

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

"We have nothing against women": How business imperatives tie the hands of elite business organizations

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ABSTRACT

Elite business organizations (EBOs) hold a privileged position within the business community, and develop management methods, norms and individuals that serve as models of 'best practice' for the economy at large. It is therefore problematic that many EBOs appear unable to achieve the same success and competence in their equality work as in their core business. In this paper we investigate how gender inequality is perpetuated in a Swedish EBO, despite various supportive external and internal structures and processes, and discuss how this can be practically addressed. A case study of FIN, a highly successful global investment company headquartered in Sweden, was performed through interviews with men and women working as investment professionals at the junior, senior and partner level. Paradoxically, we found that while all employees expressed near-universal commitment to improving gender equality, most perceived very limited possibilities to do so despite being members of a powerful business elite. This experience of powerlessness among both women and men was linked to a perceived business imperative. Our empirical analysis outlines the complex relationship between the perceived competence requirements of the core business, and the organization's perceived capacity to secure and develop such competences in individuals who were not already 'ideal workers' (Acker 1990). By juxtaposing perceived problems, solutions and 'unchangeable' circumstances, we also identify grounds for productive change in the elite business organization setting.