Restoring the order: gender segregation as an obstacle to organisational development

Lena Abrahamsson*

Department of Human Work Sciences, Industrial Work Environment, Luleå University of Technology, SE-97187 Luleå, Sweden

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Abstract

This paper raises questions about the links between gender and organisational changes. The empirical base for the discussion is a qualitative study of the effects of organisational changes in the pulp and paper industry, the electronics industry, the food industry and the laundry industry in Sweden during the mid-1990s. At the studied companies, restoration responses in the work organisations brought the organisation back into its original form and function. The study shows that gender exerts an influence both on the existing work organisation and in the organisational change. The modern organisation, with its focus on integration and decentralisation, challenges the gender order, which is a strong system, built on segregation and hierarchy. The conclusion from the study is that gender segregating and stereotypic gender-coding of workplaces and work tasks were strong restoring mechanisms and obstacles to strategic organisational changes.

Keywords: Gender; Organisational change; Restoration

1. Introduction

In this paper, some questions about the links between gender and organisational changes at workplaces1 will be raised. More precisely, the aim is to discuss how gender-based organisational patterns can be obstacles to organisational changes in the company. The flat integrated learning organisations of the 1990s appeared to open up optimistic perspectives as regards both the company and the individual worker. This paper describes what occurred in the work organisations at eight industrial companies in Sweden when organisational changes were implemented, or perhaps merely discussed. What happened when theory was put into practice? Many organisational changes were not carried out and restoration responses in the work organisations brought the organisation back into its original form and function. This was against the explicit wishes of the companies and the ideology of management in the 1990s. In attempting to change organisations, it is essential that we understand the dynamics and outcomes of the restoration responses. One aim of this paper is to discuss and explain some of the inappropriate organisational behaviour and the restoration responses.

2. Organisational changes with high aims and optimistic perspectives—both for the company and for the individual employee

Since the early 1980s there has been a growing interest in strategic organisational changes and there are many companies in the western world that have tried to change the work organisation. Changes in the surrounding world, e.g. higher capital costs, greater competition and new technology, are thought to lead to a need for organisational changes in order to achieve higher productivity. New models with a group-based flow organisation are seen as the best way to enable companies to react more quickly to the demands of the surrounding world, thanks to less bureaucracy, faster decision-making processes and organisational learning.

Even for the individual, there are thought to be a number of favourable perspectives: the new models of
work organisation offer work assignments with opportunities both for women and men to learn and develop. One positive feature, from the employee’s point of view, is the vertical integration of work tasks, for example delegation of white-collar tasks to blue-collar workers. It is intended to be an enrichment of the substance of work and a way of delegating responsibility down through the hierarchy. One common way to do this is to assign some of the supervisor’s former duties to shopfloor workers, and this was indeed the case in the studied companies.

There are also some general expectations that flat, open, boundary-less organisations without barriers between departments, functions, and professions should become organisational structures that are better for women than the traditional hierarchy. Studies show that women have greater possibilities to function professionally in group-oriented and network organisations (Blomqvist, 1994; Gunnarsson, 1994; Kvande and Rasmussen, 1995). These studies indicate also that in these types of organisation it seems to be possible to create a working climate where women and men can work together with greater possibilities of gender equality. In its pure form, the flat integrated organisation means the “mixing” of men and women, without such an obvious hierarchy with men at the top and women at the bottom. This indicates consequently the possibility to make changes in the gender order.

3. Restoring and restraining mechanisms

However, in spite of the optimistic perspectives and the extensive dissemination of ideas, organisational changes have often met with limited success. The lofty aims have been difficult to live up to, both in terms of achieving higher productivity and in building up learning organisations. There is often inconsistency between management discourse and concrete praxis in the organisation (Furusten, 1999; Milkman, 1998; Rovik, 2000; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998) as was also very evident in the study presented in this paper. All the studied companies had high aims for their organisational changes but they ran into obstacles when implementing the new organisational models. The transformation process came to a halt and the organisation often reverted to the old set-up. Companies and organisations do not act rationally (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) and one clear pattern in my studied companies was that the companies tried to accelerate and brake at the same time. They introduced directly contradictory changes. A metaphor for some of the organisational actions observed is “taking two steps forward and one step back”.

In the analysis, the concepts of restoring mechanism and restoration responses are used. By this is meant a strategic or unconscious action which can be either organisational or individual, and which in different ways draws the organisation back into its original form after an organisation-oriented project. Sometimes the restoring mechanisms are direct, such as the abolition of the position of “supervisor” to make the organisation “flatter” and then, after a short period, the reintroduction of the position. Sometimes the restoring mechanisms are more indirect, such as making conditions invisible through name changing or through saying one thing and meaning another. One example of the effects of restoring mechanisms is renewed, and perhaps reinforced, segregation of work tasks, functions and divisions. Other examples are a growing wage gap and a stronger informal status ladder among the production employees, new formal levels and positions in the hierarchy and frequently an unjustifyably strong focus on technology. However, there is seldom a complete restoration and it is not everything that is subject to restoring mechanisms. Several parts of the organisational changes are robust and become permanent. New patterns appear. Some of the resistance is more like inertia or restraining mechanisms (Lovén, 1999). These are actions that moderate the effects of the organisational change; an example is that some groups or individuals receive something in compensation for negative effects occurring during the unstable period of change.

Restoring mechanisms do of course have many explanations, for example the strength of management and the strategies and change methods that are used at the time of implementation (Abrahamsson, 2000; Håkansson, 1995). In this paper, the focus is on organisational explanations for the restoration responses. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) use the concept of organisational misbehaviour to describe this kind of phenomenon. There is for example a simplified underlying and uncritical view that organisational changes are positive and that it is undesirable for the employees not to accept the new order. Sometimes disobedience to the planned changes can be justified (Sundin, 1998). Decisions from top management can be unrealistic. In order to handle the daily work some creative disobedience and adjustments from middle management and supervisors are necessary. Not all disobedience is creative however, and not all top-management decisions are wrong. In attempting to change organisations, it is essential that we understand the dynamics and outcomes of the restoration responses.

4. A gender study of organisational changes

The empirical base for this paper is a study of the effects of organisational changes in the pulp and paper industry, the electronics industry, the food industry and
the laundry industry in Sweden (Abrahamsson, 2000). Organisational changes at eight large and medium-sized industrial companies were monitored, with repeated visits during the mid-1990s. The criteria used to select the companies were that they should be industrial companies that had invested in strategic organisational change and that women should be employed in the production area. Data was collected between 1994 and 1998. Qualitative methods was used, whose empirical core is repeated interviews with 25 female industrial workers and observations from their workplaces. A total number of 59 persons were interviewed, 30 women and 29 men (Table 1).

Based on the first contacts with the companies, a decision was made to use three different analysis categories: (1) male-dominated workplaces; (2) gender-segregated workplaces (many women working in production); and (3) gender-balanced workplaces. These three categories use the concepts of the strength, range, and hierarchy of the gender order as described by Thurén (1996). The categories also describe three different organisational starting-points before the introduction of organisational change (Table 2).

Another important part of the empirical data was written documents from the companies studied and management literature. The analysis was carried out in four different parallel steps: each person was analysed separately, each company was analysed separately, all the companies were compared, and finally the new organisation models’ discursive patterns were studied. In the analysis, interest was taken in the connections between these patterns, what occurred in local organisations and how the new organisational models were “consumed” in the local organisations.

4.1. Integration and decentralisation

Despite different starting-points, the content of organisational change among the studied companies showed numerous similarities. All sought to change into an organisation that incorporated the latest organisational ideas into its structure. There was evident influence from the rhetoric in current management literature on topics such as process orientation, integration, decentralisation, teamwork, learning, individualisation, and participation. The ideas, concepts and methods that management used were inspired by the large organisation models prevailing in Sweden during the 1990s; for example Lean Production, Total Quality Management, Business Process Re-engineering, The Learning Organisation (Senge, 1990), The Boundaryless Organisation (Ashkenas, 1995), Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1993), and the Individualised Organisation (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1997).

The change-oriented projects studied included fairly comprehensive changes to work organisations aimed at organisational renewal with strategies for flexibility, productivity, learning, continual improvements and quality. The content of the change-oriented projects at all the studied companies stressed integration and decentralisation as mechanisms for large-scale change within the organisations. One central objective set by the companies before the organisational change was to create a “flatter” and more decentralised organisation, i.e. an organisation that would be less hierarchical and often with a reduction of middle management. Concrete features of the change-oriented projects included the creation of working teams, job rotation, integrated maintenance, and different learning projects and training programs to enable the staff to cope with their new work tasks.

Table 1
Number of interviewed persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Number of interviewed persons</th>
<th>Female workers</th>
<th>Female managers and supervisors</th>
<th>Male workers</th>
<th>Male managers and supervisors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pulp and paper 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pulp and paper 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pulp and paper 3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pulp and paper 4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pulp and paper 5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laundry</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Electronics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total number of interviewed persons</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Restoring the gender order

One way to analyse restoration mechanisms is to study what is restored. Often there are fundamental power structures and status differences in the starting-point that are subsequently maintained, but perhaps with a change in shape and form. One element in the power structures and status differences is gender or “the gender order” (Hirdman, 1988; Connell, 1995). Many restoration responses at the studied companies were directly connected to different kinds of gender-based organisational patterns. In fact, it was often precisely the gender pattern that was restored. Restoring the hierarchy and control/power and restoring the gender order might be at work separately, but also working together as a strong organisational restoration force.

The focus in this paper is on the importance of a gender analysis of the workplace, the organisational behaviour and the change methods.

5.1. Problems with the integration of men and women

At the companies in the study, as in the rest of society, the work tasks were divided up between the sexes and labelled “female” or “male”. Typically “female” work tasks were finishing, packaging, machine operating, monitoring or inspection work, often including repetitive manual sub-operations and often lower paid. The boundaries between organisational functions, divisions, professions and occupations often corresponded with the “boundaries” between men and women and between men’s work and women’s work. Therefore, the attempts to integrate different functions, divisions, professions, occupations and work tasks led to a situation where women and men were to work in the same work teams and share the work tasks equally in some form of job rotation. The reason for this, according to the managers at the studied companies, was a wish to achieve learning, more flexibility in production, integrated maintenance and also improvement of the most injury-prone work environments, which were often women’s work.

But there was one obvious limitation to changing organisations into learning organisations. This was where women and men were intended to work together “on equal terms”, for example with wage equality, on the same hierarchical level, or participating in the same job rotation. It was very difficult to mix women and men in the same groups and it was particularly difficult to bring them to perform each other’s work tasks. In almost all the studied change-oriented projects, great difficulty was encountered in integrating the work tasks of women and men.

5.2. Problems and obstacles for the female workers

From a first look at the change-oriented projects at the studied companies, it would appear that the new organisational structures made it possible to improve women’s work situation, even if this was marginal. Job rotation, in combination with improvements in the physical working environment, made the work less injury-prone than previously, even if the workplaces in general still looked the same. Moreover, the women became freer and carried out new tasks that were not
bound to a machine. Some of the organisational projects at the companies studied were based on the ideas and ambitions of some female workers and these workers also tried to work on their own initiative, for example with production layout and production control. This correlates with the optimistic view typical in the 1980s and early 1990s (for example in Ferguson, 1984; Gunnarsson, 1994; Kvande and Rasmussen, 1995).

But this study also gives another picture. In some aspects, the problems during the implementation process and the restoration responses brought more negative effects for female workers than for male workers. The better opportunities for men in general within the organisations meant that the positive aspects of the new organisation were within their reach, despite problems during the implementation. One example of this came from the works manager of the laundry who, in lofty terms, praised women and their ability to solve problems: “Women are adaptable, flexible, mentally strong, and offer carefully thought-out suggestions”. But despite these favourable remarks about women, the same works manager would handpick men only for certain special tasks and, moreover, would give salary increases to certain men. He also had a number of confidants in the work teams, all of whom were men. Most of the women in the studied companies, to a greater extent than the men, became visible representatives of their gender when organisational problems were discussed in the companies. In the interviews, the managers sometimes referred to the women and their “typically female characteristics” as problems. They entitled it “The Woman Problem”. The focus was thus taken away from the organisational structure and away from the manager’s own role in treating women and men differently. For example, the managers consciously gave preference to men when conflicts arose and when employing new workers, with the explanation: “It is easier with men”, referring to male machine operators. The female workers’ access to and experience of opportunities in the new organisation depended more on the type of organisation. The women who worked in a more gender-mixed organisation that viewed gender as irrelevant in task performance fared better than those women who were in organisations with a pattern of gender segregation and gender-typed jobs.

6. Gender order as a restoring mechanism

The restorations in the studied companies’ change-oriented projects were not only an obstacle to the female industrial workers; they also formed an obstacle in general in the organisational changes. Gender plays an important role in influencing how organisations are built and how they work (Acker and van Houten, 1992/1974; Baude, 1992; Kanter, 1977; Lindgren, 1999; Probert, 1999). Before organisational changes are implemented, the organisation’s starting-point is a structure that often represents different conditions for women and men (Acker, 1992; Kanter, 1993/1977). If ignored, these gender patterns can form an almost inherent element that fuels restoration. These gender patterns were an explanation for many instances of restoration in the studied companies. The gender order (Connell, 1995; Hirdman, 1988) is a pattern one can see when looking at society on a general level. In different cultures, times, local situations and local organisations, there are variations. Even though there are variations, however, one can see two main mechanisms in the gender order: segregation and hierarchisation. Segregation means stereotypic segregation between women and men and between femininity and masculinity. This often gives myths of large “natural” differences between women and men, stereotypic gender-coding of things, places, work, behaviour and competencies and a strict and visible segregation between these “women’s things” and “men’s things”. Hierarchisation means a gender-based hierarchy with men at the top and means that men and masculinity are often ascribed a higher value. There is often male domination and female subordination. The mechanisms of segregation and hierarchisation are interesting since they are the opposite of integration and decentralisation.

The gender order functions in two interacting ways: through social construction of gender and through sorting by gender. Gender sorting is often very visible and considered normal, and is therefore a powerful force in the organisation. Gender sorting can lead to both direct and indirect restoration of organisational changes. The social construction of masculinity and femininity is not only an important driving force in the gender order, but also central to restoring power in work organisations (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Hollway, 1996; Lindgren, 1999; Probert, 1999; Sundin, 1998).

Gender order can therefore be seen as a strong restoring mechanism, not only in society in general, but also within work organisations. Baude (1992) illustrates this with a list of five main gender-based mechanisms that explain why work organisation structures are so resilient: (1) the clear segregation of the sexes within the companies-functional (different work tasks), physical (different rooms, places) and hierarchical (different wages, female subordination and male dominance); (2) gender-labelling of work, competencies and places; (3) stereotypic ideas of gender-specific attributes and stereotypic myths and conceptions of male and female; (4) myths of women’s work and men’s work; and (5) taboo, silence on these questions and the labelling of phenomena as ‘personal problems’ or ‘individual choices’. These mechanisms make it easy for people to re-create the old gender patterns in the new
organisation. This gives some explanation as to why organisational changes fail and why the old organisational structure is restored, although counterproductive. Of course, gender does not explain everything, but it is one of the conceivable explanations for the course of events when organisational change is effected in a company.

7. Gender-based obstacles to organisational change

The modern organisational models are largely based on integration, job rotation, integration of work tasks and functions, and decentralisation, de-hierarchisation, vertical integration and job enrichment, and a third important aspect in the modern organisational models is participation, democracy, empowerment, to involve the staff for example in change-oriented projects, production planning, analysis and development (Coffield, 1998; Ellström, 2000; Foley, 2001). In all these three aspects there were gender-based problems and obstacles during the implementation at the studied companies.

7.1. Integration

All of the studied companies made concrete attempts to implement job rotation, and five of the eight companies made more sophisticated attempts to integrate different types of function into the production teams, e.g. technical function, quality control and maintenance. However, several of the attempts encountered restoration and resulted in “empty” learning, based on rotation between similar low-skill jobs. Some of the attempts seemed successful, particularly in companies where men were in the majority, but after a while, even here, the organisation often returned to the original structure with special divisions for different functions.

Many of these restorations can be explained by the segregation mechanism in the gender order and the social construction of masculinity and femininity. For example, in the laundry, use of the washing machines was male work that was performed by men only. The various mangleing and folding machines, on the other hand, were the responsibility of the women. It was practically impossible for women to receive instruction in using the washing machines, despite repeated requests from women who wanted this opportunity to earn higher wages and achieve more variety in their work. Stereotypical ideas of women’s work and men’s work hindered several learning processes (Abrahamsson, 2001). Another example is that of the pulp and paper companies. There, the manager intended that female machine operators should take over some of the daily maintenance of the machines, while male former repairmen were in fact to work as machine operators at the same machines. However, this turned out to be impossible, one of the reasons being that the men refused to do “women’s work”. Conflicts arose, of course, and these difficulties and problems meant that the ideas of integrated maintenance, job rotation and learning came to nothing. The manager therefore wanted more male machine operators instead, in order to realise the idea of integrated maintenance. Even the female machine operators found it easier to get male operators to carry out repair work. Women were not considered sufficiently familiar with the technical and mechanical aspects of the job. Consequently, the women neither could nor would carry out adjustments or repairs, even though, they appeared to have excellent knowledge of various causal relations in interruptions in the production flow. Furthermore, they were working daily with technically advanced machines. However, no great efforts were made to persuade the female machine operators to carry out the new work tasks. One interesting aspect of these problems and conflicts is that technical issues or questions of technology were treated as something that one cannot learn in a learning organisation.

7.2. Decentralisation

In addition, the attempts to introduce a flatter and more decentralised organisation elicited gender-based restoration responses, some explained by the gender hierarchy in the gender order. Five of the eight companies introduced a “co-coordinator”, a blue-collar worker and member of the working team, who at the same time acted as a work supervisor. At the same time, the traditional position of supervisor was abolished. Many of the women, as well as the men, who were working in production were given an opportunity to serve as co-coordinators. As mentioned before, several of the women working in production were very active and showed great initiative in the organisational projects. They took the opportunities presented by the new group-based organisation with the co-coordinator system. This was especially the case in the laundry, but there the co-coordinator system was abandoned after 2 years and the position of supervisor reintroduced, with only men as supervisors.

However, even though the implementation of a flatter organisation seemed more successful, or at least stable, the new organisation did not automatically mean that women acquired better work or more power. Often, problems arose when the women were made formal superiors to (or on a par with) men in the hierarchy. Most of the women did not feel any work enrichment, nor were they given any new work tasks. In one of the pulp and paper companies, the co-coordinators said that they felt like “messenger-girls” or “mother figures” that had to tidy up and put things in order. The
co-coordinators performed work duties that previously had been shared by all members of the work team. In five of the eight companies, the co-coordinators were supposed to carry out tasks previously taken care of by supervisors, but now without the support that the supervisors had enjoyed due to their authority and position. In the laundry company, for example, the works manager did not act through the co-coordinator, as he should have done. Moreover, some of the men found it very hard to take orders from a woman. They preferred to turn to the works manager. This situation sometimes became even more complicated, since the ex-supervisors (all of them men) still remained in the organisation. In all the studied companies, the ex-supervisors received qualified tasks and higher salary, and retained their position in the hierarchy. These tendencies applied to the male supervisors. The female supervisors in the case studies followed a different pattern than their male colleagues. As a consequence of the organisational changes, the female supervisors reverted to production work. There were, however, only three female supervisors in the case studies which makes it difficult to draw general conclusions.

7.3. Participation

Staff involvement, for example in change-oriented projects, planning, production analysis and development is an important factor in a modern and learning organisation. This kind of involvement makes stringent demands on cooperation, dialogue and communication in the organisation. The concrete significance is that all employees, both women and men, should have possibilities to make themselves heard, to develop ideas and to be able to influence solutions to workplace problems and design during the change process. The study shows that communication and dialogue can be hard to realise, due to gender segregation and gender-marking at the workplaces. Women and men do not enjoy equal conditions before and during a change-oriented project. Women, more than men, are to be found at the hierarchical bottom layers, where the organisation, work tasks and physical environment can be a hindrance to motivation and engagement. Women are also often in the minority in project groups and, moreover, the projects often deal more with men and men’s problems at the workplace. In the studied companies, some managers had a strategy of leaving the female workers to their fate. That entails a risk that the male workers may form an “A-team”, an elite, as part of the new organisation. The female machine operators may form a “reserve team” outside both the change-oriented work and the new organisation.

Gender segregation and women’s and men’s unequal conditions, before and during the change-oriented project, are not “equal opportunities questions” or “feminist questions” that affect only women. They create additional general obstacles and problems during the implementation of a learning organisation, and can have negative effects both on individual and organisational learning processes at the workplace. Participation that involves only some groups or categories at the workplace can give two problems: firstly, groups of employees will not feel ownership or involvement in the change process or in the new organisation. They will not be able to learn about the new ideas, and therefore there is a risk that these groups of employees will not accept the new organisation. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, a lot of experience and knowledge of the workplaces will not be brought into the change-oriented project. Discussions and decisions in project work therefore cannot be based on the whole “reality” in the organisation.

7.4. Three patterns

In all the studied companies, similar gender-related problems were observed, but implementation problems were most obvious in those companies that had relatively visible gender segregation and a comprehensive gender-labelling or gender-coding of tasks and work areas. These companies had difficulties in both comprehending and handling the gender-related problems. This was easily noticeable in the methods of change chosen. These companies, to a large extent, used drastic methods and various forms of coercion in order to establish work teams and job rotation. This phenomenon is full of contradictions because it is so obviously not a good way to implement the learning organisation. In these companies, there were many restoring mechanisms connected to gender. The many instances of restoration made the organisations revert to something very similar to the original set-up.

In the male-dominated companies, there were not so many instances of restoration. Instead, the old models and hierarchies with many small steps were built into the project groups and the old roles were transferred into the new working teams. Normally the project groups were based on the existing hierarchy. It was principally the male workers who held the most prestigious positions, together with supervisors, middle management and white-collar workers/specialists who participated in the project groups. This was also the case in the companies with relatively visible gender-segregation and a comprehensive gender-labelling or gender-coding of tasks and work areas. This is one explanation as to why the old structure was reinstalled and built into the new organisation.

The electronics company had an organisation where the production force was more flexible and used to change. It was also gender-mixed and in addition, its organisational culture had values that tended to treat
women and men more equally than in the other
companies studied. The substance of the change in the
organisational structure of this company was signifi-
cantly greater than that of the other companies studied.
It was also easier to mix women and men in the same
work teams, and in addition, it was easier to delegate
concrete work tasks down to the production personnel.
However, after a while, even this company experienced
problems with restoration and cessation of organisa-
tional changes.

One pattern becomes evident. The stronger and more
extensive the gender hierarchy and gender segregation
were at the starting-point, the more numerous were the
instances of restoration and difficulties in introducing
organisational change. The new models of work organi-
sation, with their focus on integration and decentralisa-
tion, among other things, challenge a strong system built
on segregation and hierarchy-the gender order. In other
words, the gender order is one part of the inappropi-
ae organisational behaviour and of the inconsistency
between management discourse and management praxis
in the local organisations. One important conclusion
from the study is that the mechanisms in the gender order
(segregation and hierarchy) can be a strong hindrance to
organisational changes-especially changes towards a flat,
integrated, flexible and learning organisation.

8. Summary and discussion

The study shows that gender segregating and stereo-
typic gender-coding of workplaces and work tasks were
strong restoring mechanisms and obstacles to strategic
organisational changes. At the studied companies,
restoration responses in the work organisations brought
the organisation back into its original form and function.
There was restoration of existing structures and the
prevailing behaviour and attitudes-in spite of the
fact that the management aims were to achieve the
opposite. There was a difference between the possible
and desired development, what the companies said, and
what they actually did in concrete terms. Problems and
difficulties, passive resistance from both the employees
and the employers, and even open conflicts, hindered the
positive development of the work and workplaces that
theoretically could have taken place.

The attempts at job rotation and integration in the
studied companies encountered restoration. Moreover,
the attempts to introduce a flatter work organisation
elicited restoration responses. In many companies, the
boundaries between categories and functions and other
internal organisational boundaries corresponded with
the boundaries between women and men and the
boundaries between female and male in the company.
In certain respects, the differences became even clearer
and the boundaries more pronounced.

The study discussed in this paper shows that
organisational change is complex, it has many facets,
and it is not linear. Organisational change is also
textual. Change worked out in particular ways in
different contexts. That gender exerts an influence on
the work organisation and organisational structure
became obvious in connection with the studied organi-
sational changes.

The study also shows that it can be difficult to handle
strongly gender-segregated work organisations in a
gender-neutral perspective. Knowledge of the gender-
based power structures that restore old organisational
patterns is necessary when working with organisational
development. The modern organisation, at least in its
theoretical form, demands communication over the
"gender borders" and some kind of equality between
men and women. With a deeper knowledge of the
gender order, one can more easily handle "resistance to
change" and try to achieve a real change in the
organisation and the learning organisation.

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