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Gender and Race in the International Sciences: Organizational Practices of Diversity

Doing gender equality and undoing gender inequality—A practice theory perspective

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Abstract

Many of the efforts made by organizations to deal with gender inequalities fail to have the desired impact. This is not only because these efforts are undermined by individuals who disagree with them, nor because individuals do not perceive gender inequalities to be a problem. Rather, the issue is that gender equality practices may be embedded in an organizational context where other practices counteract gender equality. By means of a 17-month-long ethnographic study conducted at a technical university in Sweden, the interaction between gender equality practices and gender inequality practices has been identified. It is shown that gender equality practices are themselves based on either questionable assumptions (e.g., that increasing the number of women in senior roles will make a difference), or in an attempt to avoid blaming the victim, on reducing the salience of gendered categorization from which gendered inequalities can be adequately challenged. By focusing on the nexus of practices that move beyond equality work, two practices that undermine gender equality work have been identified, that is, a data-driven approach to change work and a preference for simple solutions. The conclusion drawn alerts us to the fact that even practices that do not seem related to gender equality work can have an impact on the success or failure of the gender equality work of the organization. This in turn may imply that the institutionalized underpinnings of the organization need to be changed, for example, the belief that more data will help us to find more solutions, or that there are practices out there that can be implemented to wash away gender inequality.

KEYWORDS
academia, gender equality, inequality practices, practice theory, STEM

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many attempts have been made to attract more women into the academic and professional disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (so-called STEM fields). However, the numbers remain unchanged. In many countries, women are underrepresented among students in STEM fields (Myers et al., 2019), and things look even worse on the higher academic levels: Women make up 26.2% of the Grade A staff of universities across all fields (European Commission, 2021). In STEM academia, the numbers are even lower. In 2019, in Sweden, women held 18% of the professorships in technological fields and 19% in the natural sciences (UKÄ, 2020). Silander et al. (2022) found the discouraging result that, despite extensive efforts, no current gender equality practices in place at universities in the Nordic countries were working. No action being taken by academic institutions was increasing the number of women professors. Research on what really "works" in terms of which gender equality practices of organizations increase women's representation has actually produced a palette of varying, contradictory, and mixed results (cf. Schoen & Rost, 2021) with the problem even having been likened to a "Seven-Headed Dragon" (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b) whose current equality practices "lack the teeth" to fight.

Different measures that can improve organizations' accommodation of others than able-bodied and White cis men have been put forward, tested, and investigated. Such measures include bias training of staff (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018), grievance systems (Ahmed, 2021), targeted recruitment (Leslie, 2019), and gender equality action plans (Ní Laoire et al., 2021).[1] However, the results of such measures are mixed. Findings have revealed that bias training can cause a backlash and increase discrimination (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018), grievance systems often end up blaming the victim rather than the perpetrator (Ahmed, 2021), and any action perceived as helping a disadvantaged group (e.g., quotas) ends up doing more harm to that group due to the backlash from the privileged group in terms of revenge or counteractions (Johansson et al., 2019; Leslie, 2019; Omanović, 2013). The context matters as regards which gender equality measures can be successful (Ní Laoire et al., 2021; Tienari et al., 2002). It has been shown that many tech company managers (Wynn, 2020), as well as feminism-conscious students in STEM fields (Myers et al., 2019), do not believe that a gendered order exists in society. Instead, they see gendered stereotypes as being a question of individual choice, downgrading the whole issue of changing the gender order of organizations to something that is not even a concern. Career paths have been investigated to understand how academic, and other, organizations enact subtle forms of discrimination throughout women's careers (Fenech et al., 2022; Husu, 2020; Roos & Gatta, 2009; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012a). In short, there have been many different takes on the problem of the persistence of gender inequality practices, mostly explaining why it is so difficult.

There are at least two kinds of explanations. One relates to counteractions occurring within the organization or the unintended consequences of gender equality practices. This sometimes comes under the umbrella term of organizations' "resistance" to gender equality (Salminen-Karlsson, 2016; Johansson et al., 2019; Leslie, 2019; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b), occurring because those who are privileged within a current system fear, they will lose their advantage if the status quo is altered (Acker, 2006). The other explanation reveals that organizational practices are also carried out from time to time to produce *an air* of change, without any real intention to produce *true* change, the so-called decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) or window-dressing (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017). It is possible to uphold the ideal of diversity while actually engaging in discriminatory practices. The incentive for doing this is to maintain legitimacy. Omanović (2013) showed how one organization in Sweden highlighted that they valued diversity, but where the *actual* voices of the people from the diversified groups would not be heard nor seen. Minoritized employees were used as examples of diversity—they were talked *about* but not included—they were not talked *to*. Bilge (2020) describes the same process in a university context. The bodies of minoritized teachers and researchers are used to sustain an air of inclusion, while the same people, in reality, are marginalized and face discrimination within their organizations. These are examples of actions taken by organizations to make it seem like they are practicing diversity, but without actually increasing equality.

In summary, the explanation for the lack of progress has mainly been that there are resistance and window-dressing. These findings have exposed counteractions to equality explaining why the situation is so slow to change, despite so much explicit desire to change. However, they have not been able to provide any constructive input into how the situation can change. Another branch of research, with a more constructive approach, has tried to figure out which gender equality practices work, that is, which practices increase the number of women in the field (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Schoen & Rost, 2021; Silander et al., 2022). The issue facing such perspectives is that they treat practices as entities within the organization, entities that can be designed and carried out independently of other practices, and that practices which work in one context can be transferred and applied to another context. In such a world, one gender equality practice (or more) that "works" could be implemented, and then gender equality would be achieved. However, the reality is trickier. Practices are what people *do* in an organization, being embedded into bundles of both structure and agency in time and space (Nicolini, 2009, 2012; Schatzki, 2012). This means that no practice is independent of other sayings and doings in the same context: What people do is connected with what others are doing, and what they do in one situation is connected with what they did earlier, and also with what they will be doing later.

Judging by the number of companies, managers, and employees trying to instigate change, across both public and private organizations, the explanation that change is not really the aim (window dressing) or that resistance is too fierce may not be sufficient when it comes to providing the explanation. In order to understand why gender inequality still persists, despite extensive attempts to design and implement gender equality practices, this paper focuses on gender equality practices as they are carried out in action in their own context. Using a practice perspective on practices, it becomes possible to study practices or rather *performances* of practices in their own context or in their *nexus* (Hui et al., 2017), and how they are being carried out in relation to everything else being carried out in the organization. The aim of applying a practice theory perspective is to complement our current understanding of gender equality progress (or rather the lack thereof) by providing a constructive explanation as to why gender inequality still persists. To this end, this study is based on empirical material collected via an ethnographic study conducted at one technical university in Sweden, where the author monitored diversity and inclusion work. The paper is structured as follows: First, there is an overview of what we know about gender inequality practices, and then the practice theory perspective used in this paper is presented. After that, the methodology employed in the study is described, followed by the findings. The three practices identified are then unpacked in a subsequent section. Finally, conclusions are presented together with some practical implications.

2 | THE NEXUS OF GENDER EQUALITY PRACTICES

To change the gendered situation of organizations, several authors have called for wider and more all-encompassing changes to society, for example, institutional changes (Fotaki, 2013; Roos & Gatta, 2009), changes to power relations (Burkinshaw & White, 2017), and changes to the "normal" structures and cultures (O'Connor, 2020). Pointing to wider society as the necessary source of change seems reasonable, given that organizations do not operate in isolation: They are embedded in societies with societies, in turn, differing from each other. For instance, the level of representation in STEM fields differs from country to country and correlates with gender stereotypes (Miller et al., 2015) with different contexts allowing different practices to become accepted and successful (Ní Laoire et al., 2021; Tienari et al., 2002).

Despite cultural-contextual differences, the contemporary organizations of many countries are often shaped for stereotypically male life situations. Professional success is dependent on having someone (usually a woman) taking care of (unremunerated) family life in the home (Acker, 1990, 2006; Fenech et al., 2022; Roos & Gatta, 2009). Consequently, one stream of research has focused on organizational practices that help people balance work and family life (Herschberg et al., 2018; Khilji & Pumroy, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2018). Analyzing the practices that organizations can employ to mitigate the consequences of gendered family responsibility takes the nexus of practices as society and organization. Something people do in society (i.e., practicing traditionally gendered family roles) impacts their work life (with women taking care of children and thus hindering themselves from investing as much in their careers as men do). The organization, in turn, can mitigate the situation by employing counterpractices, for example, helping people to balance their work and family lives by means of flexible working hours or childcare support.

However, research has revealed that discrimination occurs even beyond unevenly shared family responsibilities. For instance, women and men are evaluated differently (Fenech et al., 2022), even on the basis of exactly identical CVs (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), with the ideal worker being visualized more often as a stereotypical man (Acker, 1990; Banchefsky et al., 2016; Fotaki, 2013; Herschberg et al., 2018). Leveling the field by helping to level an unfair share of family responsibility is, thus, just one part of the puzzle. To address the kind of inequality practices that are connected to work and organizational activities (e.g., unjust remuneration and unfair competence evaluation), we need to understand the nexuses of practices located *within* organizations.

In order to shed light on practices within organizations, this study has been conducted in the highest-ranking country as regards gender equality in the European Union—Sweden (European Institute of Gender Equality, 2022). This context provides an "extreme" situation wherein many gender equality practices have been institutionalized. However, as the numbers above show, women are still steering clear of STEM fields. Therefore, investigating gender (in)equality practices in this gender-equal context makes it possible to learn about equality practices that move beyond the gender equality measures relating to the work-life balance and family-creation, for example, subsidized childcare, remunerated parental leave, and socially accepted parental leave for the non-birth-giving parent. Such practices are investigated elsewhere (e.g., Deutsch, 2007; Khilji & Pumroy, 2019), while in Sweden, they are explicitly institutionalized and legally mandated on the national level for parents of all genders. Studying gender equality work in a gender-equal society makes it possible to lower the relative importance of the uneven responsibility regarding family life and to elevate the visibility of the gender equality practices of organizations. Put simply, studying gender equality practices in a society where the responsibility for children is shared among the citizens makes it possible to focus more on the practices carried out *in* organizations.

3 | PRACTICE THEORY PERSPECTIVE ON DOING AND UNDOING GENDER EQUALITY

A practice is "an open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki, 2012, p. 14), and practices are a building block of both organizations and institutions (Schatzki, 2006; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). A practice is open-ended because it is not composed of any particular number of activities and spatially-temporally dispersed because it is not unambiguously locatable in time (winning a contest, for instance, can come at the end of that contest, at any point during its entirety, or at the award ceremony). This means that, while practices *make* an organization, they are not easy to pinpoint or identify.

One particularly useful study of gender equality and inequality practices is Van den Brink and Benschop (2012b), in which these scholars employed the concept of doing and undoing in an organizational perspective. Doing and undoing *gender* (West & Zimmerman, 1987) is a theoretical perspective that has been used to show how, in male-dominated spaces, women can undo their gender by suppressing/downplaying their feminine attributes in order to mitigate the negative consequences of not matching the masculine identity connected to the work situation (e.g., Nentwich & Kelan, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2009). While the concept of doing and undoing gender has provided a lens for seeing gender inequalities and understanding how these are enacted in organizations, the focus has been on the strategies individuals engage in when faced with gendered organizations. Instead of looking at how people face a gendered organization, van den Brink and Benschop looked at the practices of an organization working with (de)gendering itself, that is, changing its practices to become sex-non-discriminatory. They use the terms doing and undoing *equality practices*.

In their study, Van den Brink and Benschop (2012b) concluded that an "undoing of gender inequality simultaneously entails a doing of something else" (p. 73), highlighting the fact that adding a practice in an organization may not produce the intended results because other (overt and covert) practices are in place, which hinder the new practice from becoming the change agent hoped for. They studied appointment processes in academia, including the natural sciences, and found that, although some practices aimed at increasing women's representation among faculties had changed (e.g., increasing the number of women applicants for each job opening), other practices had remained the same and were working against the opportunity to employ more women (e.g., women not matching the ideal image of who a worthy scientist is). Other studies, too, have shown how certain practices counteract, or nullify, other practices. For instance, Myers et al. (2019) found that, although students of the natural sciences could see discriminatory practices in the classroom (e.g., women engineering students not being taken seriously), they still believed it was up to the individual to learn how to cope with the situation, that is, they were individualizing structural problems. They were learning a new practice of undoing gender inequality when they were able to decipher covert and subtle discrimination, while simultaneously doing an old practice of rationalizing and normalizing discrimination, which needs to be undone to make space for the new practice. This shows the dependency that Van den Brink and Benschop (2012b) highlighted: Old practices may hinder new ones.

Taking on a practice theory perspective, on the other hand, means that the focus is not on practices as entities, but practices as they are performed (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Nicolini, 2012), that is, the only practices that are relevant being those observable in action. The second implication is that practices need to be studied in the nexus of other practices being carried out (Hui et al., 2017), and these are made up of *both* material (objective) and cultural (symbolic) elements and interpretations (Reckwitz, 2017). In the current study, the point of departure taken is the idea of Van den Brink and Benschop (2012b) that practices go in pairs: One practice can cancel another one out. Adding a practice theory perspective to this idea widens the scope of the investigation beyond practices as entities and entails looking at the nexus of practices within the organization.

4 | METHOD

When studying practices, an immersive, ethnographic approach is adequate: It gives access to experiences of the studied phenomenon in real time and in context (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Schatzki, 2006). Through the ethnographic work in an organization, the researcher becomes one with the members of that organization and can access what is endemic to the local setting (Kunda, 2013). This study followed the activities of one technical university in developing practices of gender equality over the course of 17 months. The author was employed as a postdoc on an internally funded project aimed at investigating how universities across the globe work with gender equality in engineering programs. However, throughout this period of research, employees of the organization understood they could also use her expertise in other work, for example, developing a new gender equality policy, developing bias training for selection committees, and developing and training teachers in transforming engineering programs to make them more gender-sensitive. This provided the author with up-close access to the various negotiations surrounding gender equality practices.

Conducting ethnographic work as an insider at an organization has its advantages and challenges. The advantage is access to data, and a close understanding of what happens at the organization, something which is needed in order to understand practices in their nexus. On the other hand, it can also raise doubts regarding the intentions and position of the researcher. During the study, my membership of the organization was temporary, and I was not dependent on having this prolonged since I knew it would be impossible. This helped me to preserve a neutral stance toward the people I was working with and studying. Also, as a postdoc, I always had a researcher identity. I was bringing the research findings into discussions and meetings, and everyone knew that everything I was doing was part of my research. Being understood as a White cis woman with a foreign name (i.e., a person with two minority characteristics: gender and cultural background) may have made it seem like I was working for my own benefit within the organization. This is partially true. The aim of this paper is to make organizations like the one I studied better for people like me (and also people that are not like me). Being funded internally by the organization means they wanted me to deliver something of use to them. What I did in order not to let their interests influence this study was to separate the work I did *for* the organization from the material I collected *about* it with the latter being what I present here. Separating the two was not difficult because they only overlap slightly. For the organization, I was developing the education programs to include diversity and equality dimensions, while this paper is about the gender equality practices in the organization.

The empirical material for this study is of two types, that is, field notes and internally produced documents. Field notes are mostly notes from meetings (1–3 a week over the course of 17 months) with gender equality workers at the organization. There were many gender equality workers at the organization: There were equality representatives, equality ambassadors, a gender equality project, the equality team in line management, and two equality employees (one for student equality and one for employee equality), as well as many local initiatives to increase, for instance, the interest of girls in technology, etc. These people were grouped into several different committees and teams. These groupings were formalized to varying degrees, so it is not easy to list "types" of meetings. Moreover, many meeting constellations only occurred once, in an ad-hoc way, arranged by people at the organization based on what was thought to be important or urgent at the time, and dependent on who people felt they needed to meet. The myriad people coming in from different angles caused much confusion, and a lot of the work done at the meetings went into understanding what the different people do and how the different groups/clusters differ from each other, as well as what responsibilities (if any) they have. Some of the meetings observed were between gender equality workers and other types of committees or administrative units concerned with gender equality (e.g., faculty meetings, program directors, and Vice Rector meeting representatives of the education program). Some of these meetings were set up as workshops and were given by the author (e.g., gender equality in STEM subject content or bias training), while during other meetings, the author played a more passive part mainly observing the practices being enacted and/or discussed. What people said, how they reasoned as regards their gender equality practices and how they related to their gender equality artifacts (e.g., questionnaires, policies, and statistics) were the focus of the field notes. The work was done during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-09-01 to 2022-01-31), so all the empirical materials were collected during online meetings by means of taking notes both during and after these meetings.

The other type of material laying the foundations for this paper is internally produced documents. Gender equality action plans, gender equality policy documents, and gender equality measurements were collected, as were emails, more generic documents such as a new vision for the university, and an employee survey. There was one outdated gender equality action plan, but the gender equality policies were spread out over various documents. Finding all these documents was not an easy process; new documents were discovered with time, revealing highly fragmented gender equality work. Studying practice entails inquiry resulting in unexpected rather than predetermined outcomes (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019). Therefore, to analyze this eclectic material, I used a discovery method consisting of four steps as described by Swedberg (2012).

First, among all the things that I had found, I looked for things that were interesting. The guiding principle was finding what was surprising (Locke et al., 2008). Certain topics stood out as especially pressing to those being observed during the meetings and as surprising to me. Examples here include discussions regarding how different ways of counting the number of women in different positions would yield different numbers, the high frequency of references made to the annual employee survey, or the fact that people would complain about the lack of internally produced data but ignore nationally produced data or previous research. During the second step, I tried to carve out the central topics and name them by reading my notes and coding them. In this instance, four different practices emerged, relating to the things that were surprising. The importance of finding the actions that would affect the number of women, the fragmentation of the gender equality work done at the organization, the relative importance of an internal employee questionnaire, and the polemic created when the current gender equality policy was removed. During step three, I theorized by using analogies and comparisons, in a heuristic way, in order to gain a better understanding of the practices, abductively connecting them to previous research. I started by searching for inconsistencies in what I was observing in relation to the vast body of research on gender equality practices. What is happening here that shows a pattern that differs from previous research? For instance, why was it so important to headhunt women to apply for vacancies when previous research has shown that women are not selected during the final steps of recruitment (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b)? How could this university have a policy that was the opposite of all the other gender equality policies I had seen at universities across the globe? And how come the people at the organization would understand unconscious bias and subtle discrimination, and yet stick to working with overt discrimination alone? Writing up the findings was the fourth and final step of my analysis, where I employed a narrative strategy (Langley, 1999) that adhered to the principles of authenticity, plausibility, and criticality (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). Using a narrative strategy meant that I constructed a detailed story from the raw data, and to present the material, I used vignettes, a composite narrative, and a process narrative (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). It was during this final step that I understood that one of the four practices discovered formed part of the case description: The fragmented nature of gender equality work. The three gender equality practices, which were identified as pressing to those being observed and which were surprising to me, were *counting* the number of women, *asking* about discrimination, and *avoiding* action. In the analysis section of the paper, these findings are unpacked and related to other things happening at the organization, using a practice theory approach.

The gender equality work of the university was not intersectional. Various diversity dimensions were addressed, for example, disability and cultural background, but not in an intersectional way. This can partially be explained by the fact that the number of women is so low that analyzing them in an intersectional way seems impossible because there are just too few of them. Another explanation here is that thinking about people in an intersectional way was new to the people of the university. They struggled to get their heads around "women" as a group—they were not ready to add any more complexity to the equality issue. No other diversity dimensions, for example, race, sexuality, and gender identification, were touched upon, not even in a nonintersectional way. Regarding sexuality and gender identification, these issues were probably not addressed because of the invisibility of these people. Talking about race, on the other hand, is highly taboo in Sweden: Race data are not collected by Statistics Sweden (Sweden's national bureau of statistics) and critical race studies constitute a marginalized topic at Sweden's universities. Seven forms of discrimination are prohibited in law, but race is not one of them. The prohibited forms of discrimination are sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, disability, religion or other systems of belief, sexual orientation, and age.[2] This is a legacy that can be traced back to the Second World War when different races were treated differently and to the race studies done on Swedish indigenous groups. Today, these practices are condemned, and just talking about race is taboo, making data on race discrimination nonexistent. The lack of intersectionality of the empirical material makes it difficult to do an intersectional analysis. However, it does represent the current state-of-affairs of nongender researchers working with gender equality in academia. They do not practice intersectionality; in Sweden, adding a race dimension is highly controversial. Yet, by showing how practices need to be analyzed in their nexuses, it is possible to extrapolate the findings from this study in order to also be able to analyze other practices in an intersectional way.

5 | FINDINGS

Three practices were identified as being of central importance to gender equality workers, that is, counting women professors, asking about gender inequality in a questionnaire, and avoiding stereotypical threats by not doing anything to change the gender order.

5.1 | Counting women professors

One gender equality performance indicator is the percentage of women. The Swedish Higher Education Authority asks for these numbers every year, that is, the percentage of women in a certain capacity, for example, professors or students. In Sweden, all STEM fields at all universities are showing declining numbers of women at the top. Even though the majority of undergraduates and PhD students are women, professors are generally declining to below 30%, and at some universities being as low as 17% (UKÄ, 2020). To instigate change, the Swedish Higher Education Authority mandated all universities with recruiting significantly higher percentages of women professors between 2017 and 2019. Most universities failed: One university had the target to recruit 46% women professors, but recruited only 31%, while another one had the goal of recruiting 45% but only recruited 33%, and so forth. Sweden's two technical universities had the goal of recruiting 32% women professors but failed, recruiting only 30% and 27% women professors between 2017 and 2019 (UKÄ, 2020).

In order to increase the number of women professors, the university under study set up a project with this as its primary and most prioritized goal. This project first tried to attract women professors to the university and increase the number of women professors employed. The reasoning behind this measure was that, by attracting outstanding professors, role models would be created, which would help to change the negative stereotypes working against women entering the STEM fields. This was rather futile since the handful women professors they managed to recruit used up a large proportion of the project budget and did not alter the percentages significantly (at a university with over a thousand employees). The project team called a meeting to discuss this issue with the recruitment committee, HR, and the Vice Rector: Twelve people participated in this meeting, representing different functions. The following describes what took place:

> The recruitment committee explained that the university hardly ever recruited professors; professorships are conferred. So, attention turned to the processes of conferring professorships, and it was shown that, during recent and ongoing processes, the proportion of women was 19%. People at the meeting said they were “surprised,” “worried,” and “disappointed.” They discussed how this was possible with one HR representative speculating that the various academic divisions reasoned as follows: “We don't have any women right now, but surely some other division has one!,” and thus, no work was done to support women in their academic advancement. One project representative asked if there would be any consequences if they were unable to meet the quota. The Vice Rector explained that such an approach would be futile: “Once we were fined 20 million SEK (2 million EUR) because our gender equality numbers were low. But there were people who thought it was worth it [i.e. to pay the fine].” Several participants shook their heads wearily or nodded in recognition. This discussion about the numbers continued with several ideas and explanations being exchanged and put forward. People suggested that the numbers would look after themselves. For instance, one person said that, statistically, it takes the same amount of time for a woman to become a professor as a man, but that women simply have not been in the system long enough because the recruitment of women only started recently. Another person pointed out that more men than women would be retiring soon, again suggesting that the numbers would look after themselves.

In their struggle to make sense of the situation, they tried to rationalize why, despite the demand from the Swedish Higher Education Authority, they were a long way from reaching the quotas. Several explanations were suggested during the meeting, but none of these guess held water: They were unable to reach a common understanding as regards why the numbers were very low at the meeting and thus the rationalizations and explanations as to why the numbers had not changed continued across many meetings. What is more, it was revealed that the focus of the project, that is, the recruitment of women professors, was not the right way to try to go about that. The fact that professorships were most often conferred made it apparent why the strategy for recruiting women professors would not be fruitful.

Counting women also instigated another action, by the HR department, that was believed it would change the number of women at the organization, that is, actively seeking out women to apply for job openings. A policy had been put in place requiring a certain percentage of applicants to be members of the underrepresented gender, that is, 30. Actively seeking out and encouraging women to apply for job openings do increase the number of women applicants. However, it is questionable whether or not this will increase the number of women working at the organization. Firstly, most professorships are conferred, not filled by means of recruitment, and thus working with recruitment policies governing the applicants' genders is not going to change the situation. Second, this connection assumes that, currently, women are not employed at the organization because they have not applied: There simply are not enough interested candidates. However, research has shown that, while the evaluation criteria remain unadjusted, women will be eliminated at the later stages of the employment process (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b). Several inequality practices explain why. For instance, the same attributes and experience are evaluated differently depending on the body they belong to: The exact same CV is evaluated differently on the basis of whether the name is coded as male or female (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012) and women academics are seen as less suitable as researchers because they lack the necessary survival skills, such as confidence, commitment, and mobility, thus being less likely to be employed or promoted than their male counterparts (Herschberg et al., 2018). Moreover, women also tend to have more parental leave, as well as more teaching and administrative assignments, than men on their CVs (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b), impeding the one thing that currently matters most of all regarding tenure, that is, publications. In fact, asking women to apply for jobs they will not get anyway is actively contributing toward inequality because it means that they are being asked to put in more working hours (each application for tenure or a professorship requires a significant investment in terms of work, normally done during the individual's free time). It thus becomes an inequality practice in that it asks the disadvantaged group to invest their free time in maintaining the façade that the discriminating institution is fair.

While the widened pool of potential candidates remains unaccompanied by a change in inequality practices, it will not contribute toward changing numbers. Targeting women applicants needs to be accompanied by adjustment of the evaluation processes. Changes made to the evaluation criteria can include accommodating women's typical CVs with longer absences for parental leave, for instance, and professional careers with more teaching, and communication and administrative roles (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Nielsen, 2016; Régner et al., 2019). This would open doors to new kinds of people (regardless of gender) to populate academia. In order for the practice of "actively seek[ing] out women to apply for job openings" to be an equality practice, the inequality practices involved in the evaluation processes need to be undone. This needs to apply to both the recruitment *and* the promotion processes.

5.2 | Asking about discrimination

At the site under study, employees were asked how they regularly felt about their working situation using an online questionnaire. This questionnaire was sent out to all the employees once a year and included one question regarding "Discrimination and victimization".

Question: At my workplace, I feel safe and free from…

- negative conflicts
- bullying and abuse
- threats and violence
- sexual harassment
- harassment
- master suppression techniques

This was included in a section with the sub-heading "How you perceive the overall conditions throughout the organization." The answers ranged from "Completely disagree" to "Completely agree" on a 6-point scale with the option of also choosing "No opinion." If a respondent chooses some level of disagreement (i.e., answers using one of the three lowest scores), follow-up questions will then be posed. The respondent is asked how often this has happened and whether or not it has been reported. If reported, the respondent can answer whether the situation is being solved or has been ignored. If it has not been reported, the employee will be informed about the grievance system. The response rate was above 60%. The numbers of people answering that they did not feel safe in the above list ranged between 1% and 16% with negative conflicts and master suppression techniques rating the highest, while sexual harassment and violence rated the lowest (with numbers not having changed significantly over the past four years).

The numbers were presented and discussed at several different gender equality meetings. What was interesting, and somewhat confusing, was the fact that most people reporting fear of sexual harassment and violence had not actually experienced harassment or violence themselves. They feared it but had had no personal experience of it during that particular year. The gender equality workers struggled to make sense of these numbers: Did they mean that people had *observed* sexual harassment and violence, due to fearing it, but that they had not experienced it themselves? Or had they experienced it during previous years? The one thing that was clear and easy to understand was the fact that, in all the questions where a gender difference had been found, men were generally more satisfied. This was referred to thus at several meetings that men felt better than women.

Asking people about gender equality in questionnaires is problematic from several perspectives, and some issues become extra problematic when we try to measure gender equality by putting questions to employees regarding *their own* experiences. First, it puts the focus on what people themselves are able to identify. Much discrimination in the STEM fields is subtle (Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2010; Roos & Gatta, 2009), leading to the first problem of evaluating gender equality through questionnaires: The answers will only reflect what the employees have actually experienced themselves—not what happened behind their backs (e.g., information that was hidden from them, or opportunities they were not considered for), or things they were unable to recognize for themselves (e.g., recognizing master suppression techniques aimed at you can be difficult). Many gender inequality actions are normalized within the organization, meaning that people stop noticing them (hence the term "subtle," see Roos & Gatta (2009), Ranga & Etzkowitz (2010), or Moss-Racusin et al. (2012)). Second, asking people about their own experiences transforms what is, and should be, treated as an organizational problem into an individual one. While it is relevant to know about people's own experiences, it is also important to remember the performative aspect of a questionnaire, that is, through it, the organization communicates what counts to its employees. What people *have lived* counts, and it asks victims to identify themselves (anonymously) rather than asking people to report if they have seen others engaging in sexism, racism, etc.

The next issue with questionnaires is that they define what gender equality is within the organization. Posing questions regarding the seven prohibited forms of discrimination (gender, transgender expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age, and disability) overlooks several of the subtle forms of discrimination. We know, for instance, that feminine expression (regardless of gender or sex identification) is devalued (Balachandra et al., 2019) and that it might be an important clue when it comes to understanding the persistent marginalization of women and non-cis people in STEM fields. Women are not discriminated against because they are women—they are discriminated against because their experiences are devalued (Acker, 2006; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Heilman & Caleo, 2018) and because they do not "fit in" (Banchefsky et al., 2016; Gherardi, 1996; Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2010), which explains the persistent privilege of cis men but is not covered by the seven prohibited forms of discrimination.

While questionnaires report on how individuals feel at the organization, they fail to report on gender equality because they fail to capture the subtleties. Instead, they transform gender equality into a matter of harassment and sexual assault, which it is not, and nor should it be because these are criminal acts that should be dealt with legally. For instance, the university under study boasts of the existence of a complaint system for reporting sexual assaults and reminds its employees in the questionnaire of the existence of that. However, there is no place to report all the other instances of violence toward employees, for example, colleagues being harassed to clarify their ethnic origins, or selecting books that do not include marginalized groups when talking about the professional roles of academics at internal team development events. These events are seen as less severe: Nevertheless, since such occurrences are much more frequent than sexual assault, they become normalized. Not asking about the "small" but "normal" things makes them less important in the life of the organization—but not in the life of the marginalized or minoritized employee. Sexual assault is more disturbing and visible than the power struggles occurring between the different perspectives on a research field of a particular department (potentially having a gendered dimension, given that research fields are highly gendered). These issues are very important from a gender equality perspective, but they are overshadowed when the focus is on the sexual harassment and complaint systems. The inequality practices that need to be undone are the reduction of gender inequality to what is explicitly visible and severe and the focus on what people have experienced *themselves*.

5.3 | "To do or not to do?"—Avoiding action

In order not to point out women as a problem at the studied university, a policy had been put in place saying that no targeted actions should be undertaken because these would be pointing at women as the problem, rather than the domination of men and masculine culture. This is an excerpt from the policy (author's own translation from Swedish):

> All work toward gender equality at [name of university] is based on three fundamental assumptions:
>
> 1. There are no differences between men and women regarding talent in the natural sciences and technology [1],
> 2. Minorities are often subjected to negative stereotypification, which affects their performance in a negative way [2], and
> 3. Targeted actions concerning stereotypified minorities may increase the level of stereotypification [2].
>
> Based on these assumptions, gender equality work at [name of university] must not consist of targeted efforts concerning minority groups. Instead, efforts must be broad and to the benefit of everyone, including minorities, but without pointing to or problematizing these.
>
> References
>
> [1] Janet Shibley and Marcia C. Linn, "Gender Similarities in Mathematics and Science," Science, 314 599, 2006.
> [2] Claude M. Steele, "A Threat in the Air, How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance". American Psychologist, 52, 613, 1997.

The HR department believed they were doing equality by avoiding "stereotype threat" and saying that men and women are equally competent with the policy of not doing any actions directed at any marginalized groups being in place between 2006 and 2018. When it was realized that this was not changing anything in the current gender order (both the answers given in the questionnaire and the number of women remained the same), and there was criticism in the press and from the Swedish Higher Education Authority, a change was made to the course of action: A gender equality project was started with the aim of increasing the number of women at the faculty. This resulted in the need to withdraw the no-affirmative-action policy because it was in conflict with the new project. When it was removed, people protested. One comment made, according to the gender equality project leader, was: “Why did you remove the policy? It was so good! And it was based on research!”. People missed the policy of not doing anything once it had been removed, thinking that the new course of action would not be research-based (which is believed to be both more reliable and desirable in a university setting), but based on ideology and politics. Management, too, believed that the policy of doing nothing was the right one: The rector had explained that they only needed to remove the policy temporarily to speed up the change process, but also that this policy was actually the right way of going about equality work.

The policy of not doing any targeted actions was based on two references that problematized the fact that, when you tell women they are not as good as men, they underperform, and the fact that, measured objectively, men and women are equally talented in mathematics. Both these references provide important insights into equality practices, for example, not trying to fix women and not reproducing harmful and wrong stereotypes relating to excellence in STEM fields. While it is true that many actions taken to make academic institutions more gender equal have been about fixing women (Burkinshaw & White, 2017), for example, helping them to navigate their university in the same way as men, to negotiate salaries like men's, and to generally become more masculine, this does not mean that all kinds of targeted actions need to reproduce gender stereotypes of women as being in need of help. This policy entailed no specific practices being enacted to help women, or other minorities, to feel included and belonging because virtually any accommodation or change could be interpreted as an effort targeted toward a specific group. For instance, if gender perspectives on technology were to be included in research and teaching, or teachers were to provide a wider range of examination methods to accommodate the fair assessment of people with different learning styles, such actions could be interpreted as targeted efforts—or not. Instead of making sure that these university practices were not trying to “fix women,” it was decided to make sure that no practices were made that would help level the playing field between men and women. However, inclusion does not equate to *helping* marginalized people. It can also mean altering what is valued during an evaluation process, for instance.

One surprising finding relating to the no-targeted-actions policy was that it was untouched and in force for 12 years. For a policy, that is a very long time, with policies tending to change much more frequently. Also, over these 12 years, much gender equality research had been conducted, which could have informed and updated the policy. But this did not happen as it was a convenient policy that supported the status quo rather than instigating the change. Another surprising aspect of the no-targeted-actions policy was its high visibility and compliance with policies often tending to be forgotten. But again, it was a convenient policy, which explains why it became highly visible. The inequality practice that needs to be undone is the fear of doing harm acting to paralyze the organization into inactivity.

6 | UNPACKING THE FINDINGS

When looking at the actions of an organization using the doing/undoing gender equality approach of Van den Brink and Benschop (2012b), certain practices that counteract gender equality actions become visible. Doing equality practices is not enough to make gender equality happen: Gender *inequality* practices also need to be *undone*. The practices uncovered in this study, that is, counting women, asking about discrimination, and avoiding stereotype threat, may all seem like decent gender equality practices—according to both research and common sense. However, if carried out in isolation, they become undone. The present analysis has hopefully been able to provide some clues as to which inequality practices need to be undone to make equality practices function as hoped, that is, in order to increase gender equality. Increasing the number of women needs to be accompanied by a change in the evaluation criteria applied to the candidates, asking about discrimination needs to be accompanied by a broader conception of discrimination, and a stereotype threat needs to be avoided, it is not by avoiding addressing inequalities.

Including a wider nexus of practices in my analysis (i.e., using a practice theory approach) makes it possible to move beyond the dyadic view of practices and to see instead which practices happen at the organization, which *indirectly* influence its gender equality work—even though the connection may not be apparent at a first glance. In this case, two practices in the nexus were counteracting gender equality work, that is, the data-driven approach to gender equality work and the preference for simple solutions.

6.1 | Data-driven approach to gender equality work

The people of the organization were good at counting and trusted numbers more than anything else (a common practice in engineering, see Navarro-Aguiar, 2017). To them, counting people in different positions, for example, the number of women professors, and measuring people's feelings at work made sense. Also, these were numbers that had been asked for by others, for example, The Swedish Higher Education Authority, the Gender Equality Agency, and the Work-Environment Authority. When they found a gap in their understanding (e.g., when they could not understand what had caused certain answers to be given in the questionnaire), their recurrent solution was to collect more data and more detailed data. They believed that they needed more data to find out what to do. In their nexus of practices, data was a necessary and sufficient source of change. Unless their own data could show something, they were reluctant to act, and when they did not know what action to take, they tried to add more data. This process occurred in both the counting of women and when asking about discrimination in the employee survey. This data-driven approach to change work proved that something needed to be done, but they struggled to make sense of the numbers they had created. This is not surprising as the numbers themselves do not explain *how* they arose in the first place. It is simply not possible to draw conclusions about actions on the basis of numbers: "There are no words or numbers that even remotely correspond to objects, people or actions, and vice versa" (Czarniawska, 2000, p. 117): It is futile to try to translate numbers into actions and actions into numbers.

The present case shows that the number of women employed becomes a proxy for gender equality, and manipulating these numbers is possible without providing gender equality in practice. Changing the percentage of women at an organization will not necessarily change the patriarchal university system and masculinist culture (Acker, 2006). The people of the organization build the culture, but if all of these have been educated under the same system, they will continue to reproduce that same culture. Studies have shown that affirmative actions become a problem for the women who have been subjected to them, because they are then seen as less competent and become players in a lower division (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b). This shows that the culture does *not* change when more women enter the academic workplace and that the performance indicator *percentage of women* may actually work against what it was set up to achieve, that is, gender equality. It is possible to achieve that indicator while actually increasing gender *in*equality, making the goal of increasing the number of women a futile operationalization of the aim of gender equality (if it causes women to be perceived as less competent). The preference for internally generated data was so high that even previous research would sometimes be ignored (in the case of the gender equality policy, or by adding a requirement for women applicants for job openings). The practice of the organization of giving preference to internal data rather than previous research was hindering gender equality work. This also shows a deviation from the officially presented view that research is more reliable than anything that the HR department can deliver (in the case of the gender equality policy, for instance).

6.2 | Preference for simple solutions

Another practice present in the organization was the *preference for simple solutions*, rather than complex understandings, which could then potentially lead to more adequate solutions.

Considering that the context of this study provides an explanation as to why a policy that prohibits targeted actions was possible and accepted, and why it was interpreted such that no actions were to be carried out. As a technical university, people are more familiar with the natural sciences than the social sciences. The implications of this relate to the difficulty of bridging the boundary between the social and natural sciences; the value of objectivity versus the value of subjective positions (Udén, 2017), the universality of research versus the importance of context (Ní Laoire et al., 2021), and the preference for quantitative methods that can prove "what is" versus the preference for understanding *why* and *how* something comes about. The two references in the policy explained *what is:* Stereotype threat exists and there are no relevant differences between men and women. This was translated literally into: *Nothing needs to be done because men and women are equally good at math, and if we talk about gender stereotypes, we harm women.* But there was nobody that understood that the translation of research into practice was too literal and simplistic. Even though men and women are equally good at something, this would not necessarily mean they will be evaluated fairly, or seen as equals, and we can both talk about and be aware of stereotypes without stigmatizing the negatively stereotyped group. In fact, we *must* talk about stereotypes if we want to undo them, since silence and taboos will not help us to solve problems. They threw out the baby with the bathwater when they threw out targeted measures. They were not able to do equality with this policy.

The preference for simple solutions is also seen in the questionnaire. The questions in the questionnaire list what is considered discriminatory in a workplace, and the questionnaire tells the employees that all of these are solvable through the complaints system. However, complaint systems seldom solve inequality issues for various reasons (Ahmed, 2021), including the treating of each instance of discrimination as an isolated event. This becomes problematic when there are a lot of instances of subtle discrimination, which individually do not warrant an official complaint because they are just not harmful enough or because they do not clearly breach the discrimination law.[3] However, taken together, these show a highly toxic and unjust environment. This is not captured in the questionnaire or in the complaint system. When the organization was focusing on the number of women professors, it was also simplifying the problem: The intention was to increase the number of women without making changes to the culture in the belief that the culture would change itself once women entered. Two inequality practices at play in the nexus are (a) the preference for research that explains *what is* rather than research that contextualizes findings and (b) neglecting the role of the societal in producing reality.

7 | CONCLUSION

In order to understand which gender equality practices work, these need to be studied in their nexus: What other things are happening at the organization? However, this is not easy to decipher both for practitioners and researchers: How can the "right" nexus be identified? The results of this study suggest that Van den Brink and Benschop's (2012b) idea of doing and undoing gender(in)equality provides an important analytical step in understanding what needs to happen in order to combat gender inequality. However, first looking at the gender equality practices that are being done and then identifying the gender inequality practices that need to be undone may not be enough. The practice perspective helps in taking a wider perspective and in identifying practices that do not seem to be related to gender equality but which end up influencing gender equality work. In this case, at a STEM-focused university, two such practices were identified, that is, the preference for data-driven development work (rather than research-driven) and for simple solutions (rather than adequate solutions). These practices became visible via a combined analysis of doing and undoing gender (in)equality using a practice theory perspective. This may provide an important tool for future gender equality work. It is not only a matter of doing gender equality and undoing gender inequality, but it may also be important to revise other practices underpinning the whole institution upon which the organization is founded.

The selective approach to research used, whereby the organization trusts and uses certain types of research (functionalistic research giving answers to *what is*) but ignores other types of research (the kind that provides a complex answer to *how* things happen), is consistent with the preference to choose simple over adequate gender equality measures. For instance, variance-based research is given more credibility than interpretative approaches, even though the former does not provide any practical solutions, while the latter does. This can be interpreted as window-dressing (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017). However, this case has shown that it is potentially connected to the ontological underpinnings of what constitutes research, that is, generalization (at the expense of understanding) and universality (at the expense of usability). This may be an example of the difficulty faced by natural scientists in making use of social science research, rather than an example of ill-will and a lack of desire to make an *actual* difference.

The collective effort made previously to understand what works when combating gender inequality has struggled to present a coherent picture (Leslie, 2019), in part because practices are embedded in specific sociocultural and historical contexts (Ní Laoire et al., 2021). In this study, it was shown both that gender equality goals can be met by practicing gender inequality and that gender equality practices can be nullified by other inequality practices. Removing the eggs from a cake and hoping it will survive just won't do—the cake will fall apart—just as picking a few practices won't constitute gender equality and may actually increase gender *in*equality. It was also shown that gender inequality practices may stem from practices which, at the first glance, seem disconnected from gender equality work, that is, the wider practices of the organization. Others have shown how ideologies shape our view of gender equality and the potential actions that can be envisioned (Myers et al., 2019; Wynn, 2020). Similarly, this study shows that the non-gender-related practices of the organization shape its gender equality work, and thus also how gender equality practices are formed and practiced. Ní Laoire et al. (2021) explain the nexus of practices that affect the gender equality of an organization in terms of national-cultural embeddedness. The current study, on the other hand, explains an organization's nexus of practices, which may hinder equality practices from delivering what is intended, that is, gender equality.

However, what does it mean when we say that a practice *works*? Ní Laoire et al. (2021) answered this question by stating that this should be redefined as “what works best *here* and *now*” (p. 16, italics in the original). While the current study supports such an answer because it has been confirmed that context does matter, this study helps organizations to better understand context in terms of what they do. Based on this study, the answer is “it depends on what other things are happening at the organization.”

7.1 | Practical implications

Below, there are suggestions regarding what organizations can do in order not to fall into the trap of favoring simple, data-driven solutions and ignoring previous research into more adequate solutions:

- When designing new practices aimed at strengthening equality, assess current practice in order to identify which inequality practices need to be undone; the invisible and the naturalized must also be included. This can, for instance, be done using ethnographic or action-based research into the home organization.
- To change unfair assessment processes, the myth of the meritocracy needs to be undone. This requires teaching people how the meritocracy is a decoupled ideal (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Nielsen, 2016), and how women are devalued during selection processes (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Régner et al., 2019). It also needs to be communicated that changing assessment procedures does not mean lowering requirements: It means *different* evaluation dimensions.

- The idea that once the number of women has increased, the culture, power relations, and discrimination will stop, needs to be undone (Acker, 2006), via communication and information.
- Asking people only about their own experience of discrimination transforms the organizational issue of gender discrimination into an individual experience. Considering the performative aspect of a questionnaire, it would be more powerful to ask about by-stander positions: Have you witnessed sexism and oppression? This would signal, in the questionnaire, that this workplace is a community and that, in this community, we look out for each other. Moreover, it should not be put under a heading such as "gender equality," or "work environment" because this normalizes its occurrence as something forming part of a work context—which it is not. Sexual harassment is against the law and as such, if asking about its occurrence in a questionnaire, it should be put under a heading termed "illegal actions" or similar.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author does not report any conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author following a reasonable request and with respect paid to confidentiality.

ENDNOTES

[1] For a more thorough topology of gender equality practices, see Leslie (2019).

[2] Discrimination Act, Swedish Code of Statutes 2008:567, https://www.do.se/choose-language/english/what-is-discrimination (accessed 2022-09-05).

[3] The seven prohibited forms of discrimination still make it possible for unequal salaries (European Institute of Gender Equality, 2022; Statistics Sweden, 2020) to be a reality in Sweden. This shows that the law is unable to capture all forms of discrimination.

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