# The role of negative stakeholders when implementing gender equality initiatives: An example from Norwegian academia

Extended abstract

Max 1500 words

**Key words:** Gender balance initiatives, academia, negative stakeholders, social innovation processes

# Introduction

Gender inequality exists in today’s workplaces and is constantly reproduced by systems, structures, and social processes (Acker, 1990; Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Fotaki & Harding, 2019). Societal norms and expectations can influence how men and women are treated and the career opportunities available to them (cf. Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2019)(Svenkerud & Ballangrud, 2019). To move from inequality to equality requires transformational change (de Vries 2016) and sustainable processes. Although there has been a great deal of research on the phenomenon of inequality, we know less about how to remedy it. Notions of gender neutrality and meritocracy within organizations, which erase the history and the complexity of gender imbalance, continue today (Scully and Wahl, 2007). Academia is no exception to these systems of gender inequality and these myths (cf. Aguinis, Ji, & Joo, 2018; Bailey, Peetz, Strachan, Whitehouse, & Broadbent, 2016;; Miller & Roksa, 2019).

To ensure the attainment of gender equality and to guarantee the sustainability of equality in academia, organizations and leaders must continuously work with systems, structures and processes and understand that gender equality is not a result but a process. Drake et al. (2017) and others (Lindberg, Forsberg, & Karlberg, 2015) have suggested the role of social innovation to implement gender equality initiatives at the organizational level.

Social innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas to meet social needs (Mulgan, Tucker, Rushanara, & Sanders, 2007). It has also been applied to address social problems or social concerns (Herrera, 2015:1468) such as historical inequalities, unfair privilege, and structural favoritism. In such cases, its end result (value) is accumulated on the level of society or some other institutional or collective level. Phills (2008) writes of social innovations; “Any novel and useful solution to a social need or problem, that is better than existing approaches (i.e., more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just) and for which the value created (benefits) accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals”.

Gender inequality in academia may fit this definition, especially when it relates to the lack of women in top academic positions, as it may be less apparent within specific departments and schools, and more obvious across institutional fields and at specific institutions. Nonetheless, solutions and changes must, to a large degree, be started at the organizational and individual levels. For example, the problem of few female professors within specific male dominated fields such as economics or engineering, may indicate a social problem within the professional field, but actual initiatives to recruit and mobilize more women to qualify for professorship must be targeted towards individual women working at specific organizations. When this is done, it may seem unfair to others who are competing for positions and resources within these organizations, or even worse, it may be interpreted as discrimination by those men who are currently systemically, albeit not individually favored. Research has shown that diversity initiatives receive differential support depending on who you are (Abramovic & Traavik, 2017) and that men can be less favorable to such initiatives. Gender equality policies may be seen as a zero-sum game (competition) by men with women taking resources away from them (Kuchynka, Bosson, Vandello, & Puryear, 2018). (Ruthig, Kehn, Gamblin, Vanderzanden, & Jones, 2016).

Within social innovation theory, stakeholders are central (Drake, 2018). Stakeholders are those who can positively or negatively affect or be affected by the success of an innovation (Cels, de Jong & Nauta, 2012:13). Being social in nature, it follows that social innovations are bound to involve numerous stakeholders with potentially conflicting interests, perceptions and preferences (Lettice & Parekh, 2010:141). According to Schumpeter (1942), no matter how many advantages an innovation can produce, disruption is bound to occur. At the very minimal, the status quo is disrupted. And disruptions must be foreseen and managed. Normally, the focus is put on how to engage stakeholders who may positively affect social innovation efforts (Sørensen & Torfing, 2014). Negative stakeholders are rarely studied and may pose a threat to planned or ongoing change processes (Cels et al., 2012; Razali & Anwar (2011).

In this paper we will explore a gender equality initiative as a social innovation, and examine the importance of identifying and influencing negative stakeholders. The aim of the initiative, which is the empirical example that serves as the basis for our investigation, was to increase the number of female professors at a higher education institution. We will investigate how male colleagues may perceive and interpret such initiatives through the lens of existing ideologies of meritocracy and a gender-neutrality, and their role as negative stakeholders. We then discuss how these perceptions may be constructively handled by change makers and action researchers.

# The study

The empirical starting point for our study is a Norwegian gender balance project entitled *Women in Research* (WIR), conducted from 2015 to 2017 at the University College of the Milky Way (UCM) (both names are pseudonyms). WIR was, in turn, a part of a more comprehensive national programme, with its main objective to “support cultural and structural renewal in the research system to promote gender equality and a sustainable research system” (Work programme, 2013-2017:8). WIR was operated as an action research project with one of the current authors as a participant in the four-member research team[[1]](#footnote-1). The overall aim of the project was to enable more women to qualify for full professorships. More specifically, the research application emphasized actions to be implemented at two levels: (i) targeting individual women who were placed on the tier beneath the top academic position of professor (female talents) and (ii) targeting leaders, the academic career culture and possible systemic practices that might impact women’s actual career opportunities and behaviour in practice. The primary action that was implemented at the level of ‘women talents’ involved a network of 58 women who were invited to participate in 1 and 2-days seminars twice a year. In addition, the network members were eligible for career promoting measures, such as access to a mentor, having their curriculum vitae assessed by a professor or otherwise qualified expert, or applying for extra funding that could be applied to buy oneself free from teaching and other non-merit based duties and work tasks.

In this paper, we will specifically examine an example of a negative stakeholder and how their actions led to the termination of the project. Over the course of year two of the WIR project, this stakeholder, a male employee, set in motion a series of events, based on arguments rooted in notions of gender neutrality and meritocracy, which led to an official complaint and eventually the project being shut down prematurely.

We will focus our study on the powerful impact that one individual stakeholder can have on stopping social innovation for gender equality. First, we will argue that in order to sustain gender balance and equality negative stakeholders need to be identified and influenced. We propose that by looking at the WIR project from a social innovation perspective, we can uncover the potential impact that negative stakeholders have in the process. Second, we study the role that the myths of meritocracy (Scully, 1997) and gender neutrality play in enabling negative stakeholders to resist gender balance initiatives. Lastly, we put forward recommendations for how to implement gender balance initiatives in academia by actively managing not only the positive stakeholders but also the negative ones.

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1. The other three members are Brit Ballangrud, Jorun Ulvestad and Sigrun Svenkerud. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)