# THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF GENDER EQUALITY PROGRAMMES A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY AT THE MANAGEMENT OF A GERMAN AND A FRENCH AUTO MANUFACTURER

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**Summary:** Virtually all major auto manufacturers have adopted policies to promote gender equality and increase the proportion of women in their managerial ranks. However, progress is very slow paced and the automotive sector remains a male bastion. This study draws from Ely and Meyerson´s fourfold conceptualisation of gender equality change in organisation to explore discrepancies between the espoused theoretical formulations and the practice of gender equality at two large auto manufacturers in France and Germany. The author used company's document analysis and semi-structured interview methods with male and female managers. The paper presents first selected results and is organised as follows: after a brief introductory part, the theoretical framework is described. Third, it maps and compares the gender equality programmes at the French and German case companies. Finally, it offers a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted.

**Keywords:** gender, diversity, management, organisation, equal opportunity

## 1. Introduction

Institutionalising forces such as the European Union push countries across Europe to put the issue of gender equality in management in the forefront of their corporate agenda. The critical question gender equality is particularly evident in an industry that has historically employed few women in most countries; namely the automotive industry. The European automotive industry is the largest producer of motor vehicle in the world, and employs nearly 13 million individuals in EU 27, with one fifth of the workforce being comprised of women. Hence, the sector has a great significance not only on the European level. The motor vehicle sector employs in France and Germany directly and respectively 749 and 225 thousands persons. Only 10% of women hold a managing position in Germany and 20% in France. Despite various measures implemented since decades to counter the striking gender disparity, the glass ceiling in the French and German automotive industry is firmly in place. Very few women are represented at the executive levels and on boards of directors. Consequently the focus of the present research is on the study of the interventions and initiatives for gender equity/gender diversity within a male dominated organisation.

## 2. Theoretical background

The conventional scholarly knowledge about gender issues in the workplace is captured by Fletcher and Ely (2003) in four approaches or "frames" for understanding what gender is and why inequities exist between men and women at work. Each frame implies a vision of gender equity and an approach for achieving that vision. (see table 1). The first three frames are rooted in the common tendency to think of gender as an individual characteristic, and gender issues as stemming primarily from differences between men and women. While interventions derived from these approaches have achieved significant equity gains for women, their impact

has been limited. The fourth frame instead provides a more complex approach to understanding and conceptualizing gender. As Meyerson and Kolb (2000: 563) argued, *"gender is not primarily about women nor it is localized in discrimination practices; it is about the more general process of organizing itself. Gender is an axis of power, an organizing principle that shapes social structure, identities, and knowledge."* From this perspective, it is argued that organizations are inherently gendered. That is, the institutional arrangements of organizations are reflective of socially constructed sex differences where men are privileged and women are devalued or ignored (Acker, 1992; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Rao et al., 1999

*Table 1: Four conceptual frames to gender equality in organisations*

| | Definition of gender | Problem definition | Vision of gender and equity | Approach to change | Benefits | Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Fix the women** | Socialised sex differences | Women lack skills, know-how to "play the game" | No differences between men and women, just like men | Develop women's skills through training, mentoring, etc. | Helps individual women succeed, creates role models when they succeed | Leaves system and male standards intact, blames women as source of problem |
| **Celebrate the differences** | Socialised sex differences. Separate spheres of activity | Women's skills not valued or recognised | Differences recognised, valued, preserved | Diversity training: reward and celebrate differences "women's says" | Legitimate differences: feminine approach valued; tied to broader diversity initiatives | Reinforces stereotypes, leaves processes in place that reproduce differences |
| **Create equal opportunities** | Sex differences in treatment, access, opportunity | Differential structures of power and opportunity yield less access, fewer resources for women | Create level playing field By reducing structural barriers, biases | Policies to compensate for structural barriers, e.g. affirmative action, work family benefits | Helps with recruiting, retaining, advancing women: eases work-family stress | Has minimal impact on organisational culture; backlash; work family remains woman's problem |
| **Revise work culture** | Central organising feature of social life embedded within belief systems, and social practices | Social practices designed by and for white, heterosexual, class-privileged men appear neutral but uphold differences | Process of identifying and revising oppressive social practices; gender no longer an axis of power | Emergent, localised process of incremental change, involving critique, new narratives and experimentation | Exposes apparent neutrality of practices as oppressive; more likely to change organisation culture; continuous process of learning | Resistance to deep change; difficult to sustain |

Source: Ely and Meyerson (2000)

## 3. Aims, methods and data

The findings presented in this paper are part of a research project examining how gender equality interventions and other women advancement programmes as applied in the automotive organisations in France and Germany are functioning and designed on the one hand, and perceived and experienced by the individuals on the other hand. A qualitative case study approach comprising the analysis of company documents and semi-structured interviews was used. The case study method is an appropriate empirical research strategy to employ as it contributes to a holistic understanding of a phenomenon within it social context, ensuring that the complexities of the setting and its participants are taken into account (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). The field study generated data based on semi-structured interviews format comprising open-ended questions and addressed to 25 respondents, female and male executives from 28 to 59 years across the managerial hierarchies, in all core business units. The data were analysed using Ritchie and Lewis's (2003) qualitative analytic hierarchy as a guide. The aim was to highlight managers' own stories of equal opportunity and career advancement and hereby increase the understanding of how individuals view and experience gender equality and gender relations in a particular organisational setting.

## 4. Research findings and discussion

### 4.1 Mapping gender equality programmes

Central to both French and German case companies is the approach "Create Equal Opportunities". The critical part of the approach is to create equal opportunity by eliminating discriminatory structural and procedural barriers. Interventions are legal and policy-based; they include in both companies affirmative initiatives, such as differentiated targets to increase the proportion of female apprentices, female skilled workers, female graduate and professional recruits and female executives. Revised recruiting, transparent selection procedures and promotion policies aim to make requirements more "neutral" so that women are more likely to be in the same situation and thus qualified for equal treatment. These are the building blocks of the so-called "meritocratic system", based on supposedly objective criteria of education, experience and skills. Whereas the measures to combine work and family responsibilities, a significant component of the equal opportunity frame are addressed to both male and female employees, the largest majority of employees taking advantage of these policies remain the women, in France as well as in Germany. This can be partly explained by the lack of childcare infrastructure in Germany (Kurz 2006), the hybrid nature of family policy in France (Fagnani 2009) and by the gendered role cultures in both countries. In the management sphere, many women resist using these flexible work benefits for fear of doing so will harm their careers and create backlash (Rapoport et al. 2002. Bailyn 2006). This illustrates the "seemingly gender neutral" bureaucratic structure and the patriarchal structure still powerful in male organisational cultures (Acker 1990; Wajcman 1998).

The similarity between the French and the German company stops here. The other pendant and probably the most contested measure in the German company targets the individual's barriers impeding women to advance in the management latter. The main rationale behind the women only advancement program is to equip the women with the necessary skills to play the game. Stemming from the liberal strain, the goal of the "Fix the women" is to minimize differences in experience, academic and business socialization between women and men so that women can compete as equals (Fletcher and Ely 2003, Kolb and Meyerson 2000). These interventions are ameliorative strategies organisations typically use as first response to difficulties in promoting and retaining women. However, the focus is on the individual level, not on changing the systemic factors within organizations and institutions that create an uneven playing field for women.

The French company instead has coupled its "Create Equal Opportunities" actions with the notion of "diversity" as key driver for company performance. This frame labelled as "Celebrate Differences" shifts the focus from eliminating difference to valuing "women's difference" and in particular their so called "inclusive and collaborative management style". It does not address the power of the masculine image that underlies most generally accepted models of occupations success, leadership, or managerial acumen. In addition, the French case company has developed a set of interventions initiated by the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) department of the company. These measures can be framed as "Revising the work culture". Doing so, the French company acknowledges that organizations are inherently gendered and gender is considered a social rather than biological construct. (Acker 1990). The company approach focuses on a broader and open communication to combat against gender stereotyping and masculine images prevalent in the automotive industry, and by intervening directly in the educational institutions (i.e. high schools, university and engineering schools) and promoting women networking channels. These interventions are incremental and based on an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation and learning conducted by CSR and HR units. The following matrices (see Figure 2) offer an overview of the interventions studied at

the French and German companies, and identify four areas of impact and change: formal and informal, individual and systemic. (Rao & Kelleher's 2005)

*Figure 2: Comparison of gender equality programmes at the German and the French auto manufacturer*
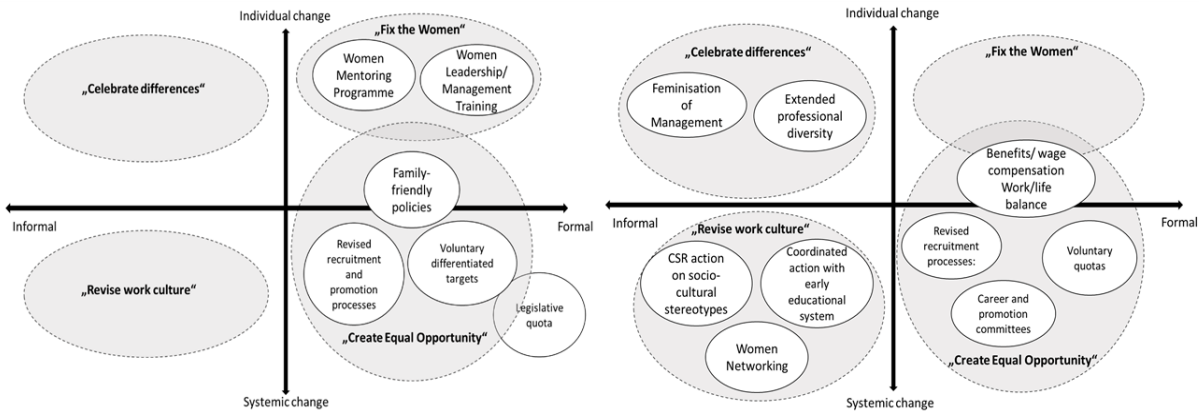


Source: Rao and Kellehar (2005) Impact and change of company actions, author's adaptation

## 4.2. Interviews results

In the following, first selected results are presented based on the interviews. Two main themes were identified and described in more details as follows.

### 4.2.1 Gender hierarchy and feminine deficiency

In most of the interviews, the basic hierarchical male dominated form of organisation is taken for granted in the company. Gendered hierarchy is normal, typical anodyne statements illustrate such taken-for-grantedness: "*There is one thing; in general, many men work in the automotive industry, which explains why there are more men in management than women. (R. Man in middle management)*". By way of explanation to the question, why so few women in the industry and in managerial positions, the interviewees pointed out the lack of interest of women for technical studies or professions: "*I think also that there are just few women who are interested in and decide to make career in these fields. For example, more than 80% of our applicants and interns are men. (S. woman in lower management).*" Patriarchal gender order and masculine norms are thus constructed and maintained through a deep entrenched gendered discourse that identifies the problem at the level of women rather than at the level of the processes in the workplace into predominant male organisations (Ely & Meyerson 2000, Hannapi-Egger 2011).

### 4.2.2 Faith in the meritocratic system

The belief that competence only counts is a leitmotiv across the management levels and regardless the gender or the culture. "*I have shown and proved my competence. (T. Woman in high management).* As other studies have shown (e.g. Whitehead, 2002), both women and men can be 'slow' to perceive gender based disadvantage in the context of work – preferring instead to believe that the system is fair. Whereas young women noted the paucity of women at senior positions or in technical division in the organization, they justified and explained the disparity through individual deficiency (e.g. lack of ambition). From Kelan et al. (2009), key characteristics of Generation Y individuals a strong belief that gender equality has been

achieved: "*This (gender) might have had an impact for the older generations, but for our younger generation (R. Man in high management)*" Male and female respondents invoked a strong belief in the gender neutrality of their organisation. Notions of meritocracy, based on supposedly objective criteria of education, experience and skills, have strong purchase in understandings and applications of 'fairness' at work – suggesting that women can compete for jobs and promotion on the 'same basis' as men. At the same time, they mentioned that the social expectations and gender roles of may hinder the process of neutral competence evaluation. This supports Wajcman's (1998) notion of 'contemporary patriarchy', i.e. the subordination of women within a framework of equality – a subordination based on the concealment of unequal outcomes and which can be difficult to detect. Faith in meritocracy as a 'solution' to gender disadvantage continues (Krefting, 2002) despite evidence that gender strongly defines managerial careers. For example, women remain in the minority on the vast majority of company boards (Ahmansson and Ohlund 2008; Vinnicombe et al. 2010) despite having amassed considerable human, and reputational, capital.

*4.2.3 Affirmative actions vs. voluntary initiatives*

Most of the male and female interviewees rejected the interventions aimed at women only, in particular gender quotas. Typical answers are "*I did not take part to any sort of women advancement program and consider this whole story as bullocks. We talked about with my supervisor at that time and said how ridiculous it was (T. Woman in high management).*" These clear statements show two strong yet contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, the fear of feminine stigmata and accepting the masculine mould may lead to a polarisation of relations and in-group tension among women as pointed out by Campbell (2004), which as a result contribute to the maintenance of the "individual woman as a problem". The status quo in relation to gendered hierarchies in the organisation is intact. On the other hand, women continue to construct their work identity against the mirror of male values (Wajcman 1998). Male managers unanimously rejected any forms of affirmative actions. They do not include themselves as actors in the gender debate, rather as passive observers although they possess a substantive knowledge about gender (in)equality in the workplace. They rather identified themselves as victims and showed resentment: "*It is unfair, ok women have several disadvantage in the organisation, but the problem lies somewhere else. Why men should be penalised and women shall get the straight line to management (F. men in middle management)*". In addition, both male and female managers from both companies stressed the importance of voluntary interventions. They typically expressed the need to empower girls and young women at an early stage to enter technical education and careers within the automotive sector. According to them, interventions at an early age and more generally outside the company and providing a higher visibility of feminine role models are key actions.

**5. Conclusions**

Selected results of the first analysis of a French and German automotive company were presented, as it is still an ongoing research project. This paper has attempted to illustrate how promoting gender equality in a male dominated field is complex and can bring about unexpected pervert results. It became clear that despite the great variety and high number of policies, organisational processes and cultural gendered roles remain untouched and continue to obstruct women's progress. The research reveals how the equal opportunity policies and the rhetoric of gender justice draw attention away from continuing disadvantage and privilege in both companies. At the organisational level, approaches to enhancing gender equity need to be customized and steadily reviewed, as the critics note that the focus on structural barriers or

individuals traits without systematic attention to underlying cultural norms and values related to gender, work and organisation is not enough to change organisations (Mescher et al. 2010).

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