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## Article

# The Impact of Single Agents on Gender Equity in Organizations – The Case of Austrian Equal Opportunity Active Works Councillors

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Manfred Auer, Heike Welte\*

## **The Impact of Single Agents on Gender Equity in Organizations – The Case of Austrian Equal Opportunity Active Works Councillors\*\***

**Abstract** – The aim of this article is to explore the influence of single agents on gender equity in organizations. In our qualitative study, we focus on works councillors as equal opportunity agents in large profit organizations in Austria, because of their unique institutional position regarding organizational change in the direction of gender equity. This study is based on the concept of social positioning within the theory of structuration (Giddens 1992). We organize our empirical material along Stones' (2005) conception of the 'quadrupartite nature of structuration', including external and internal structures, activities and outcomes. In the discussion of reasons for the rather limited impact equal opportunity active works councillors have on gender equity, we emphasize the constitutive approach of co-determination and a liberal concept of equal opportunity policies. Accordingly, works councillors broadly accept gendered structures in organizations and mainly deal with obvious, unfair (formal) procedures or individual cases of discrimination as the outcomes of these structures.

### **Der Einfluss von einzelnen Akteur/innen auf betriebliche Gleichstellungspolitik – am Beispiel von gleichstellungsaktiven Betriebsrät/innen in Österreich**

**Zusammenfassung** – Zielsetzung dieses Artikels ist es, den Einfluss von Gleichstellungsakteur/innen auf Chancengleichheit der Geschlechter in Organisationen zu untersuchen. Grundlage dafür bilden qualitative Interviews mit gleichstellungsaktiven Betriebsrät/innen in großen privatwirtschaftlichen Unternehmen in Österreich. Wir konzentrieren uns auf Betriebsrät/innen, da diese Akteur/innen institutionalisierte Möglichkeiten der Förderung, Kontrolle und Initiierung von Gleichstellungsmaßnahmen in Organisationen haben. Den theoretischen Rahmen bildet das Konzept der sozialen Positionierung als Teil der Strukturationstheorie von Giddens (1992). Die Daten werden anhand der vier Dimensionen der 'quadrupartite nature of structuration' (Stones 2005) organisiert: externe Strukturen, interne Strukturen, Aktivitäten und Ergebnisse. Die Gründe für den von uns konstatierten geringen Einfluss gleichstellungsaktiver Betriebsrät/innen auf betriebliche Chancengleichheit der Geschlechter liegen vor allem in den institutionellen Rahmenbedingungen betrieblicher Mitbestimmung sowie eines liberalen Konzepts von Gleichstellungspolitik. Betriebsrät/innen akzeptieren weitgehend vorhandene geschlechtsspezifische Strukturen in Organisationen und agieren in erster Linie bei offensichtlich diskriminierenden Verfahren oder in einzelnen Fällen von Diskriminierungen.

**Key words:** gender equity, works councillors, social positioning, structuration theory, Austria (JEL: J00, J59, J70, J83)

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## Introduction

Studies on equal opportunity (EO) policies in organizations demonstrate the importance of specific agents (e.g. women representatives, human resource managers, diversity professionals, supervisors) regarding these policies (e.g. Frerich 1997; Foster/Harris 2005; Tatli et al. 2006; Kirton et al. 2007). Empirical literature on diversity or EO agents concentrates on their role within organizations, their understanding of equity and their strategies of change (e.g. Cockburn 1989; Meyerson/Scully 1995; Lawrence 2000; Foster/Harris 2005; Nentwich 2006; Kirton/Greene 2006; Auer/Welte 2007; Healy/Okileome 2007; Kirton et al. 2007). A subject of ongoing discussion is the different approaches to change that these agents assume in the context of tension between business and feminist agendas (e.g. Cockburn 1989; Acker 2000; Ely/Meyerson 2000; Kirton/Greene 2006). Furthermore, there is a body of literature that debates, if these agents can be characterized as either liberal reformers, radicals or tempered radicals (mainly Kirton et al. 2007; also Meyerson/Scully 1995). The answers are not only connected to the attitudes and values of EO agents and organizational characteristics (working conditions, official EO policies, etc.) but also to the EO agents' institutional background. That means diversity professionals at senior levels (Kirton et al. 2007) act on a very different institutional basis than trade union equality officers (Kirton/Greene 2006), human resource managers, equal treatment officers (Auer/Welte 2007) or EO officers (Nentwich 2006).

In this paper we explore the influence of single agents on gender dynamics in organizations by concentrating on EO active works councillors. These agents have a unique institutional position regarding EO. This position is characterized by the works councils' key role in the Austrian industrial relations system (Traxler 1998) and the strength of the regulations of the Works Constitution Act (1974) that establishes them as the legal representatives of the workforce at company level. Trade unions estimate that approximately 50 % of all employees in private companies in Austria are represented by works councils (Hermann/Flecker 2006). Of all European works councils, the Austrian, similar to the German system, includes the most extensive rights to information, consultation and joint decision-making (Jenkins/Blyton 2008). As a consequence, co-determination represents an important institution within Austrian organizations. These legal regulations also empower works councils to ensure equal treatment of all employees and to suggest programs to support women. Thus, based on their formal (legal) position, works councillors are expected to work in favour of more equity between men and women. The relevance of works council participation in the area of EO can also be attributed to the generally less direct and, therefore, limited role of trade unions in decision-making processes at company level. Moreover, official diversity or EO managers hardly exist in private companies in Austria. However, the influence of works councillors on EO in Austrian organizations remains unexplored.

This paper is based on a qualitative empirical study and focuses on the impact of the social positioning of EO active works councillors on gender relations in private companies in Austria. It particular, discusses the reasons for the rather limited effects of their EO activities. The data of our empirical study are, first of all, based on qualitative interviews with Austrian works councillors. Secondly, we refer to gendered struc-

tural properties of the Austrian society and, in particular, provide a structural analysis of the concepts of co-determination and EO policies, including not only their legal basis but also their normative and practical conceptions.

When analysing the elements that support and undermine the capabilities of specific agents to influence a particular field, it is important to understand their social positioning. Therefore, our analysis draws on the theory of structuration (Giddens 1992), mainly on the idea of potentially knowledgeable and reflexive agents. However, their scope of agency does not merely depend on their experiences, knowledge, and abilities but on the objective context. We refer to the construction of the ‘quadrupartite nature of structuration’, used by Stones (2005) to critically but appreciatively enhance structuration theory and to offer a systematic framework for empirical studies. Stones (2005), unlike Giddens, aims at bridging ontological concepts with empirical ‘evidence’ in order to offer strategies for empirical research based on structuration theory. Stones’ concept has “the potential to uncover the differentiated way social structure mediates agency” (Edwards 2006: 912). We use Stones’ framework to explore the limitations and potentials of individual agents to achieve substantial changes towards less gendered organizational structures and practices.

Our article starts with a short introduction of the ‘quadrupartite nature of structuration’. Then we clarify the methodological approach to our empirical study. Following this, we present the main empirical findings referring to external structural elements of participation in EO policies/practices, the internal structure and activities of EO active works councillors, and perceived outcomes. Finally, we discuss these results by developing a deeper understanding of the limited impact of EO active works councillors on gender equity in organizations and conclude on the role of single agents in changing organizational gender dynamics.

### **The ‘quadrupartite nature of structuration’ and social positioning**

Structuration theory offers a sensible approach for analysing the impact a specific group of individual agents can have on organizational structures and practices. Agents are conceptualised as having “the capability [...] to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (Giddens 1992: 14). The adequacy and virtuosity of using organizational structures depend on the agents’ individual biographies and abilities as well as on specific contexts. The knowledge or awareness of agents is always allocated unequally between agents and limited by unacknowledged conditions. The more adequate the agents’ perception and understanding of the specific context is, the more likely can they avoid unintended consequences and be successful with their particular projects (Stones 2005).

Since we are interested in analysing the impact of specific groups of agents, the concept of social position within structuration theory is of particular importance. Giddens (1992: 84) defines a social position as “a social identity that carries with it a certain range (however diffusely specified) of prerogatives and obligations that an agent who is accorded that identity (or is an ‘incumbent’ of that position) may activate or carry out [...]”. However, social identity is never absolutely fixed. It may be fragmented, ambiguous and subject to continuous reproduction through political, social and discursive processes (Ainsworth 2002). Social position “relates individuals to the

structural context in which they are embedded” (Battilana 2006: 655). Social positioning, therefore, describes the process of integrating an individual in a network of social relations and patterned practices. In order to form a more specific theoretical basis for our empirical study, we further differentiate the concept of social position(ing) in drawing on Stones’ (2005) analytically separated but inter-linked aspects of the duality of structure (‘quadripartite nature of structuration’):

*External structures:* As Stones (2005) argues, external structures are independent of agents. External structures not only exist in a material and cultural sense but also in and through the relevant networked agents-in-context, which implies “structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place over resources, chances, and access” (Battilana 2006: 656). External structures emphasise institutionalised positions and, therefore, formal and informal requirements, as well as rights and relations of the social position that pre-exist the incumbent agent. The reproduction of patterns of position-practices is contingent, depending “on the activity of position-taking and making” (Stones 2005: 63). Potential tension exists between the requirements loaded onto a position and an agent’s abilities to fulfil corresponding expectations. Moreover, there is also a potential lack of cultural understanding or willingness to meet these expectations.

*Internal structures* emphasize agents’ perception of the social context and knowledgeability of the structural characteristics and dynamics of the social system in which they act. Here, we stress the sense of capability the agent-in-focus has, including the potential usage of specific resources and the availability, knowledge and prospective handling of rules to stabilize or change the social situation. Therefore, agents also have some kind of understanding of existing power relations and dynamics and of the possibilities this context and their own social position offer them and others. The level of distancing from specific social situations varies from a ‘taken-for-granted duality’ to a ‘critical duality’. “The latter [...] refers to instances in which the agent has a degree of critical distance from the internal structures, such that she is able to take up a strategic-monitoring relationship to them, or to reflect upon them theoretically” (Stones 2005: 57). “Taken-for-granted duality”, on the other hand, suggests that the meaning of the situation cannot be questioned by the agent-in-focus because of a strong personal involvement or commitment to an organization, institution, principle or whatever.

*Active agency* refers to the ways in which the agent uses internal structures to act routinely, without reflecting on the specific circumstances, and strategically, based on a critical distance to the conditions perceived. In principle, agents have the potential to choose actions intentionally and carry them out effectively, even against dominating rules and established power structures. The agents’ scope of action depends mainly on their knowledgeability. However, agents are also able to use the knowledge of other individuals within social systems. Agent activities can be understood as position-practices that also include the – often simultaneous – processes of active positioning and passively becoming positioned as agents. They monitor, reflect on and react to these practices; at the same time they may create new practices.

The aspect of *outcomes* incorporates effects of external and internal structures and agency. These results, including successes or failures of agent purposes, again become part of the external and internal structures and influence active agency. This dimen-

sion covers different levels of change or stabilisation of social orders and identities. Moreover, agents have very different capabilities to change or stabilise social orders, and the outcomes of activities are not always intended.

## The study

Our empirical study concentrates on EO active works councillors' perceptions of their influence on gender equity in organizations. It is based on a qualitative approach that draws upon open, usually not standardized and ambiguous empirical material and emphasises reflection and interpretation (e.g. Alvesson/Sköldberg 2009; Flick 2006). We used a non-random (purposeful) sample to offer a qualitative picture of the impact of EO active works councillors on gender equity in organizations. Moreover, our findings reveal social patterns of works councillors participation and involvement in the area of EO and thus go beyond the perceptions of single agents. Based on the empirical material, we explore social and cultural 'mechanisms' as recurring processes. We argue that these socio-cultural patterns apply to other cases in similar structural and institutional contexts (Flick 2009; Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010), with the limitation that multiple meanings of social reality always allow alternative interpretations.

Our study is based on 11 semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews with works councillors of large private companies in different industries (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Organizations included in the analysis**

Industry	Number of employees	Interviewed works councillor
Banking	4200	1 female
Chemistry	1400	1 female/2 male
Finance	600	1 male
Insurance	740	1 female
Manufacturing	1050	2 male
Metal industry	2200	1 male
Retailing	400	1 female
Transportation	560	1 female

The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted throughout a one-year period. They were recorded, transcribed and sent back to the interviewees for feedback and permission to use the data.

Although we covered a range of different industries and interviewed nearly as many female as male works councillors, industry and gender did not constitute major criteria for choosing interview partners. Rather, in the selection of interview partners we concentrated on their level of activity in the field of EO. To assure that the works councillors interviewed are characterized by a 'high level of activity' we collected information on companies that had won regional or national 'competitions on family and women friendly organizations' (<http://www.familieundberuf.at>) or had initiated EO projects like 'gender check', supported by national or international programs. If these companies had works councils, we contacted the heads of these works councils and asked them about their part in these activities as well as the role of other works council members in creating and implementing organizational EO policies. In other



words, we used a kind of self-assessment of EO activity levels and invited works councillors to interviews on this basis. In addition, some of the works councillors interviewed made us aware of works councillors in other companies who were active in the area of EO.

In the interviews we collected data regarding the interviewees' perception of their careers, their social position in the relevant organization, EO and gender equity, co-determination, as well as organizational structures and cultures. However, these themes did not limit the scope of the interviews. Several general, open-ended questions were posed in order to provide respondents with opportunities to raise and explore other issues of relevance.

Stones' quadripartite nature of structuration served as a framework for processing our data. Based on that framework, we used content analysis (e.g. Mayring 2008) to work on the data. We defined thematic units along our interview guideline and developed categories from our interview data that offer potential answers to our research questions and related them to our theoretical framework (see Table 2): Starting with first examples of each thematic unit, we derived categories from the text and carefully explored, if they were in fact relevant throughout the whole material. Based on these significant categories, we worked through the interview transcripts in a recursive process (Alvesson/Sköldberg 2009), extracted and paraphrased the findings and related these parts of the interviews to relevant categories. Additionally, we analysed external structures of organizational EO policies in Austria based on relevant literature. These structural elements were included in the interviews in order to identify the EO active works councillors' view of this context.

After consolidating the paraphrased findings, we checked the entire material once again, including parts we excluded in the first step, and re-examined them with reference to our framework. The aim was to verify the reliability of how we processed the empirical material. Moreover, we summarized each category to extract relevant material available for interpretation.

Our interpretation focuses on ambiguous and multi-layered perceptions of works councillors regarding their participation in the context of their EO involvement. Structuration theory speaks of agents' conduct analysis (Stones 2005: 121-123): It concentrates on internal structures of agents and how these agents reflexively monitor what they do, how they draw upon resources in interaction – the ontological category of knowledgeability. However, for researchers, conduct analysis has to be supported by context analysis to identify the main “‘objective’ possibilities open to, and the constraints upon, the agent(s)-in-focus” (Stones 2005: 125). These constraints and possibilities have to be related to agents' context analysis that means their interpretation of identified external structures. “Agent's context analysis can be used to analyse the terrain that faces an agent, the terrain that constitutes the range of possibilities and limits to the possible” (Stones 2005: 122). Therefore, we relate the perceptions of the agent-in-focus to contextual aspects, in particular to the dominant societal and legal framework of EO (policies) and the structural elements of the Austrian co-determination system. Moreover, we try to understand the empirical material from different (theoretical) discussions on EO (policies), the gendered character of organizations, concepts of participation and gender dynamics in organizations.

**Table 2: Thematic units and categories determined**

Dimension of the analytical framework	Thematic units	Categories
External structure	Austrian society	Labour market Welfare system Family culture
	Co-determination	
	Legal regulations concerning EO	Law of Equal Treatment Works Constitution Act
Internal structure	Reasons for becoming involved/motivated	Personal concern/experiences Moral concept Activities depend on self
	Understanding of EO and of the role within EO policies	Active versus passive role EO as main versus minor issue Something additional versus part of the job/the role
	Understanding of co-determination	Legal rights as basis Use versus non-use of legal regulations Compromise versus confrontation
Activities	Content and form	Single cases of discrimination EO projects Routine versus exception
	Social relations	Recognition and acceptance of self Building networks Raising awareness Conflicts between different functions
	Logic of organizations	Economic, social Use versus non-use
Outcomes	Differentiated view	Establishing EO policies/practices
	Ambivalent and contradictory success	Limited activities Ignoring gender equity

## External structures

EO agents are not only members of a specific organization but also find themselves positioned within certain societal contexts, legal regulations, regional communities and networks, as well as family backgrounds. Therefore, they are affected by regulations and national cultures, their welfare and industrial relations systems and discourses, for example, about family, gender, economy. Equally important, they are embedded in gendered organizational structures and practices that mainly derive from a gendered society. We argue that the following elements of the gendered Austrian society, legal regulations of EO, and the established system of co-determination form the dominant structural context of works councillor activities in the area of gender equity.

First, EO policies in Austrian organizations are confronted with a framework that can be characterised by strongly gendered labour market structures, a conservative/corporatist welfare system, and rather traditional family cultures (Dörfler 2007):



Gendered employment behaviour, wage differentials, as well as hierarchical and occupational segregation are depressingly persistent in Austria (Commission of the European Communities 2010). Women account for approximately 80 % of part-time workers and 70 % of workers in marginal employment. Moreover, the number of women in top-management positions is still very limited (4 % female CEOs) (Zahidi/Ibarra 2010; Statistik Austria 2012). Women continue to be very much concentrated in a narrow range of mainly low-paid occupations, in sectors such as health and social services, retailing, and tourism (Statistik Austria 2012).

The conservative/corporatist welfare regime emphasises the duty of the state to provide financial compensation for important societal tasks (Esping-Andersen 1990). Whenever labour market participation is not seen as acceptable or desirable, the state provides financial compensation for parents (Doorne-Huiskes et al. 1998). The key work-family policies in Austria are the parental leave scheme in connection with the Childcare Benefit payment (introduced in 2002), the entitlement for one parent to work part-time (established in 2004), as well as the moderate and regionally rather diverse expansion of the childcare infrastructure (Auer/Welte 2009). This ‘familialisation’ of the welfare state and the high transactional benefits re-emphasise the traditional role of mothers and fathers and, therefore, the gendered division of labour (Bradshaw/Finch 2002; OECD 2003).

Traditional ideas about the nature of family, motherhood and fatherhood very much reflect the Austrian socio-political design of gender equity and reconciliation of work and family (e.g. Auer/Welte 2009). Studies also reveal a low degree of cultural acceptance of full-time employed mothers (in particular with young children) in Austria (e.g. Neuwirth/Weinhart 2008).

Our study shows that works councillors are confronted with these societal characteristics as organizational cultures which “draw heavily on wider cultural meanings” (Liff/Cameron 1997: 36). All interviewees refer to the influence of the socio-cultural context in their approach towards EO.

“That’s a problem of society, not a particular problem of our company. In general, women don’t see themselves in a leading position [...]. That doesn’t fit the societal picture of a woman. She isn’t seen as a leader but as a team player and as a busy worker. And you learn this as a child in your family; in fact, you grow up with this role model” (female, insurance).

The material and symbolic strength of these settings strongly depends on how they are accepted and supported within organizations – not only by the management but also the majority of employees. Organizations, explicitly and implicitly, probably use these assumptions and values to integrate and potentially modify cultural practices.

Secondly, gender equity is the objective of specific regulations of Austrian labour law. Particularly, the national Law of Equal Treatment (2004) for the private sector forces employers to support equal treatment of women and men (regarding, for example, payment, recruiting, further training, working conditions, or promotion) and to prohibit direct and indirect discrimination by gender. This law is related to European legislation which aims at equity between women and men (e.g. employment framework directives) concerning access to employment, equal pay, maternity protection, parental leave, and occupational social security. Additionally, the Austrian Works Con-

stitution Act (1974: §92b) includes gender equity regulations. Besides general legal norms of equal treatment, the Works Constitution Act includes the protection and support of women at work, mainly in fields of human resource management like recruiting processes, training, promotion, and – particularly – the reconciliation of work and family. These regulations clarify that the works council has the right to suggest and discuss related measures with the employer, who is, however, not obliged to apply these suggestions. If employer and works council approve it is even possible to implement formal workplace agreements regarding these issues. However, none of the companies involved in our study has such a formal workplace agreement.

All these legal regulations on EO offer an ambivalent basis for works councillor activities. On the one hand, they form the setting for their policies and allow works councillors to become involved. On the other hand, these regulations emphasise controlling and monitoring processes by EO agents but no strong interventions.

Thirdly, the system of co-determination affects EO practices. Works councils in Austria are of particular importance for negotiating and establishing working conditions in organizations (Hermann/Flecker 2006; Jenkins/Blyton 2008). Co-determination and, therefore, works councils are widely accepted in companies and society in general. Formally they have an independent position from the employer, which means that their decision-making processes are separated from management. However, they have to negotiate and agree with the management on many issues. Works councils frequently adopt a very ‘pragmatic approach’ (e.g. Bosch et al. 1999; Frege 2003): They are aware of the diverging interests of management and works councils (and employees) but also understand economic pressures and necessities. Usually, they are able to develop cooperative and integrative forms of bargaining and dealing with management.

EO active works councillors legally and factually depend on management support and goodwill. In addition to the legal requirements to involve management in the development and implementation of EO policies, top management and superiors are crucial for substantive changes from a cultural perspective. Without their direct and undisputed encouragement and cooperation EO policies are likely to constitute ‘empty shells’ (Hoque/Noon 2004) and hardly achieve a taken-for-granted status within organizational practices. EO active works councillors also need the backing of the works council as an institution, since all participation rights are legally given to this collective agent.

## **Internal structures**

Perception and knowledge of the external structural terrain are often built over a long period of time and form internal structures consisting of various skills, beliefs, dispositions and the like (Stones 2005). We concentrate on three aspects of the internal structures of EO active agents: their motivation for becoming involved in EO and related values, normative perspectives regarding gender (equity), and the acceptance of the concept of co-determination.

The interviewees’ motivation to actively improve gender equity in organizations, additionally to their normal jobs does not derive from the law or from any social or official pressure on EO active works councillors but from their conviction that it is

necessary to promote more fairness, social responsibility, and social justice and to support disadvantaged employees: “It’s about people for whom you can do something” (female, banking). Additional reasons for the interviewees’ commitment include negative personal experiences in the organizations (e.g. gender-related obstacles in their careers) and their impression that EO activities strongly depend on their own initiatives. Although these works councillors criticise that the works council as an institution lacks awareness and activities concerning gender equity, they themselves do not see the equal opportunity of men and women as a main priority of the works council’s participation. They regard other aspects of working conditions (e.g. workplace security, benefits) as more important for employees and the company and, thus, for the legitimacy of works councils.

Based on their own experiences, some interviewees conceptualize gender dynamics, and therefore also EO, as complex societal and organizational power relations. They raise issues like the limited number of women in management positions and difficulties in career development related to the ‘glass ceiling effect’. However, the views of other EO active works councillors interviewed on the roles of men and women in society and in organizations can be characterized as relatively conformist with dominant socio-cultural structures of the specific Austrian region in which our study took place. Consequently, EO measures are often seen as directed towards women only and are filtered through the lens of work-family issues.

“The main problem is still balancing family and job. [...] That’s the problem we face and, therefore, we have started a project focussing on this issue” (male, finance).

Some works councillors even represent women in terms of stereotypical female traits and behavioural patterns. For example, concerning the perceived resistance of women to apply for leading positions, these works councillors accept that women are well educated nowadays; however, women are still attributed a lack of self-confidence and flexibility.

“There are many mental hurdles [...] women are insecure, less prone to accept risks, constantly protecting themselves with some kind of know-how, [...] these are still the things in your head” (female, chemistry).

These works councillors hardly question the gendered character of organizations but rather refer to women’s lack of ambition and assertiveness, but also to discriminatory attitudes and behaviour of superiors. Additionally, their general dispositional frames of meanings include a rather individualistic, liberal approach towards gender equity. Accordingly, these works councillors are sceptical about too much support for women careers. In their view, women cannot expect more than fair procedures.

“They have to make it on their own. And if she wants it, she will get it. Otherwise they would not be accepted as superior” (female, transportation).

Not surprisingly, the EO active works councillors interviewed support the overall concept of co-determination.

“I would say that our labour law is one of the best. I wouldn’t want to constrict it in any way” (female, chemistry).

Moreover, they regard labour law in general and the legal regulations aiming at EO in particular as useful for changing gendered practices. However, they are keen on downplaying the role of legal norms for their participation and instead emphasise

pragmatic and collaborative relationships with management and employees. They are rather cautious with legal arguments in the field of EO, because they feel that if they involve the law, it will weaken their position in negotiations with employers in general. For these works councillors it is important to act as representatives of the workforce in a way that fits the cultural framework of the organization, and to gain acceptance as well as appreciation as a person and for their main job. From the interviewees' perspective, the strength of their social position and their impact on gender equity depend on their ability to deal with all issues and agents involved in a socially acceptable, often consensus-orientated way.

"[...] that one finds a solution and compromises that everyone can live with. Works councillors just have to balance both sides somehow" (male2, manufacturing).

## Activities

The interplay of societal/organizational structures and the perception of these structural properties constitute the framework for EO active works councillor activities. Three themes are of particular importance: content and form of EO activities, working on social relations, and the logic of the organization.

In terms of content, the interviewees' activities are concentrated on different gender-related aspects of human resource management, such as recruiting, job evaluation, parental leave and re-entry, training, working time, dismissals and – rarely – critical social relations and behaviour like sexual harassment. The forms these activities take mainly include routine (standard, formal) monitoring procedures, the use of legal norms and to deal (formal or informal) with individual cases of (potential) discrimination. The latter is not just perceived as a much more political activity but as rather stressful, often contentious and, therefore, personally challenging. Although EO-related complaints of individual employees are relatively rare, some of the works councillors interviewed believe that these cases are only 'the tip of the iceberg'.

"I rarely receive complaints. Once or twice a month things happen, which don't turn into a complaint as the staff resign themselves to it or because the information never even reaches me" (male, finance).

A different approach, in form and content, derives from participating in or even initiating specific change projects in areas, such as salary structures, organizational design, organizational communication, or EO programs. Through these projects the works councillors become more strategically relevant and visible within the organization. They feel this kind of work to be more meaningful and enjoyable, particularly because they are able "to change something" (female, chemistry). However, in general, the interviewees perceive the content and official form of their activities as EO agents as less important than the way and manner in which works councillors conduct themselves and can relate to other agents (e.g. superiors).

As individual activities always take place in the context of related position practices (Stones 2005), it is fundamental to build formal and informal networks. The EO agents interviewed pay attention to being involved in the formal and informal 'public life' of the organization in order to become or remain integrated, to maintain their level of knowledgeability, and to be able to understand the practices and dynamics of the organization. Members of networks do not necessarily have to be physically pre-

sent and still may be able to affect specific interactions (Benschop 2009; Stones 2005). EO can be supported and “[...] if you want to achieve something you must be able to use your networks in these situations” (female, retailing). The interviewees perceive these networks, communication structures and knowledge systems as essential for their work in the sense of knowledge exchange and ‘emotional’ support, particularly in cases of conflicts.

The EO active works councillors interviewed try to improve their social position within the organization. They want to be recognised as being responsible for gender equity. Colgan/Ledwith (2000: 244) describe this form of transformation as “social creativity” and differentiate it from social change. Remarkably, in the interviewees’ perception, the recognition of EO active works councillors mainly derives from their professional function, personal qualities, and their social integration but not from their position as being formally responsible for EO. Therefore, these EO active works councillors try to become accepted as a person by other agents and within the organization in general. Interestingly enough, EO active works councillors describe these activities as more or less routine practices.

“Quite simply, the staff accepts me as a person; making the effort is just part of my job as a works councillor” (male, finance).

The interviewees try to use their professional position including their functions, hierarchical position and social status to enhance their chances of acting in favour of gender equity and employee needs. At the same time, this configuration restricts their scope of action, since they have to pay attention to unrelated organizational and personal aims, to contexts, and occupational tasks.

“And then you run the risk that you don’t do some of the things that you should have done [...] because there are too many other things in your head” (female, banking).

They must reflect on the different opportunities and risks involved. Generally speaking, the reflexive-monitoring agent “must also keep in mind her other projects, their likely contexts, and what is likely to be required to fulfil them” (Stones 2005: 26).

The EO active works councillors interviewed try to enhance the acknowledgment of gender equity and EO policies. Their strategy is to raise awareness through small steps because their experience has shown that this results in behaviour changes. Conversely, if they raise issues of gendered organizational practices more vigorously, this can create conflicts and turn into (micro)political struggles. These works councillors find themselves in a difficult strategic position: Many employees accept the task and engagement of works councillors but, at the same time, these employees ignore, avoid or even rigorously reject gender issues because they believe that gender discrimination does not occur in their organization.

“A large group of employees doesn’t think that it makes sense to pay attention to this issue” (male, finance).

Frequently, employees seem to see such activities as ‘pointless’ and ‘de-legitimizing’ works councils and, therefore, hardly support the social position of these works councillors. The interviewees often see themselves acting without strong structural and social support. They have to justify their engagement vis-à-vis the employees represented and, simultaneously, need to convince superiors and top management, as well.

Moreover, they try to use the works council as an institution in favour of EO. Usually, they have to convince other works council members, too, because they have different ideas about social justice (similar Kotthoff 2003).

Besides relating to their professional and personal recognition in the organization, the interviewees use elements of the culturally accepted organizational context for employees, such as economic reasoning or social responsibility. One way for them to 'break the ice' and establish EO as an important issue is to focus on hard facts of material inequality and economic aspects as main elements of organizational logic.

"One is successful only if one can show the management this success in figures. This means something to the organization, as women are human resources; they have received training and this costs money. If one cannot recuperate these costs, then it is a loss of human capital. Such arguments work well" (male1, chemistry).

Organizational logic allows EO active works councillors to refer to an established and accepted language as well as 'common' practices to enforce certain policies.

## **Outcomes**

The interviewees have a rather differentiated view regarding the outcomes of their activities: On the one hand, they see EO as more established within their organizations because of their activities: Top management and superiors are more aware of the issues involved; works councillors are able to monitor, although not always influence, decision processes that can affect gender issues.

"When one argues inequality [...] they react quite sensitively [...] because nobody wants to be seen as discriminating against women. If you don't address it, they carry on the same way they did before" (male, metal).

On the other hand, they do not perceive fundamental changes of gender relations within their companies; management, superiors, the majority of employees and even other works councillors often oppose or ignore EO policies.

The interviewees experience 'ambivalent' success: they can accomplish minor changes but are opposed by the organizational rhetoric that gender equity has already been achieved anyway. Furthermore, EO active works councillors are labelled as those responsible for gender issues. For some superiors and other works councillors this means that the organization is already active, that nobody else needs to be engaged and that discrimination is banned. As a consequence, questions of equity do not become an organizational issue that has to be dealt with at different levels and by diverse agents.

These outcomes, in turn, become aspects of the internal structures of EO active works councillors and the external framework in which they work. Therefore, these outcomes create specific expectations and constitute the EO active works councillors' social position and scope of action.

## **The limited impact of EO active works councillors**

External constraints have a strong impact on the success or failure of the activities of works councillors directed at gender equity. However, these works councillors' values and beliefs, their understanding of EO and co-determination as well as their interpretation of their social position as 'change agents' have the potential to reinforce but



also to weaken these external constraints. Giddens (1992) conceptualizes agency as having 'transformative capacity' and agents as potentially reflexive of social structures and capable of transforming them. Therefore, we do not only discuss the main external and internal limitations (and their interplay) of the EO active works councillors' social position but also identify (unexploited) potentialities to strengthen their social positioning and, therefore, their impact on gender equity in organizations. We will move from external resistance as a relatively simple barrier to deal with to more complex limitations that derive from a combination of cultural as well as legal constraints and of EO active works councillors' knowledgeability that are more difficult to overcome.

Obvious acts of resistance to works councillors' participation in EO issues are mentioned relatively rarely in the interviews. Works councillors can easily cope with these situations, since they can complain to the (top) management and use their legal rights; the agents involved can be forced to correct their behaviour. However, these agents may only change at a formal level but not in their general dispositional approach towards works councillors' participation, particularly in the area of EO.

The overt resistance of some superiors to the very idea of gender equity represents a barrier that the interviewees qualify as more serious. Although the interviewees hardly identify open neglect of EO among the top management, they still find this approach at lower hierarchical levels. The attitude of these superiors derives not only from the relevant organizational cultures but also from the gendered societal structures in Austria. Consequently, the EO active works councillors interviewed try to improve their social position by constantly trying to raise the awareness of management, employees and other works councillors in terms of gender equity issues. In cases of discrimination, these works councillors are also prepared to go beyond that and, as a last resort, accept a final recourse to the power of legal norms. However, the usually consensus-orientated culture of participation as well as the lack of support from the employees involved and the works council as an institution can question this legal approach and restrict the EO active works councillors' scope of action.

Interviewees also refer to a 'rhetoric of equality' in their organizations as an important barrier to challenging discrimination, because it covers up persisting inequalities between men and women. Processes of discrimination are explained away by individual differences, "in accordance with the meritocratic ideology that sees success and failure as determined by individual traits" (Czarniawska 2006: 236), and they are not related to organizational structures and practices. For EO active works councillors it is a delicate matter to argue against this 'rhetoric of equality', because management as well as employees may perceive this criticism as disregard of organizational EO efforts, as failure to acknowledge and appreciate changes already achieved within the organization.

The limited success of EO policies creates a contradictory and difficult situation for EO active works councillors: On the one hand, they themselves contribute to the 'rhetoric of equality' by communicating success achieved in the area of EO, also in order to legitimate their own social position and activities. On the other hand, they are expected to uncover discrimination and fight for counter-measures. However, they hardly challenge the material, ideological and symbolic (sub)structures (Acker 1991) of

these rhetoric and practices that strongly restrict their success (similar Acker 2000; Ely/Meyerson 2000). Benschop/Doorewaard (1998) argue that both the persistency of gender inequality and the perception of equity emerge from a 'gender subtext'. These 'texts' not only include all symbolic processes and results (written texts, talks, artefacts) that contribute to the social production of meaning but also refer to material organizational processes and practices. It is this gender subtext that "directs organization members to trace the gender distinction back to gender-neutral factors" (Benschop/Doorewaard 1998: 802-803). This makes it possible to celebrate the gender neutrality of organizations (achieved) and neglect the prevailing gendered character of organizations. Gender subtext not only hampers the uncovering of gender discrimination, it also undermines the impact of policies and activities to increase equity between men and women (e.g. Dickens 1999). The lack of success of EO policies can not be attributed to open resistance but to 'normal' unequal practices accepted by culture and society. These taken-for-granted assumptions and practices strongly and negatively influence the works councillors' social positioning as EO agents. Furthermore, EO active works councillors are hardly able and willing to challenge complex gender dynamics in organizations more fundamentally.

Another important element that defines the EO active works councillors' scope of action is the specific approach to participation of the workforce derived from the concept of co-determination. This concept is characterized by a "constitutional approach" (Frege 2005: 159) towards organizational democracy. The transfer of rights in the political sphere to the economic sphere forms the philosophical basis of the legal implementation of co-determination rights for elected employee representatives (Frege 2005). One consequence of this tradition is the legally explicit and cultural implicit concentration of employee participation in works councils. Not only do works councillors regard themselves as elected representatives with the responsibility to professionally and authentically represent the heterogeneous interests of the workforce, but also many employees see their role in the participation system as rather passive and dependent on the works council as an institution. Works councils are often institutionally characterized by a lack of gender awareness and gender knowledge (e.g. Klenner 2004; Krell 1999). Moreover, the interviewees see their participation in the area of EO as having to deal with potentially very diverse concerns within the workforce, particularly including competing needs of men and women regarding career opportunities, working time schedules, and work-family policies. Questions of EO are, therefore, a contested terrain, also for EO active works councillors, sometimes leading to manifest but more often to latent conflicts (Acker 2000).

The 'constitutional approach' towards co-determination creates a lack of direct employee participation. Johnson (2006: 263) criticises the lack of empowerment of 'normal' members of organizations "through their participation, their education and their development of [...] democratic consciousness" in different concepts of organizational democracy. Without directly participating, without developing a deeper knowledge of organizational processes and structures and without experiencing the problems of decision-making processes on social and personnel affairs, many agents will remain uninvolved in organizational democracy and co-determination (also Pateman 1970). This may even be stronger in a field that is characterized by little knowledge

and limited awareness, such as EO. This lack of attention and activities of the majority of employees has an impact on the social positioning of EO active works councillors and forms an important barrier to becoming active, to developing initiatives and improving gender equity.

Co-determination is also based on the idea of an institutionalized counteractive power of workforce representatives to lower the dominance of management. This concept of power is established on a resource-based view, offering rules and rights to control the activities of others. However, power processes, gendered practices, and discrimination are much less official and deliberate practices than subtle and fluid “unintentional/non-reflexive practising of gender” (Martin 2006: 255). While this practising of gender is based on institutionalized gender activities, it is also inscribed in day-to-day organizational routines, habits and social relationships. Therefore, the very idea of specific agents responsible for EO is based on a concept of power that is hardly capable of achieving fundamental changes towards gender equity.

Combining these social and structural elements with the main strategic and moral perspectives of EO active works councillors and referring to the discussion on the role of EO agents (e.g. Meyerson/Scully 1995; Nentwich 2006; Kirton/Greene 2006; Kirton et al. 2007), we can characterize EO active works councillors as ‘tempered liberal reformers’:

They stick to the main ideas of liberal EO policies, such as fair procedures, bureaucratization and positive action (see Kirton et al. 2007), and hardly suggest more radical measures. This approach towards gender equity is aligned along legal structures that are based on the idea that inequalities can be corrected by top-down introduction of bureaucratic controls and formalized human resource management procedures. They stress formal procedures to allow women and men to compete for existing positions on equal footing and to avoid income differences or other forms of overt discrimination.

This liberal position is combined with the fact that many EO active works councillors’ rather shallow understanding of gender inequality in organizations moderates their role. Some limit EO to work-family policies for women including their usually affirmative notion of supporting and maybe deepening existing gendered divisions of labour in society (e.g. Auer/Welte 2007). Others even reproduce gender stereotypes, for example, the ideology of general less ambitious and work-committed women, and demonstrate a lack of critical reflection on dominating structures.

Yet, this understanding of gender equity is not the only critical aspect that tempers their role. They are also characterised by a moderate approach to organizational change, and rather seek cooperation with the management and acceptance by employees. Unlike trade union equality officers in the study of Kirton/Greene (2006: 444), works councillors are not sceptical of the business-driven motives of EO policies, but welcome this economic rationale as well as management support. This is mainly due to their institutional and legal background and to their pragmatic stance towards participation. Similarly, looking for compromise and accepting co-optation are not only based on their personal approach towards gender equity but also on their positioning within the legal and actual structures of co-determination. However, the EO active

works councillors interviewed are aware of strategic implications: They stress their knowledgeable, social standing and personal acceptance within their social/organizational system. In fact, developing a comprehensible personal identity as well as reading and understanding the respective organization can be regarded as necessary strategic elements to achieve organizational change (Linstead et al. 2005).

## Conclusions

This paper has used the concept of social positioning (Giddens 1991; Stones 2005) to explore the impact of EO active works councillors on gender dynamics in private companies in Austria. Based on this analysis we want to draw general conclusions regarding the influence single agents can have on EO in organizations.

First of all, the institutional background of EO agents enables as well as restricts their scope of action and influence on gender equity. The relatively strong legal norms of participation of works councils are not mainly directed at EO but at the representation of all employee interests. Therefore, gendered structures and practices are only a minor aspect of the works councils' participation and are not a critical issue for the social acceptance of works councillors as representatives of the workforce. In other word, a strong institutional setting not mainly aiming at gender equity provides a rather weak structural and socio-cultural support for EO agents. Nevertheless, the institutional framework allows them to question decisions that have problematic gender implications and legitimates their involvement in more or less explicitly defined EO areas and individual cases of overt discrimination. At the same time, their impact is limited to specific questions and forms of unequal treatment of employees and particular modes of intervention: Less obvious, more subtle types of discrimination are not on the agenda; more radical forms of influence on decision-making processes and resistance to gendered practices can hardly be put into practice. These institutional restrictions are not only based on the legal framework but, and maybe even more importantly, on traditional socio-cultural patterns of participation. Depending on the institutional background of EO agents, they have to question and possibly overcome conventional forms and contents of participation and politics in order to achieve a stronger impact on gendered structures and practices.

However, more radical approaches towards gender equity and forms of participation need substantial backing by other (relevant) agents through sustainable social relations. This includes the formal as well as informal integration in different networks. The question of social support reaches beyond local representatives of the workforce, such as works councils. It includes management, employees, and even external agents like trade unions. If these potential support groups ignore or reject the idea of gender equity, the influence of EO agents is massively restricted, both politically and culturally. Building acceptance as a valuable member of the organization and establishing sustainable networks that mainly work as transactive knowledge systems (Brauner/Becker 2006) and political support structures are fundamental for EO agents to gain substantial influence on gender dynamics in organizations. Since the social position of agents is not only determined by their position within specific organizational fields, like EO, but also by their social standing in the organization (Battilana 2006), these supportive social relations do not always derive from EO activities

but originate from other activities in the organization (and are then transferred to the field of gender equity), e.g. projects, cooperation in daily work.

Although institutional and social structures do not determine the individual understanding of gender inequalities and of adequate EO policies, they still can strongly influence the social identities of EO agents. The EO active works councillors' personal attitudes and values are frequently a starting point for their engagement but play a relatively minor role in their EO activities due to the strength of the institutionalized system of co-determination. Therefore, tensions between moral and feminist principles of EO and the business case of gender equity as experienced by other EO actors (e.g. Kirton et al. 2007; Dickens 1999) are usually not that important for EO active works councillors. They are caught in the constitutive idea of co-determination that emphasises a very pragmatic approach towards participation in decision-making processes. In fact, a 'realistic' understanding and accurate knowledge of organizational structures, processes, formal rules and social norms – i.e. knowledgeability (Giddens 1992) – are fundamental for achieving organizational change. However, a narrow understanding of knowledgeability can also hamper individual EO activities, because it concentrates on what can be (easily) achieved within a given framework. This restricted perception of knowledgeability lacks learning, since it fails to reflect on the limitations of dominating socio-cultural, legal and economic structures of organizations and to acknowledge the transactional relationship between organization and individual (e.g. Elkjaer 2009). As a consequence, EO agents broadly accept gendered structures in organizations and in society and (re)produce dominant position practices that only deal with unfair (formal) procedures and decisions as the outcomes of these structures. Important steps for increasing EO agent impact on gender dynamics in organizations could include a deepening of the EO agents' knowledgeability towards reflexivity, developing their gender awareness and knowledge, shifting their taken-for-granted dualities of EO to critical dualities, and turning their routine EO activities into strategic activities.

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