did not offer any relief but made the problem feel even harder to overcome. Others agreed. They needed and wanted to discuss their actual everyday reality, how they could solve problems and handle various situations. Only after satisfying that need they were open and ready to learn more about academia from a gender perspective.

A comparison of the reactions to gender theory in Svea and Nora shows how different expectations, stemming from how the objectives of the programmes were defined, affected how receptive participants were to gender perspectives. The Svea group experienced
a continuous input and use of theory which the group could rapidly assimilate. When analysing why this happened in Svea, two aspects of the programme design and approach stand out. The first is that the structural perspective was already integrated with the objectives of the programme, affecting the participants’ expectations on what kind of content they would be exposed to. The second aspect is that the participants shared their experiences early on and used them in a step-by-step collective analysis. Gender studies were continuously and pragmatically examined from the start, and applied to the group’s own experiences and thoughts and verified from a critical perspective throughout the programme.

The Nora participants’ expectations on how they could contribute to GE was that they could help change the gender balance in leading research positions as individuals. In their eyes, the first encounter with gender theory transformed them from senior researchers with the potential to become top researchers into a group of subordinated and discriminated women with few academic career opportunities. This did not coincide with their own self-image. Instead, they described themselves as highly-qualified individuals in a very competitive but meritocratic organization, an organization where anyone can succeed if they are competent and work hard. The new attitude to gender research later on in the programme can be seen as an effect of changes in how the participants experienced their situation. By sharing their personal stories, they could discern patterns and structures. Experiences previously regarded as isolated occurrences or individual victories or failures were now seen as stemming from organizational structures. The new perspective made it possible and relevant to apply theories on gender and organization. Theory helped the participants to deepen their understanding of academia in general and everyday events in their own lives in the organization.

The theoretical approach in Svea contributed further to empowerment, as it provided the participants with a framework for interpreting their experiences of discrimination, harassment, being made invisible or demeaned. The joint structural analysis of gender inequality gave the individual participants a sense of relief and affirmed them. They no longer blamed themselves for being exposed to discrimination, and gained more incentive and energy to contribute to organizational change. This collective empowerment was transformed into engaging in initiatives for change in their own institute, as a method for turning knowledge and insights into action. Applying theory as a platform for action in practice helped participants to avoid experiencing their awareness and knowledge as a burden. These results in Svea concur with previous studies where women’s coping strategies are analysed (Ethelberg, 1985; Lindgren, 1985; Wahl, 1992/2003). In Nora, rather than experiencing gender theory as limiting, as they had in the first workshop, introducing it at a later stage increased the participants’ scope of action. By providing a forum where participants could discuss actual everyday reality, gendered structures were made visible, and gender theory became a useful tool for addressing that reality. Both programmes reached a stage where gender theory was experienced as a relief. In Svea, this relief was empowering and gave incentives to work for organizational change, whereas in Nora, the relief contributed to finding coping strategies in their individual academic careers. In conclusion, the objectives were revealed in the form of relief that gender theory could offer. The exercises where participants reflected on their own and others’ experiences generated a collective image of the academic organization that, in both cases, opened up for gender theory, contributing to a deeper understanding of gender order in academic organizations. What was initially experienced as a limitation in Nora transformed into knowledge that offered relief from self-blame. Moreover, in Svea, this sense of relief empowered the participants to work for change. According to the analysis, exercises sharing experiences from academic cultures and gendered academic conditions, is crucial in the programmes and can preferably be introduced before gender theory is presented. The collective analysis of the academic
environment is central in order to proceed from the individual career strategies to organizational change.

**Where is Gender Theory When You Need It? Reactions of Anger and Disappointment (R Q 2)**

Our comparative analysis now moves on to the second research question, focusing on how different objectives affect how participants cope with resistance from the academic environment.

Nora was presented by one of its project managers at the concluding conference for the overarching GE project of which the programme was a part. The presentation included two quotes: one by a male researcher who had been a guest speaker at Nora, and one by a female participant. The quote from the male researcher described how he had been helped and supported by other male researchers throughout his career, for instance by reduced teaching obligations while he was writing research applications, or by being offered a “consolation beer” when his applications were rejected. He tries to do the same for young researchers in his team. The quote from the female participant described how she stays in her office, not even going to get coffee, after receiving a rejection letter on her application, since she does not want to meet her colleagues, whom she imagines are talking about how bad her application was. The project manager used these quotes to illustrate the difference in working conditions for male and female researchers. Research takes place in a context where the opportunities are subject to the willingness of other researchers to discuss ideas, publish and quote articles, invite to projects, conferences and networks, grant funding and time for research (Husu, 2020). The male researcher’s quote indicates how natural it is for him to receive support in the form of adapting the workload to his research requirements, and how, when things are tough and his applications are rejected, his colleagues console and encourage him. The female researcher instead describes how she lacks support and blames herself for failing. She interprets the rejection of her application for funding as proof of her shortcomings as a researcher. The project manager ended the presentation with a summary of the results of the programme, adding that it had contributed to making the participants more resilient, better at dealing with setbacks and change in a more positive way. Sharing experiences has helped them identify structures rather than focusing on individual problems and failures, and this has been empowering.

After listening to the presentation at the conference, some of the Nora participants approached the project manager to say that they felt the quote by the female researcher painted them in a bad light. They interpreted the project manager’s presentation as an account of how they were weak but had grown stronger thanks to the programme. They did not agree that the project manager was describing the gendered academic structures and the different conditions for male and female researchers respectively. The structures and patterns that were discernible to the participants at the final workshops, and which they had analysed using gender research, evaporated in contact with the organization outside the workshop room. Again, it had become essential to present a strong and competitive facade, with a gender-neutral perspective on individuals. When gender theory was not the common platform for analysis, the participants were unable to apply it, as though they had forgotten all about it. They were upset and disappointed by the project manager’s presentation.

In connection with the concluding workshop in Svea, members of senior management were invited to a seminar. A presentation at the seminar was prepared in detail, aimed to illustrate what participants had learnt about gender inequality and its theoretical interpretation. The participants individually read their own accounts of gender inequality to the audience; then, Svea participants in small groups took the stage to jointly analyse the situations. The audience listened attentively, without interrupting. The next part of the seminar focused on demonstrating interactive methods, with audience participation. One of the project managers interviewed a participant about her views on the challenges of gender inequality at the university. The interview was prepared in advance, and interviewee and participants have rehearsed the contents. The woman identified three types of
inequality problems called “making invisible”, “denial” and “ignorance”, selected because they represented the results of the group’s collective analysis of the organization. She described how women often blame themselves and thereby assume responsibility for gender inequalities, comparing this to putting on a suit of armour as a form of defence. She then described a situation she herself had experienced.

*What I saw in the room was senior business managers in dark suits and what I assumed were a few professors. They looked tired, or rather, uninterested. I was wearing a pale dress, since it was summer. I quickly regretted my choice of clothing, I should have worn my dark suit dress. The looks I got were bland, but above all, the comments at the end were banal. I’ve held presentations of my operations countless times, but this was different. I wasn’t wearing my armour, and I was embarrassed about feeling proud of what we had achieved. I left and thought, “Never again”.*

She told the seminar how she was later contacted by a woman professor, who apologized on behalf of herself and the entire meeting for not giving her any affirmation or praise. She also apologized for the thoughtless input from the audience, and added dryly that this would never have happened if she were a man. The exchange with the female professor was a painful reminder of everyday gender inequality, and that it matters that you are a woman:

*I wear my armour for battle. Always.*

This situation was familiar to the woman, illustrating a theoretical awareness of gender inequality and exemplifying several concepts. The discussion with the project manager was planned to make these aspects visible. The interview was followed by a structured exercise with reflections in groups, called reflective teams (Andersen, 2003). The project managers gave the invited audience an introduction to the exercise, and the Svea participants joined them. The groups took turns reflecting about what they had heard in the interview. When the guests took part in the discussions using their perspective on GE, while the Svea participants reflected with their shared knowledge—which was considerably more insightful and prepared—a division arose in the room. The Svea participants were frustrated by this, but the guests did not seem to notice it. Several women among the guests expressed that they were familiar with the phenomenon of women taking the blame when gender inequalities are pointed out, and how this serves to maintain a culture of inequality. Repeatedly, a few (predominantly male) members of the audience, located the cause of the problem to society at large, inferring that the woman’s story did not concern the university itself. These men also claimed that the situation was the same for men and women. Several Svea women brought the discussion back to the organizational culture, maintaining that women were more vulnerable in their choice of clothing and other physical aspects. The men persisted in claiming that the culture was the same for everyone. One Svea woman insisted that women were sexualized to a higher degree than men, with the result that “women are forced to have several defensive layers”. The divide between these two interpretations grew even more obvious as the exercise proceeded. Although they were not surprised by the divide, the project managers had not bargained for how strongly the Svea participants would be affected by it. After group reflections, the interviewed woman in her comment to the exercise stressed that the story should not be interpreted as her making herself a victim. This is clearly about the system, she emphasized.

When the guests had left, the Svea participants expressed their need to process the day’s events. The interviewed woman felt misunderstood, and that she was seen as lacking in awareness. All Svea participants were frustrated by not getting through to the guests, whom they found were unable to take in what was conveyed. The project managers took responsibility for what had happened and analysed the events together with the group. The purpose of the exercise had not been described clearly enough to the guests. The guests had received new knowledge without time to digest it, and several of the men obviously lacked awareness about gender inequality. Several women among the guests recognized some of the content in the presentations, but as individual experiences. They lacked a structural understanding of the underlying causes. The invitation to reflect in groups,
where the guests took part on the same terms as the Svea participants, had triggered the divide. With the integrated understanding of inequality as structural and power-related in Svea, the project managers could reactivate knowledge about gender to address the frustration and disappointment that arose. The group could collectively analyse the situation that had occurred by returning to gender theory, and the participants restored their confidence to work for change.

The clash that occurs when participants are confronted with the gender-unaware organizational culture was revealed in both programmes (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010). The reaction in Nora was anger and disappointment directed at the project manager and the programme, reactions that were difficult for the project manager to turn around. The resistance came from the Nora participants themselves, when the gender-neutral and individualist culture spoke through them. At the concluding conference, to which leaders and colleagues from their organization were invited, the participants in Nora lost touch with the structural analysis of gender inequality in academia that previously had offered relief to frustration. The predominately individualistic academic culture hit back, and the participants felt that the presentation portrayed them as weak. In Svea, the lack of gender awareness in the organization caused a divide in the interpretations at the concluding workshop. The participants were unprepared for what they perceived as resistance. Their frustration and disappointment were directed at the programme and themselves (Amundsdotter et al., 2015). In their eyes, they had failed in their leadership for change (e.g. Wahl & Holgersson, 2021). Together with the participants, however, the project managers were able to analyse the clash by reconnecting to gender theory and in-depth analysis, undo the frustration and restore confidence to work for change. A programme design, where the participants’ insights are presented to the senior management of their organization, can meet unexpected setbacks such as the one encountered. The results implicate that preparing for gendered reactions and resistance can facilitate the handling of frustration and anger (Amundsdotter et al., 2015; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Pincus, 2002). In the situation of experiencing resistance in Nora, an individual understanding of gender theory did not protect the participants from feeling accused as failures by the academic culture. Individual coping strategies were not enough to handle the cultural resistance the participants encountered. They became apprehensive about being seen as weak by the organization (Ethelberg, 1985; Lindgren, 1985; Wahl, 1992/2003).

Conclusions

How the objective of increasing GE in an organization is defined has a great impact on how gender theory is received and applied by participants in GE programmes. With an objective defined at the individual level, gender theory is rejected repeatedly, as the structural perspective collides with the participants’ image of themselves as future top researchers. Defining an objective at the organizational level prepares participants for understanding academia as gendered and unequal. Gender theory then becomes empowering and a useful tool in the work for change.

The objective also has a significant effect on the participants’ ability to cope with resistance within the academic environment. In both programmes, participants seemed to lose their foothold when encountering organizational resistance. However, with an objective defined at the organizational level, the frustration that arose could be repaired, and the participants restored their sense of empowerment, by reconnecting to gender theory. When the objective was defined at the individual level, participants were less able to interpret the resistance as an expression of a gendered organization. Their frustration continued and was directed at the programme and themselves.

The contribution of this paper is that the objective for GE work have an impact on the implementation of GE initiatives. Our comparative analysis focuses on the process, participants actions and reactions, in programmes with a gender-theoretical orientation. Several aspects in the process are affected by the objectives: learning, empowerment and the capacity to deal with resistance. Objectives reveal assumptions about the causes of gender inequality. When objectives
focus on the individual, the process repeatedly shows how the problem of inequality is interpreted at the individual level, i.e. that the problem is women, and that women are still to blame. The individual focus implies that women have to adapt to the prevailing conditions, and this does not challenge the gender inequality of the organization itself. With objectives focusing on structure, the participants interpret inequality as stemming from a gendered organization. It enables them to acquire new knowledge, become empowered and deal with resistance, which prepares them for challenging inequality in organizations.

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