

**The Implementation of Gender Equality in the Workplace
Resistance and Levers for Action**

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What are the forms and factors of resistance to gender equality in the workplace today? What are the strategies deployed by gender equality agents to try to overcome them? This paper offers to answer these questions by using empirical research conducted for more than ten years on the promotion and implementation of gender equality in French companies and administrations. The analysis starts from a contradictory trend over the past 50 years. On the one hand, gender equality at work has become a legitimate social objective and a matter of corporate social responsibility, and it is attracting growing interest in the political and economic worlds (Laufer, 2014). On the other hand, the effective implementation of this principle is far from complete: scattered, ambiguous and even contradictory measures have not made it possible to reduce inequalities and new disparities are even emerging (Maruani, 2017). The paper aims to shed light on this phenomenon by studying how the most directly concerned audiences tackle the issue of professional gender equality. It first draws a typology of the main forms of discursive resistance that are pervasive in political and economic circles and feed the inertia observed at the national scale. It then adopts the perspective of gender equality consultants to highlight their diagnosis of the situation, as well as the strategies they use in their daily work to deal with resistance and involve the people with whom they meet in a process of social change.

Analytical frame

The analytical frame articulates management/organizational literature and gender studies. On the one hand, the notion of “resistance to change” was introduced by Coch and French who offered to analyse this phenomenon by questioning why people resist change so strongly and how to overcome their resistance (Coch & French, 1948). At the same time, Lewin defines resistance to change as a restraining force moving in the direction of maintaining the status quo in opposition to a force pushing for change (Lewin, 1951). This notion has since been widely used, particularly to explain the poor performance observed in the management of organizational change within companies (Soparnot, 2013). Extensive research has been carried out to the meanings of resistance, their types, the forms they take, their location, their characteristics and their factors. Research has provided multiple and useful typologies when it comes to study this phenomenon.

On the other hand, change has been at the heart of gender studies since their development in the 1970s, in the wake of women’s rights movements (Bereni & al., 2012). By analysing the social construction of gender difference and the inequalities that result from it, these studies open the way to challenging the positions and roles of women and men,

particularly in the workplace. In recent years, they have paid growing attention to resistance in an attempt to explain why gender equality is progressing so slowly despite the clear signs of its institutionalization (Benschop & Verloo, 2006). Research has focused on oppositional dynamics to the political project of gender equality or reactionary rhetoric; they have also investigated discursive and material resistance to gender equality in organizations, pointing out gender-specific variations of resistance to change (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013).

The paper aims to contribute to this scientific knowledge developed from the analysis of the implementation of gender equality in French businesses and administrations. It offers to focus on discursive practices, both in favour of and against the promotion of gender equality. It first reviews the arguments in a wide range of political, economic and media voices to support the status quo. It then examines the arguments shaped by gender equality consultants to overcome this resistance. The paper assumes that discursive approaches make a contribution to understanding the perpetuation of gender inequalities since they help to reveal the gendered subtexts of organizations and the labour world, and shed light on how people can both sustain change and justify inertia on gender inequalities (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Ainsworth, Knox & O'Flynn, 2010).

This field study is interesting for several reasons. First, there has been abundant and binding legislation since 40 years in France, and various players (employers, trade unions, women's networks, consultants, etc.) have been involved in promoting this topic and have developed many tools; however, progress on the ground is very slow (Laufer & Silvera, 2017). This investigation field thus offers the possibility of analysing resistance over the long term, suggesting that this phenomenon is largely widespread. Second, there is little work in France on resistance to gender equality, especially in the economic and labour worlds; if this question is raised in research on professional gender equality, it has not yet received specific attention to identify its main causes and manifestations. More generally, international research on the implementation of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in organizations is mostly based on specific case studies and do not take the time to conduct "meta-analyses" in order to produce robust typologies. Third, while there is growing interest in the issue of resistance to gender equality in the workplace, little is known about how people copy with it, especially gender equality agents. A number of studies point out forms of "resistance to this resistance", particularly in the emerging literature on gender equality experts (Kunz & Prügl, 2019), but there is virtually no systematic review carried out.

Methods

The research was initiated in 2006 as part of a doctoral program and has since continued through various projects (Blanchard, 2018; Blanchard & al., 2018; Blanchard, 2019). It is founded on a wide variety of materials including: a five-year experience as a gender trainer and consultant; a review of the scientific literature on the implementation of gender equality in French companies and administrations; a large corpus of field productions (institutional communication, books, guides, reports, interviews, parliamentary hearings, etc.) from the political, economic, associative and media worlds; an unpublished study on gender equality agreements signed by companies located in one of the French regions; observations of about 50 events on gender equality and diversity;

and more than 100 interviews with gender equality consultants, public officials, HR managers, diversity managers, gender equality officers and members of women's/equality networks. The data were the subject of a thematic content analysis aimed at identifying as many arguments and practices as possible for and against the promotion of gender equality in the workplace. The arguments were then categorized to design the typologies presented below.

Results and Analysis

Resisting Gender Equality

The analysis first points out the multiplicity of places of resistance to gender equality. Indeed, if the different groups of actors potentially concerned by this issue (business leaders, unionists, HR managers, female workers, etc.) are driven by their own action logics, they share some similarities when it comes to tackle this issue.

Table 1 draws a typology of the discursive resistance to gender equality, defined as a set of elaborate and complex manoeuvres, global methods designed to perpetuate the status quo (Romito, 2008); it highlights three mechanisms of negative apprehension of this topics (occultation, relativization and opposition), which are themselves split into seven strategies (denial, legitimization, dilution, relegation, perversity, futility and jeopardy); the last three being taken from the work of Hirschman (Hirschman, 1991).

Table 1: Mechanisms and Strategies of Resistance to Gender Equality in the Workplace

Mechanism	Occultation of Gender Inequalities		Relativization of Gender Inequalities		Opposition to Egalitarian Reforms		
Strategy	Denial	Legitimation	Dilution	Relegation	Perversity	Futility	Jeopardy
Any Problem?	No		Yes, but...		Yes, but...		
Standard Arguments	<p><i>Gender equality is already there</i></p> <p><i>Gender inequalities don't exist (here/anymore)</i></p> <p><i>Men and women both experience gender inequalities</i></p>	<p><i>Gender inequalities are due to social/natural gender roles</i></p> <p><i>Gender inequalities result from women's preferences and choices</i></p>	<p><i>Gender Inequalities are addressed spontaneously</i></p> <p><i>This is not a specific issue but a diversity issue</i></p>	<p><i>Stereotypes in education must first be addressed</i></p> <p><i>There are more urgent and priority issues to be addressed</i></p>	<p><i>Actions favouring women discriminate against men</i></p>	<p><i>Companies can do nothing, it is a social issue</i></p>	<p><i>Actions in favour of equality threaten the survival of companies</i></p>

Table 2 discloses a multitude of tactics that support the resistance strategies transversely; ten tactics have been identified: euphemising, blaming, psychologizing, depoliticizing, naturalizing, partitioning, discrediting, complicating, symmetrizing and dramatizing. The singular role and omnipresence of the “discrediting tactic” may be underlined, which

aims to depreciate and stigmatize gender equality promoters and experts. Not only does their action suffer from a suspicion of militancy that is incompatible with the managerial orthodoxy, but it also suffers from the negative connotation associated with feminism in French society, the terms “feminist/feminism” being rarely used in the economic world (Blanchard, Boni-Le Goff & Rabier, 2013).

Table 2: Tactics of Resistance to Gender Equality at Work

Tactics	Standard Discursive Practices
Euphemising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimizing figures and facts about gender inequalities in the language • Overvaluing of minority counter-examples • Mitigating individual/collective responsibilities
Blaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transferring responsibility for gender inequalities on women
Psychologizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referring gender inequalities to personal factors and not to organizational or societal factors
Depoliticizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disconnecting gender equality from power issue
Naturalizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anchoring gender inequalities in a natural social order • Valuation of a “male” and “female” instinct
Partitioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dividing the different forms of gender inequalities to ensure that their continuity and structural nature are not being considered • Dividing the women’s group (according to their social, ethnic origin, etc.) to prevent collective awareness
Discrediting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depreciation and stigmatization of gender equality promoters, their arguments and initiatives, in the name of their activism and/or feminism • Disqualification of gender equality experts/expertise for their failing to meet scientific or managerial standards
Complicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing difficulties in understanding gender inequalities • Accentuating difficulties in the implementation of gender equality
Symmetrizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equalizing the discriminatory situations experienced by women and men
Dramatizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exaggerating and staging the uselessness and dangers of the promotion of gender equality

Promoting Gender Equality Against Resistance

The analysis then adopts the perspective of gender equality consultants. The ones encountered for interviews largely discussed the resistance they daily face and a common observation has stood out: professional gender equality is a difficult work, and a work that is hard to sell. Consultants put forward two interpretations to support this statement: the lack of knowledge, in the two-fold meaning of ignorance and misunderstanding of gender equality issues; and the lack of recognition, in the meaning of challenging the legitimacy of intervening on this topic. Doing so, they particularly underline some gender-specific factors of resistance, dealing with cognitive resistance (the lack of gender expertise), psychological resistance (the fear of being challenged or judged on a topic that touches the intimate and structures identities) and political resistance (the lack of willingness to question the existing gendered power games).

On the basis of this diagnosis, gender equality consultants set their strategies to copy with resistance; priority is given to raising awareness that gender inequalities are a problem that must be addressed right now, which appears as a sine qua non condition for legitimizing their consulting and for selling services. Table 3 emphasizes two complementary strategies that are used to “reveal” this issue to audiences and potential clients: making gender inequalities visible and arguing to convince. Table 4 discloses a multitude of tactics that support the revelation strategies transversely.

Table 2: Strategies for Promoting Gender Equality at Work

Mechanism	Revealing Gender Inequalities				
Strategy	Making Gender Inequalities Visible		Arguing		
Approach	Describing	Explaining	Reassuring	Committing	Capturing interest
Objectives	<i>Providing a clear and unquestionable picture of the situation</i>	<i>Providing a common understanding of the situation</i>	<i>Overcoming audiences' fears and reluctance to tackle gender inequalities</i>	<i>Fostering engagement on the basis of moral arguments</i>	<i>Generating positive and beneficial representations of gender equality</i>

Table 2: Tactics for Promoting Gender Equality at Work

Tactics	Standard Discursive Practice
Clarifying	• Explaining the concepts, framework for action and mechanisms producing gender inequalities
Showing accuracy	• Using precise figures, data and facts
Being scientific	• Using scientific studies and concepts • Using establish and/or recognized theories and scientific results • Build bridges with socially accepted analyses
Using examples	• Valuing the efforts of made in other organizations/services to encourage identification and imitation
Using technology	• Relying on technical devices to legitimize the intervention
Neutralizing	• Distancing from all forms of activism/feminism • Distancing from any emotional dimension
De-dramatizing	• Using a humorous register
Relieving guilt	• Demonstrating empathy • Highlighting mechanisms that go beyond individuals
Politicizing	• Anchoring gender equality in values, political and social issues
Raising awareness of responsibilities	• Reminding individual and collective responsibilities
De-partitioning	• Emphasizing the continuum of gender inequalities
Valuating	• Highlighting the benefits in terms of risk prevention • Highlighting the benefits in terms of business case
Exercising entryism	• Integrating gender equality into other priority and legitimate issues

Discussion and Conclusion

Finally, the paper discusses strategic dilemmas experienced by gender equality consultants as the result of the confrontation between their own ideals and their financial dependence on clients in a quite flat and competitive market. It also underlines the interest of studying discursive resistance to gender equality in organizations and advocates that it should be recognized as a key dimension of the work of gender equality agents since it is “a powerful instrument for change” (Wasserman & al., 2008); for instance, it could be systematically integrated to their training and be the subject of regular formal discussions within the peer community. At last, the paper highlights some limits of this work, including the absence of organizational context in which resistance and strategies to overcome them take place.

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