

Master's thesis

Gender Quota as Practice

Exploring gender quota practices and their power dynamics in a business organisation using the practice approach

By

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Abstract

Despite organisations devoting time and money to increase the number of women, progress is slow. Recent installations of gender quotas for businesses have barely resulted in the intended increase of gender diversity. As we know little about quota implementation in businesses, particularly about the practices that are most effective for compliance, this research reveals quota practices and examines their effectiveness through the analysis of power dynamics by answering the research question: *How does an organisation do gender quota as a practice?* Using the practice approach, observations and interviews were conducted and material artefacts were collected. The analysis discusses three quota practices – matching, rewarding and gender balanced shortlisting – and two surrounding practices: storytelling and developing women. Despite their marginal effect to substantially increase gender diversity, the organisation is mainly doing these surrounding practices as tensions and resistance mostly prevail within the quota practices. Furthermore, quota implementation is much of a one man show due to the lack of commitment to the quota obligations. Ultimately, this research reveals how tensions and resistance may hinder the intended increase of women in organisations through quotas. Longitudinal research can give better insight into power dynamics within quota practices and how this impacts dynamics at work.

Keywords: gender quota, practice approach, practice research, quota practices, resistance, gender equality, zooming in, zooming out

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Contents

- 1. Introduction..... 5
 - 1.1 Gender diversity in organisations 5
 - 1.2 Quota as practice..... 7
 - 1.3 Problem formulation, aim, research question and case selection..... 8
 - 1.4 Academic contribution..... 9
 - 1.5 Societal relevance 9
 - 1.6 Outline 10
- 2. Theoretical framework..... 11
 - 2.1 Gender equality in organisations 11
 - 2.2 Gender quota..... 12
 - 2.3 Doing gender diversity in terms of practices 14
 - 2.4 Gender quota as practice..... 18
- 3. Methodology 19
 - 3.1 Philosophical assumptions 19
 - 3.2 Research design 21
 - 3.3 Case..... 26
 - 3.4 Research ethics, reflexivity, and boundary conditions 27
- 4. Data analysis 29
 - 4.1 The (self-imposed) gender quota through time..... 29
 - 4.2 Zooming in on doing gender quota as practice 30
 - 4.3 Concluding remarks after zooming in on doing gender quota as practice 36
 - 4.4 Zooming out on doing gender quota as practice 37
 - 4.5 Concluding remarks after zooming out on doing gender quota as practice..... 40
- 5. Discussion and conclusion..... 41
 - 5.1 Discussion..... 41
 - 5.2 Conclusions..... 47
- References..... 49

Appendix 1..... 55
Appendix 2..... 56
Appendix 3..... 57

1

INTRODUCTION

Despite initiatives aimed at increasing the number of women in (the top of) organisations, women globally remain considerably under-represented in senior leadership roles and corporate boards (Atria, 2019; Catalyst, 2019; Christensen & Muhr, 2019; McKinsey&Company, 2018a). A widely debated tool for changing the over-representation of men is a gender quota. Governments, like in the Netherlands, and organisations (self-)impose quotas to accelerate gender diversity in corporate boards as well as throughout the entire organisation. However, progress on a global scale is slow and according to the Female Board Index 2019 only 6 companies in the Netherlands meet the quota requirement of at least 30% women in the boards (Catalyst, 2018). Moreover, gender quotas have raised controversy and are often met with tensions, dilemmas for diversity practitioners or resistance (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Christensen & Muhr, 2019; Dahlerup, 2008; Pande & Ford, 2011; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). While we know little about quota implementation within business organisations, particularly what practices are effective for compliance or perhaps are resisted, this research reveals quota practices and shows an analysis of the power dynamics as well as the role of (diversity) practitioners within one organisation.

1.1 Gender diversity in organisations

Over the years, the issue of gender diversity in business organisations has received increasing attention in both the academic literature and the popular press (Francoeur, Labelle, & Sinclair-Desgagné, 2008, p. 83). Additionally, the business case for inclusion and diversity is receiving growing awareness (McKinsey&Company, 2018b, p. 1). In order to understand why gender diversity within organisations is discussed in the first place, it is important to understand where the debate comes from. The call for gender diversity in organisations arguably has got its roots from a society in which gender inequality prevails on numerous aspects in life and is acknowledged as a worldwide problem, often in favour of men. It is defined by the United Nations as “not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” (United Nations, n.d.). It is 1 out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders in 2015. Within business organisations, gender inequalities persist in a number of areas – from unequal pay for similar jobs to unequal representation in different organisational layers (Casey, Skibnes, & Pringle, 2011, p. 614). Inequality is more complex and less overt when analysing power dynamics. Although scholars agree that power is

evidently present in gender diversity studies, it has also been called ‘the elephant in the room’ (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 3). Within this research, power dynamics will be analysed thoroughly.

From the literature it appears that goals, definitions and reasons (not) to strive for gender diversity are much debated and often fundamentally disagreed upon. A key question that arises is why gender diversity would be a business goal. And *what* exactly should be aimed for? But just as important: what will it bring? Many successful companies regard policies for inclusion and diversity as a source of competitive advantage, with gender as one of the key differentiators (McKinsey&Company, 2018b, p. 1). Examples of these advantages are improved customer orientation, higher employee satisfaction or being better able to attract top talent. Besides, gender diversity particularly in corporate boards can create economic benefits such as increased return on equity and operating performance (Choobineh, 2016). According to Choobineh (2016), it also advances the social good as firms with more women are more likely to engage in corporate philanthropy. However, gender diversity management also raises controversy. For example, diversity programs are criticised for being a replacement of positive discrimination programs and its implementation may not fit interpretations of equality, since special treatment of diverse groups may be considered unjust (Acker, 2006, p. 457; Bleijenbergh, Peters, & Poutsma, 2010, p. 414).

Due to insignificant progress of women representation in higher management and corporate boards, while extensive research is providing social and economic benefits of gender diversity, gender quotas are (self-)imposed by governments and organisations throughout the globe to accelerate gender diversity in (the top of) organisations.

A gender quota

A quota is a (legal) tool to increase the numbers of under-represented groups in organisations or governments to correct historical under-representation (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 11). Corporate board quotas are legally regulated at the national level but usually apply to only a subset of boards within a country (Hughes, Paxton, & Krook, 2017, p. 334). Countries may adopt quotas as a response to changing attitudes about women (Pande & Ford, 2011, p. 3). For organisations, it is argued that gender quotas correct for past and present-day discrimination of women (e.g. in recruitment and selection processes), since managers – both men and women – continue to favour men over equally qualified women (Choobineh, 2016). Governments and (political) institutions play a major role in the development of regulation regarding gender diversity in corporate boards (Terjesen, Aguilera, & Lorenz, 2015, p. 245). This is illustrated by the fact that countries have been using different approaches to increase gender diversity. For example, a soft approach in the form of encouragement of equal employment opportunity policies and awareness-raising is adopted by New Zealand (Casey et al., 2011). A more radical measure is setting a ‘hard’ corporate gender quota, compelling companies by law of

having a gender balanced board and put sanctions on it when they fail to do so – where Norway took a leading role by imposing quotas for both public and private companies as the first country worldwide (Terjesen & Sealy, 2016).

Meanwhile in the Netherlands, the government has imposed a gender quota which aims to get more women in corporate boards of a selected group large private and listed organisations (although calling it a target figure): on January 1st 2020, at least 30% of the people in these corporate boards must be women – and at least 30% must be men (Rijksoverheid, 2017). Companies which do not meet these requirements, must provide an explanation in their annual report; a policy known as ‘comply or explain’ (Choobineh, 2016; Henderikse, 2015). This Act on Management and Supervision came into force on January 1 2013 but due to insignificant results, the deadline was postponed from 2016 to the first day of 2020. Yet, progress in the Netherlands so far has been slow (Atria, 2019, p. 4; McKinsey&Company, 2018a, p. 12). Critics argue that the Dutch approach is too voluntary because of its non-binding character as organisations experience limited pressure for compliance with the quota (Henderikse, 2015). This might be due to the fact that the only sanction is public exposure rather than financial or other legal punishment.

Aside from governments, organisations might set gender diversity targets and sometimes impose a quota (with sanctions) upon themselves. However, it takes power to impose a quota and this ‘solution’ is seen as a controversial one and has raised new concerns, tensions and resistance (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Christensen & Muhr, 2019; Dahlerup, 2008; Pande & Ford, 2011; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). For example, quotas are criticised for being artificial solutions which bypass (fair) competition, and managers – both men and women – may see quotas as a sign of (their) failure to obtain equality through (in their opinion) fairer methods (Choobineh, 2016; Christensen & Muhr, 2019; Krook, 2013). A frequently debated question is whether quotas are meritocratic, referring to a system in which people should get the position on the basis of their abilities (Christensen & Muhr, 2019; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). As quotas seem to go hand in hand with tensions and resistance, and current research appears to focus on unpacking the black box of quota implementation (see for example Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh, 2019), this research taps into this gap through the adoption of the practice approach.

1.2 Quota as practice

This research focuses on those gender diversity (or quota) practices within one organisation while it aims to comply with a gender quota, regardless of the actual change in the numbers of men and women these practices bring about. While previous research has focused on gender diversity practices like mentoring and training (see for example Benschop, Holgersson, Brink, & Wahl, 2015), the focus in this research lies on practicing the quota, i.e. the (deliberate) appointments of women in those positions to which the quota applies. Organisations vary in the practices and processes that are used to achieve their

goals, and these practices and processes also produce class, gender, and racial inequalities (Acker, 2006, p. 447). The practice approach puts power front and centre and understanding power dynamics is highly relevant for the study of gender quota implementation (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). It follows that practices are the object under study as I followed them throughout one organisation. When identifying and analysing these practices, the technique of zooming in and zooming out has been used, recursively looking at both a detailed description of the practice (doing gender quota) and the surrounding nexus of other practices which are connected through social and material artefacts (Nicolini, 2009b). The analysis critically reflects on the accomplishment of the practice, as well as its produced effects, what the role of (diversity) practitioners is and how power dynamics play a role.

This methodological approach was recommended by Janssens and Steyaert (2018) as the practice-based theory of diversity. They argue that practices and their connections, not individuals or discourses, are the unit of analysis to study and understand the social life of a diverse organisation (Janssens & Steyaert, 2018, p. 2). They suggest to look at management practices not from a psychological or discourse-based perspective – where data is mainly collected through respectively surveys or interviews – but from the practice-based approach, observing bodily, material and discursive resources. Therefore, in order to obtain this (empirical) data, seven non-participatory observations were conducted within one organisation to which a gender quota applies. In addition, as Janssens and Steyaert (2018, p. 33) suggest, asking (critical) questions can make the effects of practices visible and their alignment or contradictions of the practice under study with other practices. Hence, five interviews were performed, out of which four with a participant in an observation. Finally, the analysis of material artefacts and their alignment or contradictions both among the practices as well as between the data collected through observing and interviewing gives a convincing and meaningful description of what the practice is, why it is the way it is and why it is not carried out differently (Nicolini, 2009b, p. 122). The result of this is an analysis of how one single organisation is ‘doing gender quota as a practice’.

1.3 Problem formulation, aim, research question and case selection

Despite the installation of gender quotas, and organisations which increasingly devote more time and money to increase the number of women (in the top), change is slow at best (Christensen & Muhr, 2019). The problem in this research is that we know little about how quota implementation in business works, particularly about the actual practices that are most effective for compliance or those in which tensions and resistance prevail. Therefore, the aim of this research is to reveal the quota practices within one organisation and examine their effectiveness through the analysis of power dynamics, in order to facilitate change towards gender equality. This leads to the following research question:

How does an organisation do gender quota as a practice?

The selected case for the empirical research is a Dutch listed organisation which falls under the Act on Management and Supervision in the Netherlands. Additionally, it has installed a self-imposed gender quota for top layers in the organisation due to the substantial under-representation of women, which makes the problem statement relevant for this organisation.

1.4 Academic contribution

The academic contribution this research aims to make is twofold: fill a knowledge gap in academic literature on gender quota implementation in business and contribute to methodological research regarding the practice-based theory of diversity. The first refers to that no research has been done in a business context to the effectiveness of practices for compliance with a gender quota by taking indeed practices as the unit of analysis and study them by doing observations. The identification of these practices and their effects will be novel to the literature on gender quotas and diversity within a business context. Additionally, the analysis of tensions and resistance within the practices contributes to the literature on gender diversity as well. The second refers to the contribution of knowledge in the value and challenges of using this method. As Janssens and Steyaert (2018) argue, discourse-theory based research and organisational behaviour-theory based research do not capture the full picture, leaving room for practices to explore phenomena from a different (ontological) angle. Moreover, and crucially, a practice-based theory of diversity may contribute to a better understanding of the continuing and persistent asymmetries that characterise diverse organisations (Janssens & Steyaert, 2018, p. 34). In doing so, this research contributes to the methodological development of the practice-based theory for diversity.

Finally, there have been multiple calls for more qualitative research regarding gender diversity (in corporate boards) in the context such as the comply or explain-legislation, research specifically related to corporate gender quotas as well as methodological recommendations for conducting observations (Casey et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2017; Kakabadse et al., 2015; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016; Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). This research aims to contribute to this as well.

1.5 Societal relevance

The adoption of gender quotas is on the rise since the start of the 21st century. Whereas electoral quotas were adopted by an increasing number of countries at the end of the 20th century, corporate quotas for businesses now experience a significant increase (Hughes et al., 2017). In recent years, the expansion to alternative forms of quotas and self-imposed quotas extended this development. This research is of interest to members of other organisations to which a (self-imposed) gender quota applies, especially

for diversity practitioners and people who identify with feminist ideals. Identified practices and their effects may encourage them or other organisational actors to critically reflect on their own practices, possibly resulting in a different way of gender quota implementation. In addition, the societal debate about the pros and cons of gender quotas may be fuelled, possibly more narrowly directing towards the improvement of gender equality practices. Furthermore, since the deadline for compliance with the gender quota in the Netherlands is on January 1st 2020, this research is of interest to any organisation to which the quota applies. Finally, studies also show that adopting gender quotas has broader societal/cultural impacts, as it seems to have spillover effects that help to increase women's rights more generally (Christensen & Muhr, 2019, p. 81). Ultimately, a better insight into quota implementation could facilitate this as well.

1.6 Outline

This research is structured as follows. Chapter 2 will describe how this research is embedded in the literature concerning gender equality in organisations, practicing gender diversity and the implementation of a gender quota with its pros and cons, to finally conclude with the theoretical gap of identifying and analysing gender quota as a practice. Chapter 3 discusses what methodological choices are made, which philosophical assumptions are the basis of this research and why. This chapter also examines how this research is conducted, including justification of the chosen single case, the research design, where and how the data were collected, analysed, and reported, and how is being dealt with research ethics. The analysis of the collected data is examined in Chapter 4. And lastly, Chapter 5 contains the conclusions and discussion section, including interpretation of results, contribution to knowledge, practical implications, limitations and suggestions for further research.

2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter puts the research in the context of relevant literature, before closing with a brief overview of the concepts and the theoretical gap which this research aims to fill. The concepts which will be discussed are: gender equality in organisations (2.1), a gender quota (2.2) and doing gender diversity in terms of practices (2.3). This chapter ends with an overview of the presented theories and the literary gap: gender quota as practice (2.4).

2.1 Gender equality in organisations

Equality is an ambiguous term that needs to be examined before application. Scholars argue that the term equality can be interpreted differently. For example, equality as the same treatment of diverse groups, equality in outcomes of group representation or equality as meritocracy – where people have the power on the basis of their ability (Bleijenbergh et al., 2010). Within organisations, inequalities exist in what Acker (2006) calls regimes. Inequality regimes are the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organisations (Acker, 2006, p. 441). It follows that in this research inequalities in organisations is defined as:

...systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations. (Acker, 2006, p. 443)

This definition aligns with the elements of the practice approach in this research for its focus on practices where the available resources at that particular place and moment in time play a crucial role. These inequalities may prevail along identities such as gender, race or class. The concept known as intersectionality refers to the intersections of these identities rather than seeing them as independent, often illustrated through the frequently marginalised interests of women of colour when practices focus on gender (Crenshaw, 1994). I acknowledge the (theoretical) value of this concept within gender studies. However, it lies beyond the scope of this research to include it into the empirical analysis.

Key to any form of (gender) inequality is power, in this research defined as “the control of resources, structures, behaviours, agendas, ideologies and cultures and subjectivities” (Kärreman & Alvesson,

2009, p. 1118). One pivotal form of power in the context of organisational change towards gender equality is resistance; a key issue for management researchers that use critical perspectives (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014). While gender diversity may challenge masculine domination of boards, the literature cautions us that changes in head counts and representation are important but insufficient conditions for changing power and inequality structures (Kakabadse et al., 2015, p. 268). As a result of the over-representation of men in boards (and higher management), men have the power over goals and decisions which can hinder change in gender representation, thereby maintaining something often referred to as an ‘old boys network’ (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Mateos de Cabo, Terjesen, Escot, & Gimeno, 2019; Perrault, 2015). When it comes gender quotas and equality, others make the distinction between equality of outcome (in numbers) and equality of opportunity (create a level playing field) (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Choobineh, 2016; Kirton & Greene, 2016). Gender equality and the gender quota as an instrument are at odds with each other; arguably, they have the same purpose, yet, they are very different. Understanding the implementation of gender quotas therefore is important, as original gender equality intentions could be changed or lost in the translation to practice (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). The next paragraph will discuss the contested measure of a quota extensively.

2.2 Gender quota

Central topic in this research is a gender quota. In this paragraph, I will examine what a (gender) quota entails, discuss its history, how it relates to power and gender equality, and outline the pros and cons of the instrument.

Introduction to a quota

A quota is a tool to increase the numbers of under-represented groups in organisations or governments to correct historical under-representation (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 11). Although boardroom diversity is increasing, women remain under-represented and progress on a global scale is slow (Catalyst, 2018). Over the past two decades, quotas have extended beyond legislatures to public institutions, such as cabinets and executive agencies, and to state advisory councils, subnational governments, labour union directorates, and corporate boards (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2013, p. 310). Gender quota laws are still a fairly recent phenomenon; most countries have adopted them since 1991 (Baldez, 2006). However, the adoption of gender quotas specifically for corporate boards has rapidly grown over the past decade – they especially gained popularity since Norway implemented the first one in 2003 (Choobineh, 2016). Different forms of quotas can broadly be categorised as follows: binding quotas with sanctions (hard quotas), quotas without sanctions (soft quotas) – like in the Netherlands – and voluntary targets – like a self-imposed quota (Choobineh, 2016; Mateos de Cabo et al., 2019). Despite the increasing number of (corporate) gender quota impositions and its debated (dis)advantages,

many scholars (and practitioners) fail to mention why this instrument exist in the first place. Not (per se) because women are the under-represented group. The under-representation is a result from attitudes about women. A quota has the goal to change these attitudes about women, as Pande and Ford (2011) state, and ultimately, I argue, to value either gender equally.

While essentially quotas aim to increase gender diversity, scholars argue in favour of quotas using arguments which reflect benefits for gender diversity. However, I argue this is an incorrect reasoning. A gender quota is *a* way, but not necessarily *the* way to increase gender diversity. Arguing for gender diversity therefore does not equal arguing in favour of a gender quota. The study by Kakabadse et al. (2015) is a good example of the highlighted importance of increasing the number of women directors in the boardroom, but not through quotas as they feared that enforcing quotas could ultimately undermine the value they create. Terjesen and Sealy (2016) use the ‘utility perspective’ – which seeks the most economically satisfying outcome – to argue in favour of quotas because of fresh perspectives that women bring. It is important to point out that scholars who use gender diversity arguments to defend quotas assume that a quota by definition increases gender diversity – which from a historical perspective has not necessarily been the case, especially for soft quota policies (Mateos de Cabo et al., 2019). Arguments in favour of quotas are, for example, that existing systems are unfair in the ways they assess women - that they discriminate and ignore women's merit - or that the understanding of merit is too narrow (Bacchi, 2006, p. 34). Furthermore, as Bacchi (2006) argues, a measure like this is an attempt to do justice by redressing entrenched privileges, rather than being discriminative (positive or otherwise). Benschop and Van den Brink (2014, p. 9) state a quota also problematises former practices of lip service without action and establishes a steady critical mass. Finally, quota proponents leverage justice to suggest that all demographic groups should be represented equally, e.g., women comprise half the population and therefore should hold half the power (Terjesen & Sealy, 2016, p. 29). Despite this, a quota is seen as a controversial instrument.

The controversy of a gender quota

The ‘solution’ of a quota is seen as a controversial one and has raised new concerns, tensions and resistance (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Dahlerup, 2008; Pande & Ford, 2011; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). First of all, power is central to the concept of quotas, since it needs top-down decision making power to install them in the first place (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 12). This applies both to governments as well as organisations which implement self-imposed quotas. Furthermore, quotas are criticised as ‘artificial’ solutions to women's under-representation – and thus as fundamentally undemocratic (Krook, 2013). Choobineh (2016) states that gender quotas may provide equality of outcomes (representation), but do not satisfy equality of opportunity, for the reason that a quota bypasses (fair) competition. In the private sector, counterarguments are that businesses back out of government

control over the composition of their staff and that the most qualified individual should have an opportunity to get any position in the board (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 11; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). Consequently, scholars discuss whether quotas are meritocratic, and if not, whether this creates a ‘fairness problem’ (Choobineh, 2016; Christensen & Muhr, 2019; Henderikse, 2015; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). When arguing for the best quality of a candidate, it’s worth mentioning quality is always based on the criteria set by those with power, even when the criteria seem to be accepted by a number of people (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). These people are generally considered more knowledgeable and qualified to do this job. Whilst the ideology of meritocracy in careers and organisations is central to Western society, most director appointments are not purely talent-based (Terjesen & Sealy, 2016, p. 34). Terjesen and Sealy (2016) state that meritocratic classes perpetuate their power by defining merit; this class is often regarded as white, middle-class, middle-aged, educated men.

A problematic consequence of quotas which might appear in practice is the question whether organisations comply out of justice or (economic) utility (Terjesen & Sealy 2016). And when they do not comply, whether there are sanctions – and how severe they are. Sanctions determine the success or failure of quotas, since a successful implementation highly depends on the possible penalties for non-compliance (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 12). Still, gender quota implementation does not guarantee that decision-making power moves from the hands of men to a more equal balance of men and women (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). Some state that quotas do nothing to change the gendered appointment systems; they only change the numbers and do no more than add women and stir (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 15). Lastly, a quota system might create a stigma-effect on women who have gained their position when a quota applies, resulting in questions about the qualities of those women (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Choobineh, 2016; Henderikse, 2015).

This research will examine quota implementation as practice and how the controversy of the instrument comes to the fore. Moreover, power dynamics will be analysed within the practices and what role actors in favour or against quotas and/or gender diversity in general play. Ultimately, this affects how gender quota implementation is being practiced in the organisation. While knowledge about gender inequalities has grown, we know less about how to change inequalities, particularly about the actual practices of change that are most effective in different settings and contexts (Benschop et al., 2015; Benschop & Verloo, 2011, p. 277). The analysis of the collected empirical data therefore discusses the effects of identified practices.

2.3 Doing gender diversity in terms of practices

This paragraph will examine literature concerning ‘doing gender diversity’ and discuss questions like: why engage in diversity management? How is gender being practiced? How are diversity practitioners

involved and what are the challenges they might face? Central theme in this paragraph is the notion of practices.

Practicing gender diversity

In order to reduce gender inequalities, organisations often engage in diversity management. Diversity management may very broadly be described as an approach to inclusivity for all employees (Bleijenbergh et al., 2010). A more narrow definition of diversity management which will be used in this research, is: "...a successor of the traditional affirmative action or equal opportunities programs used in some countries, focusing on specific social groups defined by sex, ethnicity/race and age, rather than on individuals" (Bleijenbergh et al., 2010, p. 414). There is a growing interest in gender diversity in organisations, such as the effects of diversity in boardroom decisions, firm performance and the recent emergence of transnational business initiatives for gender equality (Calkin, 2016; Joecks, Pull, & Vetter, 2013; Rao & Tilt, 2016). As a 'business case', diversity is believed to engender competitive advantage by establishing a better corporate image, improving group and organisational performance, and attracting and retaining human capital (Bleijenbergh et al., 2010, p. 414). A research report by McKinsey states that having gender diverse executive teams is consistently positively correlated with higher profitability (McKinsey&Company, 2018b). Moreover, it is argued that gender diversity benefits the social good, has (national) economic benefits and improves financial performance (Choobineh, 2016). Research suggests the decision-making process improves with greater gender diversity on boards, and these boards tend to be tougher monitors of company executives (Kakabadse et al., 2015; Smith, 2018). Finally, fraud could be mitigated with gender diverse boards, as women tend to be more financially risk-averse than men (Choobineh, 2016). As a result, there seems to be a growing awareness of the business case for diversity in organisations (McKinsey&Company, 2018b). Scholars and practitioners seldom contest the importance of diversity in organisations any more (Benschop, Holgersson, Brink, & Wahl, 2015, p. 2).

How to achieve the organisational change that is needed to transform organisations into more inclusive and diverse places to work is, nevertheless, much less obvious (Benschop et al., 2015, p. 2). The question then is: how is gender diversity being practiced? And what are practices? Within this research, practices are defined as "the actual, constantly evolving accomplishment of an object-oriented activity which obtains some durability and diffusion by virtue of being sustained by a social grouping and inscribed in some material or symbolic intermediaries" (Nicolini, 2009b, p. 121). They are real time sayings and doings in a specific place and time, conceived as simultaneously discursive, embodied and material (Janssens & Steyaert, 2018, p. 12). As Nicolini (2009b, p. 122) argues, practices (i) entails some form of agency, materiality, and history, (ii) depends on other practices to happen, and (iii) produces some form of effect in the world. Gender diversity practices which might prevail in

organisations are training, mentoring, and networks (Benschop et al., 2015). Ahmed (2012) explains how you could ‘do diversity’ by working out how to circulate the matter of diversity around, both as a word and in documents. But while the intention of practices may be empowering the formally defined target groups, they may also have (unintended) negative effects, actually reinforcing inequality structures in the longer term (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). As it takes resources to practice (like time, money, or personnel), power and control determines the availability and accessibility of these resources. When it comes to radical interventions such as quotas, it takes power to control the practices of recruitment and selection and enforce such a contested measure (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 12). Organisational controls like rewards are, among other things, made possible by power derived from gender (Acker, 2006). Ultimately, diversity practitioners experience various difficulties in practising gender diversity with regards to power and control, especially when a quota applies.

The role of practitioners

Practitioners are crucial in the implementation of diversity practices. They can be (diversity) managers, but also executives like the CEO or actors in the organisation who engage in diversity out of personal interest or belief. Recent studies of gender equality change within a new managerialist context emphasise the need to understand the role of diverse actors in implementing top-down measures even more (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). Research suggests that diversity practitioners face a range of paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas in their work (Kirton & Greene, 2016). They are often placed in a state of ambivalence between different goals such as business (professional) goals or equality (personal) goals, tasked with a diversity role on the one hand and commonly having a wider personal vision of social justice on the other (Kirton, Greene, & Dean, 2007, p. 1986; Tatli, Nicolopoulou, Özbilgin, Karatas-Ozkan, & Bilgehan Öztürk, 2015). Consequently, this can make them unpopular with many organisational actors and often leaves them on the margins of mainstream strategy and policy-making (Kirton et al., 2007, p. 1992). Sometimes these tensions stimulate resistance, especially when implementation is supported with the ambiguous term “equality” (Bleijenbergh et al., 2010). For example, special treatment of diverse groups may be considered unjust and could result in tensions among (diversity) managers and employees about the implementation. As diversity practitioner, you need persistence, but this goes hand in hand with resistance: the more you persist, the more signs of this resistance. The more resistance, the more persistence required (Ahmed, 2012).

Some diversity practitioners may be classified as ‘tempered radicals’; individuals who identify with and are committed to their organisations, and who are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organisation (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 586). However, in order to be taken seriously by

management, diversity practitioners sometimes need to temper their radicalism if they are to construct a convincing diversity agenda (Kirton et al., 2007). For example, diversity professionals might criticise the status quo for informally excluding women or minority ethnic people, but they might also be reluctant to employ radical equality measures for fear of provoking backlash among the white male majority, in particular their own sponsors (Kirton et al., 2007, p. 1982). Consequently, they might internalise dominant business-driven values and compromise their personal commitment to equality or legitimise the business case above all other (social justice) considerations. The sustainability of gender equality programs and anchoring of gender awareness in day-to-day practices, therefore, is one of the main challenges scholars and practitioners currently face (De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016, p. 433). The primary condition for the success of diversity initiatives in organisations is top-level managerial commitment and leadership (Tatli et al., 2015, p. 1247).

Commitment from the top

The commitment of top management to gender equality, diversity, and inclusion is expected to lead to diversity practices and outcomes (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2018, p. 199). Commitment is important not only because of symbolic effects but also because it increases the odds that equality actions are taken. Studies focusing on the role of actors in the implementation of gender equality measures have found that commitment from top managers proved crucial for ensuring that actors deliver on implementation (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). However, commitment may only be of rhetorical nature, as it seems to be a challenge to engage leaders into action that goes beyond sloganism, verbal and symbolic support, or lip service (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2018, p. 199). The CEO is seen as the primary role model who must be involved for the rest of the organisation to follow his or her example. In order to facilitate organisational change towards equality, diversity and inclusion, Tatli et al. (2015) argue for creating champions at different levels of the organisation – like line managers or senior managers. Additionally, feminist actors can play a key role in advocating and sustaining gender equality change (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). As Tatli et al. (2015, p. 1255) conclude: to prevent diversity management being a one person show, success depends on if it is shared with external and internal stakeholders and supported by the organisational leadership.

The empirical analysis will evaluate how the organisation is doing the gender quota as practice, and additionally, what role diversity practitioners like a diversity manager or the CEO play in compliance with the quota. Furthermore, commitment from actors such as the diversity manager, the CEO, or other organisational actors is discussed and how this can affect how the organisation is doing gender quota as practice.

2.4 Gender quota as practice

The theoretical framework in this research has started off with the concept of gender equality and its multiple interpretations. “Equality” can mean a balanced representation in headcounts (of gender), but also equally valuing men and women. I argue that attitudes about women are the cause of their substantial under-representation in higher management and corporate boards. As a result, an increasing number of countries and organisations have been imposing gender quotas, which also implies an act of power over those to which it applies. As practicing gender diversity to challenge inequalities is widely adopted by many organisations nowadays, we know little which practices are most effective in tackling these inequalities. Especially those practices within businesses that aim to comply with a gender quota. In one study on gender quota implementation however, it was found that the practices of gender specific calls, scouting, and playing around were performed by actors in a university in order to comply with the quota. The context of a profit organisation in the private sector therefore gives this research its originality. Moreover, Van den Brink and Benschop (2018) showed how a radical intervention such as a quota can help to uncover the subtlety of gender inequality practices and make persistent and implicit stereotypes visible and discussable. From this, it follows this research examines how an organisation is doing gender quota as a practice, taking notions about gender equality and diversity management into consideration which are outlined in this chapter. This research opens the black box of gender quota practices to better understand indeed these practices, their power dynamics, and effects (re)produced within the practices.

3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter first discusses the philosophical assumptions and position that is taken, followed by the assessment of this research (3.1). The second paragraph examines the research design, first discussing the methodological approach and providing arguments for the how and the why of this research. Additionally, this paragraph gives a detailed account of how the research is conducted, including methods which are used, data collection and how data is analysed and reported. Paragraph 3.3 outlines the case, including justification and description of the organisation. The fourth and last paragraph deals with research ethics, reflexivity, and the boundary conditions of this research.

3.1 Philosophical assumptions

Philosophical or metatheoretical commitments are a key part of the methodology, especially in qualitative research, and have implications for the research design (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Firstly, epistemology deals with the essence of knowledge, or what the researcher classifies what does and does not constitute of (scientific) knowledge. Given the focus of this research, an epistemological subjectivist stance is taken. I reject the possibility of neutral observation and admit there is a socially constructed reality. I acknowledge subjectivity in my interpretations as a result of my philosophical position and my personal characteristics such as gender, origin, age etc. This research has a constructivist-interpretivist approach. This has implications for this research in that findings are not considered as the researcher's view on 'reality', but an interpretation of socially constructed situations in a particular moment in time. More concretely, studying a particular practice in time means that different interpretations and bodily expressions of participants, alongside material artefacts, create the (meaning of the) practice.

Ontological questions concern whether or not the phenomenon that we are interested in actually exists independent of our knowing (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Here, differentiation about the status of social reality lies in realist or subjectivist assumptions. To me, there is no world 'out there' to be explored independent of our knowing. I consider reality as socially constructed, and a projection of our consciousness and cognition. Thus, a subjectivist stance is taken. This aligns with my acknowledgement that practices happen at the same time and in different places. I am aware that I am only able to capture a fragment of this constructed reality, in that particular time and place, thereby acknowledging the uniqueness of the practice. Since I consider phenomena such as gender equality as socially created rather

than independent of our knowing, this research provides perceptions of and attitudes towards equality. The same goes for how (positive) discrimination and inclusion or exclusion are socially created and perceived. In addition, I consider tensions and resistance as something which does not exist in individuals and groups, but something which is created through (everyday) sayings and doings. This ontological angle would help diversity research to better understand how phenomena are continuously (re)produced (Janssens & Steyaert, 2018).

By combining the above ontological assumptions with the assumptions regarding epistemology, it follows I take the philosophical position within qualitative research called critical theory. The aim of critical theory-based approaches towards organisational research is to understand how the practices and institutions of management are developed and legitimised within relations of power and domination (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Yet, critical theory also asserts that systems can and should be changed and the belief is that these systems can be transformed to, for example, enable emancipation. These characteristics align with the focus of this research on practices, power dynamics and change towards gender equality.

Assessment of qualitative research

Within qualitative research, objectivity often is not the goal (Symon & Cassel, 2012). In fact, and in this research in particular, subjectivity and interpretations are omnipresent. When using a constructivist approach in which the researcher's objectivity is not (assumed to be) present, what positive-informed research calls their 'validity' and 'reliability' are less appropriate for the assessment of research, as those terms encapsulate the notion that research can mirror the world being observed (Symon & Cassel, 2012). However, as Nicolini (2009b, p. 135) argues, getting close to work not only gives us access to critical aspects (the 'data') of organisational practising, it also enhances the robustness and validity of these data due to presence *in situ* and expressions of values, attitudes and knowledge from actors in their natural habitat; something which is referred to as ecological validity. I have followed the practice of doing gender quota while the diversity manager helped me in getting access to various organisational departments, connecting with people in the organisation and collecting relevant documents for me. As both an expert in terms of knowledge on gender diversity, as well as arguably him being *the* person to 'show me around' in the organisation, the diversity manager as representative of this organisation and its gender diversity strategy secures a big part of the quality of this research. No other actors seemed suitable beforehand to fulfil this task for me. At the same time, this also created a certain dependency for me on him. However, as more extensively explained later in this chapter, during the empirical research I have actively been looking for other quota practices and actors who could have helped me in getting access to them. Whereas at the start I had been working closely with the diversity manager, later

on, I independently – although communicating for agreement and updates – worked myself towards the collection of new empirical data.

3.2 Research design

This paragraph will outline the research design. First, the nature of the research design will be examined, after which the methodological approach is discussed. This is followed by how and where data was collected, analysed and reported.

This research has an inductive approach, meaning it generalises from observations to theory. The nature of the design is somewhat flexible, or emergent and self-defining. As Symon and Cassel (2012) state, the researcher often has a research question or focus in mind, but (s)he cannot know which events will be most important, nor which data will become valuable sources of evidence. Therefore, the research design had been open for change as new situations emerged because of possible access problems (Symon & Cassel, 2012). As Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh (2019) state: “to understand what is actually done at the organisational level and what its implications are for the gender equality intentions, organisational actors need to be followed during the process.” This design is appropriate considering the openness of the research question; at the start, anything relating to how the organisation is doing the gender quota was of interest for the researcher. However, the purpose has been to follow the practice of doing the gender quota. This implies practices in which the appointment of women over men for positions to which the quota applies is of primary concern. It follows that this had been the focus in mind during the empirical research.

In order to get as close as possible to this, I have been looking for discursive resources and material artefacts concerning the gender quota. The diversity manager told me in an introductory meeting what the organisation is doing to increase gender diversity and comply with the quota; from cross mentoring programs to coaching sessions for boardroom positions. Additionally, I asked respondents at the end of every follow-up interview whether they could help me in getting to quota practices and whom I should be talking to. This way of doing research resonates with the snowball technique in that every new contact provides new sources of information, which in turn gets me closer to the practice of doing the gender quota. Practising is, in fact, by definition improvising, risking, and taking chances, as ‘what to do next’ is fraught with consequences for the practitioners (Nicolini, 2009b, p. 135). The ‘research antennas’ I took into the field, which Nicolini (2009b) refers to as ‘the palette’, are the verbs matching, appointing, recruiting, selecting, coaching, networking and mentoring.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach in this research is the practice approach. Work from Nicolini (2009a, 2009b, 2012) and Nicolini and Monteiro (2016) forms the methodological basis in this research. This approach is firstly chosen for its suitability to capture how things are organised as they unfold, thereby creating a broader causal and historical perspective with regards to the practice under study. Just describing what actors say and do is argued to be increasingly incapable of capturing what is really going on (Nicolini, 2009b). Secondly, Janssens and Steyaert (2018) recommended to use this approach in future research to gender diversity practices in organisations for both its value and novelty. In two cases, Janssens and Steyaert (2018) illustrate the value of the practice lens, one of which functions as an example in the empirical research. This hypothetical case is about career mentoring and describes how diversity management practices reproduce rather than change inequalities because they are connected with other inequality-(re)producing practices. Its novelty in diversity research seems promising as critical organisational studies focus on the role of power in organisational and emancipatory change (Symon & Cassel, 2012). This makes this approach very suitable for studying the gender quota as practice within an organisation. Moreover, the practice approach puts power front and centre and understanding power dynamics is highly relevant for the study of gender quota implementation (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). All practices embody different interests and are hence internally fragmented, subject to multiple interpretations, and open to contradictions and tensions (Nicolini, 2009, p. 4). Studying practices such as doing the gender quota, which is highly contested, aligns well with the focus on tensions and resistance which might prevail.

The practice approach focuses on real-time sayings and doings, mediated by the way in which discourse, materiality and our bodies are entangled and the consequential belief that phenomena such as inequalities, knowledge or power emerge from this (Janssens & Steyaert, 2018; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). The empirical focus in the practice approach lies on activity (Langley & Abdallah, 2011, p. 124). The research antennas (matching, appointing, recruiting, selecting coaching, networking and mentoring) embody these activities. It follows that the unit of analysis in this research is the practice of doing gender quota. However, the practice approach means not only focusing on the detailed accomplishment of the attempts to comply with the quota, but also how surrounded practices are knotted together, come into being and function in a nexus of practices in such a way that the results of one performance become the resource for another (Nicolini, 2012, p. 2). While the diversity manager guided me to meetings in which matching, recruiting, selecting, and mentoring is practiced, I carefully considered which practices were closest to doing gender quota. Because, as Nicolini (2009a) argues, the idea is to get both a detailed description of the accomplishment of the practice of doing gender quota – by zooming in – as well as how practices in the nexus around doing the gender quota are created – by zooming out. These techniques – zooming in and zooming out – are used during the empirical research by questioning: how does this practice affect how the organisation is doing the gender quota as practice? In other words,

when attending a cross mentor session, I asked myself how this practice affects the actual appointment of women over men to those positions to which the quota applies. By doing this, a distinction was made between quota practices revealed when zooming in and practices identified when zooming out. As Nicolini (2009b, p. 121) examined, the iterative zooming in and out stops when we can provide a convincing and defensible account of both the practice and its effects on the dynamics of organising, showing how that which is local contributes to the generation of broader effects.

Two challenges which I experienced when conducting the empirical research were the accessibility of the practices (in the form of meetings, events, etc.) and the researcher-researched relationship, which comes from ethnographic studies (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 6). For both these challenges, I have been dependent on the diversity manager who was not only my contact person, but also participant and respondent. He is the one who guided me through the organisation to the practices I was searching for (my research antennas). He has not been able to get access for me to all the practices I would have wanted to study because of confidentiality or privacy issues, or simply due to the cancellation of meetings or the fact that particular meetings did not take place during the time of conducting the empirical research. Besides, the route I took in following the practice had the 'risk' of being *his* route, rather than mine, bringing me to the 'wrong' practices. At last, he was also participant and respondent, which called for conscious awareness in keeping an independent position rather than being influenced by him advocating in favour of particular practices. Especially when working from a more critical perspective, this means inquiring into issues of power in the researcher-researched relationship (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 6). I would argue his influence in conducting the empirical has been that I have collected more data which concern mentoring, networking and coaching practices, rather than matching and appointing practices. This has resulted in more empirical data of zooming out practices than of those when zooming in on gender quota practices.

Data collection

The data collection involved non-participatory observations (7), semi-structured interviews (5) and the collection and analysis of material artefacts (10) (Symon & Cassel, 2012). All the data were collected in a time span of six weeks. An overview of the collected empirical data which is used in the analysis is to be found in Appendix 1. The diversity manager brought me to practices of matching, proposing employees to new positions in the organisation, internal recruitment and selection, events about networking and mentor sessions. The primary method in the empirical research has been performing observations, which is argued to be the best way to study and analyse practices (Janssens & Steyaert, 2018; Langley & Abdallah, 2011; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016; Symon & Cassel, 2012). Observations make it possible to generate data that would have been impossible to find in documents and hard to gather through interviewing alone (Symon & Cassel, 2012). They focus on the regimes of doings and

sayings (the activity or practice at hand), rather than merely what people say and do (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). The researcher has not been participating in any of the situations, or taken the role of complete observer (Symon & Cassel 2012). This is because the practices (and their effects) need to be as close to their natural existence.

When Nicolini (2009, p. 23) explains the zooming out technique, this would require attending conferences, meetings, and gatherings where the practice is debated; attending policy-making forums where the practice is taken into consideration and sanctioned; reading the (scientific) literature where the practice is legitimated; travelling to places where the practice is adopted; and so on. I followed the practice of gender quota by using this technique. Four observations were performed at meetings and three at events. The notes from the observations describe how bodily, material and discursive elements accomplish the practice at hand. In addition to the observations, performing follow-up interviews gave the opportunity to reflect with the respondent on the social situation and to ask critical questions. As Janssens and Steyaert (2018, p. 33) argue, asking (critical) questions can make the effects of practices visible. Four follow-up-interviews were conducted in response to an observation. One interview – the one with the diversity manager – functioned as an overarching reflection of the collected data through the observations, interviews and documents. All interviews were transcribed. A list of questions was created beforehand but, more importantly, there was room for inquiring into the alignment or contradictions of the practice under study with other practices by asking questions directly related to the specific observation that was performed. The list of questions can be found in Appendix 2.

Lastly, the practice approach suggests that knowledge is conceived as a form of mastery that is expressed in social and material capacity. The collection of material artefacts is therefore part of the (constitution of the) practice. In organisational settings, material artefacts will typically include research question-relevant texts like annual reports, correspondence, internal memos, cartoons/jokes/photos on office doors and bulletin boards, webpages, etc (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Collected material artefacts are the integrated annual reports from 2013 to 2018, an internal memo from the Executive Board send in 2017, website texts regarding the organisation's (gender) diversity stance and the diversity and inclusion strategic plan 2019-2021.

Data analysis and reporting

The ambiguity of the research design is that its seeming beneficial flexibility requires convergence in the stage of data analysis (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Whereas during data collection the intention is to gather more data than perhaps needed – to avoid missing crucial information – the analysis is more specific. When scrutinising practices, we must attend to two activities simultaneously: (1) the practices we aim to investigate; (2) the practices through which we attempt to re-present them (i.e., our representational activities and vocabulary) (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016, p. 6). The analysis was

conducted starting with the practice being closest to doing gender quota. This, I consider, are the actions through which actors aim or have the potential to appoint women over men for those positions which fall under the quota, regardless of the actual change the practice brings about. Empirical data from observations, interviews and/or material artefacts ground the claims which are made when scrutinising the practice. When it comes to the vocabulary, I used the notes in the story about career mentoring described by Janssens and Steyaert (2018, p. 19-20) as an example, which read: “*white men mentoring black women and men, and that the mentoring sessions take place in the mentors’ high-status offices.*”; “[mentor] *in an impersonal manner, with stiff bodily gestures and a formal, loud tone of voice, limit their mentoring to fixing ‘their problems’*”; and “*observe how also black women, nervously sitting at the other side of the impressive office desk, refrain from establishing a warm and open relation, later explaining in an interview how they aim to keep a distance from white men*”. Finally, analysing and reporting sayings and doings not only focus on what is said or how it is said, but also on what is *not* said. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2009, p. 68) explain that when doing organisational ethnography, researchers need also to attend to absence, to silences, those positions and views that may have been silenced by others or are, perhaps, silent by choice. I have also adopted this approach in the data analysis.

However, this is only part of the job. A merely descriptive study will not suffice when analysing practices and phenomena that transpire through them. Ultimately, the ‘why-question’ must be posed by the researcher. Because, the result of the recursive movement of zooming in and zooming out is a meaningful description of what a practice is, why it is the way it is and why it is not carried out differently (Nicolini, 2009b, p. 122). Tensions and interests of actors within the quota practices provide insight into why a practice is not carried out differently. Therefore, the role of actors like diversity practitioners and (line-)managers is crucial and is examined thoroughly. The analysis of concepts like gender equality, power, discrimination, inclusion or exclusion reveals how phenomena come into being and persist in time (Nicolini, 2009). To be able to analyse persistence of practices and effects in time, a historical lens has been applied to the gender quota as practice. As Nicolini (2009, p. 20) states, the question for organisational scholars should not be “do practices change?”. Instead, the question is the opposite: “through which mechanisms does practice achieve durability in time?”

This research will personally be handed over to the diversity manager of the organisation in written form both in its entirety – as requested by him – and in a concise form containing parts of the most relevant chapters such as the problem formulation, aim, research question, brief description of applied methods, the findings and conclusions. Additionally, there will be a moment when the research is going to be presented at the organisation for a selected audience.

3.3 Case

The empirical data was collected in one organisation: a Dutch listed organisation. The case was chosen firstly on the condition that the Dutch gender quota law applied to it. The Act on Management and Supervision applies to companies that meet 2 out of 3 of the following (Atria, 2019, p. 12):

- Companies which have generated revenues of more than 40 million euro
- Companies which employ more than 250 people
- Companies which own capital of at least 20 million euro

Additionally, this organisation was of interest for the researcher because a self-imposed gender quota was re-installed. In order to study gender quota practices, an organisation which currently deploys activities on this issue will most likely be an appropriate case. In other words, the single case is chosen for its revelatory potential and richness of data as well, which are valuable criteria in studying a single case (Langley & Abdallah, 2011, p. 109).

Case description

The case is a publicly listed company. At the time of writing, according to the Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) manager (within this research also referred to as diversity manager), 26% in the entire organisation is women. The organisation furthermore distinguishes different layers in the top of the organisation (Figure 1). For the Executive and Supervisory Board, the national quota applies in that 30% must be women by January 1st 2020. In addition to the national quota, the organisation has set a self-imposed quota for several layers. The target here is that one out of three (33%) positions must be filled by a woman. The organisation also has put self-imposed restrictions for hiring new people from outside the organisation. Instead, it focuses on their own workforce in order to get those (women) in higher positions. As a result, the organisation attempts to comply with the gender quotas with their own resources in the form of finance, personnel, knowledge, etc.

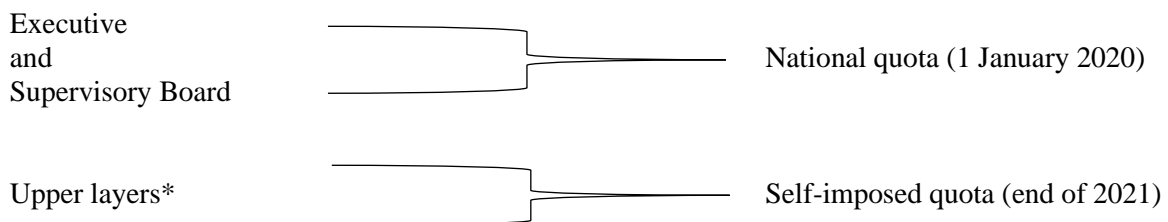


Figure 1

*generalised for anonymity purposes

3.4 Research ethics, reflexivity, and boundary conditions

When it comes to research ethics, I agreed for permission of conducting the observations and interviews, mentioned that participation of participants and respondents was voluntarily and safeguarded confidentiality of information from the organisation. In addition, I told participants that it is possible to stop the observation or interviews when requested. I am aware that I will have access to events and processes that are current, live and immediate. This means they are not perfectly successful and thus imply a certain, or even high level of sensitivity (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Before every interview, I asked for permission to record the interview with audio only. Furthermore, I made clear answering a question is not obligatory when there are reasons for her or him not to (e.g. too personal, confidential, etc.). I reported on gender and job title of participants as to secure anonymity of most of them. Additionally, I asked participants for permission to make notes of appearances such as age (indication) and description of clothes (from casual to professional). However, as there can be one manager of a particular team, this sometimes does not give full anonymity. The people in question are informed about this. I also told participants no names of people or other organisations are used, and that the results will be used for research purposes only.

Reflexivity

A key component and challenge of the critical approach is being aware of your own position as researcher, as well as characteristics that (unconsciously) make you who you are. Reflexivity is by Symon and Cassel (2012) defined as “an awareness of the researchers’ role and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research processes and outcomes”. The most important features which arguably have influenced the research process is the fact that I am a student, and thus not being connected to a (business) organisation. This possibly gave me easier access to meetings and events, as well as insight into confidential documents. The diversity manager, who had worked together with a student from a different university before, guided me to meetings and events and took care of getting access to them. This gave me more freedom to move around in the organisation as well. While I was asking respondents to connect me to more people, I independently was looking for the quota practices myself – although keeping the diversity manager updated. Ultimately, this has influenced the research outcomes as well, because access to these meetings and events led to the final conduct of the empirical research.

Boundary conditions

Rather than speaking of limitations, I use the term boundary conditions for qualitative research with a critical perspective. This brings the question to the fore whether it is reasonable to claim that these findings apply to other settings. This way, the emphasis is on generalisation from observation to theory.

I argue the findings of this research do apply to other settings. First of all, the findings could apply to any organisation to which national or self-imposed gender quotas apply, inside or outside the field of business. One of the boundary conditions therefore is that these findings will not apply to organisations which do not take any (gender) diversity practices into consideration. However, the findings of this research can be useful to organisations which do not have any quota imposed, but still practice gender diversity in order to increase the number of women in the organisation. The analysis of tensions and resistance in this research can be valuable knowledge for diversity practitioners when implementing gender diversity strategies.

4

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter outlines the analysis of the empirical data. First, a historical path of the gender quota in this organisation is described (4.1). The second paragraph examines practices that were identified when zooming in on the gender quota as practice. Paragraph 4.3 provides concluding remarks after zooming in. The next paragraph examines practices that were identified when zooming out (4.4), after which this chapter ends with concluding remarks after zooming out on the gender quota as practice (4.5).

4.1 The (self-imposed) gender quota through time

When following material artefacts through time, no reference to a gender quota in any of the integrated annual reports from 2013 to 2018 was found. Neither is there an explanation why the target of 30% women in the board has not been met yet. During the interview, the D&I manager tells me at this moment there are no consequences for not complying with the quota from the government, while he refers to the soft approach of the ‘target figure’. Remarkably, the D&I manager gives the impression not being aware of the fact that the law obliges organisations to provide an explanation for non-compliance in their annual reports. Despite this, the D&I strategic plan 2019-2021 reads that the organisation needs diversity in order to be compliant with the law and in some documents measures are outlined which are aimed at accelerating gender diversity. A memo from 2017 in the name of the Board of Management and signed by the CEO (re-)announces measures to increase gender diversity due to lagging results. These are formulated more in detail in another document, which describes three acts: (1) Vacancies at and above the upper layers are only allowed to be filled when women form at least half of the shortlist; (2) At least one in three of the appointed functions at and above the upper layers should be filled by a woman and; (3) Making diversity targets part of the discretionary factor for the bonus plan for senior management. In the strategic plan it is stated which ‘part’ of the organisation will be responsible for achieving these gender targets: “Business is responsible, HR facilitates”. Also in the internal memo from 2017, it reads: “We expect from the responsible line manager together with the HR organisation this will be done from this moment.”

The self-imposed quota has been imposed, cancelled and re-installed again. The decision to re-install the quota has been taken by the current CEO due to ‘insufficient results’ in terms of gender representation throughout the organisation. Before, the organisation did maintain a gender quota, after

which it was put an end to for a while during the period when there was a different CEO. This illustrates the power that comes along with the position of the CEO and arguably his belief in the quota as an instrument. Whether the organisation is practicing the gender quota has depended to a considerable extent on one individual. As Benschop and Van den Brink (2014) argued, it takes power to impose a quota. Not only with respect to governments, but also to individuals like the CEO. Additionally, the CEO is often seen as the primary role model who must be involved for the rest of the organisation to follow his or her example (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2018). Although I did observe the CEO speaking out for diversity, he seems to be less in favour of a quota. At an event for women, which was intended to stimulate other women from the labour market to work in the organisation's sector, the CEO is present to give a brief introductory talk. *"We look for talent and diversity"*, he says. *"Not because society asks us to or the government imposes"*. Just before the end of the event, I had a brief conversation with the CEO. I asked him why, according to him, more women should be present in the top of his company. He tells me he does not believe in the business case argument, claiming that there are too many variables other than gender that could explain improved performances at a particular moment in time.

"The reason for gaining women in the top is to include different forms of talent and values that women have. Now, it is unbalanced. But it is also about self-esteem. Many women are reluctant towards senior positions. But why? They don't have to be, and should not be"

His statement disregard the quota obligations. Although the CEO admits the organisation will try to hire more women, the quota is not reason for it. The dependency for compliance with the quota on individuals like the CEO can thus be problematic. Moreover, a change in CEO moves power to a different individual, possibly having a different opinion about how, if at all, to practice the gender quota. The D&I manager explains to me the change in CEO earlier had been a major influence in this.

4.2 Zooming in on doing gender quota as practice

When it comes to doing the gender quota by the organisation, this entails practices in which actors aim or have the potential to affect the appointment of women over men in (the top of) the organisation. This paragraph outlines three identified practices, regardless of the actual change in numbers of men and women they bring about. In this examination, phenomena and effects such as power, discrimination and inclusion are part of the scrutiny of the practice. The following practices are discussed in detail: the practice of matching, the practice of rewarding and the practice of gender balanced shortlisting. These practices resonate with the three measures the organisation formulated in order to accelerate gender diversity: (1) Vacancies at and above the upper layers are only allowed to be filled when women form at least half of the shortlist (the practice of gender balanced shortlisting); (2) At least one in three of the appointed functions at and above the upper layers should be filled by a woman (the practice of matching) and; (3) Making diversity targets part of the discretionary factor for the bonus plan for senior

management (the practice of rewarding). An overview of the identified practices after zooming in can be found in Table 1a, Appendix 3.

The practice of matching

As doing gender quota means appointing women to positions for which the quota applies, the practice of matching, I argue, is closest to the potential compliance with gender quota targets. The D&I manager explains in a meeting which I observed that it is indeed a goal that at least one in three functions at and above the upper layers should be filled by a woman. However, *how* this actually works he does not tell. Neither who is responsible for the concrete actions which must fulfil this particular goal. When following the D&I manager in the organisation, he suggests to observe two meetings: a matchings meeting and a succession board meeting. The matchings meeting will be discussed first.

Every other week, a recruitment meeting takes place. Here, new appointments of employees who either want to fulfil a different job or whose contract ends soon are discussed; in other words, matching of internal candidates to internal vacancies. Employees from different layers in the organisation are accompanied and represented by a member of the team who helps them getting into a new, usually higher position. The team members only use a laptop from which the internal vacancies are read. A spreadsheet is being updated with the agreed follow-up steps after discussing the candidate, like sending a vacancy as proposal via email. The team members speak for the candidates and try to formulate their preferences from their own experiences with them. Candidates are discussed one by one concerning their professional experience and personality, before the team comes to consensus which job he or she will be proposed. This process happens without the candidates themselves or their current (and future) managers physically being there. As a consequence, the members of the team can have a big influence in a new match when connecting candidate to vacancy, since in this meeting they can make preliminary matches without direct intervention of either a candidate or manager.

During my presence in one of their meetings, the team members have a high energy level and there seems to be a positive atmosphere. The six employees (two men and four women) who are present smile a lot and make one joke after another. Because of this, it feels like as if it is just another regular meeting they are having. Before the meeting starts, one of the women tells me she would be interested in reading my research results. Just when I say the research is about the gender quota, one of the men interrupts quickly by saying “nonsense” and then looks away. Nobody comments on this. The manager of the team – the other man – makes the remark at the beginning of the meeting that there are a lot of vacancies at this moment, which could mean more options to make a good match. Later on in the meeting, it appears he has only women candidates (4) in his own portfolio. In total, 24 candidates are discussed in this meeting: 15 men and 9 women. One candidate has been matched, a woman. The team is cheering when one of the team members makes the announcement.

There is little doubt this meeting has the potential for directly practicing the gender quota, since the team tries to match candidates to vacancies in the upper layers of the organisation for which the self-imposed quota applies. However, during this meeting there has not been one moment where (anything related to) the gender quota was being practiced. The process went from professional expertise of the candidate to required expertise for any available and suitable position, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, during this particular meeting there were no signs of proponents of the quota from any other employee. Arguably, the D&I manager is the crucial absentee in this meeting. The manager of this team tells me in the interview afterwards what role gender plays in this particular meeting:

“Yes, limited. Look, for us everyone is equal. We already experience a lot of difficulties in making the managers think differently. So beneath intervention is a lot more whether it is a man or woman, highly educated or not, age; independently we try to find the best position for people and for this we do everything. Yes, whether that are men or women doesn’t matter much to us.”

When I ask him what he knows about the organisation’s gender diversity strategy, he tells me he has worked closely together with the current diversity manager before. He believes that now there is a divide from a particular salary scale upwards in terms of concrete gender targets – this includes also candidates in this particular meeting. He says he does not know exactly *what* these targets are. Interestingly enough, he pleads for an organisational gender target: *“I know there is a divide from this level upwards. And there you have it, then you make it special again. I believe you should do this throughout the entire organisation.”* Van den Brink and Benschop (2018, p. 181) already mentioned that managers might express positive attitudes towards gender equality and diversity as principles, but predominantly resist when it comes to actual actions to change the gender order. The manager of this team appears to be both aware and knowledgeable on the topic of gender diversity within the organisation. However, practicing the gender quota is not given any attention or can be ignored, despite the meetings’ potential to influence new appointments on the basis of gender. From the manager’s point of view, there appears to be reluctance as a form of resistance with regards to doing gender quota practices here. The manager chooses not to include the gender quota in their recruitment meeting, although he is aware the organisation has set targets which applies to functions his team discusses. In this situation, he could use his influence as manager of the team to put gender targets on the agenda. Instead, he appears to have the power to *not* put gender targets on the agenda.

He seems to have made this choice at least on the basis of his personal opinion about the quota as an instrument. In the interview he explains a gender quota is treating a particular group as ‘special’, while this should not be the case in order to avoid making a lot of other groups ‘special’ too. *“Where does it end? Because now it is the women, later the elderly, then people distant from the labour market, people with a migration background.”* As Bleijenbergh et al. (2010) argued, special treatment of diverse groups can be considered unjust and could result in tensions. His statement also suggests that his

personal belief in the gender quota influences the extent to which practicing the quota is being done in the meeting, and therefore how the organisation is doing gender quota as practice. This also illustrates the controversy of the quota as an instrument, in the sense that personal reasons against the quota seem to influence the implementation of it. The manager argues for an equal level playing field, without making women ‘special’, as he describes it. Also, the contrast in the data with regards to his plea for gender targets throughout the organisation on the one hand, and the reluctance to include it in this meeting on the other show the contribution in studying the practice by doing observations; his sayings during the interview are not consistent with his doings that were observed.

A different meeting which is supposed to take place about every 4 to 5 weeks is a succession board meeting. The D&I strategic plan describes this meeting as follows: “Monthly review with Business VP’s HR, VP leadership, advisor succession planning and D&I manager to identify and match talents to open positions, but also identify women who are at risk for leaving the company. This output will be used for the ExCo [Executive Committee] meeting.” The D&I manager invited me twice to observe this meeting, but they were both cancelled and postponed. Because the topic of gender diversity in the upper layers of the organisation is one of primary concern in this meeting, the diversity manager was clearly frustrated about the postponements and tells me diversity often is the first topic to be taken off from the agenda. He explains to me the organisation is cutting on costs with regards to diversity and these cancellations might be a consequence of this. His comments seem to suggest there is a lack of commitment from the top, at least financially. Importantly, commitment from the top is identified as a core issue in organisational change towards gender equality (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2018; Tatli et al., 2015). The D&I manager himself also emphasises the weight of it, when I ask him in the interview how important commitment from the top is in his job:

“Very much. No, it is very important, this commitment from the top. First of all for the reason that you are making policies which are actively executed, you need the buy-in from the top. But also in the budget. I also need money to actually do things.”

The (top of the) organisation seem to be practicing priority here. However, not in favour of gender diversity and the quota. Although it remains unclear what the exact reason for the postponements is, some of the clearly highly positioned people who are supposed to be present in this meeting can suspend this meeting at least more than once. This could mean there is a lack of urgency given to a meeting in which gender diversity is a topic of primary concern, especially considering the diversity manager saying diversity is often the first topic to be taken off from the agenda. He seems powerless in this situation to do something about it, while he expresses his discontent. This most likely affects the tempo and course of action in doing the gender quota as practice by the organisation, while the deadlines of the quotas are looming. As Ahmed (2012) argued, diversity practitioners need persistence in getting their job done. This certainly seems to apply on the D&I manager.

The practice of rewarding

Another practice when zooming in on the gender quota is the practice of rewarding. This implies that incentives are set which aim to persuade managers in appointing women over men. This variable rewarding is financially in the form of a bonus and applies to the upper layers (see Figure 1, Chapter 3). This practice was announced in the internal memo from 2017, signed by the CEO. In addition, the diversity manager explains in multiple meetings I observed as well as in the interview the change in the gender strategy. A change from punishing bad results, which was done before, to rewarding good ones should present gender diversity as an (economic) opportunity, he tells enthusiastically in an interview. *“It is already a difficult topic. I don’t want people to be punished on this. I do believe in rewarding good behaviour.”* When I ask him what the consequences for the managers are who do not meet their gender targets, he says: *“What happens? Of course you will have a bad reputation.”* In other words, not living up to these targets should be embarrassing or shameful for the manager, whereas before their bonuses were being cut. In another meeting, I observed the diversity manager explaining he chose this ‘positive approach’ as to avoid resistance.

When first critically reflecting on this practice, it does barely seem to challenge (gender) inequalities. Questions arise whether compliance with the quota targets comes out of (economic) utility, as Terjesen and Sealy (2016) pointed out, for procedural reasons (just because it is part of the targets) or substantively (because managers really think it is the right thing to do). As Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh (2019) found when uncovering practices in doing gender quota implementation within a university, compliance here too seem to be stimulated procedurally, rather than substantively. And this procedural compliance is rewarded with a bonus for the manager. Moreover, the team which is supposed to benefit from gender diversity does not (directly) seem to be involved in this rewarding. Creating financial incentives for compliance may have the purpose of accelerating gender diversity, but might actually reinforce (gender) inequality by strengthening the position of the managers – who are mostly men – in relation to the team members. This resonates with the case description by Janssens and Steyaert (2018) about career mentoring. Rewarding also is, as Acker (2006) argued, a form of control which in this case reinforces the power that comes with the managerial position. It also creates ambiguity in ‘the why’ behind appointing women over men: while the D&I manager aims for compliance with the quota, the manager (also) might want to be rewarded financially. As a result, expenses regarding gender diversity could rise proportionately as these targets are met. Still, through the mechanism of incentives, practicing the gender quota obtains a certain durability in time, as Nicolini (2009a, 2009b) argued. It continuously triggers managers to meet their targets. The risk, however, is that it could also persuade managers in playing around with the team composition in order for them to get this bonus; a practice found by Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh (2019) in quota implementation in a university.

It looks like a measure which can have the wrong effect has been put into practice and the diversity manager supports the change from punishing bad results to rewarding good behaviour. However, this was done as to avoid resistance, as I observed him telling this. Whereas before managers could face a cut on their bonus when targets were not met, now they can only be rewarded. The D&I manager gives the impression he would like this measure to be the way it was before – since he was involved in changing it as to avoid resistance. This calls into question the relative power that the diversity manager has to get the things done as he would like them to be. It also suggests that people might be able to effectively resist against (strict) measures which are aimed at increasing the number of women, but simultaneously might negatively affect them on the individual level.

The practice of gender balanced shortlisting

The last practice which is identified when zooming in is the practice of gender balanced shortlisting. However, there is a difference when comparing the formulated measures (sayings) and how these are maintained in practice (doings). When it comes to this practice, it is barely done at this moment, the diversity manager tells me. The internal memo from 2017 announces to re-install this measure. Due to bad results in terms of women representation, it reads, the Board of Management has decided to implement the following measure: a candidate shortlist of fifty-fifty men and women. It implies that every vacancy from a particular salary scale and higher needs to have a candidate shortlist of 50% men and 50% women before it may be filled. However, although the D&I manager admits in the interview the idea is good, this measure is not maintained in practice anymore. He explains the reason for this as follows:

“We do look at it though, especially when redesigning after a reorganisation. We have got four new positions; how is the candidacy, and here we do the challenge to get fifty-fifty. And then especially in the appointments, there you have the chance to make actual progress. But before it was so strict, that when there was a proposal for forthcoming appointments and the shortlist was not correct, not fifty-fifty, the vacancy was not fulfilled. And we have let that go because on the one hand, we did not maintain it, but we also did not report on it. So when I started in October I thought well, it is a nice measure, but if you don’t act upon it, it is useless. And I actually do support the measure, the idea is good, but you have to maintain it in practice. So in 2019 we don’t use it that much in practice.”

Here lies a gap between the sayings and doings with regards to the measures to increase women appointments. The former CEO announces the re-installation of this act in 2017, organisational documents mention it and the D&I manager also supports the idea behind it. Despite this, there is a lack of priority to put it into practice. The diversity manager approved to cancel the practice because it was not being reported. The goal of fulfilling a vacancy seem to have been at odds with this practice when

he says it was so strict when there was no fulfilment of the vacancy. This might illustrate the decision power and freedom that comes along with his position, if he decided to cancel it. However, other actors may have played a role in this cancellation, possibly the ones who should be making sure the shortlists were correct and report on it. Because the diversity manager is a proponent of this measure, the cancellation does not seem to come from him (alone). In the interview, he tells me frustrated, while he hits the table with his fist, he actually wants the targets to be more radical than they are now: *“There should be the rule of thumb: after a reorganisation it must be fifty-fifty and not something else for the management team. Stricter, you know. No nonsense! Not 30% no, also the management team fifty-fifty. Or else you don’t get your management team. If you can shortlist four men you can also deliver four women, you know that!”* Despite his plea for stricter rules, in practice the overall targets stick at 30% women and the practice of gender balanced shortlisting is not maintained anymore. As Kirton et al. (2007) argued, diversity practitioners sometimes need to temper their radicalism if they are to construct a convincing diversity agenda. It looks like he was and still is in favour of this measure. But also, strict gender quota practices again seem to provoke tensions.

4.3 Concluding remarks after zooming in on doing gender quota as practice

When zooming in on the gender quota as practice, three practices are identified: matching, rewarding and gender balanced shortlisting. Matching implies connecting a candidate to a vacancy within the organisation, rewarding means financially compensating managers when they meet their gender diversity targets, and gender balanced shortlisting involves making a candidate shortlist of 50% men and 50% women before a vacancy may be filled. However, these practices do not bring about substantial change in order for the organisation to comply with the gender quota. This is mainly due to the commitment to the quota obligations from salient actors in the organisation as well as the tensions and (potential) resistance which prevail in these practices.

First of all, individuals like the CEO and the diversity manager have power over influential decisions in doing gender quota as practice. The power of the CEO in this case is illustrated in the imposition, cancellation and re-installation of the self-imposed gender quota. Furthermore, the diversity manager seems to have considerable power in determining through which practices (and their way of implementation) the organisation will be trying to increase gender diversity. Commitment from the top, and certainly financial commitment, are crucial for him to be able to do his job. When having obtained this financial commitment, it gives the diversity manager the power to decide on how to spend the budget. Still, the diversity manager appears to be much more committed to the quota obligations than the top as well as some (line-)managers. This is clearly illustrated in that the CEO disregards the gender quota in a speech, a lack of urgency seems to cause postponements of the succession board meetings,

the fact that gender does not play a role in the matchings meeting and the diversity manager's view on the gender targets of which he wants them to be more radical and strict than they are now.

Moreover, resistance can influence how strict the organisation's rules apply in practices. The rules in two practices were considered too strict; cutting on the manager's bonus and compiling a fifty-fifty gender balanced shortlist before a vacancy may be filled. Punishing bad results by cutting on the bonus has been turned into a financial reward for managers when they meet the gender targets as to avoid resistance, although this might actually reinforce inequality structures rather than challenge them. And while the diversity manager is in favour for a gender balanced shortlist and a fifty-fifty management team composition, the practice of gender balanced shortlisting is not maintained in practice anymore because it was too rigorous. These changes suggest that (potential) resistance is holding the diversity manager back from effectively installing stricter rules within certain practices, and this affects the extent to which the organisation is able to comply with the gender quota.

4.4 Zooming out on doing gender quota as practice

When using the zooming out technique on doing gender quota as practice, two other practices are identified: storytelling and developing women. I followed the D&I manager to meetings, events and interorganisational programs for women. Both these practices are based upon identified practices during the empirical research: the practice of storytelling comprises lobbying for support, convincing and inspiring the workforce, expressing the gender diversity strategy and motivate and persuade women for promotion; the practice of developing women comprises networking, mentoring, training, and coaching. As Nicolini (2012) explained, the results of performing these practices can be resources for the practices examined above in the zooming in section (4.2). An overview of the identified practices when zooming out can be found in Table 1b, Appendix 3.

The practice of storytelling

The D&I manager experiences difficulties when it comes to keeping the topic of (gender) diversity on the (strategic) agenda. This was already reflected in the presumable lack of (financial) commitment from the top. Additionally, during the six weeks when the empirical research was being conducted, four meetings relating to gender diversity were cancelled where I was supposed to observe. A way of trying to keeping diversity on the agenda, is practicing storytelling. This is mostly done by the diversity manager. He describes himself as 'the face of diversity' in the organisation, which is interesting considering he is a white middle-aged and highly educated man, arguably the norm as opposed to being divers. Nevertheless, in a number of meetings he explains his job is one of lobbying for support, convincing people about the value of gender diversity, inspiring, motivating and persuading women for

promotion. In one meeting, he says that he sometimes literally goes from door to door to talk to people and convey the message of gender diversity. I observe him as very passionate and committed out of personal belief in favour of gender diversity. While he reports on gender headcounts to the managers, he devotedly explains in multiple meetings his ultimate goal is to increase the number of women in the entire the organisation: *“Yes, I only quit my job when the 30% has been reached”*. He is committed to the community of women within the organisation and the specific cause of gender diversity, this clearly being at odds with the dominant culture in the organisation. There are tensions between the status quo and the alternative – increasing the number of women – which he arguably experiences the most considering his position. He shows resemblances to Meyerson and Scully's (1995) analysis of a tempered radical. In trying to win approval from two audiences – proponents and opponents of quotas – the ambivalence that comes with his position is evident. The practice of storytelling reflects the way change is being made through local, spontaneous and authentic action by directly expressing his feelings and beliefs.

McKinsey already stressed that senior executives need to tell stories, preferably personal and emotional ones, about their engagement, experiences, and beliefs about gender diversity to strengthen the case for diversity and to prompt more people commit to it (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2018, p. 200). This is clearly the case here. However, the diversity manager is often using the business case argument to convince people in the organisation. As Kirton et al. (2007) argued, diversity managers might legitimise the business case argument above (all) social justice arguments. This also illustrates the dilemma of the dual agenda diversity practitioners might experience; on the one hand, he uses the argument of mixed teams that perform better (the business case). On the other hand, he genuinely seems to strive for gender equality while trying to engage those in power. Despite this, he tells me he wants to focus on the 70% that is worth convincing, rather than on the 30% that is not. This leaves room to question how crucial this 30% might be in gathering enough support for practicing the gender quota. While storytelling has the potential to include anyone in the engagement of gender diversity, only those (potentially) in favour are included in this practice. At last, practicing gender diversity in this organisation seem to be too much of a one man show, in which the diversity manager is the protagonist. As Tatli et al. (2015, p. 1255) argue, diversity management can be only successful if it is shared by external and internal stakeholders and supported by the organisational leadership. Nevertheless, the results of practicing storytelling can be a resource for the practices of matching, rewarding and gender balanced shortlisting, since more awareness of and belief in gender diversity might positively affect the importance and priority to practice these.

The practice of developing women

When following the D&I manager to meetings, events and programs, I noticed the organisation is giving much attention to the preferential treatment of women. The purpose of these events and programs is to encourage and prepare women for higher positions in the organisation. This has been through the stimulation of networking, the participation in a cross mentoring program, the availability of coaching sessions for women to make them ready for a board position as well as the organisation of workshops for women to discuss their needs for promotion. For example, the diversity manager explains to me during the interview boardroom coaching is a program usually for one or two women who will be selected by directors. During the program, questions like “how do things go in a board?” and “how to behave in a board?” are central. Most of the practices of networking, the mentor program and the coaching sessions are in collaboration with an external association, one which provides help to organisations in achieving their (gender) diversity goals. These practices involve positive discrimination activities and seem to have the purpose of personal and professional development of women. In a meeting, the diversity manager explains most of the organisation’s budget for diversity goes to these programs.

I was present to observe at one of the days of the mentor program. This interorganisational program links mentors and mentees from different organisations to help them with difficulties the mentees experience with regards to promotion or making a career. On the day I observed there is, after the informal reception in the lobby of the hosting organisation, a presentation about the power of networking. The inspirational talk seems aimed at encouraging women to actively engage in expanding your network. After the presentation, the mentors leave and the sub group session starts in which mentees among each other discuss issues at work. Although the mentors should be contributing in the personal and professional development of the mentees, their value on this day remains questionable. In one of the follow-up interviews I performed after the subgroup session, a manager describes the marginal role of the mentors on that day:

“My mentor was not here at all. So I have let it put it in the agenda, but I thought yeah.. I do understand that he is not here. (...) You do miss the interaction with the mentors. So you can share experiences. And also some commitment right, because I think you believe it is important when you sign up as a mentor. And then something is organised and I think the majority of the mentors is not here.”

When critically reflecting on the practice of developing women, the effects on gender diversity and compliance with the quota are marginal. The mentors that day were only supposed to be present during the reception while breakfast was served and during the presentation about the power of networking. This means there has barely been time scheduled for the actual development part. Generally, this practice implies that women need extra knowledge and skills to be able to be ready for higher positions and

compete with men, since there are no such programs for them. Finally, this practice can be a resource for the practice of matching and arguably for the practice of gender balanced shortlisting. The development of women might convince managers rather sooner than later about their qualities for a certain position. However, as a quota implies, women were to be appointed in the first place anyway.

4.5 Concluding remarks after zooming out on doing gender quota as practice

When zooming out on the gender quota as practice, two other practices are identified: storytelling and developing women. Storytelling implies lobbying for support, convincing and inspiring the workforce for gender diversity, expressing the gender strategy within the organisation and motivating and persuading women for promotion. The diversity manager is mostly the one advocating for the opportunities of gender diversity, often using economic arguments such as the business case (gender balanced teams perform better). While his devotion to the cause of gender diversity is evident, quota compliance in the organisation appears to be much like a one man show. The practice of developing women means preparing the women in the organisation for higher positions like (senior) management or board positions, mostly through the participation in programs which focus on networking competences, interorganisational mentoring and coaching on for example the do's and don'ts in corporate boards. The diversity manager explains most of the organisation's budget for diversity goes to these programs.

Both practices seem to do little in the appointments of women over men for positions to which the quotas apply. Arguably for this reason, signs of tensions or resistance barely came to the fore here compared to the practices identified when zooming in on the gender quota as practice. Nevertheless, the results of these practices can function as resource for the quota practices. For example, the development of women may foster the likelihood of managers and other employees to see them as more valuable and therefore include them more in candidate shortlists, which in turn increases the probability of a woman being appointed.

5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the results in a broader (literary) context, after which the contribution to knowledge, practical implications, limitations and suggestions for further research are discussed (5.1). This chapter closes with the answer to the research question (5.2): *How does an organisation do gender quota as a practice?*

5.1 Discussion

The discussion section examines the interpretation of the results in a broader (theoretical) context, as well as contributions to knowledge, practical implications, limitations of the research and suggestions for further research.

Interpretation of results

The practice approach has put power front and centre (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). For example, in the analysis of the quota-as-practice, the organisation aims to empowering women through the practice of rewarding. However, this can have (unintended) negative effects and actually reinforces inequality structures in the longer term (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010; Janssens & Steyaert, 2018; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). This is due to the enhanced position of the manager through financial rewards when gender diversity targets are met. The incentive to meet the 30% requirement of women in the team composition questions whether compliance from the manager will be out of justice or economic utility. Additionally, there is no incentive to go beyond this 30%, which might stagnate the acceleration of gender diversity. Moreover, sanctions determine the success or failure of quotas, since a successful implementation highly depends on the possible penalties for non-compliance (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014, p. 12). The change to a rewarding system took out the sanction element. Furthermore, Benschop and Van den Brink (2014, p. 12) stated that when it comes to radical interventions such as quotas, it takes power to control the practices of recruitment and selection and enforce such a contested measure. The practice of matching and gender balanced shortlisting concern recruitment and selection, both of which being subject to power dynamics between the diversity manager and (line-)managers. The imposition, cancellation, and re-installation of the self-imposed gender quota also illustrates the power

that comes with the position of the CEO, and the dependency of diversity practitioners on these decisions. But power shifts when for example budgets are guaranteed. After all, when the diversity manager receives a budget from the top, he has the power to decide how the gender diversity strategy is to be implemented.

This research also contributed to the call to better understand the role of diverse actors in implementing top-down measures (Voorspoels & Bleijenbergh, 2019). If and how an organisation is doing gender quota as practice highly depends on a few actors such as diversity practitioners and executives like the CEO, as Benschop and Van den Brink (2018) outlined. On the one hand, the power that comes with their positions determine to a great extent which practices are initiated and in what way. This has much to do with their accessibility and control over resources such as budgets, decisions as to whether and which mentor programs or external collaborations the organisation will deal with, and how rewarding systems will be practiced to incentivise certain behaviour. Moreover, a new CEO brings uncertainty in how, if at all, gender diversity targets will be integrated in the organisation's strategy. Since most of the positions that have these privileges are occupied by men, they (unintentionally) might keep these inequality structures intact or even reinforce them (Acker, 2006). On the other hand, their commitment to the cause of gender diversity and a gender quota in particular is of much importance. The diversity manager's dedication shows he wants the targets to be more radical than they are now, when he argues for a fifty-fifty gender balanced shortlist and corresponding composition of management teams. However, he has to temper his radicalism and seems reluctant or even unable to employ radical equality measures to enforce gender quota compliance (Kirton et al., 2007). Furthermore, as Benschop and Van den Brink (2018) and Tatli et al. (2015) argued, commitment and leadership from the top is of primary concern for the success of diversity initiatives. While financial commitment might be declining, this leaves rhetorical commitment as symbolic support.

Furthermore, when practicing the gender quota, this comes with tensions, resistance and dilemmas which illustrate the controversy around quota implementation (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Christensen & Muhr, 2019; Dahlerup, 2008; Pande & Ford, 2011; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). The ambiguity that comes with the term "equality" comes to the fore in different ways (Bleijenbergh et al., 2010). For example, the manager of the team at the matchings meeting pleads for equality of opportunity (or an equal level playing field) by not making anybody 'special'. He says for the team every candidate is equal, whether you are a man or a woman. He seems to believe a quota creates a fairness problem and special treatment of diverse groups is unjust (Bleijenbergh et al., 2010; Choobineh, 2016). At the same time, people speak out for equality in representation or outcome, like the diversity manager. He, in turn, seems to struggle with the dilemma of the dual agenda. This dilemma often leaves him in a state of ambivalence. He uses the business case to justify gender diversity and this is believed to be at odds with equality or social justice goals (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). Arguably, he legitimises the business case argument above others in order to gain support from the majority, who

are mostly men (Kirton et al., 2007). This dilemma is reflected in the compromise of giving managers financial bonuses when they reach their targets and the diversity manager 'selling' it as a positive approach as to avoid resistance. This example also illustrates the challenge in reconciling the business agenda with equality goals.

Something which is new in the literature on gender diversity and quotas, is the distinction between advocating for gender diversity or for a gender quota. Kakabadse et al. (2015) already found in a study that the importance of increasing gender diversity was highlighted, but *not* through quotas. While scholars are providing reasons in favour of gender diversity to argue in favour of quotas, I emphasise the difference between them. From this research, it appears that this organisation advocates for gender diversity in different ways: from sections in multiple documents to the CEO who argues for more women in the organisation because of the values they bring. However, practicing the gender quota seems highly contested within this organisation, despite its self-imposed quota.

Finally, these results add to the literature the identification and scrutiny of the practices when zooming in on the gender quota as practice (matching, rewarding and gender balanced shortlisting) and zooming out (storytelling and developing women). In addition, this research shows more signs of tensions and resistance within the quota practices which are identified when zooming in. The practice of matching, for example, is accomplished by a team of six people who every other week come together for a meeting. Without the candidates, or any manager, they discuss and represent the candidates' professional backgrounds and personalities in order to come to consensus about a potential match with an internal vacancy. For this, in terms of materiality, they only use a laptop for searching to vacancies and making notes of follow-up actions. From my observation, their bodily appearance suggested this meeting was one in which the working atmosphere was very positive, as the team members were making jokes and were laughing throughout the meeting. While within this practice there is much potential to actually do the gender quota and appoint women to relevant positions, this is not the case. The manager of the team confirms the marginal role of the topic of gender diversity within this practice, while he argues against a quota during the interview.

Contribution to knowledge

Firstly, through this research, I have attempted to fill a part of the knowledge gap in the literature on gender quota implementation, more specifically in a business context by using the practice approach. The identification and scrutiny of practices, the analysis of power dynamics, tensions and resistance within these practices as well as the role of diversity practitioners and the CEO contribute to our knowledge about practicing gender diversity and gender quota implementation in particular. This research offers original insight into the practices within a business organisation that aims for compliance with gender quotas. This research reveals how tensions and resistance may hinder the intended increase

of women in organisations through quotas. Furthermore, it encourages critical reflection on gender diversity and quota practices.

Secondly, the practice-based approach has proven to be a valuable method in studying practices in the field of (gender) diversity. Its most valuable contribution, I argue, lies in the alignment or contradiction of data from observations with follow-up interviews and material artefacts, thereby making use of a different ontological angle to study practices. For example, the manager of the matchings meeting team argues for gender diversity targets throughout the entire organisation during the interview. However, while these targets apply to positions which his team discusses, he does not include gender as a condition in the accomplishment of the practice of matching candidates to vacancies. Neither does he encourage or compel his team to do so. This is also illustrated when studying the practice of developing women. Discursive elements and material artefacts valued the importance and contribution of the mentoring program. When studying the practice through an observation, however, the contribution of this program was devalued by the researcher. In addition, this devaluation was shared by a participant of the program from the organisation. The challenges when adopting this approach in (business) organisations might be the accessibility of practices and gathering data from all (ontological) angles, i.e. real-time sayings and doings through observations, discourse through interviews, and the collection of material artefacts.

Finally, as Janssens and Steyaert (2018) argued, the practice-based theory of diversity contributed to a better understanding of the continuing and persistent asymmetries that characterise diverse organisations. Within this organisation, to which the national quota applies and which has a self-imposed gender quota, tensions and signs of resistance within the quota practices are prevalent while at the same time the organisation advocates for the value of gender diversity. This could bring the organisation and its actors in a state of ambivalence. The practice approach might force us to rethink the role of agents and individuals, e.g. managers and the managed (Nicolini, 2012). It sheds new light on the nature of knowledge and discourse, and foregrounds the importance of the body and objects in social affairs (Nicolini, 2012, p. 6). Additionally, it reaffirms the centrality of interests and power in everything we do.

Practical implications

This research indicates that gender quota practices may provoke tensions, resistance, and dilemmas, which could hinder gender quota implementation and consequently the acceleration of gender diversity in organisations. Therefore, understanding power dynamics is highly relevant for the success of quota implementation. I emphasise the distinction between advocating for practicing gender diversity compared to a gender quota. Organisational actors, diversity practitioners in particular, should take power and resistance into consideration when designing gender quota practices, which primarily involve

recruitment and selection practices. In addition, it is important to manage resistance in change projects towards gender equality. This could be done, as Van den Brink and Benschop (2018, p. 194) argue, by setting out a narrative about the interventions and their effects. Ignoring or ineffectively addressing resistance can become a negative force that can threaten change (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018).

Furthermore, a critical reflection on practices as to how compliance is stimulated, is necessary. This will encourage designing practices which stimulate substantive gender quota compliance, rather than procedural compliance out of (economic) utility. In order for quota implementation to be more effective, diversity practitioners should also question whether practices directly influence the appointments of women over men, while comprehensively adapting the practices to comply with gender equality goals substantively. Finally, I suggest to bring the gender quota more to the front in the organisational discourse, as to engender the scrutiny of conflicting interests and bring legitimacy to the discussion (Benschop et al., 2015; Christensen & Muhr, 2019). This can help to uncover commitment by top layers in the organisation to the gender quota and make acceptance or disregard visible.

Limitations of the research

Despite its valuable contribution, the practice approach has still been applied in a limited manner. Only seven observations and four follow-up interviews were conducted, while in the literature it often is recommended to perform ethnographic studies to practices in order to capture them both more in detail and to get a better picture of the nexus of practices surrounding the practice under study. One of the reasons for the limited application of this method is the nature (master thesis) and corresponding feasibility of the research. In addition, getting access to (quota) practices in the organisation has been a challenge for both the researcher and the diversity manager. Consequently, not all observations capture the practices in which the appointments of employees are central, specifically those for boardroom positions. This has made it difficult for me as researcher to study practices thoroughly and come to a more in-depth and grounded description and analyses of the practice(s) under study. Moreover, four times an already planned observation had been cancelled, which limited the potential in providing a more substantiated answer to the research question.

Lastly, the adoption of the practice approach as a research method has been new to the researcher. This has resulted in discrepancies between the outline of the methodological approach and the actual application of it during the empirical research. Likewise, my inexperience in conducting observations has been a limitation in my ability to collect and analyse the data accordingly. This is illustrated in the fact that the subtlety of bodily aspects of the practice play a marginal role in the eventual analysis and description of the practice. Therefore, all identified practices in this research should remain under scrutiny within future research to gender diversity and quota practices within an organisation.

Suggestions for further research

Firstly, more research is needed to further the understanding of gender quota practices both within and outside the field of business organisations in order to fuel the scarce literature on indeed gender quota practices. More specifically, I suggest to use the practice approach to further investigate the power dynamics, tensions and resistance which prevail in gender quota practices and how this impacts dynamics at work inside the organisation. What forms of resistance can be identified? What is causing and fuelling this? And how can acceptance and commitment throughout the organisation be generated? But also, how can resistance within quota practices successfully be managed in order to facilitate change towards gender equality? From this, it follows that more research is needed to the interpretation of the roles of diversity practitioners and other salient actors in the organisation like the CEO, (line-)managers or feminist actors as to how they can deliver on both equality and business goals.

Secondly, future research could look into the effects, successes and failures of self-imposed gender quotas in comparison with (legal) quotas from governments. Differentiations can be made in terms of practices, power dynamics and the commitment or resistance from organisational actors. In addition, implementation in the context of a hard quota *with* legal sanctions can provide a valuable analysis as to how an organisation successfully might comply with a gender quota. However, the implications of gender quota practices on gender equality should be analysed thoroughly, as well as how substantive compliance can be stimulated. The contribution to the qualitative assessment of these practices can be provided by the use of the 3D model which Benschop et al. (2015, p. 3) have developed. They argue this model can serve as an academically informed qualitative assessment tool for practitioners wanting to assess management interventions addressing diversity.

Finally, longitudinal or ethnographic research which includes conducting observations will help to further identify and analyse gender quota practices in order to better understand gender quota implementation. The practice approach can be of significant value, especially when also thoroughly considering bodily aspects in the accomplishment of the practice. Furthermore, following one particular practice over a long time would give a (more) detailed and rich description and understanding of the practice and social phenomena which transpire through it. This will also give more insight into the power dynamics within the practices and arguably how contribution to gender equality goals may be realised. Additionally, using the practice-based approach for diversity in organisations will create more understanding as to how the application of this method is to be used in a useful manner within different (organisational) contexts. The combination of performing observations, interviews and the collection and analysis of material artefacts is recommended.

5.2 Conclusions

This paragraph provides an answer to the following research question: *How does an organisation do gender quota as a practice?* Based on the analysis of the collected empirical data and literature review, the following conclusions are made.

The organisation advocates for gender diversity through different ways. For example: in annual reports the value of gender diverse teams is highlighted, the CEO emphasises values that women can bring into the organisation and the diversity manager literally goes from door to door to convince people about the (economic) opportunities of gender diversity. However, a gender quota as a means to it, is highly contested. This affects if and how the organisation is doing gender quota as a practice.

The diversity manager seems genuinely devoted to the cause of gender diversity. As he is the only formal diversity practitioner, he arguably is the architect of the organisation's gender strategy and deals with the rules and regulations which aim to increase the number of women in the organisation. Receiving a budget from the top for implementing the strategy, gives him the power in deciding how to spend it. However, the top shows a lack of (financial) commitment to the quota obligations, which results in his dependency on their power. This was illustrated when a self-imposed quota had been imposed, cancelled and re-installed again by different CEOs. Additionally, the current CEO disregards the gender quota in a speech and there seems to be a lack of urgency given to the succession board meetings where gender diversity in top layers is a topic of primary concern. Moreover, the diversity manager claims the organisation currently is cutting on costs for diversity, which limits his possibilities in implementing the organisation's gender strategy.

Nevertheless, three practices were identified when zooming in on the gender quota as practice. These are: matching, rewarding and gender balanced shortlisting. Matching implies connecting a candidate to a vacancy, rewarding means financially compensating managers when they meet their gender diversity targets by means of a bonus, and gender balanced shortlisting involves compiling a candidate shortlist of 50% men and 50% women before a vacancy may be filled. Within these quota practices, however, tensions and resistance are prevalent. Firstly, this is illustrated in that actors disregard taking into account the gender quota, resulting in matching candidates intentionally without gender being a condition. Secondly, an approach with less strict rules was implemented as to avoid resistance, which resulted in a reward system in which managers can receive a bonus for achieving their gender targets instead of being cut on the bonus when they do not. And thirdly, while the diversity manager is in favour of the rules in the gender balanced shortlist practice, it was cancelled because it was considered too strict.

As a consequence, the organisation is trying to increase gender diversity mostly through the practices which are identified when zooming out on doing gender quota as practice. These are: storytelling and developing women. Storytelling is mostly done by the diversity manager by lobbying

for support and convincing people about the opportunities of gender diversity. The practice of developing women means preparing the women in the organisation for higher positions like (senior) management or board positions, mostly through the participation in programs which focus on networking competences, interorganisational mentoring and coaching on for example the do's and don'ts in corporate boards. Most of the organisation's budget for diversity goes to these programs. While these practices show little to no signs of tensions and resistance, they also seem to have little effect on the actual appointments of women over men.

In the end, the organisation is doing gender quota as practice to a great extent through those practices which have too little effect on substantially increasing gender diversity for compliance with the gender quota. This is because tensions and resistance prevail in the quota practices, in which it is more likely that a woman is to be appointed for a position over a man. Whether and how the organisation is doing gender quota as practice highly depends on a few individuals like the diversity manager and the CEO, and the power and commitment that comes along with their position and personality. But also commitment to and belief in a gender quota from salient actors in the organisation, like (line-)managers, is crucial. Ultimately, this research is showing a devoted diversity manager who is working persistently to increase gender diversity in the organisation, while being hindered in his attempt to do so, thereby making the organisation's gender diversity strategy look like a one man show.

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APPENDIX 1

Empirical data collection

Type	When	Participant(s) / Respondent(s)	Topic
Observation	May 2019	D&I manager and 2 advisors	Exploring to set up a leadership program exclusively for women
Observation	June 2019	D&I manager and representative of talent assement & development company	Discuss what a leadership program exclusively for women would look like
Observation	June 2019	D&I manager and representative external association	Discuss progress concerning diversity commitments
Observation	June 2019	D&I manager, mentees and mentors from various organisations, invited speakers	Mentoring program: presentation about networking
Observation	June 2019	Employee organisation, employees from other organisations	Mentoring program: subgroup session
Observation	June 2019	Team, matchings meeting	Internal matching, recruitment and selection of internal candidates
Observation	June 2019	CEO, D&I manager, about 100 women from various organisations, invited speakers	Stimulate women to work in the sector, specifically for this organisation
Interview	May 2019	Employee organisation	Follow-up interview on meeting setting up leadership program for women
Interview	June 2019	Manager organisation	Follow-up interview on subgroup session mentoring program
Interview	June 2019	Manager organisation	Follow-up interview on matchings meeting
Interview	June 2019	Employee organisation	Follow-up interview on subgroup session mentoring program
Interview	July 2019	Diversity & Inclusion manager	Interview concerning collected data
Document	-	-	Integrated annual report 2013
Document	-	-	Integrated annual report 2014
Document	-	-	Integrated annual report 2015
Document	-	-	Integrated annual report 2016
Document	-	-	Integrated annual report 2017
Document	-	-	Integrated annual report 2018
Document	-	-	Diversity & Inclusion plan 2019-2021
Document	-	-	Diversity and inclusion – website text
Document	-	-	Gender diversity – website text
Document	-	-	Memo CEO regarding gender diversity targets and measures (2017)

APPENDIX 2

Questions follow-up interviews

The following questions were formulated in advance. During these semi-structured interviews, specific questions regarding the performed observation were asked.

1. What is your function (job title) and position (hierarchically speaking) in the organisation?
2. Could you describe your own background in terms of origin, education and career?
3. How do you experience the organisation's gender diversity strategy and practices?
4. To what extent do you think this particular situation/meeting/event is connected with other practices in the organisation's gender diversity strategy?
5. What influence would you like to have concerning the topic gender diversity in this organisation?
6. Do you consider this as realistic?
7. What is your opinion on the gender quota in the Netherlands from the government that applies to executive boards?
8. Could you recommend me someone to go talk to when it comes to gender quota practices within this organisation?

APPENDIX 3

Identified practices when zooming in and zooming out on the gender quota as practice

Table 1a – Identified practices when zooming in

The practice of...	Description
Matching	Connect an internal candidate to an internal vacancy, for example by discussing the candidates suitability for a job and proposing the vacancy.
Rewarding	Financially compensating managers when they meet their gender diversity targets to persuade them in appointing (enough) women over men.
Gender balanced shortlisting	Having a candidate shortlist of 50% men and 50% women for a vacancy before it may be filled.

Table 1b – Identified practices when zooming out

The practice of...	Description
Storytelling	Lobbying for support, convincing and inspiring the workforce for gender diversity, expressing the gender diversity strategy within the organisation and motivating and persuading women for promotion
Developing women	Networking, mentoring, coaching and training. Most of the times in collaboration with external organisations and these programs are for women only.