

Organisational Culture and Gender Equality

A Study of Leading Business Companies in Switzerland

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Abstract

Social sciences increasingly have adopted the problem of gender inequality as a theme on the level of its symbolic and cultural reproduction. Yet, hardly any issues on gender in organisations have referred to concepts of 'organizational culture'. Starting from there, we focussed on the 'tacit dimension' of gender difference and (in)equality in everyday corporate life. Based on the methodology and methods provided by the sociology of knowledge, basic assumptions about gender relations and (in)equality were reconstructed. Empirically the study took its lead from group discussions with male and female mid level managers of more than twenty leading business corporations in Switzerland, as well as documents, structural and observational data. The results show, that male dominated industrial corporations still are guided by orientations that exclude women from leadership, while service industry - which do employ a comparatively higher number of women in management - culturally offer better conditions for female careers. However, also gender cultures within service industry differ as an effect of a multiplicity of factors, of which one is the mastering of organizational change.

Results

Mission statements

Industrial corporations either still tend to ignore gender issues in their mission statements, or treat them in a very abstract and not obligatory way, while the service sector generally seems to be more sensitive and responsive. Nevertheless, gender equality in this case are usually negotiated on the foil of a meritocratic ideal, disregarding the societal preconditions of male/female achievement.

Female leadership - 'explicit communication'

Gendered experiences and world views generate subcultures in all management circles studied. Female leaders however, seem to be more able to bridge the gap between the sexes than their male colleagues. 'Explicit communication' characterizes business companies led by women, and contributes to the cultural exclusivity of these firms. The articulation of implicit demands and tacit agreements by women leaders certainly is not biologically determined – it is the fact of being a stranger in a world of men that requires those skills.

Communicative cultures of non-confrontation and dispute

The differences of men's and women's experiences in male organizations is quite often paralleled by a pattern of communication, which rhetorically simulates consensus, while opposition and disagreement dominates. Much greater is the ability to dispute in companies with balanced gender relations in management. In this case discourses between the sexes reveal an oppositional-confrontative pattern, and the struggle for mutual understanding and common orientation.

Corporate 'gender cultures'

Table 1: Typology of corporate gender cultures

dimensions of orientation	male traditionalism	corporate collectivism	social idealism	normative individualism	pragmatic utilitarianism
corporate gender relations	homogeneity	concealed heterogeneity	social difference	valorized diversity	varity and variability
relation between corp. and societal gender order	inner sphere = outer sphere	inner sphere ≠ outer sphere	inner sphere ≠ outer and inner sphere	inner sphere <-> inner sphere	inner sphere + outer sphere
gender equality policies	privilege for women	societal question	corporate responsibility	individual problem	corporate advantage

The typology illustrates the variety of collective orientations as it results from corporate history and practise

Pitfalls and chances of reorganisation

In times of transformation corporate gender relations become newly exposed to re-negotiation, the outcomes of which can strongly influence the experience and mastering of such transition. Reconstructing experiences of corporate reorganisation in terms of their consequences for orientations towards gender equality policies in Swiss service corporations undergoing profound change, the study highlights that current corporate reorganisation is much more likely to lead to cultural forms of female exclusion than to support equality.

Structural equivalents

The degree of horizontal sex segregation or the specialization of professional roles, as it is illustrated by the degree of qualification, can be interpreted as a structural indicator for the cultural integration of women. A strong gradient between the qualifications of the sexes usually is accompanied by culturally suboptimal conditions for women. The statistical analysis of the qualificatory structure in business companies shows, that the male management of industrial firms does rarely make use of the potentials of highly qualified female employees; service industry, led by a higher number of female managers, is able to realize the qualifications of their women employees much better.

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