Doing Gender in a Local and Regional Context
- An Innovative Process of Mainstreaming Gender Equality

Hans Lundkvist & Hanna Westberg

Abstract
Sustainable regional and business development depends on access to people motivated to invest their lives in a region and its enterprise. However in a time of demographical changes, urbanisation and new values on life and work among the next generation, the issue of attractiveness is crucial for both a region and its workplaces. The purpose of this chapter is to describe a process methodology for increased gender awareness in an enterprise and to emphasise the relationship between organisational and regional development. In this context, we use the innovative combination of the two scientific fields, gender and action-research in a collaborative project between researchers and an engineering enterprise in a semi-rural area of Sweden. This collaboration aims for a more gender mainstreamed organisation so as to retain and attract the most suitable labour for the future. During the long-term process, the employer and employees became more conscious of the importance of gender-equal issues; a factor we believe to be an important prerequisite of sustainable growth.

Keywords: attractive work, employer brand, gender, innovation, sustainable growth

Introduction
In this chapter we describe the development of an innovative process for increased gender awareness. We hope this description will inspire to a more innovative use of different theories and methods. We also want to highlight conceptual similarities between social capital in a societal context with the trust that forms the basis for a sustainable change process within an organisation.

The steel and engineering industries and related services are important Swedish exports. A significant portion of these products are produced in the Bergslagen region, where the Swedish Steel Producers’ Association, Jernkontoret, runs the Triple

---

58 From the total value of exported goods 2011, the share of workshop products’ was 46.4 percent (SCB Statistic Sweden. SITC (Standard International Trade Classification) http://www.scb.se/Pages/TableAndChart_26625.aspx
59 Bergslagen is a major ore-producing region in central Sweden, lying northwest of Stockholm and extending from Lake Vänern (Sweden’s largest lake) to the Gulf of Bothnia. It falls predominantly within the
Steelix innovation system,⁶⁰ a cluster consisting of about 700 SMEs,⁶¹ seven steel producing companies, manufacturers of mechanical equipment for metal forming and industrial IT, 13 municipalities, universities and research centres, regional actors and regional authorities. The aim is to create new knowledge and competence through connections and interaction between smaller and larger enterprises, universities, research institutes and the community.

However, since all regions, innovation systems and enterprises are dependent on access to people, the current demographical changes, urbanisation and new values concerning life and work present employers with challenges regarding the supply of employees for the next generation. The ageing population in EU countries indicates that the struggle for talent and competence has only just begun. Thus, demographic development, migration and a strongly gender-segregated labour market are expected to be obstacles to industrial as well as sustainable regional growth. Gender equality issues have been on the political agenda in Sweden for a long time. Although much progress has been made, many obstructive structures remain. The statistics show Sweden to be one of the European countries with the highest participation rate for women in the labour force. At the same time, Sweden has the most gender-segregated labour market. In a practical sense, there is one labour market for women and one for men. The labour market is also vertically gender-segregated, with a majority of women in lower-level positions and men in higher positions (Gonäs et al. 2005; SOU 1997:137; SOU 2004:43). In addition to these challenges, the traditional structure of the economic life in many industrial regions is based on traditions with a male norm. As a result, women relocate to larger cities for further education or employment in other industries (Region Bergslagen, 2002; Forsberg et al. 2006; Hedlund 2008; Westberg 2008).

Development trends in regional economic policy are largely influenced by interests in various forms of interaction and systems, such as innovation systems. Governments and researchers of different disciplines have pointed out that innovations of different kinds occur in interactions between actors, which are important for regional development (Brulin and Westberg 2000; Westberg ed 2005; Reflection Note on Integrating partnerships in ESF programmes 2007-2013; Svensson and Nilsson, eds. 2008; Innovation & Gender 2011; Brulin and Svensson, 2011). Collaboration can take place between different types of organisations which have both complementary and similar orientations. The researchers also see collaboration between different actors in the development of strong coalitions as a basis for learning and to meet future changes (Gustavsen and Hofmeier, 1997; Etzkowitz and Leyersdorf 1997; Svensson, Jakobsson and Åberg 2001). Over time, various theories form the understanding of innovation and new ideas, trying to incorporate the processes and relationships as keys to innova-

⁶⁰ An initiative started by the Swedish Steel Producers’ Association.
⁶¹ Small and Medium-sized Enterprises.
tion and learning. These ideas are a reaction to the innovation theories which reduce everything to structure, actor and system and which do not include the processes, procedures and relationships that exist within the system. Incorporating a gender perspective into an innovative environment does not necessarily lead to gender equality, but it can reveal injustice and how gender is done\(^{62}\) in this environment; this will create gender awareness and knowledge of action. In this case, the gender perspective can be an important contributor to innovative and sustainable growth. Action for increased gender awareness can also be seen as one important parameter in making the engineering industry more attractive to women, as a strategy for attracting available talent (best suited to the work task) regardless of sex. The benefits of gender equality are further enhanced through a more gender-balanced family and work life, which in addition to economic growth, increases the quality of life and wellbeing for both men and women. Thus, gender mainstreaming\(^{63}\) in innovative environments can contribute to gender equality and sustainable growth (Westberg eds. 2005; Innovation & Gender 2011).

When in 2008 VINNOVA (the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems) opened its call for ‘applied gender research within strong research and innovation milieus’ (TIGER), Triple Steelix, with the mission to support regional development based on prosperous enterprises, found an opportunity to finance collaboration with regional enterprises. Based on discussions with enterprises and inspired by successful projects/processes such as ‘Learning by Fighting’\(^{64}\) (Gunnarsson, Westberg, Andersson, and Balkmar 2007) and the action-oriented gender research project ‘Gender network’\(^{65}\) (Andersson, Amundsdotter, Svensson 2008), the project ‘Gender Perspective for Attractive Work’ (GATT) was created. Unlike some other projects, the purpose of GATT was to do collaborative research with private companies willing to generate gender awareness, not only for selected groups of staff but for all of them.

Later in the same year, the Swedish Steel Producers’ Association received the encouraging message that Triple Steelix had been granted funding by VINNOVA for the GATT project. With funding secured and highly motivated for participatory gender

---

\(^{62}\) When West and Zimmerman published their article ‘Doing Gender’ (1987) they put their finger on a theme which, has appeared in different guises in feminist theory on sex/gender during the second half of the 1900s.


\(^{64}\) Learning by Fighting was a project within VINNOVA during the period 2003-2005. Its aims were to develop gender mainstreaming in the organisation and strengthen the gender competence when launching programmes and evaluating applications.

\(^{65}\) For more information see the chapter, Developing Innovative Organisations Using Action-orientated Gender Research, by Andersson and Amundsdotter.
research, Hanna Westberg, an associate professor with long experience in gender research and fieldwork in collaboration with engineering enterprises and Hans Lundkvist, a doctoral student with extensive experience in business and project development, reconnected with the companies that had expressed an interest in collaborating earlier in the year. However, due to the global finance crisis, motivation to participate was significantly reduced. We met with polite but firm rejection regarding cooperative knowledge production. One company even replied that its focus was on continuing to exist for another three months. This reaction indicates that the motivation for private businesses to participate in regional initiatives for sustainable change processes is influenced by the state of the market. Thus, finding an enterprise willing to invest time in an applied gender equality research project became even more difficult. It was not until we listened to the companies’ actual needs and thoughts on future developments that collaboration could be initiated. The breakthrough came one evening when Hans Lundkvist participated in a meeting with volunteers representing different regional organisations which had gathered to discuss the meaning of the concept of employer brand (Sullivan 2004; Backhouse and Tikoo, 2004; Parment and Dyhre, 2009). After the meeting, the HR manager at Dellner Couplers AB (presented later) expressed great interest in collaborating with the GATT project. Both the HR manager and Hans saw the notion of employer brand as a door-opener for a collaborative process generating increased gender awareness. The project had finally found a partner with which to collaborate.

This chapter aims to describe a process methodology for increased gender awareness in an enterprise and to emphasise the relationship between organisational and regional development. It also shows how gender mainstreaming became an important notion, a development parameter, for an expanding enterprise in a semi-rural region.

Interactive research as an innovative collaborative process

Kurt Lewin introduced the concept of action research in the 1940 and the meaning of the concept has developed over the years. A large number of international articles are found in the anthology *The Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Articles from the Nordic context can be found in the anthology *Action and Interactive Research: Beyond practice and theory* (Aagaard Nielsen, K. & Svensson, L. (eds.) 2006) and another anthology *Gemensamt kunskapande – den interaktiva forskningens praktik* (Johannisson, Gunnarsson and Stjernberg (eds.) 2008).

---

66 The concept of employer brand with a gender perspective will be elaborated upon in forthcoming articles.
67 In this contribution, we address the concept of gender mainstreaming as an ongoing process for a change of norm and discourse and a strategy for gaining increased gender equality within the enterprise.
Docherty et.al (2008) stress that there is a difference between action and interactive research. They emphasise a difference in involvement and how active the researcher is in the process; in interactive research the researchers are not supposed to be as active in the process as in action research. The interactive research perspective aims for an equal exchange of experience, learning and knowledge between researcher and participant. The ‘ideal’ interactive research process involves the researcher and practitioner on the basis of their experiences and knowledge. Together they formulate the research plan and then work throughout the entire change process of research, analysis, recording and dissemination of the results achieved (Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson, 2006; Svensson, 2002; Gunnarsson, Westberg, Andersson and Balkmar 2007). Reason explains the purpose of action research in a broader sense as:

*The essential purpose of action research is to address issues of concern to individuals and communities in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose is to contribute to the increased well-being—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of humanity and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a)* pp.191

In practice, the degree and level of interactivity varies not only due to the degree of action research but also by different phases of the research process. The role played by the researcher in the interactive approach underlines the supportive part played by the researcher. This role constitutes an important procedure in the interactive research process. Hence, a distinction is made in relation to the more traditional role of researcher as observer. Also emphasised is the difference between the supportive role of researcher and the more advisory role of consultant and therapist (McGill and Brockbank, 2004; Gunnarsson et al. 2007).

The interactive researcher has no ambition to run development forward exclusively or take responsibility for a programme or project. Leading the development work is seen as a task for all involved and the desire for local commitment is perceived as a necessity for development work to be sustainable (Lindholm et.al, 2011). Lindholm et.al. also stress that:

*Development also requires continuous analysis and reflection, in which different strategies and approaches are balanced against each other in everyday situations of power and conflicts of interests, traditions and practices, on both the societal and organisational levels (Lindholm et.al 2011) pp.15* (translated by the authors).

Trust is essential in order to fulfil this mission.

Our project strategy was to take steps towards a vision of gender equality in the enterprises, by raising awareness of gender equality issues and gender structures. These structures are often hidden and we are all more or less influenced by them, implying that the project could face both conscious and unconscious resistance. For this reason
it is important to use basic examples to raise the general understanding of gender as a construction and how it is reproduced in everyday life. Inspiration for this action can be found from the four different “points of entry” or perspectives defined by Acker (1999, p 180-185): Procedures, activities, divisions which people do that leads to gender/segregation patterns – Images, symbols, forms of consciousness which justify and recognise existing gender power relations as natural– Interaction between individuals such as interplay between individuals and groups – Internalization of and adaptation to gender-marked expectations and opportunities. This strategy (for increased gender awareness) of combining the concept of ‘doing gender’ and action research in collaboration with practitioners, can be seen as an innovation-driven process (VINNOVA Report VR 2011:14).

Women wishing to enter the male-dominated fields, must often break through resistance from men who are defending a male-marked workplace, with power relationships relating to fields and positions. It is important to find a balance so that the awareness-raising process is initiated with as little resistance as possible. Other projects have described their experiences of being forced to consider how progressively the issue of gender can be approached in a change process without causing strong resistance (Coleman and Rippin 2000; Gonäs ed. 2005). In other words, most change processes will at some point meet resistance and hesitation in particular processes that challenge norms and traditions. In the field of engineering for example, men’s interpretative prerogative is used in defining qualifications, which keeps women from technical work (Gunnarsson, 1994; Abrahamsson and Gunnarsson, 2002). Amundsdotter (2009) describes different kinds of resistance and refutation as power strategies. She highlights three dimensions: the fear of being declared hysterical or crazy, the fear of losing position and the fear of facing opposition.

**Trust, an essential feature**

Approaching an engineering enterprise stemmed from a natural science (positivistic) paradigm and was formed by a technical-economical rationality, with issues regarding gender equality and social construction; we tried to understand their mission, aims, problems and solutions in order to establish trust and participatory confidence. This trust is an important parameter when performing interactive research. We advocate that the trust established between the participants, as well as between the “blue collars” and a managing team is as important as the social capital in a region or nation. Social capital is built up through ongoing discussion regarding the citizens’ trust in public institutions, the citizens themselves and the present social and cultural climate. Social capital is understood in different ways by different researchers, but in short, trust in civil society is a very important part of social capital (Putnam 1996; Holmberg and Weibull 2000; Uslaner, 2000). Similar to social capital in civil society we believe that social capital is needed in a collaboration project between researchers and the enterprise. Gustavsen (2003) suggests that one can see action research as a process of building social capital.
Whether or not social capital in a society is a positive resource depends heavily on the rationality on which it is based, that is, on technical-economical rationality or responsible rationality. Technical-economic rationality views people as a means to an end. Responsible rationality, on the other hand, sees people as an end in themselves. (Westberg 2006; Westberg and Eklund 2008). How social capital is generated and functions depends on the dominant type of rationality in society. In many contexts, the concept of technical-economical rationality is perceived as superordinate to responsible rationality. The apparent gender-neutral orientation of a prevailing technical-economical rationality does not identify gender equality as a resource except when a win-win situation is demonstrably possible. The profitability of the market-economy approach, which is based on the values of technical-economic rationality, sometimes conflicts with the intention of the national strategy of a sustainable society, which is based on the values associated with responsible rationality. We believe that bringing up gender issues in a collaborative change process within a culture of technical-economical rationality requires innovative methods.

An example of regional collaboration

Dellner Couplers AB (DCAB) is an expanding company which manufactures, sells and maintains couplers for trains in a global market. The headquarters, comprising corporate management, the development department and some production, is located in Vika, a semi-rural area 250 km northeast of Stockholm. Production facilities are also located in Poland, the US, India and China; sales and service organisations are located in several other countries. The total annual turnover for the entire enterprise is close to USD 100 million and there are 500 employees worldwide. In the enterprise’s expansion plans the headquarters will remain in Vika, a geographical location owing to the company’s history from 1941. However, this location can be seen as an obstacle. To counter this drawback, the company expressed the need to build a better reputation on the labour market, strengthen their employer brand and become more attractive as an employer. When the collaboration between Dellner Couplers and the project was launched in 2009, the plant in Sweden had 180 staff members, 75% men and 25% women (45 people in total). The average age was 40 and amongst the women employed, two-thirds (30) were office workers with administrative duties and one-third worked with production. The business management comprised one woman and six men. Of the total of 25 people in middle management, 21 were men and four were women. The proportion of women in managing positions was thus 19%.

The collaborative process

As researchers in the GATT project, we do not want to do research on, for, or about the company. Instead, we seek a participatory approach with the aim of developing new knowledge alongside the company. Based upon long experience in feminist action research, Hanna Westberg’s role is to support and guide Hans Lundkvist in action planning and in his role as a facilitator during the change process and the workshops.
With a degree in mechanical engineering and several years in the engineering field he is familiar with the activities, including design, production and commercial requirements, of engineering companies. Moreover, as a man, father, and part of the male norm in Swedish society, he also has an understanding of the tension that exists around the gender equality debate. His experiences contribute to a wider understanding of the complexity and resistance which might exist when sex and gender equality is discussed. In order to establish a sustainable relationship (likened to social capital) with mutual trust between the parties, the collaboration started with an open discussion between Hans and the HR manager. Using the concept of employer brand was both an innovative and important strategy for the HR manager, who was to present the plan to the board, comprised mostly of men. The discussion was summarised in an outline/picture, logical framework, which described the causality among different activities contributing to a more attractive work for both women and men. After informing the company management of the planned activities, the logic, methods and expected results of the change process, the HR manager was mandated to begin the intervention. The intervention plan included two major activities involving the whole company during the year of collaboration:

- Invitation to all employees to answer a questionnaire regarding attractive work.
- Requesting all employees to meet for a mutual exchange regarding the results from the questionnaire and the concept of ‘doing gender’.

Supported by us, the HR manager was responsible for informing both the managing team and the personnel during the process. She accomplished this at a general assembly using different media, such as a special bulletin board, intranet and oral presentations. By inviting all personnel to participate in the change process, the enterprise expected to accomplish a genuinely solid platform for a long-term process without support from the researchers. The internal work was to be continued through reflective learning by a group of volunteers who deepened their understanding of doing gender in workplaces and in life generally.

Starting with questions about attractive work

The interaction started with an employee questionnaire (known as the *att questionnaire*) developed by the Theme Working Life research team at Dalarna University. The questions were based on a model (Åteg, Hedlund and Pontén 2004) which describes the qualities of an attractive job. The questionnaire was distributed in order to find out the employees’ opinions on the qualities which contribute to attractive work and how they perceive their current jobs. It was developed with a ‘gender-neutral’ approach and did not address the dimension of gender. The major reason for choosing this questionnaire was its local competence and proven results as a good starter for a process of discussing work conditions. This strategy was used in order to respond to the culture we perceived to be prevalent at DCAB. However, since the questionnaire
was not developed to cover gender, we decided to raise gender issues in the subsequent workshops, which were woven into the questionnaire feedback process. The aim was to increase awareness of gender issues as a component of future success and appreciative new knowledge.

All employees were given the option of answering the questionnaire. In order to obtain an acceptable number of answers, the employees were given a choice of two different methods of completing the questionnaire, a web-based version or a paper form. The questions in both formats were identical and all responses were entered into the same database. To obtain enough responses to the \textit{att questionnaire}, two response periods were held.

Between the two response periods, the anchoring process continued with an internal leadership conference, at which Hans Lundkvist described the project, process steps, aims and desired results to a group of 20 of the 25 middle managers. This gave them an opportunity to discuss specific questions with us and was an opportunity for us to stress the importance of inspiring the rest of the staff to respond to the questionnaire. An extra questionnaire with general questions about gender equality was handed out. This extra questionnaire was extracted from a gender-sensitive checklist and the reason for using it was to get some information on opinions regarding gender from inside the enterprise before other actions were commenced aimed at developing a method of mainstreaming gender for sustainable development and growth\textsuperscript{68}.

\textbf{Workshops}

During the autumn of 2009, 13 workshops were held with the participation of approximately 130 employees divided into groups of between four and 22. The composition of the groups was based on the company’s organisational structure. A majority (11 of the 13 workshops) took place outside the company in an assembly room in a separate building. This was an advantage since in the field of action/participatory research it is important to create arenas for interaction which allow participants and researchers to share knowledge and experiences (Aagaard Nielsen and Nielsen 2006, p. 79). The assembly room was a neutral area for all involved and a traditional meeting place for thought and reflection. The duration of each workshop was three hours.

The purpose of the workshops was to present and discuss the results from the \textit{att questionnaire} and raise awareness regarding gender issues. After the two first workshops we (the researchers) did not feel satisfied with the process that had been implemented because we did not feel we had accomplished the aim of creating a reflective dialogue with the participants. Our strategy for interweaving the concept of ‘doing gender’ in the interactive process based on the results from the questionnaire had not worked out satisfactorily. This was also recognised by one of the managers who complained after attending the third workshop and criticised the approach regarding the

\textsuperscript{68} A total of 19 staff members (management and middle management) answered the questionnaire.
issue of gender as being overly modest and cowardly. An explanation for this inadequacy is that our awareness of the reaction which gender discussions can cause made us approach the subject very cautiously at the beginning of the workshop series. Due to the unsatisfactory result, the design of the workshops was dramatically rearranged and became more focused, challenging and innovation-driven. This flexibility was both facilitated and required by the chosen action research strategy. In brief, the new agenda for the workshop sessions was divided into three phases: an introduction phase, a gender perspective phase (‘doing gender’) and a phase in which the results of the survey were presented, discussed and an action list jointly drawn up.

Aiming for an open atmosphere based on mutual trust, the workshops began with some information about the project, project owner, the Swedish Steel Producers’ Association/Triple Steelix and the financier, VINNOVA. The participants were also given a brief description of the project’s objectives for the enterprise and what benefits each actor (company/researcher) was expected to gain through the collaboration. Since time for the workshop was limited, this opening phase was crucial in establishing a foundation of trust (social capital) between the participants and the researchers.

The purpose of the second phase, the gender perspective (‘doing gender’), was to raise awareness of how gender is created in our daily lives and how it may affect the perceived attractiveness of the workplace. To support the process, we started to use pictures, anecdotes, and provocative arguments to contribute to a more lively interaction. The new innovative approach using pictures contributed to a more open atmosphere and we were encouraged to use anecdotes to ‘open up’ the discussions.

Pictures from the design field showing forms and functions challenging daily opinions were chosen. In this way, the issue of equality did not come too close to an individual’s private sphere. Everybody saw the same pictures, everyone was on a common footing, and no one was singled out or accused. However, on one occasion, a man commented loudly, ‘Is this some stupid feminist initiative?’ By the end of the workshop, however, he was more relaxed. Hee Pedersen (2008) advocated the usefulness of pictures and concluded that the inclusion of pictorial material is a useful way of developing ‘poststructuralist thinking technologies’ to further expand our understanding of the complexities of communication in both individual and collective sense-making. She stated that images have a broader and more open content than single words and that picture and transform abstract and complex feelings, opinions, experiences, concerns, attitudes, and worries into tangible objects which the practitioners can actually talk about, explain and expand.

Anecdotes or storytelling can be seen as knowledge-sharing stories which, if well designed and well told, can help others learn from past situations and respond in future ones (Sole 2002). This can contribute to a more open atmosphere encouraging the exchange of thoughts if handled with care, nourishing the social relationship in that moment. The use of analogies is a method recommended by Ullmark (2007) when striving for understanding in a dialogue between, say, a designer and client about
planned target images. It can function as an eye opener to explain complex matters. Analogies to the past, to other firms or industries, and to other competitive settings like sports or war are useful in strategic discussions (Gavetti, Levinthal and Rivkin, 2005). Coro and Taylor (2007) promoted the use of analogy when a complex technology is explained as a strategy to get prospects to comprehend a unique offer. In this context, the concept of ‘doing gender’ is the complex issue to explain.

In addition to the pictures and depending on the group’s level of openness, Hans very often used anecdotes, analogies and provocations to start discussions. In order to de-dramatise the discussion and to create an open and permissive climate, he used his own personal experiences as a husband, father and professional in different types of businesses. He explained that he always considered himself as a caring father and an understanding husband, but that he could remember arguments about parental leave and domestic work versus work in the house or in the garden. The examples he used were based on his life as a gender-blind, non-reflective man, and the participants were asked to give feedback and comments from their own experiences. An example of an analogy was when we asked the participants if anyone knew why the car-insurance premium is higher for a young male compared with a female of the same age. Usually, often after a joke, someone explained it was due to the higher risk of young males getting involved in accidents. The analogy would then be connected to the question, ‘Who will most often use new technical investments, for example an advanced numerical controlled machine?’ Most of the time, this provocative analogy started a short discussion and gave the workshop participants an opportunity to reflect upon how males are more often taken for granted as operators when new technology is introduced. A man from the maintenance department commented that he ‘…considered women to be more cautious with the machinery than the men’, a comment another man questioned by saying, ‘Why just go 80 when you can do 120?’ The dispute was followed by a short discussion about gender, productivity, and risks. At another workshop, a female worker said, ‘… it seemed like the guys get cordless telephones, mobile phones and PowerBooks, whether they need them or not…’

The final phase of the workshop, the presentation of the results from the employee questionnaire, was divided into three steps. In the first step, an overhead slide was both shown on a screen and copies distributed to the participants. The slide showed a graph showing the 15 most important qualities, according to measurements, for work to be perceived as attractive. The chart also showed the value of how the group estimated their current job. After a brief explanation, the participants were divided in ‘beehives’ to discuss and write down suggested activities to maintain or achieve those prioritised qualities. The discussion was combined with a coffee break. In the second step, the qualities with the greatest discrepancy between desired and experienced work were presented. The groups were again asked to discuss the results and write down suggestions as to what measures they could take in order to reduce the gap. The final part of the workshop was used for a discussion on five questions about differing views of
work and working conditions between men and women. These questions were taken from the employee questionnaire and were those in which the researchers had found differences between the answers of men and women.

Before ending the workshop, we always asked the participants, ‘How has it been?’ for spontaneous feedback on the content and methodology. Many participants expressed their appreciation for taking part in the process.

Effects for the enterprise in the region

During the collaboration period, the enterprise invested a vast amount of the employees’ productive time in the change process, an investment which in the long term is expected to pay off with a more attractive and gender equal workplace. More than two thirds of the employees at Dellner Coplers participated in the workshops. They all received feedback from the results of the att-questionnaire and most were introduced to the importance of gender equality, ‘doing gender’ and reflection about their work conditions. Their new awareness can be beneficial not only as employees but also as citizens of local and regional society. Lindgren and Forsberg (2010) describe gender contracts ‘as the informal regulations which govern the everyday relations between men and women’. According to them, gender patterns exist in general, but there are local and regional variations in these patterns. From a historical perspective, various economic systems as well as local economies form contracts, which are repeated through practice when challenged in the context of economic and social transformations. This is an important consideration and will continue to be so as DCAB has a long history in a small village located in a semi-rural area; one in which it has also decided to remain.

During the three-hour workshop, all participants had the opportunity to express their thoughts, opinions and suggestions about how the enterprise could become a more attractive place to work. After the final workshop, the enterprise received more than 140 written suggestions on how to develop the company. A majority of these related to the same issues, such as physical work conditions, leadership, acknowledgement (feedback) and relations.

The managing team was aware of the shortcomings concerning the physical conditions and that many of the premises were inadequate. Therefore, an architect was commissioned to develop a proposed extension to the building. When the architect submitted the first design of the extension, the management noticed that the locker room for female employees was much smaller than that room for men. Inspired by the gender process, the management did not want to get caught in old structures and asked for a fresh proposal. The revision had a movable wall between the two sections. Thus, knowledge and awareness of management regarding gender equality had been increased. Another sign of this new awareness was that in the process of developing a new homepage with a subdirectory for careers, the subcontractor was ordered by the HR manager to be aware of the gender equality aspect when designing the page. They now understood that the layout must be appealing regardless of sex. This awareness is
important since the page for job advertisements communicates the first impression of the company to the applicant (Parment and Dyhre, 2009). Furthermore as a result of the increased awareness of the importance of gender issues, a number of employees at Dellner Couplers got the opportunity to participate in a series of seminars which gave them more inspiration and knowledge for the ongoing internal process. The aim was to secure sustainability for the new knowledge and pay attention to gender as a positive component in building a stronger employer brand.

Findings from the collaborative process
The questionnaire was an effective ‘door opener’ for gathering employees for a discussion of the construction of gender. Similarly, the concept of employer brand was crucial in getting the technical-economical rationale-driven management to listen to the suggestion of including gender issues in the collaboration to develop more attractive work in the organisation.

A clear scepticism was noticeable when the gender-related discussions began. However, when the pictures were shown, everybody focused on the images and the subject suddenly became less uncomfortable; reactions were positive, often with spontaneous comments. Furthermore, the anecdotes which Hans shared from his life started discussions which included arguments both for and against. Sometimes the discussions were very amusing, such as the one about whether razors for male and females in the same price range had different qualities of blades (Mach 3 versus Ladyshave) and if so, why? One man insisted there was a difference and knew this from his own experience because he had used a Ladyshave. On another occasion, one man presented the opposite view, also based on personal experience.

Once a trusting atmosphere had been created, the participants opened up more and gave positive as well as negative examples from the workplace. However, only in few occasions were these stories related to gender issues or how gender is constructed. Many participants expressed great appreciation for being shown the results of the questionnaire and involved in the process because they had not expected to participate. As a sign of participation, after one of the workshops one man told the story of his first summer job back in the 1960s: the women he worked with had received lower wages despite the fact that their duties were the same, a situation that the man considered unfair.

When the HR manager, a year after the last workshop, was asked what the company management had learned from the collaboration, she claimed that employers need to be courageous and dare to ask co-workers about what they consider important when choosing a place of work. Due to past problems, the management had been nervous about the results of the questionnaire. She stated, ‘I was most afraid that we would be unable to take care of the result afterwards…’ The collaboration gave the enterprise new experiences and knowledge for their journey towards becoming a more gender-aware and attractive employer. When asked if she was satisfied with the innovative process, the HR manager’s prompt answer was, ‘Yes, I think it was very good’. She
felt very confident since the process model was scientific and had been developed in collaboration. As an example of the advantages, she stressed how the idea of integrating gender equality into the discussion about employer brand would not have been possible without the inspiration and support of the project:

*I think like this: it’s still a sensitive subject and especially for me as the only woman in the management team..... for me to take the frontline role and argue for letting more women getting a chance, that’s tough, so I think we really benefitted from the project, but we have still a long way to go.*

The HR manager was later promoted to Sales and Marketing Director for the company, something she believes was a normative breakthrough thanks to the gender awareness project.

**Concluding remarks**

In an industrial environment driven by a technical-economical rationality which prioritises market demand, gender issues often become a “sidecar”, not integrated into the organisation and not seen as an important parameter for sustainable corporate as well as regional development. The lack of concern for openly discussing gender equality issues may perhaps be explained by the belief that society and most workplaces are gender equal. It has been documented, both in Sweden and abroad, that a high level of employment does not automatically result in an integrated workforce in which women and men are equally spread throughout the professions and management (Emerek et al., 2002; Rubery, Smith and Fagan; 1999). The pattern of technical-economical rationality is found within the innovation system, in Triple Steelix and amongst many companies in the industrial region. The main objective of enterprises has to be profitability, but for a more long-term sustainable development on both company and regional levels, organisations have to consider the importance of increased gender awareness and awareness of individual conditions in the workplace.

The collaboration with the enterprise revealed a lack of awareness regarding the concept of gender equality, irrespective of sex. Both women and men gave examples of resistance and ignorance at the beginning of the workshops. Gender was not seen as an issue before it was presented from the perspective of equality, and gender differences were not considered a major problem. This is probably representative of opinions of gender equality in contemporary society in general.

We found that physical work conditions, relations (power structures), management, internal organisation and communication between the different departments were more frequently debated. Women and men in the same structural position behave similarly, but women may be more likely to be discriminated against since they are positioned on lower levels in the power hierarchy. For example, responses to the *att-questionnaire* indicated that women in general found commuting back and forth to work more of a problem than men. This is not a company-related problem so much as
an example of how regional planning in general is still based on a male norm. If such discrepancies were seen as general and not gender-related problems, their solutions would benefit both women and men.

Social sustainability includes gender equality, which is also to be seen as a driving force for development and achievement of regional sustainable growth (Westberg 2008). Experiences within European social funding programmes and regional growth programmes show that, while the various project owners have an interest in gender equality, knowledge is lacking as to how this might be achieved in practice (Gunnarssons and Westberg, 2003; Westberg, 2005; Balkmar, 2006). Regions, enterprises and individuals often believe that they are compliant with the expected level of gender equality. This belief is also true of the innovation system, Triple Steelix and the company with which we collaborated.

Gender equality is a matter of awareness on the structural level among all stakeholders that are dependent on sustainable regional development. Due to the interdependency of private individuals, enterprises and regional authorities, processes for gender awareness and questioning the norm will contribute not only to more democratic but also more innovative growth. However, we think it is important to start a process of increased awareness adjusted to the context of the addressee. “Getting under the skin” of an organisation to find its gender equality needs will be a part of the solution. Since employees are part of other associations in society, the discussion about “doing gender” will not only benefit the development of the employer brand but also contribute to deeper understanding of gender on a societal level. Whether we strive for development on regional, business or individual levels, we have to think in new ways and abandon traditional norms. The collaboration between the project and the enterprise is an example of an innovative process created to make gender visible within the Triple Steelix innovation system.

To sum up: despite regional gender contracts and different terms of ignorance and resistance, we believe it is possible to increase gender awareness in enterprises and organisations but we must be perceptive and innovative. In order to establish collaboration we believe it is crucial for the researchers to meet the organisation at their actual point of need and knowledge and find an opening for a collaborative journey based on mutual respect. In our case, we achieved this through the notion of employer brand as a point of departure and got past inherent resistance in a historically masculine dominated environment.

Defining an innovation as being something new and useful (often seen in relation to a commercial market), we believe that a gender perspective will most often increase the innovative process and enlarge the success options. Consequently, we argue that the described process model, combining gender and interactive research in collaboration with practitioners, is an innovative process for generating awareness within an organisation. We also believe there to be an interdependence between individuals, enterprises and community and that, if awareness is raised among employees at an
PROMOTING INNOVATION

enterprise, this can affect not only the enterprise but also the society. With this perspective we consider that knowledge of the concept of social capital (in the sense of trust) might be relevant to achieving long-term change in an organisation and contributing to more sustainable development in the region.

From the above we, as researchers, have found great interest in further investigating the combination of employer brand and gender awareness for sustainable change processes in organisations and enterprises. An article is therefore planned.

References


Statistics Sweden: http://www.scb.se/Pages/TableAndChart__26625.aspx.


The International Labour Organization (ILO):


Westberg, Hanna & Eklund, Margareta (2008). Gender and Growth – a necessary combination for the future. info@managingdiversity.se.