

1

Introduction: The Many Faces of Gender and Organization

Texts on gender and organizations often start by referring to common knowledge or statistics showing an inferior position of women in relation to men. Women in general have lower wages, even within the same occupation and at the same level, experience more unemployment, take more responsibility for unpaid labour, are strongly underrepresented at higher positions in organizations, and have less autonomy and control over work and lower expectations of promotion (e.g. Chafetz, 1989; Nelson and Burke, 2000; Ely et al., 2003). There is massive empirical evidence on these issues and those arguing that there exists a gendered order (or patriarchal society), which gives many more options and privileges to men, particularly in working life, but also in life in general, have little difficulty in substantiating their case.

Clearly gender, defined as the ‘patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine’ (Acker, 1992: 250), is a key concept for understanding what is happening to individuals in their working lives. It is crucial for understanding how people encounter encouragement, scepticism, support and suffering in organizational contexts. These viewpoints are based on ideas about fairness and they typically emerge from assumptions about women’s interests in removing sources of inequality, through counteracting male dominance.

It could also be said that gender issues are worth focusing on from quite a different point of departure: the business-managerial one. From a management perspective, there are reasons to be concerned about the ineffective uses of human resources arising from the current gendered order, described above (e.g. Adler, 1994, 1997). Counteracting sex discrimination and traditional gender patterns would make possible a more rational way of recruiting, retaining, training and promoting labour. Utilizing ‘diversity’ – e.g. by employing, listening to and taking seriously the viewpoints and experiences of both men and women may also facilitate organizational learning and creativity. A flexible work force may be used more effectively if it is unconstrained by traditional ideas about ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’, and what is seen as natural and appropriate for men and women to do. Therefore there are good reasons for management to consider gender when addressing organizational cultures, structures and practices. To maintain ways of thinking and acting, as well as social structures, that prevent almost half of the labour force from being fully utilized

in terms of their qualifications and talents, may be said to be a prime example of irrationality. And although rationality in organizational settings – as in human life in general – is more often preached than fully practised, too obvious deviations from what appears to be profitable should have a fair chance of triggering changes, or at least attempts at change.

These two motives for taking an interest in gender and organization – injustice and profitable management – are strong and it is hardly surprising that interest in this area has expanded over recent years both in the expansion of gender studies as a discipline and, more specifically, in relation to management and organization theory as well as in organizational practice.

However, simple and straightforward, arguments seldom work easily in social science. Social reality is complex and contradictory. In terms of management considerations, for example, it is possible that there is a surplus of talent in relation to high-level jobs and it cannot be taken for granted that top priority is given to encouraging and utilizing an increasing number of career-oriented people. Companies often benefit from women having learnt that their place is in relatively low paid jobs, and the lack of ambition conventionally ascribed to women and their expectations of finding fulfilment in the family sphere facilitates adaptation to the many modestly skilled jobs available in contemporary working life (Acker, 1994). A gender division of labour which means that compliant and cheap female labour is accessible may be more beneficial for many companies than taking equal opportunities seriously, at least if the latter should call for major changes.¹

In addition, the career-oriented person, giving priority to work over family or other non-work commitments may be preferable in the business world, as a strong commitment to equality would often mean a re-balancing or downplaying of corporate matters in relation to family obligations and values. From the organization's point of view, the sex² of the work-career-committed person is of no significance per se. Gender equality is not in opposition to the norm of the long workweek for people in key positions or career tracks. And we are witnessing more cases where females give more priority to career than their spouses. Still, in the majority of cases, organizations draw upon and reinforce conventional gender patterns when encouraging and utilizing strongly career oriented persons. The 'male breadwinner' image still supports strongly career-oriented, instrumental males working very hard for the business. These complications are worth considering before assuming too much management interest in gender fairness. Even for managerial jobs it may be optimal for companies if most women are not strongly committed to promotion to top jobs. A manager of a large UK retail company said,

What I can't have are sixty very ambitious people as store managers. I only want ten very ambitious people. Fifty I see as being hardcore managers, permanent in the areas where they are. And what I am looking for, crudely, is thirty- to forty-year old females, with a good retail background, who are very effective and very efficient in their job but, because of their domestic circumstances, won't want to move. (Cited in Cockburn, 1991: 49)

Rather than focusing on so-called rational arguments, for example around objective interests and means to end, it is better to explore how people in companies define

priorities, think and act in this area. We argue in this book that it is more meaningful to focus on complexity and variation in different industries, labour markets, occupations and organizational cultures, rather than trying to arrive at an average picture for organizations and working life as a whole. Presumably there are very different opinions and motives among executives over pursuing a more progressive corporate practice. Sometimes organizations have an interest in increasing the pool of female talents for managerial tasks; banks employing many women seem for example often eager to do so, while mass service industries benefit mainly from the access to inexpensive (female) labour. Although equal opportunities is increasingly espoused by companies, this may often be more a matter of lip service for legitimacy reasons than serious business intended to permeate corporate practices.

In terms of universal gender discrimination in working life and society, the common picture outlined at the very beginning of this chapter may therefore be too self-evident. Let us complicate the picture somewhat. Even though males apparently have much more access to privileges associated with formal power, wealth and status, this is not necessarily the same as they have better lives. Men do not have a monopoly on privileges, and women in some respects score more points on the goods of life. That men are, in general, much better paid, have far more formal power in organizations and hold the most prestigious jobs is beyond any doubt. However, equally clear is that men's life expectancy in the Western world is shorter than women's.³ They end up in jail much more frequently, more often than not lose custody battles over children after divorces, are (or used to be) forced to do military service in many countries (which for some may be seen as a privilege, but for many it is a mixed blessing or strongly negative), and more men than women commit suicide (WHO 2005).

Furthermore, we would not wish to paint too negative a picture over women's representation in many of the top jobs in both the public and private sector, albeit there are significant variations by country. In the Nordic countries, women make up about half of the cabinet members. This can be compared with for example the UK where 28 per cent of the cabinet members are females (EOC 2006). Of the EU commissioners – the top people in the union – about a third are women (2007). Women are represented in many top-level public sector positions such as university presidents (or vice chancellors) police chief constables, etc. For many it is clearly seen as positive, indeed important, to elect or appoint women to such posts. Of course, it can be argued that the proportion of women in these examples is still fairly low and that they offer merely symbolic examples, forms of 'window dressing', tokenism and to appeal to female voters. And in, for example, Sweden it seems that it is not uncommon to place females in board positions in order to fill the quota and make things look good and avoid critique. However, it is still worth noting that some of the mentioned political top positions are among the most powerful, prestigious and visible ones, and the impact in substantive, but perhaps even more in symbolic terms, should not be underestimated. The election of women and the espoused value of having women in top positions in these high profile and visible areas reflect a fundamental and positive attitude that people hold with regard to female representation in top positions in politics and many public sector organizations. Recognizing that there are generally held attitudes

that are in favour of women holding top jobs in our societies, does not mean that the achievement of gender equality is straightforward and without problems.⁴ Furthermore, it can be added that people might express one opinion regarding relatively distanced holders of top positions – safely located far away from one's immediate life/work context – and another when it comes to women being their own managers. Attitudes are seldom consistent.

There are huge variations in different societies with regard to women's representation in top positions in business and other organizations and it may be argued that the above examples are only relevant to relatively more gender progressive societies such as those in Scandinavia. Generally, women are, if not totally absent, then strongly underrepresented in top jobs in most countries (including the parts of the world that this book primarily addresses, i.e. the Western world). However, in most Western countries the number of women in top jobs is increasing, albeit slowly. The case of Scandinavia is not that atypical; even though it is reputed to have a high degree of gender equality, the overall picture is highly contradictory and in many respects contradicts the general positive view presented by the statistics on female political leaders and public sector top administrators. The gender division of labour is as pronounced in Scandinavia as in most other Western countries. In most high-level jobs, male overrepresentation is very strong. Only about 22 per cent of higher middle and senior managers in Sweden are women and there are even fewer at the top.⁵ Compared to this there is a much higher percentage of female managers in the US than in other countries, but also in the US few women reach the top jobs. (Of course, one may have doubts what statistics really say, but it gives at least some crude hints about the state of affairs.) Although women's share of management jobs has increased, the gender hierarchy in organizations has not been altered substantially. Women managers are mainly concentrated at the lower levels in chains of command. They tend to supervise workers of their own sex, and their role in decision-making is primarily providing input into decisions made by men (Reskin and Roos, 1990). However, this does not necessarily mean that women are disadvantaged in performance assessments and recruitment to top jobs. One study, for example, of applicants to senior executive positions in the US federal government showed that women received higher performance appraisals and were more likely to be hired than male applicants (Powell and Butterfield, 1994).

If the reader now feels a bit confused, he or she has got the message. Our point, hardly original, is that gender patterns are complex and often contradictory. There is considerable variation in the evidence of biases, subtle social mechanisms and cultural ideas against women, as well as there being indications of the opposite. Case studies of organizations show considerable variation in the working lives of men and women, in terms of careers and work conditions as well as the structures, cultures and processes affecting options, actions, values, satisfaction and suffering (Billing and Alvesson, 1994; Billing, 2000, Deutsch, 2007; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Also different parts of the labour market and during different times show considerable variation (McCall, 2005) (see Chapters 3 and 4). It is not easy to discover universal mechanisms or structures below these empirical 'surface' variations. Talk about 'gender systems' (or patriarchy) is then problematic and not very useful for the understanding of organizational

phenomena, since this means overstressing broad patterns and consistency while disregarding variety and change.

However, it is not only gender discrimination and obstacles to the realization of equal opportunities in work organizations that we wish to highlight. Nor is it solely male domination and female victimization and lost opportunities that are to be focused upon. Of interest is also the rich variation in the way in which organizations carry gender meanings, and how men and women live their organizational lives. Work organizations are not just representative of privileges for men. For both women and men, work organizations can bring about conformism, constraints and suffering. Conversely, both may experience joy and benefits not just from wage labour but also from everyday organizational life. In other words, some of the constraints on individuals in organizations – such as the pressure to give priority to work over family – do not solely originate from male domination, but are also contingent upon the workings of capitalism and the idea of organizations effectively and competitively producing goods and services, making a high material standard of living possible.

The exploration of *gender-in-organizations*, the mapping of what happens to men and women at workplaces, as well as of *gendered organizations*, seeing organization cultures in terms of masculine and feminine values, ideas and meanings, may lead to the telling of many different stories. The gender-in-organizations perspective focuses on women and men as fairly robust categories and investigates how these are treated, behave and/or experience work and life. The interest is often in measurement and comparison of groups of men and women. The idea of gendered organizations indicates that workplaces are more than sites where gender is played out. Organizations are seen as inscribed by gendered meanings – structures and practices are characterized by assumptions and values of a masculine or feminine nature actively 'producing' people in organizations (Ely and Padavic, 2007). Here the emphasis is on construction processes, how organizations like other social institutions are 'artificially' shaped in specific ways and in their turn contribute to the construction of men and women.

Many of the *gendered organization* stories, but also quite a few of those focusing on gender-in-organizations, are explicitly and intentionally pro-women, opposing male domination and aiming at improving the conditions for women. However we also believe that it is worth addressing how many women may act conservatively in relation to equality ideals, perhaps against their own interests, and how organizational cultures may affect many men in unfortunate ways. In addition, a gender perspective on organizations can give us important insights into how organizations function, for example in terms of, inter alia, leadership, strategy, organizational culture, groups, communication, ethics and corporate social responsibility. In other words, the approach goes beyond questions about positive and negative outcomes of gender patterns for careers and work situations of females (and men).

This variety of significant issues on the topic of gender and organization is, for us, part of what makes the subject so exciting. We try to take this variety of important issues and aspects seriously in this book, considering men and women in organizations but we are also going beyond this and look at a range of organizational phenomena from different angles.

Organization theory and gender

It should be clear by now, that there are many good reasons for taking an interest in gender and in organizations as well as for combining the two. Organizations are central economic institutions that take care of the production of goods and services and of a major part of the control and care of the citizens. Most of us are in daily contact with organizations, either working in them or relating to them as clients or customers. Organizations are workplaces, sites for childcare and education, and institutions taking care of social services and health. Organizations are the context for our working life and play a significant role in our well-being, and it is therefore of great importance to appreciate how they function, which logic (goals and means) dominates, which actors and groups set the agenda and how the relations between people are formed. The study of organizations – Organization Theory – is accordingly a large and expanding field.

Over the past two decades there has been an increased interest in gender and organizations to such an extent that, as Gherardi (2003) observes, recognition that mainstream (cynically referred to as ‘malestream’) organizational theory is male gendered has become something of a truism. However, despite this recent recognition within the more critical strands of the discipline, it is worth reiterating that organization theory has traditionally neglected gender issues; employees have been viewed either from a supposedly gender neutral perspective (but in reality representing a male perspective, given that studies were invariably on male workers by male researchers) or from a point of view that considers only male and masculine aspects of work and organization as interesting (Hearn and Parkin, 1983; Mills, 1988; Martin and Collinson, 2002). In a *Handbook of Work and Organizational Psychology* (Drenth et al., 1984) one short article out of 42 deals with ‘women and work’, while gender aspects are not addressed in any of the other chapters.

The massive literature on organizational culture in the 1980s, often driven by an interest in the meaning of life at the workplace hardly considered gender. However, despite this, there has been increased recognition of the importance of this area of study.⁷ It is now almost obligatory to include a chapter or section on gender (and/or diversity) in an ambitious overview or textbook of organizational behaviour. Despite this both gender-in-organizations and gendering of organizational analysis remain marginalized topics with mainstream organizational and management theory still assuming that both knowledge and knowledge production are gender-neutral (Gherardi 2003; Martin 2000). Gender for many seems to be a theme that has to be included and ticked off so that expectations of what needs to be addressed are met and critique is avoided. What impact might this have had on the resulting analysis and interpretations? Few have considered the impact on the process of developing knowledge and understanding of organizations of the fact that only men (with a very few exceptions) have participated in its production (Martin and Collinson, 2002). Of course, the female sex in no way guarantees an interest in gender any more than the male biological sex excludes an interest in the topic (see Note 7).

Masculine dominance in academic life as well as in the organizations studied has had an important influence on the kinds of questions raised and the answers subsequently produced in management and organization studies (Martin, 2000). Some

subjects have not been considered at all or they have at least not been considered from a gender point of view. At the same time this established research is presented, and may for the 'naive' reader appear, as objective and neutral. It has been implicitly assumed and communicated that organizations are neutral to gender or that it is a man's world. The manager is assumed to be a 'he'. (This has at least been the case until quite recently, although nowadays it is perhaps only the most senior executives that are assumed to be men.) It is therefore maintained that it is the life and work of men that has been considered the research standard, both within the human relations school, strategic management research, cultural theory or any other known schools and fields of organization theory. This holds true for great parts of science as well. Research often uncritically reflects cultural beliefs. The traditional North American concept of leadership may be described as 'a pastiche based upon a masculine ego-ideal glorifying the competitive, combative, controlling, creative, aggressive, self-reliant individualist' (Lipman-Blumen, 1992: 185, see also Prasad 1997). Arguably, the whole management field has (so far had) a masculine bias (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996; Simpson 1997); and according to Cullen (1994), even a seemingly more 'neutral' theory, such as Maslow's need hierarchy, may have a similar bias. There are however changes in the discourse on management and leadership, possibly including 'feminization' or at least 'de-masculinization' – we return to this issue later in this book. Some 'truths' easily lag behind a changing world. Some claims and results in gender studies seem more relevant yesterday than today or in the future.

A gender perspective implies analysing the importance, meaning and consequences of what is culturally defined as male or masculine as well as female or feminine ways of thinking (knowing), feeling, valuing and acting. A gender perspective also implies an analysis of the organizational practices that maintain the division of labour between the sexes. The vertical division of labour according to sex can be intimately related to conceptions of the masculine/feminine, that ascribe a gendered meaning to phenomena that is contingent upon the cultural beliefs of what are typical or natural orientations and behaviours of men and women. For example, ideas and norms for leadership may, despite changes, often express a masculine undertone, which makes leadership appear to be more natural or easy to engage in for men than for women (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Ely et al., 2003; Lipman-Blumen, 1992; Schein, 1973).

The use of a gender perspective on organizations would also lead to a higher degree of sensitivity to contradictions and ambiguities with regard to social constructions and reconstructions of gender relations, and to what we consider to be discrimination and equal opportunities at the workplace level. It is important to stress that gender relations are not statically structured and defined once and for all but are emergent and changeable. This counts for the overall societal level and everyday interactions in workplaces. Apart from studying discriminating practices and gender bias in organizations it is also important to study the elements of modern organizations that produce tendencies towards equality between the sexes. This last aspect has been very much neglected in gender studies. As we shall see later on, a great deal of the literature tends to be somewhat one-sidedly critical and 'negative'. 'Misery stories' and an emphasis on problems are popular (Deutsch, 2007). There are strong reasons for a critical approach, but arguably some modern societies and many organizations have

social values and rules that promote the espoused interests and opportunities of women and do not only or mainly discriminate against them – even without the use of special legislation. These (social) rules are probably of greater importance to middle-class than working-class women.

Modern societies praise themselves for being meritocratic and most (younger) people in Western societies probably claim to be in favour of an ideology that gives equal opportunities to both sexes, even though this is sometimes restricted to lip service. The chances of ‘choosing’ ways of following or resisting norms and guidelines for how to be and act in terms of gender – and avoiding sex roles/constraining gender norms – are probably better than earlier in history for large groups. The possibility of organizations playing a progressive and ‘rational’ part should not be excluded – even though this progressive and rational part has its limits; for example it may give women better options of employment and promotion, but it does not address wider issues such as the goals, values and interests that form organizational life in a capitalist society.

A gender perspective will not only mean dealing with the way men and women are constructed as individuals – how they are formed and reformed through social processes, how they act, how they experience their working life (as well as their private life), how they are supported and discriminated – but will also include a broader view on organizations. Some ideals and values could be seen as expressing male dominance, for example, companies that ruthlessly exploit nature, ‘human resources’, consumers, and so on. Ideals such as profit and maximum growth, aggressive competition, the tendency to make quantitative ideals (money) the ultimate measure of success, could be related to masculine conceptions and a male rationality.

The limits of the explanatory/interpretative powers of a gender perspective are of course disputable, and it is certainly not the best perspective for the study of *all* aspects of organizations and working life. Being sensitive about the limits of the analytic and interpretive range of the perspective hardly implies that women should cope with their under-privileged position in working life by a one-sided adaptation to structures, goals, languages and logics that have for ages been influenced by a strong masculine dominance. A gender perspective on organizations implies studying these phenomena and focusing on fundamental questions of rationality, e.g. the structure and aims of the organization, maintaining a balance between a broad and an all-embracing view. The trick is to interpret gendered meanings sensitively in non-obvious situations without totalizing organizational life through seeing everything in terms of gender.

Besides studying general patterns and tendencies within organizations, when we deal with the construction of gender it is also important to be aware of existing variations. Most researchers have analysed what they argue are the typical and dominant trends and patterns aiming at a general picture of gender and organization, even though diversity and multiplicity have received more attention recently. Often diversity is reduced to considering the formula of gender, class and ethnicity (e.g. Ferguson, 1994). While acknowledging the risk of getting caught in complexity and detail, it is important to be aware of variation also within and outside these sociological standard categories. There may be interesting diversities among black middle class US women, for example. People may also differ depending on which of their

parents they primarily identify with: far from all identify with the parent of the same sex. Lifestyle, political standpoints, sexual orientation, age, religion, (dis)ability and family situation also account for variation. Individual differences associated with family or career-orientation may matter more than the standard categories for experiences and behaviour at work.

Also, organizations differ very much when it comes to historical and reproduced gender biases in social practices, just as the gendered meanings that characterize different fields of work, functions, professions and positions differ (Billing and Alvesson, 1994; McCall, 2005). Considering diversity without losing sight of certain patterns and tendencies then is one – of many – challenges in the gender and organization theory that this book will address.

The idea of gender studies

Conventional thinking, as well as social research concerning gender, aims at finding out 'how it really is'. Does leadership by women differ from leadership by men? What are the causes of unequal pay? Why are there so few females at the highest levels in organizations? How common is sexual harassment? Which values do women and men hold respectively? One idea of gender research is to provide authoritative answers to such questions and to develop valid theories about these matters. There are, however, great problems with an approach aiming to establish the 'truth' in gender studies as well as social science in general. The problems are of a historical, political and methodological nature.

Gender is a historical phenomenon. Gender is understood, developed and changed differently in different cultural contexts and times. There is variety between, as well as within, societal cultures. Men, women and gendered practices are dynamic, at least in modern society: social science is part of, and contributes to, culture and thus affects how gender understanding and practice will look in the future. Social science is affected by the historical context and intervenes in the making of history as part of the general cultural understanding. Consequently, social science does not only study gender, but contributes actively to the construction of gender as well. Cultural ideas and social practices rather than genes account for the ratio of males/females in terms of full-time, part-time wage labour and unpaid homework and in various occupations and hierarchical levels in organizations. Social science is fused with cultural ideas and contributes to their development.

All statements and reasoning about gender issues are informed by value judgments and are never politically neutral. The idea of studying gender is one political choice, as is of course the 'non-choice' (not paying attention to gender). To treat the distinction between 'men' and 'women' as crucial is another. One may see other distinctions – age, sexual orientation, work orientation, ethnicity, life style, religion, personality, interest in children – as equally important or even more so, or simply refuse to divide up humans into two sexes, seeing the significance of this distinction as problematic in social science as it obscures variation and misleadingly indicates that the categories of 'men' and 'women' are universal and homogeneous. It is far from certain that identifying/classifying a person as a male

or female is relevant or informative in many situations. Neither should we ignore that it is not that easy to incorporate a gender perspective to unpack social life, as gender norms seldom come through with clear subtexts. There is often a thin line between inscribing (or projecting) and revealing a specific meaning.

Also how one treats different phenomena and exercises judgement is politically informed. Does one, for example, choose to emphasize what may be perceived as relative equality or relative inequality in gender relations? How does one strike a balance between voluntarism and determinism in accounting for human action? To what extent is a particular gender division of labour treated as the outcome of 'free choice', and to what extent does the researcher emphasize constraints in the form of discriminatory practices or sex stereotypes that produce different kinds of preferences and work orientations among women and men? 'Free choice' is never a simple matter but may be understood in terms of how cultural prejudices and expectations operate as forces of power and produce certain gender-stereotypical orientations and constraints discouraging people from engaging in sex role-incongruent behaviour. On the other hand, the researcher cannot just assume that she or he 'knows best', and treat women and men as ignorant 'cultural dopes' or passively shuffled around by societal structure and disregard their espoused wishes and preferences as simple outcomes of the operation of power or false consciousness. There is no clear-cut or easy way of dealing with such issues, but how they are treated undoubtedly reflects the researcher's values and priorities. How the researcher deals with these issues is never politically neutral. In social science generally, it is impossible to avoid either questioning or reproducing existing ideas and institutions (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000).

Gender research like other social research, is clearly, therefore, a political project. It intervenes in the negotiation of how gender is understood and thus in the (re) production of gender relations and society. This does not reduce its intellectual value and significance. Its value is, however, related to other matters than the offering of 'neutral' truths accomplished through the use of a scientific apparatus. The potential value is as a source of intellectual inspiration and as an input in ongoing conversation about how one should live one's life and shape political institutions, including companies.

Methodologically, gender relations and dynamics must be seen as a particularly difficult subject area. Often, the most significant issues are hidden and elusive. How social processes and cultural understandings produce and re-produce certain gendered social relations may only rarely be directly observed. Interview accounts about these matters may be more or less reliable. They tend to be strongly affected by the interview context and hardly work as mirrors of pure experience (Silverman, 2001; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Responses to survey questions are notoriously unreliable when it comes to issues, which do not have a clear and simple meaning. Most complex and interesting issues are difficult to grasp through standardized questions. The research subjects attribute their own meanings to the questions – meanings that may deviate heavily from the meanings intended by the researcher. A particular problem concerns the subjectivity of the researcher. Although scientists are never objective, neutral and distanced towards their research, gender issues in particular are among the most personally sensitive topics one may study, meaning that existential matters,

personal background and convictions, including political sympathies, are more at stake than if one is studying, for example, formal organizational structures or mergers and acquisitions or other less emotive subjects. One may sometimes doubt whether an empirical study says less about the empirical phenomena out there than the perspectives, vocabularies, interests and preferences and idiosyncrasies of the researcher and the paradigm/research tribe s/he belongs to (Alvesson, 2002b). That a person is an 'expert' on gender is certainly no guarantee against prejudices and odd ideas about the subject matter. (The reader of this book should be aware!) Without denying that there are sometimes clear-cut answers to questions about gender, which have some validity outside local space and time contexts, the major contribution of gender studies is not to produce robust and unquestionable research results, which claim to establish the truth once and for all. Empirical research is undoubtedly valuable and should be central, but one must be open to the ambiguities involved and the historical and situated character of the empirical object as well as of the constructed and interpreted character of so-called data (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Calhoun, 1992). All this means that reflexivity becomes very important. This involves self-critically exploring how the researcher is involved in producing specific knowledge outcomes and how the researcher's own frameworks, vocabulary and lines of interpretation may command the social world; this, one should open-mindedly and cautiously try to understand.

Gender over- and under-sensitivity

The purpose of gender research is, in our opinion, to facilitate advanced thinking and reflection about gender and, thereby, about social relations, society, organizations and working life in general. Such thinking may be discussed in terms of counteracting *under-sensitivity* about the meaning and significance of gender in various contexts. More than this, however, gender studies is a political project, where knowledge production is oriented towards change.

On the one hand gender studies should therefore aim to 'sensitize' academic disciplines, politics, management and organization decision making and, in particular, everyday life interaction of organizational practitioners about the gendered nature of thinking, feeling, valuing, acting, material and social practices and structures. The major task of gender research, therefore, is to oppose the persistent under-sensitivity and gender bias inherent in thinking on many aspects of academic and everyday life and social practices that are claimed to be gender-neutral. As stated earlier, organization and management theory as well as managerial and working life practice on which it is based has neglected and disregarded the issue of gender in the past. Now gender has become a mainstream topic of discussion, meaning that gender has been paid attention to over the last two decades, but in very specific and not necessarily nuanced or very insightful ways (see e.g. Brewis, 2005; Linstead, 2000). This book will show this in some detail.

On the other hand, however, the opposite problem also sometimes occurs in gender thinking, an inclination to '*over-sensitize*' gender. This refers to a tendency in some research, as well as everyday life, to see gender as relevant and decisive everywhere, to emphasize the gender dimension consistently without fully considering

other important aspects and dimensions. A gender perspective, which assumes that male domination, or patriarchy, is the mechanism behind all sorts of miserable phenomena (perhaps in combination with racism and class structures) will legitimize indiscriminatory critique. Some authors might be criticized for overstressing a gender perspective, or for dismissing this criticism as unimportant. Of course, it could be argued that no distinction in society is more crucial than the one between male and female and that no area is therefore gender-neutral. According to this line of thinking, everything bears a significant gender meaning and reflects or constitutes gender bias, normally to the advantage of men or to forms of masculinities. This argument may, however, be accepted while still insisting on the problems with gender over-sensitivity. That everything could be perceived as having some gendered meaning or that it may be difficult to point out non-trivial areas or issues that are perfectly gender-balanced or gender-neutral does not imply that a gender aspect is worth emphasizing all the time. Also aspects including a grain of 'truth' may be overstressed. Any perspective runs the risk of being used in a one-eyed fashion, reducing all phenomena to issues of men and women or masculinity and femininity.

Why draw attention to gender over-sensitivity? It is an important part of reflexivity and a nuanced and fine-tuned approach of any research project and understanding to carefully consider when and how to apply a specific lens. In order to counteract a tendency to use a favoured vocabulary to command the world – to see it when we believe it – we must be aware of the problem of overusing a perspective. As the insensitivity to gender issues is well documented and strongly emphasized by most gender literature, we here also highlight the opposite tendency.

Gender over-sensitivity thus means not considering or too quickly disregarding other aspects or possible interpretations. It means privileging gender over other standpoints. It makes gender the only decisive factor, and this way gender as a mode of understanding becomes totalizing. The metaphors of masculinities and femininities take precedence and repress other metaphors and perspectives as interesting points of departures for interpretations and theories. Similarly, there is the difficulty of gender losing its conceptual purchase within analysis – a case of gender reductionism, where everything becomes a matter of gender and not much else.

There are different themes to consider in terms of gender over-sensitivity. One relates to the political function of gender studies. If the political aspect is stressed too strongly, it may be perceived as propaganda. Many people are sceptical about gender studies, which are seen more as ideological than scientific. There is an inherent dilemma in gender studies – as in much other critically oriented work – between, on the one hand, intellectual curiosity and academic criteria about constrained political commitment and, on the other, political engagement involving a wish to speak for the underprivileged and encourage social change to their benefit. This dilemma may be formulated in different ways: between gaining academic respectability and saying something important, unfettered by academic norms and conventions; between open-minded curiosity and a wish to use one's privileged position and skills to change the world in a liberating direction; between a wish to be as honest as possible and a drive to facilitate one's political cause (or career prospects) through the selective reporting of (and at worst manipulating) findings, arguments and language. Making strong political points may call for emphasizing

simple, coherent, politically correct descriptions and arguments (e.g. about men choosing men for senior positions), and reducing the scope for investigating and writing about complexities and contradictions (e.g. many women also preferring men in managerial and career jobs). In particular, politically powerful points involve a specific kind of rhetoric. Recognizing and emphasizing signs of increased equality or conservative tendencies among women in, for example, occupational preferences or family life orientations may weaken the case for female politicians and academics as well as perhaps risk impoverishing the base for one's own career as a researcher of gender studies, as this is normally tied to the strength of a case for discrimination and suppression of women. Often a good case for this can be made, but there is the risk of 'victim feminism', where males and male-dominated institutions are seen as oppressors and females as victims.

A related aspect of gender over-sensitivity concerns how seductive gender concepts and ideas are. They may be used to account for – or at least illuminate – all types of phenomena: from nuclear power to analytical thinking and creativity and language use. Ideas about masculinities and femininities may blinker the researcher, rather than being used self-critically and with an open mind. Of course, gender research may be seen as particularly susceptible to this, given its emotive and personal character. Gender issues involve much more of the researcher as a person than most subjects. This may be inspiring and enrich the research process as private experiences may be used productively as an input into the research. However, balancing rich experiences with qualified interpretative and reflective work calls for self-critique and scrutiny over, inter alia, use of vocabulary, selective memorizing, over-generalization from single cases and repressing alternative viewpoints. Or to say it more plainly, to be (pain)fully aware of the strong tendency not to believe it when one sees it, but to see it when one believes it (Weick, 1979).

It is not possible to state categorically what is under- and over-sensitivity to gender, nor is it easy to evaluate when either of the tendencies imprints itself in a specific case. These terms have little to do with what is 'true' and 'false' and it is impossible to prescribe an appropriate degree of gender sensitivity. However, they are issues worthy of reflection and discussion as part of knowledge production. Critics may be of help in pointing out imbalances. Sometimes there may be quite strong signs that somebody has fallen into one of the traps of under- or over-sensitivity. In the case of under-sensitivity for example, it is not an atypical experience during a lecture on gender that some students protest against the claim that gender is significant in organizational contexts and suggests that 'we are all individuals'. This is of course not untrue, but the meaning of an individual is hardly gender-neutral. Individuals (female and male) are encountered and encounter themselves in various ways, involving expectations, constraints and rewards/punishments associated with dominating discourses about gender. In this section, we focus primarily on the issue of over-sensitivity, as this is underscored in the gender literature. Here is just one example:

A feminist colleague told us about a woman whose (feminist) paper she had reviewed and rejected. The woman had attributed this to the journal not wanting feminist papers. This conclusion seemed to be somewhat premature. The journal had sent the paper to be reviewed by people who encouraged and were sympathetic to

feminist work (such as our friend). The paper was however logically 'flawed', according to the opinion of people who, in principle, were supportive of feminist work.

The author felt discriminated against because she was doing feminist work and this experience is undoubtedly valid in many cases, although perhaps decreasingly so in many countries. The problem is that one might end up attributing all kinds of negative outcomes to discrimination. In this case, however, the paper may have had substantial scientific problems and was rejected for that reason (according to our friend).

How can the risk of gender over-sensitivity be minimized? Of course, this is a matter for careful discussion in relation to specific instances. In academic work, feedback and the sharing of opinions may also lead to better judgement. What is hidden or downplayed by the use of terms such as masculinity(ies)/femininity(ies), patriarchy, sexual harassment, etc. should be reflected upon and the research text be 'opened up' so that some of the cracks in the approach become visible, counter-acting totalizing writing. The reader is thus activated in relation to the text and alternative interpretations can be considered (cf. Rorty, 1989; Steier, 1991). One possibility is to broaden the interpretive repertoire, i.e. the set of concepts, metaphors, theories, ideas and other interpretive resources that are used. These may make interpretation open to different aspects and arguments when approaching empirical phenomena or developing theoretical arguments (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). Instead of solely reading and utilizing gender theory, other theories should be drawn on in the process of intellectual work. For example, the following may be valuable: various ideas on class and ethnicity, critical theory ideas on technocratic consciousness, as well as Foucault's notion of the interrelatedness of knowledge/power and the production of subjectivity (Foucault, 1980, 1982). But also more conventional understandings of management and organization are relevant. Therefore, what we are arguing for here is a broader portfolio of interpretive tools and approaches. This means that instead of just incorporating these ideas into gender theory and using them to support gender interpretation, these other theoretical approaches may also make it possible to produce other kinds of interpretations. In doing so, this raises attention to other forms of oppression, but also to conditions and constraints around the effective functioning of organization.

Even though it is usually recognized that there are considerable differences in the category of women/men, differences associated with sexuality, class, race and ethnicity are often treated as secondary. It is common that gender researchers 'add' other forms of oppression such as class, 'race', so on and so forth. Of course, the whole idea of gender studies is to focus on, and develop knowledge of gender, but this main focus does not need to imply a sole emphasis on gender issues and a total neglect of issues and themes conceptualized in other terms.

If we wish to take the problem of over-sensitivity seriously, gender studies should have access to other vocabularies and be open to the use of these. Alternative aspects and interpretations to those favouring gender as a concept should be routinely considered. What is hidden or downplayed by the use of terms such as masculinity(ies)/femininity(ies), patriarchy, sexual harassment, etc., should be reflected upon and the research text be opened up so that some of the cracks in the approach become visible, counteracting totalizing writing. The reader is thus

activated in relation to the text and alternative interpretations can be considered (cf. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Rorty, 1989; Steier, 1991). Therefore the tendency to talk of women's oppression in a simplified and collective sense has been increasingly questioned, given the intricate web of interconnected forms of oppression, such as race, sexuality and class (hooks 1984; Sum 2000). Increasingly, therefore, other political philosophies of activism that critique inequalities and accepted ways of representation in the construction of knowledge have influenced the field of gender studies, most significantly, post-colonial theory (e.g. Spivak, 1987, 1990) and queer theory (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1993). But also perspectives showing how less gender-constrained forms of interaction and 'non-negative' gender differences are possible have emerged (Deutsch, 2007).

Of course, gender studies are not only a matter of using sound judgement concerning *when* to invoke gender concepts. More crucial is *how* gender perspectives are used and interpretations are made. Even though we think the first issue is important and needs more attention the second – how – issue is the major theme of this book.

The purpose of the book

In this lengthy introduction we have avoided the conventional norm for starting a book and refrained from a straightforward formulation of purpose and viewpoint. We have rather tried to signal our outlook of this field as messy and calling for recognition of contradictions and difficulties. We have tried to illustrate a reflexive approach and hinted at some concepts aiding this – like under- and over-sensitivity. Before we proceed, some short summarizing statements about our ambitions are in place, partly in order to counteract the reader's possible frustration and partly to give further clues to whether the book is of interest for further reading.

Compared to many other books on this topic, we are not so much in the businesses of offering robust truths, ideological support or recipes. This is neither an exercise in neo-positivism, victim feminism nor a resource book for change work. This book aims to contribute to a more reflective and multi-levelled approach to key themes in gender and organization, in which the researcher (or practitioner) considers alternative aspects, approaches and interpretations and carefully considers and acknowledges the limitations and shortcomings of the line(s) of inquiry taken. Of course, all research involves elements of reflection, but often the researcher devotes much more time and energy to developing and persuading readers about the superiority of a particular language, the reliability of empirical results or the virtues of a particular theoretical point. This is important enough but disregards and hides basic uncertainties and problems. Taking a broader perspective means exploring in depth the use of knowledge about gender and organizations, and the problems in developing knowledge in politically hot and personally engaging fields. It is our hope that this book will encourage such work in gender studies and more reflective and thoughtful practices in work and organizations.

We advocate an interpretive and processual view where the ways we – as people in everyday organizational life and as academics – do and sometimes undo gender

(i.e. break away from following sex stereotypes) is focused. We think that research should be about sensitive readings of the meanings and understandings held and expressed by people at work around gender. We also bear in mind that people sometimes navigate around gender norms and constraints. Going beyond categorizing and comparing people as men and women and sensitively using ideas of, but also being aware of the dangers of inscribing, masculinities and femininities in relation to identities, cultures and practices are key elements in our approach.

In the book we comment critically on parts of the literature and even on widely held views within the subject area. This should not be read as if we are particularly sceptical to gender studies or that this field is more problematic than others. A reflective approach means that established ways of doing social science are critically illuminated and a reorientation is suggested. As gender studies are often marginalized and are faced with little understanding, not to say hostility, from conservative and gender-ignorant circles, we are eager to avoid our intentions being misunderstood or misused. We feel confident that a critical-constructive approach also addressing problems in developing knowledge about gender, and shortcomings in substantial parts of the existing literature, will be beneficial for gender and organization studies.

On readership

In writing this book, we have a broad and mixed audience in mind. We hope that it will be of relevance for academics and students in all areas of social and behavioural sciences who are interested in gender, organizations and working life. We draw on literature from management, sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, public administration and education and, to a lesser extent, economics. Themes like culture, identity and interactions are highlighted in particular.

The book takes a broad view but is more oriented to qualitative approaches that focus on issues of meaning and understanding rather than quantitative concerns about frequencies, correlations and explanations. This does not mean that we want to emphasize the conflict between the qualitative and the quantitative, or that we are very critical of the latter, or ignore research taking a quantitative approach. Quantitative research is drawn upon where it is recognized to be of value in addressing certain questions. However, the approach taken is interpretative.

The book combines research and textbook ambitions. In other words, the aim is to present an overview of the field and to introduce gender perspectives while still aiming to make research contributions, adding new critiques, ideas and theoretical frameworks to existing knowledge. Theoretical research contributions are more prominent in the final sections of the book.

The book is Western-international in scope in the sense that we utilize literature and examples from a variety of countries. We do not aim for constant comparisons. A restriction is that throughout the book, with a few minor exceptions, we only address highly (post-) industrialized countries, similar to our own. We assume that most of what we are saying is of relevance for Anglophone and Western European countries – although variations between these (and, of course, variations within

countries) should be borne in mind. We believe that the situation in very different cultural parts of the world may motivate other themes and other kinds of analysis and possibly other kinds of frameworks than those of most relevance for Western working life and organizations. Many of the problems salient in the latter may appear as irrelevant and almost of a luxury nature in countries where the situation of females is extremely much worse than in the West and other comparatively progressive countries. Issues like female leadership and the use of poststructuralism may for example be less relevant in countries where male domination is almost total and takes crude forms. As authors, we live and work in Scandinavia, which presumably influences our text in various ways. We try to be sensitive to ethnocentricity in our approach. We frequently remind the reader – and ourselves – that empirical studies must be considered in terms of where they come from and the specific empirical terrain they cover. For example, US female managers in the 1980s must be understood as such, rather than female managers per se. Given theoretical fashions and preferences in different countries, in particular, the dominance of positivism in the top US journals in the field of organization studies, this too needs to be considered in the nature of knowledge that dominates the field (Hardy et al., 2001).

In the book we have given priority to certain areas, especially gender division of labour, work and organizational cultures, identity, masculinities and femininities, work orientations, power, socialization, leadership and promotion patterns. Some areas are included but receive less attention, including sexual harassment, unpaid work, family and work, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and earnings. We do not cover institutional conditions such as labour markets, state policies, unions, taxes, etc. (see McCall, 2005, for a review). We also devote little explicit space to how planned change may be accomplished, although it will be clear that we have greater faith in consciousness raising and learning than in efforts to accomplish changes from above through the use of for example, quotas. The book reflects our interests, competences and societal context, but also the wish to achieve sufficient depth, which makes it difficult to cover 'everything'.

The outline of the book

Above we discussed why and when to use a gender perspective on organizations. In the following chapter we will outline the different perspectives found within gender research. This field of research has become increasingly complex. The traditional view focusing almost exclusively on women as a neglected group or category within organizations has been replaced by a situation where several perspectives compete and where few assumptions can be taken for granted or left unchallenged.

In Chapter 3 we will deal with gender segregation, the horizontal and vertical division of labour. We will discuss the phenomenon of gender labelling – how jobs and tasks are defined not as open or neutral in terms of gender, but as masculine or feminine, and why male jobs tend to be more valued and, in particular, are better paid than female. But why is division of labour according to gender and gender segregation still common, and why have so few women reached top-level positions? These are questions we will explore in some depth in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 4 we address how constructions of masculinities and femininities permeate social life, and guide and constrain people's behaviour. Arguably, understanding masculinities and femininities is an important key to understanding gender division of labour and other organizational phenomena. This chapter elaborates on the possibilities and problems of using these terms, which are then employed in the subsequent chapters to address various key themes.

Chapter 5 then deals with identity. How identity is gendered – self-understandings of being a man or a woman, or a particular kind of man or woman – is a key theme in order to understand gender constructions and how people 'do gender'. Of course, it is also of interest to consider how identity may be non-gendered, i.e. when people are less bothered about defining themselves in gender terms, e.g. when other identifications and self-understandings are central at work. (An individual may feel more like a PhD student or a biologist than a female, during the work day in a laboratory.)

In Chapter 6 we treat organizational culture in terms of gender and also discuss the construction of masculinities (and femininities) in specific organizational contexts. We will explore how rites, material expressions of culture and language reflect and actively construct gendered meanings. As masculinity is the dominant characteristic of work functions and cultures in most organizations, there is less focus on femininity.

In Chapters 7 and 8 the focus is on women in management, especially promotion and leadership. While Chapter 7 summarizes the development of, and current research situation on, women in management, the subsequent chapter reviews contemporary assumptions and ideas about women in management from a four-way perspective. We look at some alternative positions in accounting for women's leadership style, difficulties encountered by women in attaining managerial jobs and some of their problems, such as a high stress level, when working as managers.

In Chapters 9 and 10 we discuss the field of gender and organization from a broader perspective, treating organizational issues on the border between gender and other critical perspectives. We discuss some basic problems in gender organizational studies and suggest some ideas for an organization analysis that is sensitive to oppositions, ambiguities and local variations in different organizations. We also touch upon how gender studies may avoid being ghettoized and cut off from mainstream concerns – still neglecting issues of gender. Moving to something in between gender-blind and gender-one-eyed understandings of organizations is seen as a vital task. Finally, we also further address process aspects on gender, reminding the reader about the need for a situation-sensitive and interpretive perspective where we recognize the limits of static ideas – like the one of a fixed gender system or a patriarchy – and look more at the many faces and dynamics of gender in organizational context.

Notes

- 1 A similar reasoning can be made about ethnic minorities and people with a working class background. Corporations benefit from meritocracy but also from people being willing to adapt to low wages, routinized work, the latter being facilitated by understandings and expectations taking segregation along gendered, ethnic and class lines as 'natural'.

- 2 Sex and gender are overlapping concepts. Sex is typically seen as referring to biological sex, i.e. the fact that nature produces people as men and women. Gender refers to how men and women are being formed through social and cultural processes.
- 3 As life expectancy has to do with what conditions we live under, we might expect a change in this pattern, if and when the work and life situations of women and men become more similar.
- 4 Another issue is how women cope in these positions. Their situation is not necessarily gender-neutral. They may encounter gendered situations, which may affect how they can operate (e.g. Billing, 2006).
- 5 Lathund om Jämställdhet, 2006.
- 6 One may argue that capitalism, or at least certain versions of it, carries a heavy ingredient of male domination and that gender equality would mean abandoning or domesticating capitalism, making it less raw and brutal. Capitalism cannot, however, be reduced to male domination, but needs to be explored also in non-gendered terms.
- 7 An exception from the trend is Baum (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Organizations* (2002), where 15 of 57 contributors are females, but where gender is mentioned on two out of 900 pages. (This also illustrates that female researchers do not necessarily express any interest in gender and that the presence of women does not have to have implications for the putting forward gender-relevant themes or perspectives. Why should they, anyway?)