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Confronting informal resistance and empty
commitment:
Contradictions in the local
adoption of gender mainstreaming

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Abstract

This article explores the local adoption of gender mainstreaming in Swedish public organisations in the Västra Götaland region. Using both observations and ethnographic interviews this study highlights the experiences of gender equality practitioners. The interviewees have central functions relating to gender equality in municipalities or public organisations with administrative authorities. Local interpretations of the strategy as well as cultural and institutional obstacles are a central focus. The theoretical framework used concerns gender patterns in organizations, formal commitment and performativity. Furthermore, theories concerning the local translation of ideas are used. The results of this study imply that the local adoption of gender mainstreaming is characterized by problematic features. Public organisations can use this strategy to gain legitimacy, and therefore reinforce empty commitment to gender equality. Embedded informal resistance in organisations are understood as contributing to this solution. It is concluded that the strategy contains internal contradictions and that it does not consider important cultural aspects related to the implementation of gender equality initiatives.

Key words: Gender Mainstreaming, Performativity, Translation of ideas, Informal resistance, Decoupling

Introduction

The Swedish labour market has since the early 1950s been subject to projects and campaigns with the purpose to increase gender equality (SOU 2014:30). Public sector organizations have often been a target for such political interventions since gender equality is believed to be created at the local level, in people's everyday lives (SKL 2014). The European declaration for equality between women and men at local and regional level from 2006 (in SKL 2014) states that municipalities and regions are the political levels best suited to oppose inequalities and promote a society which is not only formally gender equal but equal in a factual way. Thus, public sector organizations do not only engage in gender equality work for internal purposes, but to increase gender equality in society. However, despite such efforts, Sweden is still in large parts characterized by inequalities such as inherent differences in pay, career opportunities, a clear division on influential positions between women and men as well as a gender segregated division of labour both vertically and horizontally (SCB 2014).

In 1994 Sweden adopted gender mainstreaming as a strategy to promote gender equality in the public sector (SKL 2014). Public sector organizations have accordingly been recommended to introduce gender mainstreaming as a strategy for twenty years. This strategy was introduced by feminists as a way to come to terms with established obstacles acknowledged in previous gender equality work (Calvo 2013) and the strategy suggests that gender equality should permeate every part of an organization and not be limited to women's agencies alone. Since it is established that gender inequalities often are performed un-reflected within organizations, and that gender inequalities are integrated and embedded within its every-day practices (Acker 1998), the possibilities for gender mainstreaming as a strategy can easily be questioned. In addition, the possibilities for a strategy that is introduced top-down from politicians to the local organizations can further enhance this contestation since such decisions tend to have problems with getting "rooted" in an organization (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark 2011). Sweden has a strong tradition of local autonomy within the public sector, with freedom to design organizations in relation to local conditions (SKL 2014), but all political directions

on a local level are still submitted by ordinances and regulations from the higher level. Gender equality strategies proposed by the parliament or government are expected to materialize in the local setting, within the ordinary public organizations of nursing assistants, school kitchen workers, doctors, park workers and other employees. What is interesting to problematize is thus how suggested gender equality strategies are practiced in public sector organizations. The aim to make gender equality an issue that permeates the whole public system is clear, but the question is: how is this received at the local level? This study will indicate that the local adoption of gender mainstreaming is characterized by several problematic features. Public organisations strive for legitimacy from the outside as well as palpable informal resistance are obstacles which appear to inhibit comprehensive local gender equality work.

Since the implementation of gender equality within public organizations tend to be positioned as a steering issue the organization as a whole is often emphasized empirically (Kirton et.al 2007). However, the practical solution for gender equality work in public organizations is often to have a gender equality practitioner responsible for such implementations (Holgersson et.al 2011). This study will highlight these practitioners from a qualitative ethnographic perspective and view the local adoption of gender mainstreaming through their experiences within public sector organizations. Studies have shown (Ahmed 2012; Kirton et.al 2007) that equality practitioners operate in a position of uneasy tension where institutional resistance and personal visions for organizational transformation constantly clash, and this is interesting in relation to the ambitious intentions implied by the gender mainstreaming strategy. To be able to explore the local adoption of this strategy it will be highlighted from a micro perspective. The purpose of this study is thus to make sense of gender mainstreaming with regards to how it is translated and adopted by Swedish public organizations. The aim is further to explore what current gender equality work within public organisations consists of practically, and how practical solutions relate to the gender mainstreaming strategy. This will be explored through the experiences of gender equality practitioners' and situated in relation to cultural and institutional obstacles. The research questions which this study builds on are therefore the following:

How is the gender mainstreaming strategy adopted and practiced?

What obstacles are related to the adoption process and gender equality practices?

What role do the gender equality practitioners acquire given these conditions?

Previous research

This section will provide a more detailed description of gender mainstreaming as well as previous research relating to the strategy. Furthermore, previous research related to equality workers will be presented.

Gender mainstreaming – earlier research and brief background

To enhance gender equality in society the Swedish government advocates gender mainstreaming as a strategy (Arnell Gustafsson & Gonäs 2005). The strategy is also promoted by the E.U., and this is their definition:

Gender mainstreaming involves the (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of decision processes so that a gender equality perspective is in-

corporated in all decisions at all levels and in all stages of the process, by actors normally involved in decision-making. (Jamstall.nu)

A common feature of failed gender equality interventions has often been ineffectiveness in changing informal structures (SOU 2014:30). Instead, used methods have accomplished changes on a formal agenda such as writing adequate policy documents or to not discriminate in the recruitment process (SOU 2014:30). These formal agendas are a natural feature of most organizations gender equality work today (Holgerson et.al 2011). Gender mainstreaming aims to change institutional structures and priorities as well as policy instruments from a gender equality perspective (Caglar 2013). Transformed organisational structures are expected as a result of creating conditions for institutional learning by, for example, increasing gender knowledge within organizations. This strategy aim to enable bureaucrats to reorganize their institutional procedures, and further, to redefine policy values to realize gender equality (Caglar 2013). It has been suggested that gender mainstreaming probably is the only strategy available capable of producing any real transformation regarding gender equality issues (Calvo 2013; Rees 2005). But, since this strategy aims to transform unequal structures and systems by intentionally giving actors routinely involved in gender equality work the same responsibilities, it often remains uncertain and unpredictable (Calvo 2013). This because it demands that all actors involved in the process accept the same perspective on gender inequalities. Thus gender mainstreaming is often weakly institutionalized. In their article *The Promise and Pitfalls of Gender Mainstreaming* (2009) Sainsbury & Bergqvist conclude that after many years of promoting gender mainstreaming strategies, Swedish organisations often do monitor and support the implementation of gender mainstreaming. They discuss the rise of gender mainstreaming since the mid 1990s and examine the process and politics of introducing this strategy. Paradoxically, they argue, gender mainstreaming has strengthened the gender equality policy machinery. They further argue that mainstreaming as a strategy has not concerned gender equality exclusively but also been used to promote other policy goals. Thus it is still a question of priorities. Having a mainstreamed gender equality perspective in policies is not the same as prioritizing actual gender equality objectives. From these results it is possible to argue that gender equality not always gain an intrinsic value. This study therefore leans on these findings and explores how the interviewed practitioners experience their organisations when it comes to prioritizing gender equality in relation to other organisational engagements.

Other obstacles for implementing gender mainstreaming have been recognized. An identified risk with adopting this strategy is that gender equality becomes “everybody’s and nobody’s” responsibility (Mazey 2002; Calvo 2013). This is of course a central problem since far from all actors within the Swedish public sector can be believed to share the same understandings or knowledge regarding gender equality (Calvo 2013; Pollack & Hafner-Burton 2000). Also, the idea that gender equality should be mainstreamed in the organization can become an implicit argument that the issue already is mainstreamed when in fact it is not (Ahmed 2012). Having an equality committee or network can also allow a refusal from the rest of the organization to take responsibility. The commitment for gender equality issues then becomes unevenly distributed and only involves some having the responsibility so that other simply can “give it up” (Ahmed 2012). Ahmed (2012) argues that the basic assumption that everyone is responsible does not seem to work. Thus the issue remains very complicated. To remain an uneven distribution of commitment does on one hand repeat the unevenness that it challenges, and on the other, to act as if equality issues is a responsibility that everybody shares diffuses

commitment and can easily conceal inequality. These problematic features of the strategy is interesting in relation to the focus of this study since the included organizations have appointed responsibilities concerning gender equality to one person and, at the same time, adopted a mainstreaming strategy. This contradicting solution will be explored in the analysis.

The gender equality worker

Literature on equality work has not often made equality practitioners the focus of research. Diversity and equality management tends to be positioned as a steering issue and the essential role for all employees is often emphasized instead of focusing on people tasked with specific equality responsibilities (Kirton et.al 2007). The little we do know about those professionals indicates that they exist in a position of uneasy tension in their organizations. Ahmed (2012) has conducted a study concerning equality work on different universities, where the empirical basis consists of interviews with equality and diversity practitioners. The purpose of the project was to study practitioner's experiences of doing diversity work within the higher education sector. The results showed a paradox between the "taken for granted" commitment to diversity work within modern institutional life and often-experienced institutional resistance, and further, explored the tendency of symbolic commitment to diversity. Commitment to diversity work tends, according to Ahmed (2012), to be simply non-performatives, which does not bring about what they officially intend to. From Ahmed's findings one can argue that through analysing the experiences of equality practitioners it is possible to reveal symbolic performative commitment regarding equality work. This study draws on this possibility and Ahmed's study has inspired the theoretical framework presented later. The question is thus if the performative tendencies found in Ahmed's study permeates gender equality work in Swedish public organisations in a similar way, or, if the gender mainstreaming strategy have contributed to sustainable engagements.

Kirton et.al (2007) argue that we should not assume that equality workers uncritically will support their organizations suggested version of gender equality. Their study about the role of equality practitioners aimed to understand the roles and orientations of these professionals and argue that these practitioners are stuck in the tension between expectations to be committed to the version of diversity adopted by their organisations and having a personal vision of organisational transformation. From this reasoning it is possible that the interviewed practitioners in this study might have the same ambivalent relationship to their organisations gender equality work. They have to be committed to the local adoption of gender mainstreaming but may at the same time wish for more radical changes.

Keisu & Carbin (2014) draws on the work of Ahmed and touches the ambivalent relationship between personal values and organizational practices. They investigate how gender equality workers at Swedish universities articulate gender equality and possibilities for change within their institutions, and further, what visions and strategies for achieving gender equality they ascertained. This within a context where Swedish universities have been introduced to audit discourses in line with an enterprise model. They conclude that a neo-liberal setting has provided a gender equality worker who asks for more tools to monitor gender equality. Gender equality workers today do not only have to struggle with cultural and normative obstacles within their organizations, but also cope with the demands from increasing auditing within the public sector. The increased policy-machinery connected to the entrance of gender mainstreaming may affect equality workers represented in this study in a similar way, and the role of policy documents will be explored from this basis.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is characterized by both the gendered organization as well as purely organizational factors. The purpose of this combination is to be able to deepen the knowledge about the implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy with regards to both cultural and institutional aspects.

The gendered organisation

Gender equality is an ordinary and well-established feature of institutional life today, and yet, practitioners often experience their workplace as resistant to their work (Ahmed 2012). When changes are about to threaten the hierarchical and gender segregated order, actors tend to mobilize resistance to these changes (Forsberg Kankkunen 2009). Acker (1998) suggests that instead of interpreting gender relations as a direct consequence of organizational structures, it is more adequate to view it as subsumed in the organization and its processes. According to this reasoning, organizational change might not necessarily change the gender relations. Instead, the already existing order might direct intended changes in a direction which sustains established gender relations. Thus the implementation of a strategy such as gender mainstreaming may not in fact lead to the intended outcome but instead confirm the already established structure. This resistance is highly adoptive and capable of self-reproduction, and the established gender order should not be considered static. It is rather an on-going dynamic order that recreates itself through the concrete actions of human beings (Acker 1998). Gendered practices are a situational local matter which requires knowledge about the specific context in which they take place (Kvande 2003), and this further motivates the micro perspective used in this study.

In a context where male dominance and practical mechanisms for male control at different levels in society are successively being challenged, new devices for maintaining control are occurring. The *status quo ante* is often strived for and its validity argued for with both affirming and reaffirming practices (Cockburn 1991). According to Cockburn (1991), gender equality work can encounter different obstacles: cultural and institutional. These obstacles prepossess what we do, feel and think. Cultural obstacles arise in human interaction while institutional obstacles concern inhibiting procedures, structures or rules (Holgersson et al 2011). Cockburn (1991) further emphasizes contrasted agendas for change. The “short” agenda represents a minimum position that is supported by top management and which no gender equality changes could be started without. However, there is also the possibility for a “long” agenda, which involves a more substantial form of change. This study explores gender practitioners’ experiences of such agendas and situates this in relation to cultural and institutional obstacles.

Formal structure and performativity

Ahmed (2012) discusses the risk of equality work in organizations to be simply a part of a performance culture. The term “performativity” was initially referred to by Lyotard as the performativity of a system. Lyotard argues that: the desired goal becomes the optimal contribution to the best performativity in the social system” (in Ahmed 2012:84). Institutional performance and performativity involves an increasing self-consciousness about how to perform well within the system by fulfilling procedures and requirements of the system. This involves generating the right kind of appearance of gender equality work. It is treated as contributing to the optimal performance of the institution, and not as a mean in itself (Ahmed 2012). Lumby

(2008) draws on the same theoretical frame but take the reasoning about performativity one step further. She states that: Action aimed at transforming social relations ‘to be counted as proper, legitimate, political, reasonable, even sensible – must adhere to the rules of a game that is rigged in favour of the maintenance of the very process the action wished to disrupt’ (2008:353), and thus assertions of the intention to change, and the policy documents designed to achieve these changes, can be pursued within systems which preclude its possibilities for success. This theoretical perspective is adequate to use since equality work is considered, both by Ahmed and Lumby, to be characterized by a performance culture. Therefore it is important to explore if the local adoption of gender mainstreaming is characterized by such performativity.

The same kind of reasoning can be found within institutional theory. Meyer & Rowan (1977) emphasized the adoption of management ideas as purely ceremonial and argued that “rationalized myths” was constituted by a decoupling from on-going activities of an organisation. They further argue that there stands a conflict between an organisations technical efficiency and the striving for institutional demands. Gender equality can be viewed as such an institutional demand since public organisations are expected to work actively with this. A solution for negotiating organisational efficiency and already established ways to work is to decouple intended new activities from the formal structure of the organisation (Meyer & Rowan 1977). By this procedure organisations can keep its formal structures apart from new ideas, and conflicts are avoided. This decoupling allows a formal structure which legitimizes the organization towards its social context while maintaining practical activities and the original efficiency of the organisation. Meyer & Rowan (1977) argues that the possible uncertainty caused by these diffuse directives often is solved through the formulation of vague objectives and goals. This procedure legitimizes a situation where the daily practices will not be in conflict with the organisations image and aspiration to be legit. Such organisations, according to Meyer & Rowan (1977), tend to cut down their control functions since such controls might expose their inconsequent patters. Thus controls and evaluations are minimized to keep the legitimacy of the organisation. From Meyer & Rowans reasoning one could argue that the implementation of gender equality strategies could stand in conflict with the established efficiency of an organisation. Therefore it is adequate to explore decoupling processes when gender mainstreaming is adopted locally.

The adoption and translation of ideas

There are different theories concerning why organisations adopt certain ideas. Meyer & Rowan (1977) emphasize that the main motive is to gain legitimacy. The adoption of gender mainstreaming can be viewed as a legitimacy issue since both the EU and the Swedish government strongly recommend it. Czarniawska & Sevón (1996) further argue that fashion can be thought of as the steering wheel of the circulation of organisational ideas. According to this reasoning both the concepts of legitimacy together with what is considered fashionable in the field determine why certain ideas are initiated and points to the social process of idea circulation (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008). Sahlin & Wedlin (2008) argue that while adopting new ideas organisations and individuals are clearly embedded in a social environment with different expectations and rules for action. The importance of gender equality is palpable in the Swedish society and public organisations must be viewed as influenced by this social setting. This study explores if the performative culture presented above can be related to the striving for legitimacy from the outside. More particularly; if performative actions can be related to the

decision to adopt the gender mainstreaming strategy, and further, if such an agenda effects the content of local gender equality work.

To be able to analyse the local adoption of the gender mainstreaming strategy theories concerning adoption and translation of ideas will be used. This process is conceptualized as a performative process (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008) where attention is directed to richness of meaning instead of the strictly physical practice suggested by diffusion (Czarniawska & Sevón 1996). When a strategy such as gender mainstreaming is adopted locally it is translated and changed actively by local actors. This conceptual framework makes it possible to study how the gender mainstreaming strategy is transformed within organisations, and further, how the local adoption deviates from the original idea. Sahlin & Wedlin (2008) emphasize that what is being transferred between different settings is not a practice or an idea as such, but rather materializations or accounts of ideas. The infrastructure and editing rules within an organisation recontextualizes ideas, changing its formulation and content. This procedure may change not only practical forms of an adopted idea but its meaning and focus (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008). Therefore it is possible that local gender equality work significantly deviates from what is suggested nationally.

Research design and methods

As stated in the introduction this study has adopted a qualitative approach to gain understanding of public sector organisations adoption of gender mainstreaming. Since few studies concerning equality strategies have focused on the experiences of equality practitioners (Kirton et.al 2007) this study will be of exploratory character. With an ethnographic micro perspective this study will be able to explore how gender mainstreaming is realized in the practical work of public organizations, through the eyes of the gender equality practitioner. Ackers concept of gendered practices will be used as a general methodological tool for studying these everyday practices (Kvande 2003), this because it implies that we should start on the interactional level. An abductive iterative research process further characterizes this study, which is adequate for an exploratory ethnographic study (O'Reilly 2012). Thus a pendulous motion between collection of data and analysis is practiced with the purpose of remaining flexibility in the light of the empirical findings (O'Reilly 2012).

Interviews and observations

This study builds on material from eight interviews and two observations. The observations took place on two network-meetings for organisational representatives for gender equality work. The meetings contained group discussions concerning gender mainstreaming as well as presentations from both participating practitioners and other professionals. The first meeting was for invited practitioners alone and the second had the theme "bring your boss", thus managers attended also. The observations were not partaking but purely observational since the meetings provided good conditions for this. Although, of course, interaction during breaks and similar occurred. E-mails were sent to practitioners after the meeting asking if they were interested in partaking in this study. Five of the eight interviewees were representatives from this network and the other three were persons with similar responsibilities. The three practitioners outside the network were included through a snowball effect (Bryman 2009) were interviewees recommended other practitioners suitable for this study. The included organizations work with gender equality directives suggested from the government in similar ways. They either consider themselves working with the gender mainstreaming strategy today or have it as a clear goal for the near future. Six of the interviews were with persons from differ-

ent Swedish municipalities and two with persons from large public organisations with administrative authority. All interviewees were women in different ages with deviating background. It should be noted that public sector organisations are not homogeneous, and that work in social care compared to technical services are characterized by different settings. Forsberg Kankkunen (2009), for example, emphasize that social care and education services have poorer organizational conditions for social interaction among organization levels than technical services do. However, this difference will not be illustrated in this study since focus is not directed towards the context as such.

The interviews constitute the main empirical basis for this study while the observations functioned as an important gateway to getting access to the practitioners. The observed network meetings did provide empirical material, which is used in this study, but they substantially functioned as an important basis for the interviews. Ethnographic interviews were conducted and the researchers understanding of the field can be seen as a decisive factor to why this was possible (O'Reilly 2012).

Method of Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and field notes were taken. The field notes as well as the interview guide were of broad character to begin with and became more specific as the research became more focused and directed. The iterative abductive approach allowed this flexibility and further made the delimitation of the material easier (O'Reilly 2012). Coding and classification of gathered material was conducted in transition with data collection, and the collection process ended when the empirical entirety was considered saturated. Codes were assigned to particular units of the data and these codes then constituted larger categories of the empirical material. The purpose of such a strategy was to enable categories to emerge inductively through working with the material and thus not be imposed by prescribed categories (Kozinets 2010). This process assured the exploratory character of the study and enabled proximity to the gathered material in the process of analysis. The coding process involved noting patterns evident in the setting, such as a profound focus on policy documents during the observations. This coding generated indigenous typologies directly expressed by participants in their own language (Marshall & Rossman 2006). Several of the themes presented in the analysis, for example *The deficient control function* and *Anchoring and the uninterested organisation* developed from the practitioners own words. Analyst-constructed typologies grounded in the data but not explicitly expressed were also generated, such as the theme *Informal resistance* presented in the analysis. The aim has been to remain close to the material; letting the practitioners own words direct the typologies to large extent. The analysis has thus been thematic and data driven, not trying to fit data into a pre-existing frame (Braun & Clarke 2006). This is believed to decrease the risk of imposing meanings affected by the researcher on the participants (Marshall & Rossman 2006).

Ethical considerations

Since the practitioners articulated the need to not be connected to their respective organisations in this study, the presented results contain no detailed descriptions that could reveal such information. The practitioners highlighted the sensitive conditions for their gender equality work and wanted anonymity to speak openly during the interviews. Therefore confidentiality has been of highest priority. The participating practitioners were further informed of the purpose of the study and that they could revoke their partaking at any time (VR.se).

Methodological limitations

There can be a risk of limiting the focus of this study to a micro level (interactions becomes performances and not representatives for a larger structure), but since practices are believed to contain both structures and symbols, local actions can tell us how these processes work and how structures are produced. Through this understanding, practices can be conceptualized at different analytical levels and be interlinked (Kvande 2003). The decision to focus on a micro level can also be motivated by the vast majority of organizational theories which build on overstructuralization (Clegg 1990). Furthermore, the initial intention was to shadow a number of practitioners to be able to observe the organisations partly through the researcher own eyes and not only have it narrated from the interviewees' experiences. Unfortunately, this was not possible. Unstructured ethnographic interviews were used to obtain embedded and cultural understandings experienced by the gender equality worker, with the hope that this could serve an equal purpose. This solution is adequate in relation to the purpose of the study which concerns exploring cultural phenomena through the experiences of practitioners. One alternative method possibly adequate for this study would be to analyse documents and action plans in combination with interviews. But, since the majority of the represented organisations were revising their documents due to their partaking in the network these documents were not available. It is possible that the findings of this study could have been interpreted differently in the light of policy documents, but since the focus concerns a practical adoption of gender mainstreaming this is not considered a problem.

Results and analysis

As presented in the previous section the observations took place in two network meetings for equality practitioners. They gather several times a year to discuss gender equality work in their organisations. This field note was taken at the first attended network meeting:

On February 11, 2015, about 50 people are attending a network meeting in a conference centre in Gothenburg. They have been invited because they in some way are related to a declaration called Gender Equal Västtra Götaland created by Länsstyrelsen (the County Administrative Board). A majority of the invited workers are gender equality practitioners representing different public organisations in the region. Also experts and consultants working with gender equality are present. After a short presentation of the gender mainstreaming strategy they are all seated in smaller groups to discuss the theme of the day: action plans. Although, discussions occurring do not only concern action plans but wanders into more general challenges with the gender mainstreaming strategy.

An expressed purpose of these network meetings was for the practitioners to give each other support and to share thoughts and ideas. The atmosphere was characterized by a strong well-being due to both shared difficulties within their respective organisations as well as a shared vision for the future. Many of the themes discussed at this meeting permeated the interviews, also by those who were not connected to the network directly.

The eight interviewed practitioners did not have identical employments with regards to their gender equality responsibility. Some of them had a clear label, such as gender equality controller, while some of them had this assignment as public health coordinators, work environment coordinators or as part of human resource work. The gender equality role can be found on different levels in the organization, but a common feature is that they are located as a sup-

portive staff resource. Their practical work differs to some extent, but there are clear recurring themes: writing and revision of action plans and policy documents where tasks mentioned in all interviews. The gender equality workers have the responsibility, sometimes with other employees and sometimes not, to keep policy documents in line with what is expected from signed declarations and politics. Some of the gender equality workers also have the responsibility to make sure that policy documents are implemented. They are expected to assemble educational training for managers, employees and sometimes politicians as part of strategies to raise knowledge of gender equality.

The analysis resulted in four major themes which concern both the adoption and practice of the gender mainstreaming strategy as well as obstacles related to this. The first theme *Policy documents and what they imply* covers the writing and handling of policy documents and the practitioners' view of this process. The second theme *Formal commitment* covers features of practical activities as well as control functions and evaluation of gender equality work. The third theme, *The local adoption of gender mainstreaming* covers practical interpretations of the gender mainstreaming strategy as well as the relation between the gender equality practitioner and the organisation. The fourth theme *Cultural and organizational resistance* covers examples of informal resistance to gender equality and other problematic features such as poor anchoring. These themes are, as explained in the method chapter, formulated through both the interviewees' own expressions as well as the researchers interpretations.

Policy documents and what they imply

One apparent feature of public gender equality work is the writing and revision of policy documents. If public organisations sign declarations in excess of what the law inflicts then these declarations further requires action-plans related to that specific objective. The decision to work with gender mainstreaming is described as an example of such commitment. This section will concern the writing and usage of policy documents.

Policy documents – uncertain and vague?

It became clear both during interviews and observations that policy documents have an important role for gender equality work in general, and the gender equality practitioners are responsible for producing them. While discussing these documents an often-expressed view was that the gender equality worker did not know how they were used practically by other employees and managers. The finished products require much time and effort from the gender equality worker and still, they have no control over how these documents are practically used. One of the interviewees expressed her experience of this uncertainty like this:

So of course I feel when I work with this action plan that just because it exists, just because I think it's great... I have tried to work with anchoring it so that management really are involved in writing the action plan, but how do I know that it is used in an implementation phase and actually have any effect? There are many action plans that are supposed to be included in regular follow-up and control, which is not really done. (*Practitioner 2*)

Sainsbury & Berqvist (2009) argue that gender mainstreaming has strengthened the gender equality policy machinery, and the interviewed practitioners provide a consistent picture. To write and revise documents is a significant part of gender equality work. But, despite this considerable production of documents, the actual use of such documents seems less explored. As

the quote above implies the gender equality practitioners do not know what effects produced documents have. This uncertainty was something all interviewees concerned and during the observations the actual usage of documents was a feature discussed in depth.

The practitioners attending the observed network meetings expressed frustration over the general design of current strategies and criticised its vague intentions and purposes. This design is expressed to hinder practical interpretations and complicate their work. A recurring theme during the interviews was that vague intentions tend to leave managers and employees not knowing how to practically work with what is stated in the strategy. This vagueness characterizes general policy documents within the organisations also. Thus concrete action-plans with interventions adapted to fit different parts of the organisations are highlighted as an important aspect for integrating gender equality. Calvo (2013) emphasizes the potential risk of gender mainstreaming to not become institutionalised. The interviewed practitioners indicate that the vague objectives of the strategy can be one explanation to this. The practitioners reasoning about deficient practical work due to vague objectives can be interpreted as a need to hinder local interpretations. As Sahlin & Wedlin (2008) emphasize, ideas are translated as they circulate and become local versions. From this reasoning it can be argued that the gender mainstreaming strategy rests upon local interpretations of the initial idea, and the vagueness of the strategy further underlines this process. The gender equality practitioners believe this process of local interpretation to be partly hampering for the implementation of this strategy since it is hard to practically interpret objectives presented in the strategy. This reasoning will be developed further in the section *The local adoption of gender mainstreaming*.

Practical usage and the duality of signing

Many of the interviewees further expressed that producing these documents are not enough. A need for time and resources to actually work with what is stated in the action-plans is articulated, and this is expressed as a general shortcoming. Of course some practical examples based on these documents are described, such as gender work in preschool or requirement of gendered statistics, but the lack of possibilities to work with documents within the organisations are limited. Judging from the expressed limited possibilities for these documents, practical gender equality work seems characterized by a formal adoption. Documents are written in line with what is required, but what happens beyond this formal production seems less important. Thus this writing of documents could be considered an institutional performance. The vagueness in intentions and goals criticised by the practitioners can perhaps be explained as a strategy to avoid uncertainty regarding the intentions of the organisation. If used documents would consist of concrete suggestions for the change process then a decoupling of gender equality work within the organisation would be hard to disassemble (Meyer & Rowan 1977). Vague objectives can become a prerequisite for an organisation to continue with well-established activities and not having to adapt to new ideas that would threaten the established order. The situation for the gender equality worker can then become wringed. In these examples they seem to be stuck between personal ambitions for gender equality work and constantly facing a tardiness of the system.

Several of the interviewees shared the belief that the management did not know what they embarked on signing these documents, and thus their function partially concerns reminding everyone that they are expected to follow what is written in signed declarations. One interviewee put it like this:

[...] but they were not really aware that it also meant we were obliged to write an action plan. They sign [declarations] saying “we're going to work with this” and then when I go in and look [...] I have to press and say look, we have signed this, and that means we have committed to producing an action-plan. So I feel a bit like a police sometimes. Like: Hey! We have signed this, we cannot hide from it. It is not enough to just sign. We have to do more. (*Practitioner 6*)

From the practitioners experiences of policy documents it is possible to argue that the signing of declarations can mean something different to the organisation than to the gender equality worker. It seems that such commitment is characterized by “empty words” from the organisation. The gender equality workers know what these declarations imply but experience their organisations as not susceptible to what they entail. The organisations sign declarations but are, according to the practitioners, not keen to realize what they suggest.

Formal commitment

Gender equality work in public organisations is a complex matter, and a common challenge for the gender equality practitioner is management commitment. This section concerns the characteristics of this commitment as well as the evaluation and controlling of gender equality initiatives.

Priorities and characteristics of gender equality work

All interviewees communicated that their managers had a formal interest for gender equality. One interviewee expressed it like “they know what is expected by the organisation” regarding the official commitment to gender equality work. However, this formal engagement is not always followed by support and actual possibilities to work with gender equality. Since few or no resources were allocated they have to “work with what they have”. A common notion was that the organizations do not understand what it actually takes to generate successful gender equality work, and gender equality repeatedly must draw the short straw when it comes to prioritizing. Frustration was expressed relating to this matter and not seldom gender equality was compared to other features of organisational life such as learning CPR or being engaged in environmental issues, which was believed to have a more apparent position.

The importance to work with gender equality systematically, with a clear long-term plan, is a factor expressed by the interviewed practitioners. If the practical elements relating to gender equality issues are all selective measures, such as educational training at scattered occasions, the conditions for anchoring this work in the organisation are believed to be adverse. One interviewee expressed her view of the systematic process like this:

[...] One must realize that education and specific measures is good, but there must also be something more long term, something more systematic like ‘this is how we work [with gender equality] in this municipality, and it means that in this organisation we work like this’ [...] I see that this still demands more effort from the management, that they decide that this is how we'll work. That is necessary. (*Practitioner 5*)

The interviewees all expressed a lack of systematic commitment to the cause of gender equality and thus it appear to exist clear obstacles for comprehensive gender equality work. There seem to be a gap between the gender equality practitioners and the rest of the organisa-

tions. This gap concerns the understanding of this work, and further, experienced misguided intentions. Cockburn (1991) encountered the tendency for contrasting agendas. From her reasoning the official commitment provided by management can be interpreted as a short agenda. While the gender equality practitioners emphasize the importance of the long agenda, the actual activities and interventions seem to be of short-term character. This could be interpreted as a mechanism for maintaining control and the prevailing norms of the organisation instead of investing in sustainable long-term initiatives.

The deficient control function

With the expressed absence of systematic work comes the lack of controlling and evaluating the progress of gender equality work. This deficiency concerns two different aspects: a lack of following-up from political instances and an inadequate control function within the organization. The practitioners gave a coincident expression of not knowing what the practical work actually consist of. Many of the interviewees saw this as the most obvious deficiency and a clear obstacle for successful gender equality work. In addition to this, there is also a shared experience of no one but themselves asking for such information. One interviewee answered like this as a response to how documents are used:

I feel that they [the managers] need to be clearer. I would like to receive feedback, what the progress looks like. How the [local] action plans are developing and how we are doing in general. But this is not listened to. (*Practitioner 7*)

This lack of evaluation can also be linked to the experience of gender equality not being prioritized in the organization. In addition to what was mentioned earlier, when gender equality's position in relation to other organizational engagements was questioned, the interviewees found this lack of evaluation as evidence for the limited attention gender equality acquires. On one occasion it was expressed like this:

[...] It can [for example] concern that the assignment is not even a priority in the organization. That the mission exists and is appointed to someone, but it has no real support from management or politic and no results are demanded. There is a fairly general disinterest for the mission. (*Practitioner 2*)

This tendency can be interpreted as resistance to gender equality work. When changes are intended which threatens the established segregated order, resistance will be mobilized (Forsberg Kankkunen 2009). This expressed disinterest could be an example of a cultural obstacle, which strives for a status quo instead of real change (Cockburn 1991). Organisations today are expected both by law and by the public to promote gender equality, and to gain legitimacy from the outside is an important feature of organizational initiatives (Meyer & Rowan 1977). Therefore, gender equality is something these organizations are required to be engaged in. In line with Meyer & Rowans (1977) reasoning about decoupling that allows formal structure to endure while new ideas are introduced, one could interpret these organisations decisions not to evaluate their gender equality work as a strategy for not exposing their possible fallible initiatives.

The local adoption of gender mainstreaming

The interviews provided descriptions of local interpretations of gender mainstreaming and gender equality work in general. This section provides a presentation and analysis of essential features of this adoption.

The merging of perspectives

One solution adopted by many of the included organisations is to merge gender equality with other issues such as public health, work environment, diversity or otherwise. This strategy has different implications. One aspect concerns putting different concepts together to make gender equality easier for the organisations to absorb. Gender equality is often expressed to be a sensitive issue within the organisation and therefore it is argued that it is easier to implement it as part of a wider concept instead of integrating it as a separate issue. One interviewee expressed the purpose of merging gender equality together with diversity like this: For two reasons, first, it is very sensitive to talk of only gender equality, and second, we believe diversity to be equally important (*Practitioner 1*). Thus the purpose of combining gender equality with other concepts used in the organization may not always be to integrate it but to cover it. To put different concepts such as gender equality and diversity together does hide the formal intention of achieving gender equality, since it is a purpose no longer visible for the general employee. This merging of perspectives thus seem to partly be due to reluctant reactions from trying to implement gender equality with an intrinsic value. Here it is adequate to return to Sainsbury & Bergqvists (2009) reasoning about gender mainstreaming. They argue that the adoption of this strategy has not concerned gender equality exclusively but instead used to promote other features of the organisations. This tendency can also be interpreted from the empirical example presented above.

The process of anchoring

The importance of adopting gender equality in the organisation is another aspect expressed. This concerns managers and employees having problems with relating gender equality to their practical work, and thus not actively working with gender equality as a result. One way expressed to promote this is having them come up with their own interpretations of what equality means in their everyday work, partly to come to terms with top-down difficulties. One interviewee expressed this adoption process like this:

We have looked at the organisations and checked: what do you do all day that relates to gender equality? And then they work like this, and I say yes, good! And then we build on the work already done, and try to develop this, rather than coming up with something new and say that you have to work with this. That just leads to resistance. (*Practitioner 5*)

As expressed in the quote above a common notion is to investigate what aspects of the daily work can be related to gender equality initiatives and developed, instead of introducing new obligations. This seems, as the merging of perspectives presented above, to partly be a strategy for avoiding resistance. Of course local adoption has to be an essential part when introducing new ideas (Czarniawska & Sevón 1996), but in these empirical examples adoption is partly motivated as a strategy for avoiding resistance. Thus gender mainstreaming is translated to fit the circumstances in which these practitioners operate, and these circumstances seems to be permeated by different forms of resistance to gender equality work. Here it is also adequate to return to the problems with local adoption expressed in earlier section. The gender equality

practitioners seem to have an ambivalent relationship to this process since local adoption is expressed as a basic condition for comprehensive gender equality work. At the same time, this local adoption process is expressed to hinder practical work to develop in line with what is suggested in the strategy. This ambivalence concerns an uncertainty regarding the organisations possibilities of adopting gender mainstreaming in a comprehensive way. The practitioners express that they see a clear need for local adoption with regards to anchoring, but also a risk of transforming it inadequately.

Interest, knowledge and responsibilities

Another recurring theme is the practitioner's experiences of being the only one concerned with gender equality. Even though all employees are expected to have a gender equality perspective integrated to their work this is not manifested. Instead the responsibilities for this matter rest upon the gender equality practitioner. One interviewee expressed it like this:

[...] It's like constantly walking around in a struggle because I have to be everywhere pushing for this issue all the time. If I'm not attending a meeting that is about summarizing the financial statements, if I am not there the meeting will not concern equality because it is not supported by the rest of the group.

(Practitioner 2)

What could be interpreted from this quotation is that gender equality is not a natural feature for all employees. Instead, the practitioner has to make sure that gender equality is addressed. This experience seems to be combined with the sense of a "gap" between the gender equality worker and a majority of the organization when it comes to knowledge and basic understanding of this issue. Ahmed (2012) raise awareness to the risks of gender mainstreaming relating to the expected shared responsibility. She argues that to have an equality representative can allow refusal from the rest of the organisation to take responsibility. This tendency can be interpreted in this study also, since the commitment for gender equality seems unevenly distributed. A recurring expression is that the practitioners have "thicker glasses" than many others, and that this is part of the role. One of the interviewees described a situation where she had expressed to her closest manager, after a large conference, that many of the managers in their organisation revealed a low level of awareness for gender equality. She said:

[...] And I said that there is a pretty big lack of knowledge, on this day for example, and he had not thought of it. He heard me and understood what I said, but he had not reacted to what [person] actually said... but I think it is normal. Its such a common sight that it's probably more unusual to react to it. *(Practitioner 5)*

It can be concluded that the adoption of gender mainstreaming seems to be characterized by a tendency to combine it with other concepts, and that this partly is a way to accommodate resistance in the organization. Thus, the intent for "integrating" perspectives is not always to mainstream gender equality but to avoid delicate situations. Also, despite that gender equality is supposed to be integrated within all organisational fields and by all employees these practitioners on the contrary experience that it depends on them. The interviewees provide an image where public sector organizations are still in large struggling with getting the basic ideas of gender mainstreaming realized.

Sahlin & Wedlin (2008) argue that the adoption of new ideas is due to expectations and rules for actions in the social context and this adoption often not only is a decision based on legitimacy or appropriateness, but also fashion (Czarniawska & Sevón 1996). During the observations it became clear that gender equality work is something important for the image of public sector organisations, and an often-discussed theme was gender equality as a competitive advantage in relation to others. To be an attractive employer is expressed as important and active gender equality work is a significant feature of this. Thus the pressure from the surrounding environment is palpable. Several interviewees also expressed that one purpose for the organisation to work with gender equality was to be an attractive employer. This striving for legitimacy could motivate a decoupling process. Gender equality initiatives can be decoupled from already established ways to work and thus the efficiency and existing structures are never really threatened (Meyer & Rowan 1977). This phenomenon could be interpreted through the earlier mentioned experienced gap between the gender equality practitioner and the rest of the organization. The formal structure of the organisation seems to concern gender equality, but the actual every-day practices may not. The organisations appear to be formally engaged in gender mainstreaming but the expressed experiences of these gender practitioners indicate that this commitment could be empty.

Cultural and organizational resistance

A pronounced theme that permeated the interviews was resistance, and the observant reader has seen this latent in many of the above examples. This section will concern both resistance embedded in organizational processes as well as direct resistance expressed by the interviewees.

Informal resistance

Many of the interviewees have experienced direct resistance from employees and managers while trying to implement and promote gender equality. The notion that we already are equal, we cannot save the world or the tendency to be dismissed as interfering with people's private opinions are recurrent themes. However, direct resistance is expressed as quite easy to respond to. Resistance that craves more work and energy from the practitioner is of informal character. As gender equality has become an issue that is formally accepted and strived for, a new form of resistance is occurring. As one interviewee put it:

[...] You cannot be a gender equality opponent, that is something ugly to be. Everyone realizes that it is not accepted to be obstinate. So resistance is formulated on the basis of this awareness. Instead you can say "I'm positive about gender equality, but...". And that is a more difficult form of resistance, I think. (*Practitioner 8*)

Thus other methods are used to oppose this issue in a more underlying and subtle way. The feeling of resistance is often expressed in relation to features described above, such as the absence of control functions and the lack of evaluation. Resistance was also experienced in relation to the handling of policy documents. The signing of declarations was expressed to be a tool for the gender equality worker in relation to the resistance of the organisation. If gender equality is not taken seriously they can always point to these documents and state that it is something they have to do. It is also emphasized as a way to underline that it is not their "personal ideas" that are in focus, and thus legitimize gender equality efforts through pointing at these documents. This tendency was expressed like this by one of the practitioners:

I think that such signing can be a good support because it is a good document for me. I can point to it and say: you have no choice, we have signed this. But this will not work in the long run because you cannot pursue a job because someone else says so. (*Practitioner 2*)

As the quote implies the gender equality practitioners attempt to counteract this resistance through available methods, such as signed declarations, but they are still aware that this is not enough. They know that this is not a sustainable solution. This can be related to the earlier discussed contrasting agendas. The organizations appear to sign a declaration here and now while the gender equality practitioners know that such commitment requires long-term sustainable work. The organisations then express resistance to realize the objectives of such declarations. Once again it is possible to interpret this behaviour as purely a formal adoption, possibly decoupled from the every-day work of the organisation. As the quote implies, the gender equality worker has to work actively to make sure that gender equality is not ignored by the organisation.

Formal engagement that is not sensed as true commitment is thus another example of experienced resistance. This can be manifested when managers or other employees do not respond to e-mails or “bounce” question, or simply an avoidance of planning meetings with the gender equality practitioner. One example of such behaviour was this:

[...] Some managers I work with for example. We sit at a meeting and they are very positive and say "yes, this sounds very interesting, now we'll make things happen!" And then backs out of the room with two thumbs up like this and nothing happens. It's a strategy I think [...] they say yes and that sounds great, and then they can leave it because they appeared so enthused. But it does not mean that anything actually happens. (*Practitioner 2*)

As this quote implies new forms of resistance seem to occur when direct resistance is perceived as inappropriate. Cockburn (1991) stated that resistance towards gender equality is highly adoptive, and as male dominance is challenged new ways of maintaining control occurs. The new forms of resistance expressed by the practitioners appear to be adapted to the general understanding that everyone strives for gender equality. Given such circumstances, resistance could become indistinct and hidden behind positive attitudes, as indicated in the example above.

Anchoring and the uninterested organisation

Another recurring theme relating to the experienced organizational resistance is difficulties with getting gender equality initiatives anchored in the organization. As discussed above this problem could be due to vague descriptions as well as limited time to interpret the strategy. But, the deficient anchoring is also believed to be a consequence of disinterest. The ordinary employee, important for implementing the policy-document in the organisations every-day life, is expressed as never integrated in the process of deciding how to work with gender equality. This is further articulated as an explanation to why gender equality efforts often have been ineffective at being realized. The interviewees further expressed a desire for managers or employees themselves to raise issues related to gender equality to get this work anchored, but this was an experience seldom occurring. Instead the experience of a clear disin-

terest around the organisation was a dominating feature. One interviewee described it like this:

I feel that I want a greater interest in my workplace and among the managers, that this is an important issue for them too. That they notice that in this area there may be problems, and how do we solve this... (*Practitioner 4*)

This lack of interest is also expressed as a reason for the difficulties to anchor gender equality work. The practitioners expressed that gender equality efforts often were perceived as a difficult charge, or even insignificant, to the general manager or employee. Thus initiatives coming bottom-up are seldom occurring. Since the core of the gender mainstreaming strategy is for gender equality work to be integrated in all parts of the organisation and its decision processes, these empirical examples can be seen as deviating from the initial idea. Calvo (2013) states that the gender mainstreaming strategy is unpredictable as it intentionally gives every actor the same responsibility, and further, argues that gender mainstreaming is weakly institutionalized because of this. The practitioners' experiences provide an image where they alone are concerned with gender equality and the indented shared responsibility is not realized. It seems that the failure to share responsibility also can be due to disinterest and resistance from other actors in the organization.

Discussion

Public sector organizations are formally committed to gender mainstreaming due to different declarations, as well as gender political goals. To fulfil this commitment, gender equality workers are appointed. This study has drawn attention to this group of practitioners to explore the local adoption of gender mainstreaming. In this section essential aspects of this adoption will be discussed as well as the role of the gender equality practitioner.

The adoption and practice of gender mainstreaming

The analysis has indicated that the local adoption of the gender mainstreaming strategy is characterized by several essential features. When described by the practitioners the local version developed appear to be characterized by both unevenly distributed responsibilities, a general disinterest for gender equality and empty formal commitment from the organisation. This formal commitment in relation to what is practically manifested by the organisations, was a recurring aspect relating to the practice of gender equality work. The practical solutions described by the practitioners appear to be characterized by a lack of systematic work and commitment to signed declarations. Cockburns (1991) reasoning about contrasting agendas has already been used to suggest that the organisations seem to prefer short-term initiatives while the gender equality practitioners believe this approach to be inadequate. While the practitioners strive for sustainable gender equality work, which goes beyond selective measures and aims for "true change", the organizations in which they work appear to have a different agenda. The local practice of gender equality work thus seem to be characterized by initiatives situated here and now and not, as the practitioners recommend, with a long-term perspective. It has been established that organizational changes striving for gender equality might not necessarily change the established gender order (Forsberg Kankkunen 2009) and the preferred short-term agenda can be interpreted as a way of contributing to such an outcome.

The tendency to sign declarations and not realizing its objectives is another aspect highlighted by the interviewees. In the analysis this is partly interpreted as a possible decoupling process

where the organisation can be formally committed to gender equality initiatives but still in practice remain unchanged. Tendencies of the decoupling process presented by Meyer & Rowan (1977) can be related to several examples of this study. The lack of evaluation of gender equality initiatives and the unevenly distributed responsibility for gender equality can be interpreted as additional examples. The analysis implies that the main motive for a decoupling process appear to be the possibility to gain legitimacy from the social surroundings. Meyer & Rowan (1977) argue that the decoupling process enables organisations to formally adopt new ideas and gain legitimacy while at the same time maintain the original organisational structure. This could partly explain the local deviations from the intended objectives of gender mainstreaming. Public organisations adopt the gender mainstreaming strategy because they are expected to do so from politics, but also because it looks good. These conditions can create a situation where gender equality is decoupled from the every-day work of the organisation, and established organisational structures are not threatened.

Problematic features of the adoption process and gender equality practices

One aspect that is highlighted as hindering for a comprehensive gender equality work is the lack of resources and time to work with gender equality issues. The employed gender equality practitioner gets commissioned to implement this strategy but acquires no extra resources. Further, gender equality seldom seems to be recognized in the organisations everyday work. In addition to the decoupling process discussed above it is adequate to discuss performative tendencies. Gender equality is something these organisations formally work with, but the practitioners express that practical solutions are characterized by a lack of commitment and resources. It is possible that the main purpose is not to actually achieve sustainable gender equality work but to be *seen* as performing well from the outside. Equality work is deeply embedded in a performance culture (Ahmed 2012), which makes this process understandable. If the main objective is to be seen to perform well then one should not expect the practical commitment to gender equality to be comprehensive or executed systemically. From this reasoning action that aim to provide legitimacy can be part of a performative culture, which maintains the very process it seeks to disrupt. Here it is adequate to explain why we should trust the statements of these practitioners when we do not trust the organizations' official intentions. The results of this study cannot say anything about how successful these practitioners are in their work. Instead it reveals fundamental contradictions with the gender mainstreaming strategy, and these contradictions were discovered from the experiences of the gender equality practitioners. Therefore an objection saying that the experiences of these practitioners are characterized by unreasonable expectations or similar is not relevant since the interpreted results do not apply to them personally.

Another problematic feature is the experienced resistance to gender equality work. What seems to be the case is that gender mainstreaming and gender equality initiatives are adopted without considering cultural features of the organisation. Aspects such as resistance appear to actively change the conditions for implementation and can therefore hinder comprehensive equality work. The poor handling of documents could for example be interpreted as a result of this. Gender equality practitioners write ambitious documents required by the organisation and the gender mainstreaming strategy, but how these documents are used seems unimportant to the organisation. The formal process of writing documents is realized while cultural aspects such as resistance disrupt the practical work that should follow. Resistance in the empirical examples can further be interpreted as adoptable, since it seems to be performed informally in ways that cannot easily be accessed or exposed. In large it appears to be manifested through

inertia in the organisational system, which seems to concern the practitioners alone. As the gender equality workers responsible for this work in many ways are separated from the organisations everyday work they seem to watch this process from the outside, often unable to introduce the changes they know are needed. This indicates that the earlier discussed process of decoupling also should be observed through these new forms of organisational resistance. As Acker (1998) argues, gender relations within an organisation are not a product of the structures within it but subsumed in the organisation itself. Thus practical implementations seem to cause changes in the formal structures, that are visible from the outside, while the informal life of the organisation still in large appears resistant.

This study indicates that the adoption of this strategy do not take cultural aspects in consideration, and further, that it fails to consider gender equality as a possible mean in an organizational strive for legitimacy. The local versions of gender mainstreaming appear as not adapted to the complex nature of organisational life. These shortcomings can be interpreted as results of deficiencies in the strategy itself. This study highlights a contradicting situation emerging from the local adoption of this strategy; if gender equality are to be accepted its intentions has to be vague, but to have real impact it has to be concrete. Vagueness leads to a conscious masking of gender equality intentions while a concretization would involve an open disclosure of performative commitment such as criticising passive engagement from management. The later would surely fuel the already palpable resistance from the organisation further. Thus neither of these cases can be seen as providing good conditions for fundamental change.

The gender equality practitioners

The results of this study have provided an image where public gender equality practitioners are alone in their function, without any significant support or shared interest from their organizations. Since gender equality, according to the practitioners, tend to draw the short straw when it comes to prioritizing the role of the gender equality worker partly consists of trying to counter the tardiness of the organization and lobbying for long-term sustainable initiatives. The practitioners have a responsibility to implement gender equality in an environment that is often resistant to their function, despite the fact that all employees officially share this task. The complicated situation that Ahmed (2012) discusses, where gender equality becomes a responsibility belonging to “everybody and nobody”, does not occur in the expressed experiences of these practitioners. Instead they appear to be alone in their position due to both cultural and institutional aspects, and the mainstreaming intention appear as not realized. This solution must be seen as problematic since shared responsibility is an essential feature of the strategy. Judging by the empirical examples presented in this study it seems that gender equality work in public organizations still lean on the personal commitment of gender equality representatives, and this is alarming. Sahlin & Wedlin (2008) argues that it is important to consider actors and interests while studying translation of ideas, and the local adoption of gender mainstreaming seems significantly affected by such aspects.

Furthermore, it seems like the gender equality practitioners are aware of the performative tendencies discussed above. They sense that commitment expressed by others is not “real commitment” and seem to face this kind of behaviour in their every-day work. The curious position emphasised by Kirton et.al (2007) can be found in the results of this study, but the role of the gender equality practitioner appear to be further pinched due to a performative culture. The practitioners further appear to be aware of the interpreted empty commitment mentioned earlier. They know that the organisations cannot be against gender equality, and that

different forms of counteracts therefore are performed instead of straight on resistance. This tendency is something discussed by many feminist researchers (Cockburn 1991; Forsberg Kankkunen 2009) and it has been established that as male dominance is being challenged on different levels in society new methods for maintaining the existing gender order are constantly occurring. Thus this performed interest and commitment to gender equality work could be seen as a strategy to keep old patterns and further stabilize the established organisational structure.

Concluding remarks

With this paper I have aimed to explore the local adoption of gender mainstreaming in Swedish public organisations. Furthermore, I have aspired to highlight this process by studying the experiences of gender equality practitioners. The results of this study imply that the adoption of the gender mainstreaming strategy is characterized by several problematic features. Gender equality seems to be decoupled from the organisations every-day work and the intended shared responsibility is not realized. The gender equality practitioner has to push for equality to be recognized despite the intended mainstreamed gender equality perspective, and their role becomes wringed. Difficulties to institutionalize gender mainstreaming have been shown in previous research (Calvo 2013; Sainsbury & Bergqvist 2009; Caglar 2013). The contribution of this study is the suggestion that resistance is a central reason for such difficulties. Solutions for practical local gender equality work was in these empirical examples partly elaborated to avoid resistance. Furthermore, lacking evaluation, experienced disinterest from the organisation as well as avoiding behaviour in relation to the gender equality practitioner are examples that underline this resistance, and which counteract the mainstreaming objective.

This study has further emphasized that new forms of informal resistance combined with performative actions make empty commitment to gender equality likely. The common notion that no one is a gender equality opponent and the basic understanding that gender equality is a desirable goal appear to hide problematic resistance to gender equality work. Gender equality work therefore, as it seems, is not mainstreamed but performed. The performative culture which embeds gender equality has been established (Ahmed 2012; Lumby 2009), and this study further emphasizes the importance of acknowledging this. With the results of this study as basis it can be argued that the widespread adoption of the gender mainstreaming strategy might not imply that public organisations are in fact mainstreamed. Instead, it may be a response to the expectations of the social environment and an organizational will to be perceived as legitimate.

Suggestions for future studies based on these results may involve examining the experienced gap between the gender equality worker and the organisations. Interviewing other organisational actors might provide new perspectives, which possibly can refine this relation. It is possible that important aspects have been missed due the decision to only focus on gender equality practitioners, and this has limited the opportunity to draw more general conclusions about the organisations. Further, it would be rewarding to analyse the included organisations finished action plans with the results of this study as basis. The results presented in this study may not be representative for the public sector in whole, however, based on these results, it also seems adequate to investigate if other organisations formally mainstreamed could be examples of the performative empty commitment highlighted in this study. The micro perspective adopted allowed an insight in these processes and it is possible that studies concerning

the formal engagement of organisations simply miss performative tendencies that the results of this study highlight.

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