

Journal (final draft version)

Post-heroic Leadership, Tempered Radicalism and Senior Leaders as Change Agents for Gender Equality

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Abstract

Micro change agents for gender equality in organisations are often considered to be tempered radicals who work within an existing structure for changing the status quo. However for gender equality to happen, it is often claimed that heroic leadership of top leaders, or macro change agents, is required. The aim of this article is to show how CEOs as macro change agents for gender equality can be conceptualised. Drawing on interviews with 20 global CEOs and a literature review, the article develops a framework to conceptualise how CEOs are fostering gender equality around accountability, building ownership, communicating, leading by example, initiating and driving culture change. The article questions the conceptualisation of change agents of gender equality as either tempered radicals, for micro change agents, or heroic leaders, for macro change agents, and argues instead that to be macro change agents for gender equality, CEOs need to display post-heroic leadership and tempered radicalism to foster change in regard to gender relations.

Keywords: Chief Executive Officers, Leadership, Macro Change Agents, Gender, Top Management

Introduction

While a plethora of research has explored women in leadership (e.g. Bao et al., 2014; Baxter, 2012; Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Muller-Kahle and Schiehl, 2013; Seierstad and Kirton, 2015), the question of what role change agents can have on challenging gendered systems and structures for improved gender equality is less explored. Change agency is often conceptualised under the banner of equality, diversity and inclusion. Oswick and Noon (2014) show how the trend in the field moved from talking about equality over diversity to inclusion. While equality resonates with discourses of social fairness (Kirton et al., 2007), diversity refers to recognising individual differences and inclusion ensures that different 'categories' of people work together (Roberson, 2006). The changes in terminology are largely driven by practitioners rather than academics (Oswick and Noon, 2014) who attempt to find language that resonates with organisations.

Change with regards to equality, diversity and inclusion is often constructed as driven by micro change agents, such as consultants and specialists, or macro change agents, such as top leaders (Mattis, 2001; Wahl, 2014). Micro change agents regularly are tempered radicals who are conceptualised as different from the norm

and as such embody difference (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). They attempt to change systems and structures from within which makes them tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). Macro change agents such as senior leaders are seen as important to the success of equality, diversity and inclusion change (Thomas, 2004). McKinsey's survey of 235 European companies found that 83% have the issue of gender diversity on the CEO's strategic agenda with 53% featuring it amongst their top ten strategic priorities (McKinsey, 2012). This suggests that there is an increasing awareness of gender diversity as something that CEOs consider relevant to their business. Senior leaders play a key role in setting organisational cultures (Konrad and Linnehan, 1995; Schein, 2010) and should, therefore, be instrumental in supporting cultural change with a focus on gender equality (Gill, 2001; Graetz, 2000; Mattis, 2001). However, they lead change with notions of traditional masculinity and heroic leadership in mind (Fletcher, 2004).

This article aims to show how CEOs can be conceptualised as change agents for gender equality. The article first reviews the literature on change agents, tempered radicals and heroic leadership by developing a framework of practices from the literature for how CEOs can lead on gender equality, diversity and inclusion. After explaining the methodology and methods for the empirical study, it is then shown how CEOs conceptualise their role as macro change agents for gender equality. The discussion and conclusion shows how CEOs see their change agency through the lens of heroic leadership, and how they should instead draw on elements of post-heroic leadership through tempered radicalism. The article makes a contribution towards understanding how CEOs can be change agents for gender equality and articulates why post-heroic leadership and tempered radicalism are required for this.

Tempered Radicals, Heroic Leadership and Creating Gender Equality in Organisations

Gender equality is still far from a reality (World Economic Forum, 2015). Academic research has offered a range of analyses of how gender inequality is maintained (Acker, 1990; Ely, 1995; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Martin, 2003; Sang et al., 2014; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). It has also been shown that gender equality can be spearheaded by change agents. Change agents can include a broad base of actors: specialists and committed managers (the latter often referred to as 'champions') within organisations; consultants, pressure groups and headhunters and trade unions (Doldor et al., 2016; Kirton et al., 2007; Nentwich, 2006; Tatli, 2011). Due to their individual sphere of influence these actors are often referred to as micro change agents (Mattis, 2001; Wahl, 2014).

These micro change agents use tools and tactics that can fall under the umbrella term of tempered radicalism (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). The concept of tempered radicals encapsulates the ambivalence experienced by those supporting gender equality change (Meyerson and Scully, 1995): on the one hand, individuals are committed to their organisation but, due to their own embodied difference, they experience the organisational structures as unequal and unfair. These individuals work *within* organisations but do not fit in completely because they are different in one way or another from the norm. They are radical as they aim to change the *status quo* but they are at the same tempered, as they experience anger but attempt to

control. They are, therefore, not attacking the organisation but working within it to achieve greater equality.

Besides tempered radical micro change agents, there have been increasing calls for macro change agents, the top leadership, to support equality efforts in organisations (Mattis, 2001; Thomas, 2004; Wahl, 2014). The literature on diversity and inclusion as well as gender equality regularly stresses the importance of leadership to support change initiatives (Dobbin and Kalev, 2007; Hitt, 1984; Konrad and Linnehan, 1995; Lyness, 2002). Morrison (1992) writes '[c]ommitment from the top of an organization to reduce differential treatment and to foster diversity at higher management levels may be the most important factor in the success of a diversity factor' (Morrison, 1992: 184). Similarly Jayne and Dipboye (2004) state that 'a key element of any successful organizational intervention is senior management commitment to the intervention. Diversity is no different...leveraging diversity for the benefit of the organization requires on-going and consistent leadership' (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004: 417). It was stated that commitment from higher administrators was a key criterion for the effectiveness of affirmative action programmes (Hitt, 1984). Change happens if top-level management is supportive of gender equality (Lyness, 2002). Konrad and Linnehan's (1995) survey finds that top managers' attitudes were significant predictors of effective equal employment opportunity and affirmative action efforts. The reason for why senior leadership support is so crucial is 'because the organizational barriers for non-traditional managers are often systemic and subtle, meaningful change is likely to require many years of sustained leadership and effort' (Lyness, 2002: 257).

This raises the question what type of leadership macro change agents are expected to perform. Much of the existing research focuses on the idea that organisational culture change is dependent on leaders (Gill, 2001; Graetz, 2000; Konrad and Linnehan, 1995; Schein, 2010). Leaders typically lead change in organisations following Kotter's (1996) widely used eight stage process, which includes phases such as creating a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition and creating short-term wins. Frameworks such as Kotter's have influenced many practitioners in the field particularly in defining how senior leaders should lead gender equality, diversity and inclusion (Mercer, 2016; ORC Worldwide, 2008; Prime and Moss-Racusin, 2009). While much of the literature does not distinguish between gender equality, diversity and inclusion, the literature suggests the following six practices were suggested for senior leaders who want to drive change toward gender equality, diversity and inclusion in their organisations: accountability, building ownership, communicating, leading by example, initiating and driving culture change.

Accountability refers to how CEOs and senior leaders create accountability throughout their chain of command. Prior research has shown that the public accountability of senior leaders has a positive relation to changing diversity and inclusion in organisations (Dobbin and Kalev, 2007). It has also been shown that holding senior management to account for measures of success with regards to diversity, is crucial to the success of diversity and inclusion change initiatives (Kilian et al., 2005). This is particularly true if the CEO is held accountable by the board of directors and when their compensation is linked to diversity outcomes (ORC

Worldwide, 2008). CEOs and senior leaders can also hold others accountable for their performance in regards to diversity (Mattis, 2001). For instance, the CEO can hold direct reports accountable for diversity (ORC Worldwide, 2008) and diversity metrics (Kilian et al., 2005), which is again particularly effective if linked to remuneration (Giscombe and Mattis, 2002). CEOs can require the direct reports as well as managers to show diversity supportive personal behaviours, such as mentoring and developing diverse people (ORC Worldwide, 2008).

Another practice is to *build ownership*. Senior leaders play a crucial role in helping individuals in their organisation to develop the right skills to manage diversity and inclusion more effectively. For instance, there is often some discomfort that people experience when they are dealing with people different from themselves and senior leaders can help others to manage this discomfort (Kilian et al., 2005). In more general terms, CEOs and senior leaders need to build commitment from others to support diversity and inclusion. They need to create ownership so that individuals take action and they need to sponsor initiatives in order for those initiatives to be credible (Mattis, 2001). While commitment can be achieved through the accountability measures discussed above, these forms of commitment are drawn from conviction rather than through more coercive efforts such as targets and compensation.

The literature also suggests that *communication* is one of the key aspects through which CEOs can lead towards gender equality and diversity and inclusion. This relates firstly to articulating the business case for diversity (Davidson, 2008). It has

also been stressed that developing and communicating the business case (Mattis, 2001) is central for leaders. If diversity is presented as a key business issue this helps to garner support for such initiatives (Morrison, 1992). In addition, senior leaders should also present diversity and inclusion as an issue of fairness. Leaders should exhibit ethical commitment to fairness (Davidson, 2008) and present social fairness as a key driver behind diversity and inclusion (Kilian et al., 2005). Finally, it has been stressed that personalising diversity and inclusion can be a good strategy for CEOs and senior leaders to support diversity and inclusion. This can, for instance, entail the communication of personal diversity experiences (Kilian et al., 2005).

Leaders are also expected to show exemplary behaviour or *lead by example*. Leading by example includes being highly visible when supporting gender equality. This entails the following: CEO or senior management speeches; CEO presence at meetings with diversity councils; the CEO hosting of diversity meetings; active CEO participation in corporate diversity councils or task forces, speeches or letters by CEO and senior management at diversity forums, diversity brochures, newsletters articles, community involvement (e.g. minority supplier programs) (Giscombe and Mattis, 2002). This can also involve praising a minority employee, meeting an minority group or listening to a task force (Morrison, 1992). Another way through which CEOs can 'walk the talk' is by sponsoring women and other underrepresented groups for leadership positions (Mattis, 2001). Senior leaders should also encourage different behavioural styles to flourish in their organisation to avoid that only one leadership style is seen as acceptable which can be exclusionary (Kilian et al., 2005).

Senior leaders should also spearhead *initiatives*. Succession planning plays a key role here as the CEO can ensure that the organisation includes diversity parameters in such plans (Mattis, 2001). Other work stresses the importance of both board diversity and regular executive level reviews of diverse 'top-talent' and succession planning (ORC Worldwide, 2008), all of which provide fruitful ideas for CEOs wishing to kick start a culture change. A final critical leadership behaviour in this area is also to provide resources and staff for internal and external benchmarking (Mattis, 2001).

Finally, senior leaders need to *drive culture change*. It is crucial that the CEO and senior leaders provide strategic direction to allow employees to follow this strategy (Mattis, 2001). In addition, the cultural change should outlast the CEO's tenure (Morrison, 1992) meaning that changes have to be fully embedded and seen as important regardless of who the CEO is. A practical example might include the creation of dramatic and symbolic events around diversity which give organisations meaning and enter the organisational narrative (Morrison, 1992).

The six practices outlined above resonate strongly with traditional forms of masculinity in that they require being in control and taking charge. The assumption here is that what leaders want and do is simply followed in an organisation. Such a conception of leadership chimes with ideas of heroic leadership (Fletcher, 2004). In her definition of heroic leadership, Fletcher (2004) suggests that traits that are ascribed to men in society such as control, assertiveness and domination are central for this kind of leadership. The command-and-control style of leadership is juxtaposed with Fletcher's (2004) suggestion that leadership can also be

conceptualised as shared practices, social interactions and learning outcomes (Fletcher, 2004).

The literature on men as leaders and managers has vividly illustrated how this form of traditional heroic leadership is actively used to exclude women from organisations. Research by Cockburn (1991), Martin (2001) and others has indicated that practising masculinity is closely aligned with reproducing existing structures within organisations. Those structures often function to exclude women. Martin (2001) observed how men collectively mobilise masculinities through, for instance, 'sucking up' to other men or facilitating the career advancement of other men to the detriment of women. Wajcman (1998) shows how men give advice to other men through informal conversations which women are not privy to. Women therefore miss out on essential advice. Men were also shown to undermine events that were designed to support women by for instance questioning why they are needed (Cockburn, 1991). Women-only events often attempt to include male senior leaders but it has been shown that senior men are either absent or if they give a presentation remain unconvincing (de Vries, 2015). Another example of such heroic leadership is dominating meetings as Wahl (2014) has shown. Then women do not have the possibility of speaking up and getting their ideas heard. Heroic leadership has therefore traditionally been seen as a mechanism to exclude women. It is thus a bit surprising that similar ways of displaying heroic leadership are now recommended to senior leaders who want to advance gender equality. As the six practices outlined before illustrate, there is a strong overlap between practices of heroic leadership and what leaders who want to foster gender equality have to do to engage in.

To summarise thus far, the literature indicates that change agents use different strategies depending on their hierarchical position in an organisation. CEOs and the top leadership team are expected to be macro change agents and their change agency is conceptualised as post-heroic leadership. Other change agents such as diversity and inclusion professionals are micro change agents using tempered radical approaches to convince others that greater equality is desirable. This raises the question how CEOs conceptualise their own change agency. CEOs could see their own change agency as an expression of heroic leadership but some might also see themselves as tempered radicals. Furthermore this raises the question in how far the selected approaches to leadership are effective for creating greater gender inclusion.

Methodology and Methods

The aim of the study is to explore how CEOs are conceptualised as change agents for gender equality. While it would have been possible to speak to a CEO's team or to conduct a document or media analysis to explore how CEOs could be conceptualised as change agents for gender equality, we instead decided to interview CEOs to understand how they saw their role as change agents for gender equality. Such research confronts two problems. First, CEOs are traditionally a hard-to-reach sample due to their elite status. CEOs are time poor and normally well-guarded by their teams. This might explain why there is paucity of studies that seeks to interview CEOs. Second, many CEOs will not necessarily be gender-aware and as such they will not be change agents for gender equality. This might mean that

organisations are less willing to allow a researcher access to a CEO because she or he might say something that is politically incorrect.

We were able to overcome these challenges by contacting CEOs who have been singled out as supportive of gender equality. The CEOs interviewed for this research have lent their support to gender equality by signing Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), an initiative by UN Women and the UN Global Compact. In addition, CEOs who were in the lead researcher's network were contacted for an interview. They can also be expected to be knowledgeable about gender equality because the lead researcher has worked with them in that capacity. This means that the CEOs included in the sample largely saw themselves as change agents for gender equality.

During the sampling it was ensured that CEOs represented a range of industries as well as global locations. This meant that the sampling was reiterative and around 50 CEOs were contacted via email to participate in the research. 20 CEOs agreed to be interviewed of which five were women and 15 were men. 15 had signed the WEPs and five had not. The lead researcher interviewed 15 male and five female CEOs. The CEOs represented different sectors and global locations. Four companies were in telecommunications, four were professional service firms, three in information communication technologies, two in finance, two in the pharmaceutical industry, and one organisation each in energy, research, insurance, retail. The final organisation was a conglomerate. Eight organisations were in the European Economic Area, four in North America, four in Asia, three in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries and one in the Middle East. The majority of organisations were

multinational companies with four being small and medium sized businesses. The research findings were anonymised to protect the identities of the individuals and organisations and individuals were given pseudonyms.

The interviews were conducted and analysed in the spirit of discourse analysis based on Potter and Wetherell (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988). Discourse analysis in this version seeks to identify 'interpretative repertoires' which contain the common expressions and meanings used by individuals in talk (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988). Interpretative repertoires are common features of talk and reflect 'ready-made' units of sense-making that are deployed by individuals to construct a version of reality. These 'ready made' units are commonly accepted as how the world is. In contrast to other methods of qualitative analysis, in discourse analysis the aim is to identify how meaning is created in a specific context. Discourse analysis aims to identify interpretative repertoires that structure sense-making to make it possible to see what is articulated and what is not articulated. In this case discourse analysis was used to elucidate how the CEOs see their change agency for gender equality. Rather than being purely an instrument to analyse content, a discourse analysis can be employed to find common ways of talking about an issue, and in the case of this research, how leaders can support gender equality.

The interviews were on average 32 minutes in length with the longest being 50 minutes and the shortest 19 minutes, which excludes the introduction and consent gained at the beginning of the interview, which normally took around five to ten minutes. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and audio recorded. The

CEOs were asked a range of questions and for this article most answers came from the following questions: Which initiatives have worked well for your organisation? What else could be done to advance gender equality in your organisation? In those practices that you have described, can you tell me how leadership support matters? As the interviews were fluid, the questions were adapted to the flow of the interview. The material was described verbatim using a simplified form of the Jefferson system¹ by a professional transcription service and proof read by the first author. The material was then coded using the web application Dedoose. Rather than being purely inductive, the coding was based on the six practices that were identified in the literature. The practices identified in the literature were treated as commonly accepted ways - or in other words as interpretative repertoires - to talk about macro change agents gender equality. It was expected that the CEOs would draw on these interpretative repertoires during the interview because they are part of the common sense in this area. CEOs can be expected to be familiar with basic tenets of change management. The CEOs were supporters of gender equality which means that most of them will have worked with their specialist diversity and inclusion teams on how they as CEOs can lead change on gender equality, and most of the diversity and inclusion specialists will be familiar with some of the literature in the field. It is therefore a reasonable expectation that CEOs would draw on some of the elements identified in the literature when they conceptualise their change agency for gender equality, because it is the commonly accepted knowledge that discourse analysis seeks to identify.

At the same time, we also ensured that additional interpretative repertoires that were not captured in the literature could have expanded the coding structure. While

different interpretative repertoires or practices were substantiated and expanded through the analysis, there were no additional practices that could not be subsumed under existing practices. This shows that the practices identified in the literature review were covering most of the ways in which CEOs talked about their change agency for gender equality. The coding was inclusive meaning that segments could be assigned to different codes. We also checked that some interpretative repertoires were not specific to regions or gender, i.e. women and men drew on similar interpretative repertoires or interpretative repertoires were used across the globe.

One limitation of the research is that only CEOs who can be expected to be supportive of gender equality through their public commitment or work in this area were interviewed. Thereby the study is not representative of all CEOs. The study also only includes 20 CEOs of a much wider pool of CEOs who support gender equality. However the research can give insight on how CEOs, who make gender equality a priority, talk about what they do to support gender equality. The interviews were conducted in English, which means that some CEOs who do not feel comfortable in giving an interview in English might have been excluded. In addition, the study relies on telephone interviews, which means that visual clues are missing. Finally, we relied on interviews as spoken word and no conclusions can be drawn as to whether the CEOs actually do what they say they do. This is commonly accepted in discourse analysis where the focus is on understanding how interpretative repertoires are mobilised to construct a reality rather than making any statements about reality itself.

Macro Change Agents for Gender Equality

After exploring how the literature on senior leaders as change agents for gender equality, the analysis focuses on the empirical material on how CEOs conceptualise their own change agency. The literature suggested that macro change agents, such as CEOs, draw on practices that resonate with heroic leadership, whereas micro change agents use tempered radicalism. The analysis of the different units of sense-making - or interpretative repertoires - largely echoed the practices that were identified in the literature but often substantially added to them. The following analysis shows six ways of making sense of change agency in relation to gender equality, diversity and inclusion that the CEOs mobilised. Most interpretative repertoires were used by multiple CEOs showing the fluidity through which interpretative repertoires are mobilised. There were no clear patterns relating to gender and geography, which means that the interpretative repertoires were employed throughout the sample.

Developing Accountability

The first interpretative repertoire used related to developing accountability both externally and internally. The CEOs frequently constructed investor or client pressure as a motivator to take action on gender equality. There was also a concern for reputational damage with the wider business and society, and this risk could be mitigated for instance by the company's success in winning a prize for gender equality (one interviewee Bill mentioned this for instance). Here gender equality would be used for marketing and public relations purposes.

CEOs reflected the point often made in the literature that the public is the main source of external pressure for organisations on equality (Dobbin and Kalev, 2007):

Hugo: Looking at the supply chain side of the women's empowerment principles, they are being much more explicit in their requirements of us.

Hugo constructs pressure coming from the WEPs because they demand gender equality in the supply chain. Here the organisation is asked to change by an external institution and the organisation is under pressure to respond.

Adam: I think we need to force companies to change (...) investors have to play a role in that company CEO's have to play a role in that, err, search firms have to play a role in that, erm, the public and public pressure has to play a role in that.

In this rather general sounding statement, Adam lists potential pressure points that could force organisations to change but remains unspecific how he, as a CEO, is affected by this.

When the CEOs talked about internal accountability, they often constructed their own role of holding senior managers accountable for measures of success with regards to diversity:

Randall: We have to then when we're evaluating the business units, you know, pay attention of ((sic)) it if the women's views in the peoples survey are, you know, different than the men's views, then that ought to be a serious topic of discussion. U:m, if, if they're different and they're ignored when we do the office reviews, then we're just sending a message, oh this stuff doesn't matter anyhow. Um, and so it's a matter of, of measuring and holding accountable the, the women and men who lead the businesses to continue to make progress in all these dimensions.

Randall here talks about the responses of women to HR engagement surveys and also how to hold business leaders accountable to gender in their business units. The construction that

emerges is that the responsibility of managing gender equality is passed down from the CEO to managers.

Neena: All our leaders, regardless of which part of the business you run, (.) there is a very clear expectation that inclusion and diversity is very important. So if you take (.) an entity where there are zero women leaders, it becomes an explicit question that the group needs to answer, which is, you know, why do you not have women on your team?

Neena talks about how accountability for gender equality can be created in the chain of command with business unit leaders. If there are not enough women, the business unit leaders are requested to explain this. This in turn will probably mean that in the future the business unit managers might pay more attention to gender equality in their business units.

It is often claimed that boards should hold CEOs accountable for gender equality. However, this was not discussed by the CEOs. Instead Orella stated the following:

Orella: Yes, CEO per se, because CEO is also - let's say his duty among the, among the board members ((is)) to look after human resources, generally including gender diversity.

Orella here presents it as a duty of the CEO to report on gender diversity but does not mention the board holding the CEO accountable for gender equality. It is also interesting to note that she talks about the generic CEO as a man even though she herself is a woman CEO. This indicates that the implicit masculine norm that permeates much of business is also present in those who break the norm and are different themselves.

Another way the CEO constructed accountability was with working with headhunters:

Adam: make sure that there are women (.) that you bring to me to be interviewed for that job.

Asking headhunters to bring a gender-balanced slate of candidates is thus regarded as a good way to establish gender equality.

What is notable is that accountability for the CEOs largely translates into how they hold others accountable. They did not talk much about their own accountability such as how their boards hold them accountable, or how their compensation or bonus might be related to hitting certain gender targets. There is a rather vague idea of external pressure which the CEOs appear not to mobilise as a reason for them to change. Instead they talked of how they create accountability in others through asking for gender metrics or through gender balanced shortlists from headhunters. While delegating is undoubtedly a key aspect of what it means to be a CEO, it is notable that their own accountability is pushed into the background.

Building Ownership

One of the most frequently invoked interpretative repertoires by the CEOs in their support for gender equality concerned ownership. Compared to creating accountability as an external incentive, developing ownership is an intrinsic motivation, which seems to be highly valued by many interviewed CEOs.

This problem is illustrated by Trish:

Trish: So, it's a key principle that, that's just fundamentally been part, and it was driven, I mean, I would say, when we started six, seven years ago, our score was far, far lower when I took over the role. I mean, we had a very, very low erm score, and the issue had been for us to drive it, from a culture perspective, not to make it a particular exercise. You cannot say it's just a compliance thing, because we have to, and we had huge issues with white men in the business, who, especially in a technology environment like an ICT outsourcing organisation. You know, when you do a big deal with an organisation, you take over 200 or 300 employees, I would say 85-90% of those are white men. (.) So, you're set with that, dealing with that fear, and these are kind of guys, mid to late 40s, I mean, with a wealth of information and knowledge, but if you don't manage the process they become your worst enemies, but people, you know, you had to them buying it in the first place.

This talks about gender not being just compliance but it was instead about engaging white men who were the norm in the organisation to ensure that they understand the importance of gender equality. Trish talks about the fear of white men being replaced and for Trish it is key to mitigate this fear. This resonates with Kilian et al.'s work (2005) that identifies the discomfort people experience when they are dealing with people different from themselves but also a more general fear of being displaced. What Trish displays here is empathy with white men and as a woman CEO that is somewhat surprising because the intuitive association would be that a woman CEO is identifying with women.

She does indeed show awareness for women in this environment:

Trish: Because ((women)) carry the weight of just so many, you know, preconceived stereotypes with ((them)), and it's so much more challenging if it doesn't work.

Trish is cognizant of the fact that women are in a token position and the pressures this brings, and how women feel the need to be 'right' and overcompensate for being in a male-dominated environment.

Some CEOs also discussed the strategies they are using to engage others and build ownership such as visualising the underrepresentation of women in a company. An example used by Craig was taking pictures of the teams, which clearly illustrate the overrepresentation of men. Others create internal champions or advocates:

Bill: I couldn't have done it, er, er, alone. There is a, there is, er, I have 20 people in my staff and there is, you know, a lot of commitment from, er, from each one of them in, in moving the initiative down to their teams and, and, you know, intervening in cases where, you know, it was clear that, er, the women were not being considered or were not being hired. And, er, you know, just being advocates.

Bill talks about that the change effort in his company and how it is supported by his staff who pass the message down by being advocates or champions for the issue. Most CEOs talked extensively about how they gained buy-in on equality within their organisations, which also resonates with Kotter's (1996) leading change model. Like with accountability CEOs talked about building ownership rather in relation to others, and how their role as CEOs means that they are responsible for ensuring that others 'own' the issue.

Communicating

The interpretative repertoire around communication contains three rationales for gender equality: first, a business case, second, a commitment to fairness and third, a

personal commitment. CEOs appeared well trained in rehearsing these rationales for gender equality.

Adam elaborates on how business leaders, who understand the business imperative of fostering gender equality, “need to start (.) you know (.) erm, conveying that message because there's – you know, there's academic research that supports it but there's also now I think, there's sufficient experiential evidence that we really need to get that story out” (Adam). Furthermore, he explains how “dumb” it would be not to spread the story because “it would be like cutting off ((his)) right arm” (Adam). For Adam the business case is clear and just has to be communicated again and again.

Second, CEOs often communicate their commitment to fairness.

Fabio: I suppose, over and above all of that, you know, I think (.) = I think in any large organisation it's important that people work in the organisation believe that there is a sense of fairness in the way that people are treated and that's irrelevant of whether that's gender. But you know fairness between people and that there's a genuine meritocracy that exists which encourages people to pursue their careers.

The idea that Fabio mobilises is that fairness is a central part of what employees expect from the organisation. He states that this fairness means that gender is not considered and that everyone can have a successful career.

An emotional approach is to show commitment by telling a personal story that engaged a CEO in gender equality. This emotional appeal supports what Radall said. Radall carries a little piece of paper with him on which he depicts the world as 100 people of which 51 are men and 49 women (as a matter of fact he actually got up during the interview to fetch it from his coat). He tries to remind himself as well as others of how the world really looks like according to the statistics, unlike the imbalance found in most companies.

Radall: So here's what it says on my piece of paper. It says, one world, 100 people. If the entire population of the world was 100, 51 would be men, 49 would be women. And I, I often times pull this out of my pocket when I'm talking to groups. Because I want them to understand that the world doesn't look like what they're used to. (.)

Carrying this piece of paper around and literally pulling it out when he talks about the issue could be regarded as a strong commitment to gender equality by his employees.

In the interviews the CEOs were eloquent on the business case for gender equality. They drew on the notion of fairness to communicate their support for gender equality and illuminated their commitment to gender equality, diversity and inclusion through personal stories. Whereas accountability and ownership largely related to actions by others, communication was something that CEOs appeared to practice regularly to inspire others to take action.

Leading By Example

Another interpretative repertoire can best be summarised as leading by example. Many CEOs talked about supporting women by giving women visible positions. For instance, Trish talks about how they “chose four women as kind of poster women, in terms of role models, you know, for other women, in terms of senior managerial positions” (Trish). Speaking to women's groups was also seen as an effective way to support women as Neena explains. Neena said that her CFO appears at the women's events and talks to women that she “would not typically have any connections with (.) in a ((sic)) normal business as usual” (Neena).

Mortimer: We've asked our colleagues right across the business, a gender diverse, um, (.) mix of colleagues, but with a, with a, emphasis on our, er, female colleagues about which areas of the business work better, which are more con= conducive, which of the work practices and policies are more or less family or, or, or female, or, or gender friendly, etcetera.

Mortimer here talks about how speaking with colleagues can be an effective way to get feedback on what is working and what is not in relation to family friendliness in the organisation. Asking such questions and using this as an example in a research interview can be seen as a way through which CEOs lead by example.

Interviewees also discussed practices that sanction men when they display inappropriate or even misogynistic behaviour. One example was illustrated by Randall when responding to the criticism of a male employee about a mentoring

programme for women. Randall recounts how a male employee pops into the CEO's office without an appointment. The male employee complains that he feels disadvantaged because the mentoring programme is specifically dedicated to women to which the CEO replies:

Randall: 'I'm the managing partner of this office, I'm not exactly chopped liver.' Um, I said, 'did you have an appointment to see me?' He said no. I said, 'okay, so here you are, there's something that you're worried about, upset about, you have no appointment and you come walking right in my office to talk about it.' I said, 'the plain truth is that faced with the same circumstances, a young woman would not probably walk in my office, she would walk out of the firm.'

Randall used the example of putting men in their places as a way of dealing with sexist behaviour here to construct his daily practices as gender aware. He does that by describing himself as important ('not exactly chopped liver' here denotes being seen as undervalued) and calling out the privileges that men have when they complained about the extra support that women receive.

Leading by example also encapsulated role modelling specific behaviours and verbalising them:

Randall: I will never forget the story in one office where, er, this account team was talking about the fact that, you know, the partner on the job, who was a man at that time, used to sort of during some of their heavy times be leaving periodically at 4pm. And everyone on the team assumed he was going to another client to work with another client. And, um, this would happen a

couple of times a week. And, er, (.) when the facts were, this man was going to watch his daughter play soccer.

The example of a man leaving the office to see his daughter play soccer is used here to show, not only exemplary behaviour (leaving the office early for a private commitment), but also talking about it as a way to ensure that others know what the person is doing.

A similar way to talk about private commitment is used by Quincy.

Quincy: And what I said is, well, look guys, I want to be with my kids in the morning, so there is no question we are having internal meeting early morning or late evening. All internal meeting will be between 10am and 5pm.

The CEOs provided many examples of how they personally embedded gender equality in their organisations – both through actions and stories about those actions. Leading by example is an interpretative repertoire through which CEOs appear as active change agents for gender equality.

Initiating

Initiating is an interpretative repertoire that highlights how CEOs enact change agency through starting their programmes, campaigns and initiatives. CEOs talked about a whole range of initiatives their organisations were involved in to promote women and, in particular, processes around recruitment and promotion.

One commonly invoked idea is that women face particular challenges in forging a career:

Dianna: Um, also the- frankly the pyramid narrows very quickly HAHA, after a certain point in a career, and one could feel stuck or not moving forward. And more, more my observation is women at that point, er, that's when they all of a sudden choose to drop out and spend time with their family.

Here Dianna explains how the perceived scarcity of promotions presumably leads to women dropping out of work. Such statements were quite common and showed that the CEOs had reflected on the scarcity of women leaders which could be expected from the sample. Some like Randall used this insight to make change happen:

Randall: And so we began, you know, measuring, not just things like, you know, performance evaluations and promotions and compensation and what not, but drilling it back and measuring things like, you know, the percentage of, of hours assigned to priority clients. You know, we have sub sectors of clients that are priorities. And so looking at the client assignments early in a, a woman and a man's career was really helpful to ensuring that the right experiences were being generated to, to drive success. And so (.) so there are measures we look at across each of our business units, that, er, that track all of these things. You know, we're an accountancy-based firm, so we can measure things pretty darn well.

What Randall here talks about is a specific way of ensuring that women advance in their careers by being assigned to important client projects. Although it is not clear what role the CEO actually played in the process, through this story it appears that

he is very much aware of the processes through which women are disadvantaged and the steps required to overcome this.

Neena talks about how inequities in promotion processes are a central concern:

Neena: I think it's, it's got to be baked into the system. So, er, you know, er, so, what we do is every- when we have promotions, we look at all the candidates and we look at where we end up. So if there are three positions and there's twenty candidates, we look at who ends up in, er, in those slots for the three ((positions)). But it's reviewed with the, um, by the inclusion and diversity lead, to say, well, you know, three are- there are no diversity candidates in this group and there were diversity candidates in that pool that was considered, and why. So we sort of have an understanding. So that's part and parcel of every single role, evaluation and performance management process.

Neena constructs the performance management process as diversity-aware because it is questioned if there is a lack of diversity that transpires from the evaluation.

Many CEOs talked about asking search firms to provide gender-balanced slates of candidates (see above), which was used as a way to show how the recruitment process can be changed. Others like Bill and Stewart talked about the need for women on recruitment panels.

Stewart explains:

Stewart: What we have changed already, I've put a lot of emphasis on the fact that in each selection board there's at least- and we have usually I don't know, between four and six people in the selection board, that there is at least one woman in. So this I insisted ((on)). Because that again makes me- and then when I see on the shortlist other women and the man is taken, I explicitly ask if the board was unanimous. So they know that I look on these things.

Stewart suggests that a woman on a selection panel will support a woman applicant, which neglects group dynamics and their influence on decision-making processes but it is used here to argue that once a woman is on a panel the process must be gender equal.

Many of the CEOs talked at great length about the initiatives that their organisations have taken to create gender equality. While CEOs were eloquent on the subject, they did not critically question some of the initiatives they were supporting. Notably very few actually used the language of business based on figures and numbers to support their arguments. Instead initiating meant that each CEO had specific stories that showed the action their company was taking and they were constructed as successful.

Driving Culture Change

Another very commonly mobilised interpretative repertoire is that gender equality can only be achieved through organisational culture change or changes in the “eco-system” as Lorenzo called it.

Hugo: I don't think (.) that driving change in relation to (.) erm, gender or diversity more broadly, is very different to driving any kind of change in general organisations; particularly if it's sort of, deep cultural change as opposed to systems change.

Hugo here likens change in regard to gender to cultural change processes in general. Those change processes will take time.

Jerry: At the same time, we also understand that this is a journey, this is a marathon, this is a journey which we continue to, um, take.

By constructing gender change as a marathon rather than a sprint, Jerry also sets the time horizon for the change. Immediate change is unlikely to happen and gender equality is constructed as a difficult problem to solve. However the statement can also be read as that any action on gender equality now is futile due to the long time horizon required for real change to happen.

Mortimer states the following:

Mortimer: I think when the conversation is - often happens in businesses it tends to be, how do I address the issue at the top level? Er, my belief is for it to be sustainable, er, gender balance and equality in, in, in a business, you

need to actually - I'm not saying you shouldn't do stuff at the top, but you need to embed it right into the, er, heart of the organisation.

By constructing sustainably change coming from the bottom up rather than top down, he also delegates responsibility of the change to others.

One of the concerns of some CEO was their legacy.

Trish: So, I'm moving out of that active day-to-day management, I've appointed a new MD and, I think that the concern or the issue for me is, hopefully, we've created enough of a culture, you know, where that is important and where that approach, and look and you, how do you enable all people, especially women, especially previously disadvantaged individuals to come into the mainstream, and into the workplace, and you actively have to do it with policies, with programmes, for example, our leadership development programme has a bias to say that we have to have a proportion of women in there. We have to have this, that's one way of feeding it in, but it's, it's more, it's sensitising the current executive to the issues that women often face, or black people face in the workplace. And to constantly have that conversation.

So, I think that's the one thing.

What Trish expresses here is that she has attempted to create a legacy of gender equality in the organisation that should outlive her own role.

By seeing changes in relation to gender as a culture change issue, the CEOs construct gender equality as a long-term issue. This also means that immediate gender equality is unlikely but they did not give a specific time horizon by when

cultural change for gender equality might have taken hold in the organisation. This long-term view possibly also explains why there were few concrete examples of actual changes in regard to gender equality. Thereby the CEOs minimise the expectation that gender equality will happen on their watch. However one potential drawback of this argumentation is that it might give rise to gender fatigue (Kelan, 2009): gender equality is discussed as relevant but not followed up through action which means that people might grow tired of discussing the issue in spite of a lack of progress.

Discussion

The practices identified in the literature strongly resonated with interpretative repertoires used by the CEOs in the interviews. This as such is not surprising because it can be presumed that the diversity and inclusion specialists who work with the CEO are aware of the literature and have used that knowledge to work with their CEOs. In addition, much of this seems to resonate with standard leading change literature, which would have been covered in many leadership development courses attended by CEOs. Of particular interest are the discursive effects that the interpretative repertoires have on how CEOs construct their involvement in gender equality efforts.

The first interpretative repertoires on accountability and ownership construct the CEO as someone who delegates responsibility for gender equality, diversity and inclusion to others through their chain of command. This is a traditional conception of heroic leadership where the leader follows a traditional command-and-control style. In

regard to communication and leading by example, the CEO illustrated their personal change agency and how they understand some of the central issues on gender equality and try to challenge them. Here the CEO as the leader of the organisation is a role model for others who are encouraged to emulate his or her behaviours. The CEO as a leader is therefore a shining example to others on what role model behaviours are desired for gender equality change. Through initiating a culture change, the CEOs were able to show that their organisations have started a journey towards gender equality and they listed their initiatives. However they also set expectations of change to happen in a long-term rather than in the short-term. While this could be read as delegating responsibility, it is probably also a good assessment that change towards gender equality will take longer than many short-term initiatives presume. At the same time such a discursive move can be read as relinquishing responsibility and power. This clearly indicates that CEOs see their own change agency as aligned with key tenets of heroic leadership. The leader says or does something and the organisation follows.

What appears is a construction of leaders that are both heroic as well as perhaps, surprisingly, disempowered. Many of the ways the CEOs used interpretative repertoires supported traditional forms of heroic leadership for taking action by initiating change and by commanding others to make changes happen. In this sense, they perform the desired leadership attributes that the organisation seems to assign to them: one of power and authority. This is also in line with the literature that expects this heroic leadership from top managers. Yet at the same time, the CEOs appear almost disempowered and with limited control over change in their organisation. They therefore state that cultural change takes time. They realise that they need a team of

supporters to make change happen. They also seem to realise that the initiatives they celebrate will not lead to immediate effects and that even their role modelling of desired behaviours might not inspire others to emulate them. The CEOs appear to realise that the interpretative repertoires supporting a heroic view of leadership might not be as effective.

The powerlessness that many of the CEOs displayed in light of change towards gender equality is indicative of the fact that interpretative repertoires around heroic leadership are limited in their potential for change agency for gender equality. Instead it appears that the type of leadership required has to be more collaborative and engaging, which would necessitate subject positions that are more aligned with post-heroic leadership and tempered radicalism. The organisation has to be convinced that gender equality is something positive not by just following the leader but by engaging the entire organisation in change towards gender equality. This does not require a heroic leadership style but something that is more in line with post-heroic leadership (Fletcher, 2004) where engagement is built through collaboration. Most CEOs leave this type of change to micro change agents such as diversity and inclusion professionals who draw on tempered radicalism (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) to make changes happen. Such tempered radicalism draws on passion and the feeling of being treated unfairly due to not belonging to the majority group (Meyerson and Scully, 1995).

This presumes that CEOs actually want to play a role in gender equality. It could be argued that external and internal pressures lead to CEOs to articulate support for

gender equality but that they have limited motivation in actually advancing gender equality. However many of the CEOs would talk passionately about their support for gender equality from a personal perspective. As we have argued elsewhere (Kelan and Wratil, 2014), many of the CEOs cite their personal experience as a main motivating factor such as having a daughter. Other CEOs talked about their own experience of being different from the norm, based on geographical difference for instance, and how this motivates them to make their organisation more inclusive. Yet others spoke of an epiphany moment when they read a book and suddenly realised that women's equality is central for human development. This is suggestive of the fact that CEOs are not only paying lip service to gender equality or engage in a form of window dressing to appear as progressive but that many of the CEOs had a strong personal commitment to gender equality.

It also questions that tempered radicalism requires a different embodiment to the norm. One might presume that women who are part of a minority group are more inclined towards using interpretative repertoires aligned with tempered radicalism. However this research does not support this. As a matter of fact, we could not detect in the material interpretative repertoires that were used more by women or more by men. This might be explained by the fact that all CEOs were supportive of gender equality and as such had reflected on gender inequalities but this knowledge did not reside specifically in the women CEOs. The concept that a different embodiment is required to draw on interpretative repertoires that resonate with tempered radicalism might therefore be misleading. As a matter of fact de Vries (2015) argues that men can be better change agents for gender equality because it is often presumed that women only support gender equality to advance their personal interests. As such,

being a change agent who embodies difference can be perceived as less effective. Equally it can be argued that those belonging to the majority group should be able to draw on interpretative repertoires relating to tempered radicalism by making a passionate case for why change on gender equality is needed. A key problem with the interpretative repertoires that CEOs draw on to make sense of their own change agency was, however, that their personal support for gender equality was rarely translated into what they do as CEOs to support gender equality. While the CEOs recognised that their approach infused with heroic leadership might be less effective, they did not speculate on why this might be and what other forms of leadership, such as more post-heroic forms, might be more suitable. However the analysis of the interpretative repertoires suggests that CEOs can mobilise interpretative repertoires that chime with post-heroic leadership and tempered radicalism but rarely do so when they talk about their own change agency.

The research has shown that heroic leadership is the default position that CEOs occupy and mobilise with regards to gender equality. It is common sense that gender equality accepted without questioning and as such this reflects the function of the interpretative repertoire. However the research has also shown that CEOs themselves recognise that this approach might not be as effective. Other interpretative repertoires drawing on post-heroic leadership and tempered radicalism might be more suited for supporting change toward gender equality. If CEOs share their personal support for gender equality in a more passionate manner, they might be in a better position to convince their organisation to collaborate and move towards greater gender equality. As CEOs are at the top of the organisational hierarchy, they can probably be much more radical than many diversity and inclusion professionals

while they still need to address many of the fears that the white male majority might hold. Being part of this majority group might actually be a powerful way to achieve the latter. This suggests that if senior leaders want to be change agents for gender equality, traditional notions of heroic leadership are less suitable; instead these senior leaders could show post-heroic leadership. This post-heroic leadership can be displayed by incorporating some of the radicalism, passion and pragmatism that many tempered radicals display. Instead of confining tempered radicalism to micro change agents, the article thereby suggests that that tempered radicalism can be used by macro change agents as part of post-heroic leadership approaches to support gender equality.

Conclusion

This article asked how CEOs conceptualise change agency for gender equality. While micro change agents are often presumed to be tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully, 1995), macro change agents are regularly seen as heroic leaders (Kirton et al., 2007). The research shows that CEOs draw on interpretative repertoires that chime with the idea of the CEO as a heroic leader for gender equality. Leaders are required to delegate and to role model desired behaviours, which can be expected from CEOs in a position of power and authority. Yet how the CEOs talked about achieving gender equality seemed to require collaborative and convincing forms of leadership which has more in common with post-heroic leadership (Fletcher, 2004). This form of post-heroic leadership also entails much of the passion that tempered radicals regularly display. It has therefore been suggested that macro change agents like CEOs, should incorporate some of the passion that tempered radicals display in

their attempts to change the status quo. Due to their position at the top of the hierarchy, CEOs are more likely to make such changes possible and that tools and tactics provided by tempered radicals can be useful here. The article contributes an understanding to the field that CEOs conceptualise their change agency in form of heroic leadership but should instead foreground the passion that many experience for gender equality. This would ensure that tools and tactics that tempered radicals use are also useful for CEOs who want to engage in post-heroic leadership to inspire others to create gender equality.

Further research should explore how macro and micro change agents can work together to create gender equality in organisations. Rather than just looking at the usual suspects of diversity and inclusion professionals, it would be good to expand the research to potential actors such as middle managers. Many of the initiatives the CEOs talked about were targeted at middle managers yet there is very limited research on how middle managers, women and men, support or hinder gender equality. Moreover, post-heroic leadership means that those in hierarchical positions of power are not only able to enact leadership attributes required for gender equality change but that those attributes are distributed amongst other actors (Fletcher, 2004). This makes it relevant to look at middle managers and also front line employees. It should also be noted that gender equality can rarely be attributed to one group and is often a result of an interaction of different actors (Kelan, 2017). It would also be interesting to explore how others perceive CEOs and if they actually influence members of their organisation to see if they, for instance, talk about gender equality. Another potential area of research might be to explore how CEOs who have not publicly supported gender equality would respond to similar questions, as one

can presume that different interpretative repertoires are mobilised in a group that is less committed to gender equality. The article has explored the conceptualisations of macro change agents as beyond traditional notions of heroic leadership and instead suggests that senior leaders need to display post-heroic leadership in combination with tempered radicalism to work toward gender equality.

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Acknowledgement

The research has been supported by the Innovation Fund of the Department of Management at King's College London, the Women's Empowerment Principles, a joint initiative of UN Women and the UN Global Compact, and KPMG. The writing of the article was facilitated by Elisabeth Kelan's British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship (MD130085). Due to the ethically sensitive nature of the research, no participants consented to their data being retained or shared. We would like to thank Karsten Jonsen, Darren Thomas Baker, Scarlett Brown and Alison Collins as well as the anonymous reviewers and associate editors Kate Sang and Alexia Panayiotou for their invaluable comments on the article.

¹ The transcription system is an adapted and simplified version of the Jefferson system (.) is a short notable pause, (0.9) an exactly timed longer pause (more than 5 seconds, here 9 seconds), (inaud) inaudible, (text) transcriber clarification on unclear parts of tape, ((text)) annotation of non-verbal activity or supplemental information, (...) material deliberately omitted, '...' direct speech reported by interviewee, wor-sharp cut off, abrupt halt or interruption of utterance, wo:rd extreme stretching of preceding sound, prolongation of a sound, HAHA loud laughter, HEHE laughter, TEXT strong emphasis or loud volume of speech, ^Text^quieter than usual, [...] start and end point of overlapping talk, = break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance, <text> indicates that the speech was delivered much slower than usual for the speaker, >text< indicates that the speech was delivered much faster than usual for the speaker, (hhh) audible exhalation, (.hhh) audible inhalation.