

# Rethinking Men's Position in Organisation: The French Experience

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## Abstract

In the last decades, an ever growing body of research documents the tenants and the factors the asymmetrical representation of men and women in the managerial ranks and positions of authority in the organizations. Rather than extending the existing knowledge on new and subtle forms of gender discrimination in organisations, this paper aims instead at examining an often neglected dimension of gender in (mainstream) management studies, namely how to bring about change. Doing so, it adopts a critical and feminist cultural point of view and attempts to shed light on the overseen vectors of change. For this purpose, it draws on a qualitative case study which primary research question was to understand and unveil the dynamics of organisational gender equality actions. Set in the context of a male dominated industrial and technological organisation, namely global auto manufacturer located in France, the study generated interesting and rich findings pointing towards men and the growing awareness on the enactment of various masculinities in the organisation. The key results show that an important pre-requisite for successful implementation is the alliance of multiple partners and stakeholders stemming from different organs of control, operating thus as balancing tool for leveraging more cooperation and maintaining organisational as well as social consent. Second and more

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interestingly, the study draws attention on how men are identified simultaneously as key problem but also as conveyer for organisational change. They are no longer excluded in their own privileged role in the management and silent witness of the tremendous change in the greater societal context but are an active part of the solution. Hence, these organisational measures offer them the possibility to question organisational processes and assumptions inscribed in what we will here call the hegemonic managerial masculinity frames.

**Keywords:** men, gender, equality, management, organisation

## Erkeklerin örgütsel alanlardaki konumunu yeniden düşünmek: Fransız Deneyimi

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### Özet

Son yıllarda gittikçe büyüyen araştırmalar, kadın ve erkeklerin yönetsel ve örgütsel güç pozisyonlarındaki asimetric temsillerini belgelemektedir. Örgütsel alandaki görünmez toplumsal cinsiyet ayrımcılığına hali hazırda odaklanan çalışmaları genişletmek yerine bu çalışma, yaygın örgütsel çalışmalarda toplumsal cinsiyet bağlamında sıklıkla göz ardı edilen bir boyutu araştırmayı hedeflemektedir: Değişimi nasıl mümkün kılarız? Bunu yaparken de eleştirel ve feminist bir perspektifi benimsemekte ve değişimin görmezden gelinen araçlarına ışık tutmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda bu çalışma, amacı örgütsel dinamiklerde toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği uygulamalarını açığa çıkarmak olan bir nitel vaka incelemesi üzerine kurulmuştur. Erkegegen endüstri ve teknoloji şirketi olan Fransa'daki bir otomobil şirketi bağlamında yürütülen bu çalışma, erkekleri ve farklı erkekliklerin icrası konusunda gittikçe artan bir bilinci hedefleyen zengin ve ilginç sonuçlar elde etmiştir. Çalışmanın öne çıkan sonuçlarına göre başarılı bir örgütsel uygulamanın ön koşulu işbirliğini artırma ve örgütsel olduğu kadar sosyal kabulü de sürdürme konusunda dengeleyici rolü oynayacak birden fazla ortak ve paydaşın bu konuda beraber çalışmasıdır. İkinci ve daha ilginç olanı ise, bu çalışmanın erkeklerin hem problemin nedeni hem de örgütsel değişim için çözümün bir parçası olduklarını göstermesidir. Erkekler artık ayrıcalıklı yönetsel pozisyonlarında, bu eşitsizliğin

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sessiz tanıkları olarak dışarıda bırakılmamakta; aksine, çözümün aktif bir parçası olmaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu gibi örgütsel ölçümler erkeklere bizim *örgütsel hegemonik erkeklik süreçleri* dediğimiz süreçleri ve varsayımları gözden geçirme imkânı sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** erkekler, toplumsal cinsiyet, eşitlik, örgüt

The omnipresence of gender rhetoric in modern organisations blurs the contours of gender inequality today. Insidious and implicit processes of discrimination are becoming more difficult to detect. Women stay in complex ways subordinated to men (Kelan, 2013) by showing apparent consent and denying any forms of discrimination at the workplace. Similarly, male managers take for granted their privileged status and show resentment against gender equality actions (Utzeri, 2015). Similarly, Gill, Kelan and Scharff (2017) argue that the rejection of gender inequality in the workplace, the attitude suggesting a gender fatigue and the acceptance of the unequal status quo are important discursive enactment of women's, and to a certain extent men's subordination. All these aspects are the manifestation of post-feminist sensibilities (Gill et al., 2017) which are widespread and typical in organisational settings, and in particular in management.

This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on post-feminist phenomenon in organisations by focusing on men's interests. This paper considers that power and gendered relations remain a key component of management today, it therefore adopts a critical approach to examine practical solutions and actions undertaken in a corporate environment where men's position is being re-defined.

This study focuses on the automotive sector in France, a country usually applauded for its women-friendly workplace policies. In France, women in managerial positions is a common picture, in particular in public organisations, the retail and service industry; where according to the "Etudes Generations" conducted by the CNRS, a feminisation of managerial professions in these sectors has almost closed the gap. In the industrial sector, the picture is rather gloomy with strong horizontal and vertical segregation. Despite a widely accepted gender quota legislation established in 2011, women's proportion remains however overall minor, in particular in engineering and industrial industries.

Similarly, the French automotive sector is male-dominated. Women tend to occupy lower paid and lower skilled positions while the

top management is largely male. For instance, only 20% of the women working in the French automotive sector have a management position, in Germany, only 18,3% of managerial positions are held by women. The share of women in executive and supervisory boards is even lower 9%.<sup>1</sup>The industry is not only characterised by a pronounced vertical segregation but also by an horizontal segregation as there is a large concentration of women in Human Resources, Marketing or Public Relations divisions and very few in Research and Development, Technical Development or Finance, divisions where the manager talent pool is selected.

In order to correct this asymmetry, virtually all auto-makers in France (and beyond the borders) have set specific programmes to empower women, ensure equal opportunity, and to some extent promote gender diversity in management. In spite of a variety of measures undertaken on the organisational level, little progress has been done to tackle the gendered dimension of the sector (Martinuzzi et al., 2011, Moore, 2015).

Based on a case study of a car manufacturer located in France, the findings presented in this paper demonstrate how the concomitant involvement of multiple partners (thus different interests and goals) in designing measures may be an essential pre-requisite for efficiently tackling the issue of gender equality in management. In its course, the study enabled the identification of a combination of key actions and practices that brought substantial positive change. The research reports the living experience of incremental steps in a male dominated corporation which attempts to dismantle the toxic image of masculiniti(es) in management, that continue to subordinate men; through the active participation of men managers, the informal yet powerful cultural and gendered stereotypes pervading the managerial world are dissected.

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<sup>1</sup> TNS Sofres Les conditions de la promotion des femmes dans le secteur automobile (2013)

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: after a brief presentation of the theoretical framework and the methodology informing the study. The fourth part is dedicated to the analysis and interpretation of the results of the study. Finally, the last part concludes the paper by not only indicating the limitations of the study but also giving crucial recommendations for further research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In recent years, the emerging literature on men and masculinities has given a new impulse for treating the question of gender(s) in management and feminist studies in general.

Indeed, Collinson and Hearn's seminal research (1994) builds on the vast and rich existing feminist scholarship and argues that the pervasive "taken for granted" assumptions on gender in management silenced the links between men, masculinities and management. The concept of multiple masculinities illustrates the various forms in which the construction and persistence of masculinities alongside femininity are deployed. It serves as a basis to explain how gendered asymmetrical power between men and between men and women are reproduced (Collinson & Hearn, 2011).

According to Connell, management and top positions are shaped by a culture of hegemonic masculinity (1995, 1998). Many organizations are gendered bureaucracies (Acker, 1990) in which the male norm is dominant and masculine practices of resistance to female leadership persist. This normative masculinity often associated to white, middle class, middle-aged, heterosexual/homophobic, Anglo-Saxon, Christian, western, able-bodied worker dominate senior and top positions and multinational workplaces and oppress other forms and expressions of masculinity. Likewise, Wajcman (1998) describes a dominant managerial masculinity, which is characterised by the underpinning idea of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990). According to Acker, the ideal worker is fully committed, disembodied, but at the same time, sexualises women excluding them from senior management. Notions of control, rationality

and expertise are central to the discourse of “managerial masculinity” (Cockburn, 1991). The concept of “managerial masculinity” emphasizes the embeddedness of masculine values such as full-time employment or position of power within the organisational structures. Paid work thus provides men with significant status and power. As a result, men managers tend to privilege other men, sharing these values in senior positions vis-à-vis women through job segregation and discrimination. Kanter (1977) has coined the perpetuation of this male managerial elite as “homosocial reproduction”. Connell (2001) goes further and argues that a transnational business masculinity is increasingly hegemonic and is directly connected to the patterns of world trade and communication that are dominated by the North. This is a dominant masculinity marked by egocentrism, highly precarious and conditional forms of loyalty and a declining sense of responsibility (Collinson & Hearn, 1994).

Managerial masculinities might, thus, be understood as form(s) of (different) hegemonic masculinities. However, these forms of masculinities are as Connell (1995) argues, not fixed, but may shift over time, and according to the nature of the occupation. They are historically, culturally and temporally situated. Acknowledging that masculinities are embedded in organizational life (Connell, 2006), this paper attempts to understand the places for men and patterns of masculinity in a French car manufacturer. It focuses, not only on gender regimes in place, but also on concerted organisational actions that destabilise the powerful underlying assumptions and norms, that maintain and perpetuate the dominant image of managerial masculinity prevailing among men in the organisation.

In order to examine the various organisational measures aiming at improving gender equality, we rely on a promising analytical tool elaborated by Ely and Meyerson (2000) capturing the multifaceted dimension about gender issues in the workplace. The empirically based four approaches or “frames” helps understanding what gender(s) is and why gender based inequality in organisational setting persists. According to this “fourfold framework”, Ely and Meyerson argue that the



first three frames are the most used approach to achieve gender equality in organisations nowadays.

Within the frame “Fix the Women” differences of socialisation and skills are the cause of gender issues, women need to be trained to do “as good as men”. The “Equal Opportunity” frame is essentially policy based and aims at correcting asymmetry in terms of outcomes by reducing the barriers women have to overcome. Formalised hiring procedure, neutral job description and differentiated targets are typical measures under this frame. Alternatively, the frame “Celebrate the Difference” calls for the acceptance of diverse standpoints, and in particular, the appreciation of as inclusiveness and collaboration in management.

While interventions within these frames have proven significant gains for women, the overall progress is limited. The major problem lies in the fact that women are located as source of gender inequality, this view of gender corresponds to the essential differential assigned to men and women. Structures and processes remain unquestioned and men subordinated to the stereotype of ideal worker or male machine. According to Ely and Meyerson (2000), the fourth frame instead provides a more complex approach to understanding and conceptualizing gender. The frame “Revise the Work Culture” implies the change of deep structure of gender beliefs and unconscious bias that pervade every layer of the organisation and maintain the unequal gender order. The paper contends that this alternative promising approach constitutes a powerful method for kicking off longstanding and sustainable questioning of the “largest invisible majority” (Collinson & Hearn, 1994).

## Methodology

This case draws from a research project examining how gender equality interventions and other women advancement programmes in an automotive organisation in France are functioning and designed on the one hand, and perceived and experienced by the individuals on the other hand. A qualitative case

study approach comprising the analysis of company documents and semi-structured interviews was used. The aim of the case study was to leverage a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of gender (in)equality in management within its social context, ensuring that the complexities of the setting and its participants are taken into account (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). The company documents comprised yearly review, which comprises quantitative data on personnel situation and repartition, vision and strategy statement of the company, gender diversity/equality reports describing and monitoring the extent to which the case company apply and measure the progress of its gender equality programmes, detailed brochures, booklets and internal material on the companies' related measures.

The field study generated data based on semi-structured interviews and addressed to 12 respondents, female and male executives (between 28 to 59 years old) across managerial hierarchies. Interviews lasted between 30min to one hour and were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The data were analysed using Ritchie and Lewis's (2003) qualitative analytic hierarchy as a guide, which broadly seeks to identify initial themes and concepts. In line with the aim of the study, I assigned data to those themes and then refined the themes by developing overarching concepts. For the identifying and labelling of different themes, NViVo was extensively used.

In qualitative research, which is based on the interaction between the researcher and the participants, reflexivity is a key issue because researcher bias may potentially shape the data collection process. I, therefore, was mindful of my own biases and preconception accumulated and internalised through my background within the automotive industry (the insider dimension) and my personal convictions (individual dimension) reinforced by the gained knowledge on gender, organisation and sociology (the researcher dimension). Due to this threefold position, I might have unconsciously brought into the reading and interpretation of results a mixture of the above-mentioned dimensions. I, however, do believe that by actively listening to the respondents, observing the overall setting, and systematically re-reading the data materials, I could

manage to go beyond my own perspectives. In fact, this threefold position enabled me to provide a multidimensional analysis, to “read through the lines” and to gain trust among the participants. Moroccan born, with a French upbringing, originating from suburban areas of Paris, studying abroad and finally working abroad for various German automobile makers over the last decades, I reflectively could bring forward the ways gender is enacted, rendering thus the interviewees’ experiences visible.

### **Findings and Discussion**

**T**he case study essentially revealed two levels of concerted interventions, with different yet complementary impacts. This combination of organisational actions is in line with the theoretical principles elaborated by Ely and Meyerson (2000). Indeed, Ely and Meyerson’s fourfold framework for gender equality change argues for a mixture of measures stemming from different frames.

The French company relies on actions aiming at “Creat(ing) Equal Opportunities” mainly ruled by anti-discrimination law and civil rights anchored in the French legal framework, and bound to the EU anti-discrimination law. In the recent years the company has introduced the notion of “diversity” as a key driver for company performance. This element from Ely and Meyerson’s frame labelled as “Celebrate Differences” shifts the focus from eliminating difference to valuing “women’s difference” and in particular their so-called inclusive and collaborative management style. It does not address the power of the masculine image that underlies most generally accepted models of occupations success, leadership, or managerial acumen. In addition, the French case company has developed a set of interventions initiated by the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) department in concertation with external entities. These external organs are (1) the syndicates, (2) governmental certification institutes and (3) academic networks. It is here interesting to note that there is no cleavage but a tight cooperation between researchers and practitioners. As a result, the various

stakeholders involved do not only prevent the deployment of one-sided and biased measures but enable the alignment of organizational structures with latest theoretical advancements in the fields of gender and critical management studies. These measures can be framed as “Revising the Work Culture”.

The French company engages in a questioning of its processes, gender is acknowledged as the main organizing principle (Acker, 1990). Practically, this approach focuses on a broader and open communication to combat against gender stereotyping and masculine images prevalent in the automotive industry. It also directly intervenes in the educational institutions (i.e. high schools, university and engineering schools) and promotes women networking channels. These interventions are incremental and based on an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation and learning led by Corporate Social Responsibility and Human Resources units. Hence, the company is designated after a demanding review process conducted by AFNOR (Association Francaise de Normalisation), the independent and leading certifying body in France. The French company under study was the first large group in 2005 receiving the label of “Equal Opportunity Employer” renewed since then on regular basis. Additionally, in 2011, the company signed a new agreement with all trade unions stipulating the assertive expansion of the gender equality scheme in three areas: supporting the integration of women in a traditionally male-dominated industry, guaranteeing gender equality in the company and improving women’s access to senior management.

All interventions investigated are the outcome of the social consensus or “contrat social”; each decision concerning gender equality (and other social matters) is taken jointly with external partners, all trade unions and the state, meaning that each measure is not unilaterally conceived and applied, but multilaterally designed, enforced and monitored. Besides the interventions deployed to increase the number of women in management such as specific programmes aimed at women only, formal and anti-discrimination policies, the French company took the step to combat powerful and deep ingrained norms and stereotypes,

that still rule the male-dominated world of automotive. The case company undertook this step in light of the increasing number of women taking over decision-making positions, the shifting management strategies from authoritarian to inclusive styles.

This transformation towards a pre-supposed feminised managerial practice, matches the changing gender roles and expectations in the surrounding society, especially among fathers (Langvasbråten & Teigen, 2006). The male breadwinner is no longer the sole identity marker of men. However, structural obstacles remain; within the organisation, men managers must show absolute commitment to their responsibility by distancing themselves from families and care responsibilities (Collinson & Hearn, 1994). For those who deliberately choose to “care”, take benefit of parental leave, and display less focus on their career, the so-called gender-based devaluation is observed (Gärtner, 2012) as a form of discreet exclusion due to the work structure and culture in place. Hence, the context of hegemonic masculinity, in particular the managerial masculine values, constitutes a major obstacle to achieve gender equality for men and women. Hence, the dismantling of dominant discourse of masculinity underpinning managerial and organisational practices is a central component of the French company’s strategy. Men are not only the target, but also catalyser or multiplier agent.

The French company designed a comprehensive and interactive campaign of sensibilisation addressing men’s issues and interests. First, the communication material was conceived as a component of a series of open debates and lectures labelled Corporate Social Responsibility. The objective was to attract the masculine population of the organisation; historically every action labelled gender equality is wrongly and commonly understood as “women’s issue”. Second, the content of the campaign was conceived together with training and mediation practitioners on the one side, and academics of the growing field of masculinities studies on the other side. As a result, several series of communication campaigns (oral and written) were defined, revolving around the main gendered issues men encounter in their organisational

life: the normative expectation of extended availability, the conflicting and changing forms of parenting and the variable work-life balance measures.

Throughout the sessions, and addressing the above-mentioned areas, key obstacles impeding the full involvement of men in the gender quality project are named and discussed. Male employees are given the possibility to express their mixed feelings about gender equality at work, often viewed as negative discrimination against men, without fearing to be stigmatised in a post-equity context. Another important obstacle pointed out by men managers is the importance of peer opinion. For instance, they pointed how colleagues may interpret and give a negative meaning when one takes his full parental leave or when one takes advantage of teleworking conditions to support his wife with child rearing duties. Another typical attitude under the scrutiny of the peer group is the working hours and the culture of presentism deeply inscribed in French organisational life. In the end, these sessions cast light on men's invisible privileges within the organisation and in the society. These actions are essentially discursive and raise the broader issue of the gender relations, not only in the organisation and but also home, where the traditional gendered roles prevail.

The interviews with men managers who have taken part to these open debates show that these male employees hold nuanced and more critical discourses against organisational practices. They locate the source of gendered attitudes in the societal expectations, early childhood education and the organisational system. While they manifest a greater empathy for women's struggles, they attempt to re-define the contours of masculinity in their workplace and beyond. Male respondents who participated in these open lectures expressed the positive feeling of "finally catching up attention" after decades of gender equality programmes aimed at women. Once the step of individual questioning was completed, the French company's strategy continued its course by mobilizing these newly won supporters to spreading the word and initiate discussion with other men, in other circumstances, in groups within and outside the organisation. For instance, after being invited in

women's networking groups, some of the interviewed men managers merged their effort with female colleagues to create a gender diverse networking group within the company advocating for more gender diversity.

## Conclusions

Taking into account that countries, organisations and individuals are at different stages of awareness and readiness to tackle the complex issues of gender equity, there is no one approach to achieving gender equity in management suiting all countries, organisations, or even business units within organisations. Alternatively, looking at how one organisation inscribed in a particular gender context elaborates responses to tackle gender issues may be insightful.

This case study focused on a particular organisational masculinity; namely the managerial masculinity and analysed how the gender equality programmes implemented in a French carmaker affected gender relations in management and especially among male managers. For this purpose, the paper utilised Ely and Meyerson's fourfold frame to categorise the various actions. It is difficult to delineate whether this strategy is endogenous to the French case; this constitutes the main limitation of the study, as it is a highly contextualised work. Fact is that the company integrated into its organisational response the shifting gender relations and attitudes in the French society and the comprehensive legal apparatus in place for gender equality and used all synergies possible to assess a powerful programme.

These aspects show the importance of context, contingent factors and the surrounding environment in general when designing any measure, for no action cannot be developed out of thin air, and function as a standalone element.

The process of involving men to improve gender equality in the French organisational setting was conducted following three crucial steps.

First, it inscribed the approach within the Corporate Responsibility Scheme to get out of the gender fatigue trap (Kelan; 2009) addressing thus the dominant yet invisible social group in the company: men.

Second, it initiated a targeted communication plan made of seminars and developed with practitioners and academics coming from the field of gender studies and specifically masculinities studies.

Third, it pursued the strategic dissemination of these ideas through men themselves among men and women in other platforms. These cascade measures operate mainly on the informal and individual levels, triggering active questioning of the prevailing gendered beliefs and traditional managerial practices and bringing about new and sharpen awareness of gender equality as an issue for both genders. Further research involving surveys or/and agent-based simulation to evaluate how the informal actions may affect the group level could be promising.

While these measures foster new thinking among male managers, it is important to simultaneously carry on these incremental changes, not only in organisational settings, but also “at home” where women still do the lion’s share of house chores and child-rearing duties, preventing them to have the freedom of choice to pursue their career. Therefore, further research investigating life’s stories of male managers is needed. Likewise, it is important to perform more longitudinal study to measure the impact over time of such measures.



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