"Unfair to women"? Equal representation policies in Swedish academia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight how women managers in Swedish higher education (HE) both support and resist policies about equal representation, and to discuss which factors influenced if, and how, these managers took on the role as change agents for gender equality.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 22 women in senior academic management positions (vice-chancellors, pro vice-chancellors, deans and pro deans) in ten Swedish HE institutions.
Findings – The paper highlights how these women situated themselves in an academic context where gender relations were changing. They supported equal representation policies in their everyday managerial practice and also by accepting management positions that they were nominated and elected to on the basis of such policies. However, they also resisted these policies when they experienced a need to "protect" women from being exploited "in the name of gender equality".
Research limitations/implications – The paper addresses the call for research on the role of women managers in promoting, or preventing, change towards more gender balanced organizations. The paper builds on a small qualitative study with women only interviews. The study is therefore to be considered as explorative.
Practical implications – The paper makes a contribution to the research literature in the area of gender and change in academic organizations. The findings highlight how policies have different consequences in different settings and that people use their own (different) experiences when interpreting the effects of these policies. The findings thus show the varying impacts equal representation policies can have on women.
Originality/value – The discussion in the paper is situated in a unique empirical context characterized by demographic feminization and organizational restructuring. Most international literature on women in HE and in HE management is based on US or UK contexts. Swedish HE therefore provides an interesting setting. The analysis also addresses the call for more research that takes into account the multifaceted character of HE and that discusses disciplinary differences.

Keywords Sweden, Change agents, Higher education, Equal representation policy, Women managers, Gender balance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The creation of knowledge about how quantitative gender imbalance can be challenged through transformative gender interventions is fundamental to studies on gender, work and organization (Benschop and Verloo, 2011). The persistent male domination of management levels has been well documented by feminist scholars (Acker, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005), and more research is needed to understand how notoriously

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rigid and gendered structures can be changed (Linstead *et al.*, 2005; Nentwich, 2006). Especially, more research is needed to understand the role of decision makers in, on the one hand, facilitating change towards more gender balanced organizations, or, on the other hand, obstructing such change (Husu, 2013).

The intent of this paper is to contribute to research on policies aimed at changing organizations by encouraging a gender balance in decision-making positions. Drawing on an interview study with 22 women managers in Swedish higher education (HE), the paper examines how these women interact with equal representation policies. The study's aims are twofold: first, to illustrate how equal representation policies change the gender imbalance in academia; second, to problematize these policies by exploring their implications for individual women. More specifically, the paper addresses the question of how equal representation policies influence women managers' change agency with regards to gender imbalance in decision-making positions within their own HE institutions.

The paper is structured in four sections. The next section gives a brief overview of the key concept of "change agency" and summarizes the context of equal representation policies in Swedish academia. The second section presents the considerations that guided the interview study and the analysis of the empirical data. The third section outlines the findings and the analysis. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and some proposals for future lines of research.

Background and previous research

Women managers as change agents for gender equality

There are a number of factors that influence the willingness and ability of women managers to support equal representation policies and thereby take on the role of a so-called change agent (Meyerson and Kolb, 2000). Awareness of gendering processes in organizations and a sensitivity to gender inequalities have been described as important prerequisites for individuals that act as change agents for gender equality (Husu, 2013). Previous research suggests that this kind of awareness develops through experiences of being marginalized, which implies that women are more motivated to initiate change than men (Parsons and Priola, 2013). Empirical research also shows that men, generally, are less likely than women to acknowledge the existence of gender discrimination and more likely to remain passive and even resist change (O'Connor, 2011; Ryan *et al.*, 2007; Swedish Committee on Men and Masculinity, 2014). Many women with the awareness and will to act as change agents, however, are in practice restricted by their marginalized position in organizations, which leaves them with a lack of power, influence and resources necessary to initiate change (Acker, 2000). Consequently, awareness is in itself insufficient to produce effective change agents for gender equality.

Change agency also requires the authority to disrupt and challenge those organizational routines and practices that reproduce gender imbalance and inequalities (Linstead *et al.*, 2005). Senior managers possess the authority to set strategic goals and implement them, and their commitment has proven to be important in facilitating change and engaging employees also to commit to change (McRoy and Gibbs, 2009; Whelan-Berry, 2013). However, the assumption that women managers want to act as change agents for gender equality has been contested (Cole, 2000; Duguid, 2011; Ellemers *et al.*, 2004; Priola and Brannan, 2009; Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2003). Women managers' reluctance to act as change agents can be explained with reference to the masculine paradigm that permeates management and which does little to sustain notions of solidarity between women (Mavin, 2008). Instead, women pursuing a management

career develop behaviours and actions congruent with maintaining the dominance of men and masculinity in order to "fit in" (Bryans and Mavin, 2003; Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000; Linstead *et al.*, 2005).

Consequently, a critical mass of women is usually understood as being a necessary precondition if a masculine management norm is to be challenged (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000; O'Connor and Göransson, 2014; Parsons and Priola, 2013). A lone woman has been described as helpless and as a captive of an overwhelming male majority (Bown, 1999). Nonetheless, previous research has suggested that "token" women can have symbolic importance as role models (Neale, 2011). Some researchers have also reported how women in decision-making bodies have contributed to reducing the impact of a glass ceiling (Cook and Glass, 2014). Moreover, other studies have highlighted how individual women managers in further and HE display managerial practices infused by gender awareness and change agency (Deem *et al.*, 2000; Mavin and Bryans, 2002).

Grounded in this previous research a qualitative investigation was undertaken to explore to what extent women managers in Swedish HE take on a role as change agents for gender equality. Swedish HE management constitutes an interesting setting in which to study women managers as change agents because of the increase of women in these positions during the last 20 years (Peterson, 2011, 2014).

Swedish HE as a case study

Most HE in Sweden is offered at 14 public universities (entitled to grant third-cycle courses and programmes) and 17 public university colleges (with restricted degree-awarding powers) (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2014). These higher education institutions (HEIs) are agencies in their own right, reporting directly to the Swedish government. The vice-chancellor is appointed by the government for a six-year period on the basis of a proposal from the university board, and leads the HEI together with one or more pro vice-chancellors that are appointed by the board to act as deputies, often with specific areas of responsibility (Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, Chapter 2). A dean is elected by the staff within a particular faculty to be the chair of the faculty board and the leader of the heads of departments within that faculty, and has considerable authority to make strategic decisions concerning education and research. While being a vice-chancellor is a full-time position, dean and pro dean are appointments that allow for research and teaching obligations outside of the management role (Peterson, 2011).

The government appoints university boards using equal representation policies which means that women and men are often equally represented in these boards (Göransson, 2011). As Swedish government agencies, the HEIs are also obliged to help achieve statutory gender equality objectives (Swedish Government Bill, 2005). The 2005 Swedish Higher Education Act, for example, requires that equality between women and men be taken into account and promoted in the operations of HEIs (Swedish Higher Education Act, 2005:1208, Chapter 1, Section 5). Women and men must, for example, be equally represented as referees in appointment committees for teachers and professors (Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, 2002/2010:1064, Chapter 4, Sections 5 and 6). In addition, both female and male candidates must be considered when recruiting vice-chancellors and the government can require the university board to re-open the recruitment process if this prerequisite is not satisfactorily fulfilled (Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, 2002/2010:558, Chapter 2, Section 8).

This has contributed to Swedish HE becoming "exceptional in having higher percentages of women at all levels in senior management" (Özkanli *et al.*, 2009, p. 245).

Sweden has the highest percentage of female university vice-chancellors in Europe. In 2010, 43 per cent of Swedish vice-chancellors were women, compared to an average of 10 per cent in the 27 EU countries (European Commission, 2012). The proportion of women in other senior management positions such as pro vice-chancellor (60 per cent), dean (31 per cent) and pro dean (45 per cent) is also high. This is a considerable increase compared to 1990, when only 14 per cent of vice-chancellors, 19 per cent of pro vice-chancellors and 3 per cent of deans were women (Peterson, 2011).

This advancement of women in senior management positions in universities has come in spite of a continuing under-representation of women in the most senior academic positions. In 2013, only 24 per cent of full professors were women (Statistics Sweden, 2014), meaning that Swedish HE has just barely above the average proportion of women professors in the 27 EU countries (European Commission, 2012). This numerical gender imbalance differs considerably between disciplines, however (Silander *et al.*, 2013). For example, Sweden has a slightly lower proportion of women in engineering and technology compared to other EU countries (Lindberg *et al.*, 2011).

In 2010, only 63 per cent of all vice-chancellors and pro vice-chancellors in Swedish academia were professors (Peterson, 2010). This is particularly striking given that, although qualifications equivalent to those of a senior lecturer are the mandatory minimum to be a vice-chancellor or pro vice-chancellor (Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, 2002/2010, p. 1064, Chapter 2, Section 11), full professorship has usually been considered a *de facto* prerequisite for senior academic managers (O'Connor and Göransson, 2014). Nonetheless, the qualifications for employment are the same for senior lecturers as they are for professors, and include research and teaching expertise, with the distinction between them being based on the degree of expertise (Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, 2002/2010, p. 1064, Chapter 4, Section 3).

Methods and materials

This paper draws on interviews with 22 women managers in Swedish HE: four vice-chancellors, six pro vice-chancellors, five deans and seven pro deans. Totally, 15 of the 22 women were professors; five were associate professors and two senior lecturers. Their ages ranged from 44 to 64 and they had between 20 and 30 years' experience of working as researchers, lecturers and managers in Swedish academia. They came from ten different HEIs, situated in different parts of Sweden. Some of these were large, old universities, while others were smaller, more recent university colleges. The interviewees came from different academic disciplines with different gender compositions – some male-dominated at most levels (technology, engineering, natural sciences and law), others exhibiting a gender balance at some levels, even if they remained male-dominated at the highest level (humanities, social sciences and medicine). In only one discipline were women predominant at all levels (educational sciences) (Lindberg *et al.*, 2011). Although ethical considerations necessitated the removal of information that might identify the participants, the subsequent analysis will explore these disciplinary differences as far as possible within these limits.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and were all conducted in Swedish, by the author, between February and April 2010. Some were conducted as telephone interviews in order to overcome large geographical distances. The different modes of interviewing did not seem to yield any significant differences, since all produced detailed accounts of the interviewees' experiences (Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). The interviews were semi-structured, encouraging the women to reflect on

their experiences and to share them in an open manner (Scheibelhofer, 2007). The methodology followed feminist principles about privileging women's voices while exploring individual differences in their lived experiences (Parr, 2015).

A thematic interview guide was used, focusing on gender and change in academia. The analysis in this paper draws mainly on the experiences the women shared as a response to questions about how Swedish academia had changed as a workplace for women during the past 20 years, and whether they actively engaged in activities to increase gender equality in their HEI.

In some senses, the interviews were akin to elite interviews, which tend to limit the researcher's ability to direct the interview (Harvey, 2011). However, they were also a form of peer interview since the researcher was a woman in Swedish academia, and this served to reduce the negative impact of elite interviewing (Bryman and Cassell, 2006). This facilitated gaining the interviewees' trust, which is invaluable in obtaining their own perceptions of events (Mikecz, 2012).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim following guidelines about naturalness and authenticity (cf. McLellan *et al.*, 2003). A conventional, qualitative, content analysis was used, focusing on the meaning produced in the interviews (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The analytical process started with the author reading the transcriptions carefully in order to identify salient issues and noting response patterns for each of the questions. A range of techniques such as coding, categorization and theme formation was used in order to discover similarities and differences in perceptions and experiences (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). As a final step, the author consulted previous research in order to provide frameworks for analysis. Equal representation policies and women's different understandings and experiences of them emerged as a prominent theme in the coding process.

The analysis focuses on three subthemes concerning equal representation policies; first, how the women ascribed these policies great influence in changing the gender imbalance at their HEI; second, how the women themselves attained managerial authority and power through these policies and how they accepted this authority and power with reference to their role as change agent, and; third, how some of these women used their change agency to contest these equal representation policies. The three subthemes are illustrated by selected quotes from the interviews, translated from Swedish to English by the author.

Findings and analysis

Policies that give women authority

When asked to reflect on changes concerning gender equality in HE during the last 20 years, most of the women's accounts involved references to equal representation policies. These accounts ascribed great importance to equal representation policies as the impetus for changing the previous gender imbalance in decision-making positions. According to one pro vice-chancellor, equal representation policies had changed the gender composition in academic management during the past 20 years: "If you look back 20 years there were no women in top positions at the universities. Today they search for women" (pro vice-chancellor 6). A woman at another large university explained how appointment procedures and recruitment processes were guided by these policies: "This is how we make decisions. If the vice-chancellor is a man we need a female pro vice-chancellor. We can't have two men" (pro vice-chancellor 5). A woman at a large university emphasized that these policies were well recognized: "It has become generally accepted that it should be a gender mix. It is well established. Well

established" (pro dean 5). A pro dean shared her experiences of the role gender played in the election of a new vice-chancellor at her HEI:

> I know they said: "We want a woman as our next vice-chancellor". They didn't want a woman at all costs because other qualifications were important too, but I know they wanted a woman as vice-chancellor (pro dean 6).

The women also understood the policies of decisive importance when they themselves were appointed or recruited to their current management positions. A pro dean depicted the reasoning that preceded her election: "He [the dean] is a man so they needed a woman" (pro dean 2). Answering the question about what had qualified her to become a pro dean one of the interviewees explained:

> I'm a "quota-bitch". I'm sure that I would never have become a pro dean if the vice-chancellor had not said: "You have a male dean so now you must have a female pro dean" (pro dean 4).

A woman who was the first woman dean at her faculty described the process when she was elected in a similar manner, emphasizing how being a woman was expressed as an important selection criteria when the candidates were evaluated: "It was explicitly pronounced that they wanted a woman this time. I know it was a criterion for the election committee. They thought it was about time" (dean 5). The equal representation policies were thus depicted as efficient tools to increase the number of women in management positions that would otherwise be preserved for men due to the "think manager-think male" paradigm: "Without such a policy there will always be a male applicant considered more qualified" (pro dean 4). The "think manager-think male" paradigm portrays men as self-evidently managers and presents an obstacle to women seeking to attain senior management positions (Ryan *et al.*, 2011). Overall, therefore, the women interviewed depicted it as probable that without equal representation policies a particular group of men would continue to be favoured in accordance with this paradigm.

Although most of the accounts were positive some concerns were also raised about equal representation policies. One such concern involved whether a gender balance would actually entail any change: "It's politically correct to support women but it's pointless if women don't offer any alternative [to men]" (pro vice-chancellor 4). Nevertheless, this argument did not necessarily lead to the rejection of equal representation policies but instead to an emphasis on the responsibility of women managers to take on the role as change agents, in order to "offer an alternative" way of doing things, i.e. a different and less "masculine" approach to managing. The next section illustrates this determination to contribute to change.

Policies that give women change agency

The women interviewed emphasized how they had accepted management positions while being aware of the special responsibility they had as women in academia to become change agents. Only one of the 22 women stated that she had previously been interested in a management career in academia. All the other women had: "never aspired to become a manager" (pro dean 2) and expressed that: "I never considered it before I was asked" (pro vice-chancellor 1). Notwithstanding this reluctance, the women felt that they had a responsibility to take on a managerial role and become change agents because they considered themselves as accountable to other women:

> I think it's embarrassing, as a woman, to say no. The fact that you're a woman makes it impossible to say no whether you want it or not because you must support women's struggle for equality. I'm not a feminist otherwise, but if you're asked you must do it (dean 2).

Their responsibilities included using their power, authority and resources to improve and promote women's position in academia in a direct, explicit and individualistic way:

> If you have a management position you have to take responsibility to promote other women. You have to introduce women to what you do, leave responsibilities to them, delegate to them and congratulate women who are successful (pro vice-chancellor 4).

The management role was also understood as intertwined with being a change agent for gender equality in a more indirect and symbolic manner, namely by way of becoming a role model for other women: "I do make a change by being a role model" (vice-chancellor 3). Several of the interviewees had been the first woman in these senior management positions. These pioneers had initiated a snowball effect, due to the establishment of a more women-friendly environment: "I've seen how important role models are. […]. One woman breaks the walls and others will follow" (dean 4). The woman who referred to herself as "quota bitch" explained why she considered it important to accept that role: "Someone needs to be the first [woman] and prove herself and if it has to be through a quota system so be it. I don't have any problems with that" (pro dean 4). Their mere presence as managers gave them a symbolic change agency that was attributed enough significance to challenge perceptions that men were normal in the management positions, i.e. the "think manager-think men" paradigm: "Today, it's just as natural to have a female vice-chancellor as a male one" (pro vice-chancellor 1). For a woman in a management position this meant that she attracted less attention and stood out less:

> Today, people think that it's obvious that women can be found in all positions – it's different from before. It really has changed. As a woman you no longer feel like you don't belong. Both women and men can fit in. It's nothing strange (pro vice-chancellor 2).

Although the pioneer woman was ascribed an exceptionally important symbolic change agency role, the significance of having a woman vice-chancellor being superseded by another woman was also emphasized: "When that happens it becomes more and more normal to be a woman in that position. Somehow then you no longer notice it so much" (vice-chancellor 1). For a woman to succeed, the pioneer woman also had an important symbolic change agency role as she established women as no longer just token women, or as exceptions in a management position.

Policies that are unfair to women

Some of the women used their authority to resist some aspects of the equal representation policies. This resistance was exhibited by the eight interviewed women managers from the natural sciences, engineering and technology fields; disciplines where the gender imbalance is particularly pronounced in Swedish academia, with few women professors (cf. Silander *et al.*, 2013). This lack of women professors has resulted in the equal representation policies having unintended consequences for women. Awareness of these unintended consequences led to the interviewees resisting equal representation in decision-making committees and in managerial positions in an attempt to support other women in their career efforts:

> There are about 20 per cent women lecturers and even fewer women professors, but still it's supposed to be fifty-fifty. The result is a backlash because women researchers don't have the time to get the scientific merits. Women are being allocated by a 50/50 quota everywhere but there are no women (dean 3).

The absolute requirement for women to be equally represented in administrative and managerial fora, when applied in an environment in which there are few women, serves

simply to increase the workload on women disproportionately: "There are not as many women as men so the workload is heavy for them and that is important to remember" (pro dean 1). Equal representation policies were therefore criticized as actually slowing down women's academic careers since, as their administrative workload increased, it hindered them from accumulating enough teaching and research expertise to qualify as a professor:

> If there are few women they become worn out. It's important that they make sure to become associate or full professor first because becoming too absorbed in these administrative and managerial duties might prevent them from reaching their career goals (dean 4).

Another woman expressed her concerns about the consequences of the "principle of 50% women and 50% men in all decision-making contexts" as it prevented women from having time to publish their research, meaning that they "came to a halt in their scientific career" (pro vice-chancellor 2). She explained: "Women are being exploited in the name of gender equality. I've been very concerned about that" (pro vice-chancellor 2). Some of the women expressed reluctance to support the policies because of their own experiences of being "overloaded by administrative assignments" (pro dean 6) due to a lack of women that could share the burden of work that was distributed according to equal representation policies:

> I don't know how I will have time to become a professor. It takes a lot of time and because there are so many administrative work tasks […] it's difficult to have time to do research (pro dean 3).

These women tried to contribute to a solution by disengaging from the role as change agent in this particular aspect. Several of the women explained how they had refused to take on the role as a change agent and opposed expectations on them to work towards equal representation. One of the deans quoted above explained: "If they tell me: 'It's supposed to be 50-50', then I'll tell them 'No, it's supposed to be 25/75' " (dean 3). Instead they adopted the role of women's protector:

> If they ask me to work towards increasing the representation of women I've told them that I won't pursue that at any costs because of the consequences for the individual woman. It is not fair to appoint women too early [in their career] just to fill a quota. They won't have time to qualify scientifically (vice-chancellor 2).

Women from other academic fields, such as humanities and social sciences, did not express this kind of resistance, which probably reflects the higher inclusion of women in the professoriate in these fields. In Sweden, only 10 per cent of the professors in engineering and technology, and 14 per cent of the professors in the natural sciences, are women – compared to 23 per cent in the social sciences and 30 per cent in the humanities (European Commission, 2012). The problem with equal representation policies being unfair to women thus varies according to the degree of the gender imbalance within each disciplinary field.

Concluding discussion

This paper contributes to the growing body of research that addresses the question of whether or not more women in senior management positions make a difference to organizations. The results contradict previous studies which have tended to show that one of the major reasons women are not getting ahead in work organizations is a lack of support from women already in senior positions (cf. Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000;

Mavin, 2008; Neale, 2011; Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2003). The willingness of the women interviewed in this study to adopt the change agent role could be explained with reference to the Swedish approach to gender equality, which previous research has identified as more radical than in other countries (Teigen and Wägnerud, 2009). The women senior managers interviewed in this study were situated in an academic context where equal representation policies had become generally accepted and applied as a form of quota system to change the numerical gender imbalance in decision-making positions (O'Connor and Göransson, 2014). Thus, they possessed a high degree of awareness.

The paper also identifies, however, how in some circumstances gender awareness apparently disengaged the women from change agent activities. These results highlight the implications of a situation when gender equality policies are applied as if the Swedish HE sector was a unitary system when in fact there are considerable differences in the gender (im)balance between the disciplines. In such a disparate environment, a simple "one size fits all" equal representation policy may not actually be equitably representative and, as the women in this study argued, could have unfair implications for individual women. The results of this study support the argument presented by Silander *et al.* (2013) in which they emphasize the importance of considering the horizontal aspect of gender imbalance in Swedish academia. Solutions to the under-representation of women in decision-making positions need to take differences at a structural level into account and should, therefore, vary between the academic disciplines according to their history, specialization, size and the nature of the gender imbalance (cf. Benschop and Verloo, 2011).

The analysis is presented against the backdrop of a quantitative increase of women in senior management in Swedish HE during the last 20 years (Peterson, 2011). Whilst the specific confluence of historical and social factors that has led to increased women participation at managerial levels is beyond the scope of this paper, it is noted that this is an interesting context to explore senior women's change agency. The findings illustrate how women's symbolic change agency challenges the "think manager-think male" paradigm, which associates decision-making positions with men and masculinity. Increasing the number of women with the help of equal representation policies facilitates changes in the masculine symbolic image of management. This kind of symbolic change agency does not presuppose gender awareness as a necessary requirement. Regardless of the reasons why a woman accepts a management position that has previously been occupied solely by men, she nonetheless becomes a symbolic change agent. The results also imply that the change brought about by this kind of symbolic change agency has a temporary character. A more permanent change in the masculine norm requires symbolic change agency from at least two consecutive women managers. More research on both symbolic change agency and the change agency that presupposes gender awareness is needed, however.

The paper raises other questions that could be the subject of future studies. For example, the analysis cannot account for how differences between women's change agency are related to differences in age, class or ethnicity. Even though the group of women interviewed in this study is small and could be perceived as homogenous, the results show that their change agency varied significantly depending on disciplinary context. The results also show how women's awareness of, for example, unfair consequences of equal representation policies developed out of their own experiences of an increasing workload. The study provides a nuanced and multifaceted illustration of how day-to-day experiences and awareness influence how and if women managers adopt the role of gender equality change agents. If we want to further understand

women's change agency, therefore, we need to avoid simple unitary representations and acknowledge the presence of differences due to, for example, diverse experiences of being marginalized.

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