Abstract

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submitted by

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**Non-Sustainability of Gender and Diversity Policies – A Survival Strategy for Organizations?**

*Point of Departure: Economisation and Social Expectation for Social Justice*

Organizations in the private as well as in the public sphere are challenged by two social shifts. First, under the heading of economisation and the neoliberal shift, principles of economic guidance and steering have been translated into the public sector (state administrations, institutions in the health and education sector) for the purpose of cost savings and increased efficiency. Second, democratic values (e.g. gender equality, diversity, ecological sustainability) are being transferred from the public sector into private market. Companies are facing pressures from governments, consumers, employees and investors and, thus, are required to take up and implement strategies for social justice. In other words: Compared to past times, both spheres are more and more influenced by each other and public and private organizations are under growing pressure for change.

*Research Question*

Our starting point is the question, how organizations in both spheres, the public and the private sector in Germany, adopt to the new demands and how these changes impact on gender equality and diversity policies. In Germany, public and private organizations are still strongly characterized by gender inequality: women are less likely to occupy higher management positions, take on less powerful, less prestigious and low-paid employment overall, and the German labor market is largely segregated by gender in vertical and horizontal way.

*First*, we assume that the economization of the public might change the argument that has so far advocated social justice issues (such as gender equality) within public organizations. Economic efficiency might take the place of justice, which means that gender and diversity policies are more and more aligned with economic issues and procedures and only welcome as long as they promise a win. *Second*, we assume that the increasing demands for social justice that are rather new for the private sector might be able to promote gender and diversity policies in private companies, given that these organizations may face public criticism and a loss of legitimacy if they do not promote gender equality and diversity.

*Theoretical Background*

The theoretical starting point of our analysis is neo-institutionalist theory that we combine with feminist perspectives. In line with organizational neo-institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Powell and DiMaggio, 1983) we assume that formal organizations are embedded in concrete social, political and economic environments, that are highly institutionalized and that they – for the sake of their survival – have to adapt towards these formal rules, social norms and cultural values, political and legal orders (e.g. guidelines and laws) as well as to cognitive scripts and habits. In other words, neither public nor private organizations can completely ignore the new demands placed on them. However, organizations face numerous, complex and sometimes contradicting requirements. Neo-institutionalism assumes that organizations decouple formal structure activities from informal practices and routines, when they face contradictory demands.

However, in this theoretical debate is not clarified how and when organizations tend to decouple. We add a feminist perspective (Funder, 2014) to shed light on powerful hegemonic groups, such as men, that influence and shape organization’s androcentric worldviews and thereby create gender inequalities. From this perspective, the institutionalization of external demands is no automatic process, but the result of power inbalances between different organizational actors.

*Research Design*

For the analysis, we are using the empirical example of universities and an automotive supplier company in Germany. The study about the private sector is a case study (30 expert interviews, document analysis) about the inner-organizational implementation process of diversity management (Gruhlich, 2016). The case study of the automotive supplier exemplifies how private companies perceive and react to the increased social pressure on gender justice and diversity. The study about the public sector is focusing on diffusion and institutionalization of gender equality and diversity policies into the higher education systems in Germany (Weber, 2017). Universities are a representative example of the economization of the public because the governance model of university organization in Germany has changed towards neoliberal university (Riegraf and Weber, 2017).

*R**e**sults*

The results show that gender equality and diversity strategies are to some extent accepted and promoted within the organizations. However, the organizational commitment remains on a symbolical/discursive level. Even though, there are official responsibilities for gender and diversity (e.g. in the form of equal opportunities officers, diversity managers, etc.) put in place, they often prove to be ‘toothless tigers’ because they lack the resources and sanction options for sustainable changes in the organizations. We offer two explanations for this finding:

First, organizations are decoupling their formal activities from their practices in order to avoid expensive and complex restructuring and to be able to adapt flexibly to environmental requirements. In this sense, it can also be said that, acting non-sustainability regarding gender and equality strategies is a central survival strategy of organizations. Their refusal to make sustainable changes to their gender and diversity structure is justified and disguised by their publicly displayed commitment to either already being egalitarian or doing everything possible to be equal soon.

Second, gender equality and diversity politics are top-down politics that need the support from leadership level. Both concepts are open for interpretation and flexible, so that they could adopt to several organizational contexts. On the one hand, this openness and ‘elasticity’ proves to be an advantage; it explains the broader acceptance of diversity and gender politics. On the other hand, there are no binding requirements and clearly defined measures, methods or instruments for equality and, accordingly, only a few options for assessing the achieved equality. Their implementation depends to a large extent on strong actors and individual interests, of which there are too few.

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