



# All talk and no action? Making change and negotiating gender equality in Swedish forestry

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyses how women professionals make sense of change with regard to gender (in)equality in the Swedish forestry sector. While most participants described an increased focus on gender equality in the sector, perceptions of change varied. Descriptions emphasising progress observe change in the sense that an increased focus on gender equality has meant that explicit sexism is no longer tolerated. Descriptions emphasising stability, however, consider that this focus has not allowed for a transformation of the sectors embedded in masculine structures and cultures. The study thus points to a discrepancy between what organisations ‘do’ and what they ‘say they do’, which sheds light on the various forms of power, conflict and resistance involved in the constitutions of gender equality. To truly promote gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector, researchers and policy-makers must continue to make visible, address and challenge the complex practices and processes involved in organisational transformation.

## 1. Introduction

Forestry has traditionally been one of the most gender-segregated labour forces in Sweden. The major transformations that forestry has undergone (i.e., mechanisation and academization) since the middle of the nineteenth century (cf. Ager, 2014), have often been put forward as a potential opening for increased gender balance. However, the pace has been slow, and the remaining gender segregation is described as worrying by forestry companies, researchers and public authorities, mostly in terms of hampered attractiveness and ability to recruit (and retain) the individuals with the right competences according to research (Lidestav et al., 2019; SweGov, 2004). More recently, similar claims and prospects of increased gender equality and diversity have been linked to the concept and rise of the bioeconomy (Baublyte et al., 2019; Lidestav et al., 2019; Sanz-Hernández et al., 2022), although the social dimension and implications are very unclear (Ranacher et al., 2020).

In the Swedish context, over approximately the past 20 years, various strategic efforts have been made to promote gender equality and improve the gender balance within the forest sector. In 2000, the Nordic Council of Ministers adopted its first gender equality strategy for agriculture and forestry (SweGov, 2004). A few years later, it was again noted that women and men do not have the same opportunities in the

sector in the government bill titled “A forest policy in line with the times” (SweGov, 2007). In the last decade, efforts from the sector have increased, sparked by the national strategy for gender equality in forestry from the Swedish Ministry of Rural Affairs (SweGov, 2011). This strategy emphasized the business case of gender equality by framing it as a key factor for the sector to be profitable and sustainable as well as an attractive employer for a broader recruitment base (Holmgren and Arora-Jonsson, 2015; Johansson, 2020). Many forestry organisations have implemented initiatives for gender equality, and the body of knowledge, from a research perspective, has steadily grown (e.g. Andersson et al., 2018). Thus, practical measures for gender equality are considered necessary, according to the sector, government and research, and numerous efforts have been undertaken, including those focused on, e.g., education, anti-discrimination, and gender mainstreaming (Wide and Högvall Nordin, 2019).

In addition to top-down initiatives, gender equality in forestry has also been increasingly advocated for by forest owners, professionals and students (e.g. Grubbström and Powell, 2020; Andersson and Lidestav, 2016). In 2017–2018, as part of the #MeToo movement, more than 100 testimonies by women professionals and students in the forestry sector who had suffered sexual harassment experiences were published on Instagram under #slutavverkat (clear-felled) (Johansson et al., 2018).

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#slutavverkat propelled intensified discussions on gender equality in many forestry organisations and changes in forester training at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Grubbström and Powell, 2020). One additional consequence of #slutavverkat was the establishment of *Nätverket för yrkesverksamma kvinnor i skogsbranschen* (NYKS), a national network for professional women and nonbinary people in forestry, aiming to provide a platform for promoting a more gender-equal forestry sector. This differs from previous established women's forest networks in Sweden (Andersson and Lidestav, 2016; Laszlo Ambjörnsson, 2021), and elsewhere in the Global North (Brandth et al., 2004; Larasatie et al., 2022; Brandth et al., 2015), based on that these more often organise forest owning and professional women jointly with a primarily focus on competence development. Since the start, NYKS has functioned as a form of grassroots movement, pushing the industry to take a stand against gender inequalities, for example, by offering trainings and calling out sexist practices and activities such as a women-objectifying calendar by a forest machine producer – in order to later produce a calendar together with the same machine producer. Since 2021, they annually present the current ratio between the number of men and women in forestry, focusing on company board representatives and timber buyers within the campaign *People in the forest* (Folk i skog). Organized mainly in local groups and on Facebook, it comprises more than 500 members.

The seemingly increased focus on gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector calls for an exploration of the ways in which it has (or not) intervened with the sector's and organisations' traditional interconnections of men and structures and notions of masculinity (Johansson et al., 2019; Johansson, 2020; Johansson et al., 2022). The various gender equality strategies and initiatives within the Swedish forest sector, especially of the last decade, at both the sectorial and organisational levels, have had some documented effects (e.g. Wide and Högvall Nordin, 2019). However, the extent and nature of these effects, as well as their implications for gender equality discourses, the space for change and resistance of the sector, are partly unexplored. The basis of the NYKS organisation, as well as being situated within the #MeToo movement, provides a fruitful perspective on the experience and issues of gender (in)equalities and the related measures and initiatives within the Swedish forest sector. The aim of this article is to analyse how women professionals themselves describe and make sense of change with regard to gender (in)equality in the Swedish forestry sector. "Change" is here used to point to continuums of perceived practices and meanings, ranging, on the one hand, from stability/consistency to change/transformation and, on the other hand, from a perceived increase to a perceived decrease in gender equality.

In-depth exploration of the development of gender equality within the Swedish forest sector is further motivated by the different notions and strategies of gender equality that reflect different notions on gender (Squires, 2005: 366), which inevitably privilege particular conceptions of gender relations (Squires, 2008), interests (Hobson, 2003) and groups of women (Franceschet, 2003). Moreover, gender equality is embedded not only within specific organisational contexts and power relations (McCabe, 2019; Kelan, 2018; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998) but also within the organisation and its routines and practices (Wahl and Höök, 2007; Hudson and Rönnblom, 2007; Rönnblom, 2005; Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009). This results in a tendency of gender equality to be "bent", "stretched" and filled with specific meanings in relation to dominant discourses, rationalities and interests (Mayes and Pini, 2014; Guerrier et al., 2009; Verloo, 2001; Squires, 2005). One example is the "business case of gender equality" (e.g. Johansson and Ringblom, 2017). In this case, gender equality strategies and initiatives in organisations not only constitute and potentially negotiates specific meanings of gender and equality but also constitutes the organisation itself. In fact, all forms of organisational change build on a specific meaning and interpretation of both existing and future organisational activities (Tsoukas, 2005). This implies a negotiation of how to understand and practice change (Lansu et al., 2020; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017) as

well as "challenging and rewriting organisational discourse" (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 701). For organisational change relating to gender equality, a key aspect of such meaning-making and interpretation concerns whether gender structures and notions at work are perceived to be constructed outside the boundaries of organisations or constituted in relation to its process and practices (Acker, 1990; Abrahamsson, 2009). As there often exist parallel meaning-makings and interpretations of the organisation, its need for change and its relation to gendered structures and notions, negotiation of organisational futures are often closely entwined with various forms of resistance (e.g. Wahl and Höök, 2007). In fact, according to Acker (2000), resistance to gender equality is inevitable due to different and contradictory goals and methods of interventions and organisations that tend to be in play. Practices of resistance include acts that can both work to resist change perceived as not welcomed (e.g. Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Callerstig, 2016; Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013) or promote change perceived as not happening or happening too slowly (e.g. Thomas and Davies, 2005; van den Brink and Benschop, 2018).

## 2. Method and material

To analyse women's meaning-making of change with regard to gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector, we draw on 102 questionnaire responses collected during spring 2020. The questionnaire was circulated as an online survey via the help of the NYKS network. A link to the survey was posted on the Facebook network page and distributed by email to all members of the network. Circulating the questionnaire via NYKS enabled us to obtain a sufficient response rate, but the methodology is likely to shape the research process from additional aspects. Given the network's explicit aim of contributing to improved gender equality in forestry, choosing this as the population of the investigation likely means that we obtained responses from people particularly interested in gender equality. In this sense, the data are not analysed as representing women in forestry in general, but particularly women with a special interest in the issue.

The questionnaire was designed to explore the participants' meaning-making of change with regard to gender equality in Swedish forestry. The qualitative focus emphasising meaning-making and perceptions meant that most questions were open-ended, asking participants to describe and reflect on issues relating to gender equality based on their experiences. To contextualize the descriptions provided by participants, we designed the questionnaire to also include six questions mapping the demographics of the participants, such as age, type of education, profession, and type of employer. These questions were designed to contextualize the descriptions and did not include an ambition to generalize or quantitatively measure "how many" or "how often".

The results show that, in terms of educational background (or current area of studies), a vast majority of participants had earned a Master's of Science in Forestry (41–6%) or a Bachelor's of Science in Forestry (22.8%), or where studying to do so. Other recurring educational backgrounds included agricultural college and studies in biology/ecology. 41.2% of the participants were younger than 30 years old, 36.3% were aged 31–40, 12.7% were 41–50 years old and 9.8% were more than 50 years old. Regarding employment length, 19.6% were still students, 37.3% had worked in the sector less than five years, 19.6% had 6–10 years of experience in the sector, and 24.5% had more than eleven years' experience. In terms of seniority, 28.7% of the participants stated that they had managerial responsibilities. The largest group of participants (25.5%) were employed by a private company with more than 100 employees, 14.7% were employed by forest owners' associations and 8.8% were employed by a Swedish authority (e.g., the Swedish Forest Agency). The remaining participants who were not studying were employed by private companies with 11–99 employees (6.9%), private companies with up to 10 employees (6.9%), state governments (6.9%), universities (5.9%) and "other" (5.9%). Altogether, the demographics of

the participants indicated that the responding population was relatively young, currently enrolled in forestry education, or had less than five years of work experience. At the same time, one-fourth of the participants had more than 10 years of work experience in the sector, and 22.5% were 41 years old and older.

### 2.1. Analytical framework

When analysing the participants' description and meaning-making, "gender equality" was approached as a potentially empty and contested concept that is composed of and situated within specific organisational relations, logics, structures and contexts (Magnusson et al., 2008). Rather than having a fixed meaning, discourses of gender equality and the organisation itself influence (and is influenced by) employees and managers in their "everyday walk and talk" at work (Wahl, 2014: 132), which not only has the capacity to provide space for change but also to close off such potential (cf. Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Andersson and Keskitalo, 2018). A central aspect that tends to condition change is the representation of the problem at hand and the role and responsibilities of individuals and organisations (Calás et al., 2014; Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013). The processual characteristics of gender equality strategies and policies (Bacchi and Eveline, 2009) also continue during implementation. In practice, the goals and motives gender equality strategies and initiatives often have a low level of clarity, filled with taken-for-granted and/or implicit assumptions and meanings (cf. Daly, 2005) at both the individual and organisational levels. Nevertheless, how the problem of gender equality is represented and made to have meaning matters as it also, consciously or unconsciously, shapes the design and implementation of measures (cf. Bacchi, 2017).

Our analyses of respondents' meaning of gender (in)equality in the Swedish forestry sector, thus focused on the various forms of power, conflicts and resistance involved (Mouffe, 2005; Acker, 2000). On the one hand, in this process, language is not just "talk" but a constitutive part of organisational discursive change (Rose, 1999: 28). On the other hand, articulating awareness and commitment to, for example, increased gender equality, does not automatically translate into actions (Wahl and Höök, 2007). According to Ahmed (2006), "institutional speech acts" such as proclaiming that we, organisation X is anti-racist, is, in fact, "nonperformative"; that is, they do not do what they say. By not actually committing the organisation to an action that leads to anti-racism, such proclamations can, on the contrary, work to further reproduce white privilege. If there is a discrepancy between what organisations 'do' and what they 'say they do', as is often the case (Ahmed, 2007), two forms of resistance can be said to be at play: first, resistance in the form of a failure to take actions and promote change, and second, resistance in the form of calling out and addressing the absence of actions (Wahl and Höök, 2007). Resistance, thus, comes in many forms and across organisational hierarchies and builds on particular ways of interrupting both the relationship between gender and the organisations and the gender equality measurements at hand (cf. Johansson et al., 2019).

Based on the analytical framework, each author first carefully read and coded the data independently. During the second stage, the authors worked together to triangulate the preliminary codes into common themes, describing commonalities as well as variations and contradictions. In terms of commonalities, most participants described that there was an increased focus on issues related to gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector. However, the specific ways in which this increased focus on gender equality has (or not) changed forestry organisations are described by the participants with greater variation. The differences in perspectives on gender and gender equality in the sector did not in any evident way relate to the demographic difference among the participants. Rather, it related to the ways in which the participants made sense of their gendered experiences and their perceptions of change regarding gender equality in the sector. Drawing upon the theoretical conception of change and resistance (e.g. Wahl and Höök,

2007), the analysis was able to distinguish between two different but interconnected forms of meaning-making, including both overlaps and contradictions, of the development of gender equality in Swedish forestry. In the next section, findings are presented under two separate but interrelated themes: *emphasising change and positive effects* and *emphasising stability and the absence of change*.

## 3. Findings

The participants' meaning-making of gender equality in Swedish forestry was not uniform but included both variations and contradictions. While the general discourse on gender equality tends to articulate women as the main agents of change, both as individual subjects and in number (e.g. Johansson et al., 2020), not all women acknowledge that there are gendered structures and cultures that subordinate women. Included in the data were a few articulations that resisted the idea of today's forestry sector as having particular problems with gender equality that are in need of being addressed. Dominating the analysed data, however, were descriptions and meaning-making that in different ways suggested that there is an increased focus on gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector and a need to further promote gender equality. While such descriptions seemed to share many commonalities, they also included differences, especially in regard to articulating the perceived changes taking place. To deepen the understanding of the assumptions and logics that guided such meaning-making and the negotiation of gender equality it included, this chapter focuses on the various descriptions of the development of gender equality: the first emphasising the changes taking place, and the second, emphasising stability and the lack of change.

### 3.1. Emphasising change and positive effects

Many of the participants described increased awareness of and attention to gender equality as one of the major changes that has taken place in recent years. The analysed data describe this both in terms of increased awareness of the problems that exist in the sector and of concepts and knowledge of gender equality more generally. When asked to reflect upon the recent changes in gender equality in forestry, one participant stated:

It is an industry that is now realizing that problems exist. Maturity has slowly grown since #slutavverkat. Norms is now a concept that is commonly understood in my organisation! I do not have to inform my colleagues about gender equality all the time! I do not have to explain to everyone why diversity is important.

(31–40 years old, large private company, Forester, 6–10 years in forestry)

The participant describes a perceived change at her workplace where discussions on diversity and gender equality are now an integral part of the everyday life of the organisation, at least in conversation. Similarly, the possibility to say no is perceived to have grown:

Many have opened their eyes to it, and it has become more okay to say no. Before, you only had to accept "four letter words" and such, but it is not as okay today.

(31–40 years old, forest owner association, Bachelor of Science in forestry, less than 5 years in forestry)

The participant indicates that one effect of this increased focus on discussing issues of gender equality is that there seems to have opened discursive space to oppose and take a stand against overt sexism in the form of jokes or comments. It has become more acceptable, and perhaps even expected, to say no.

Other descriptions emphasise that change describes, in different ways, how gender equality is now on the forestry agenda. These observations often frame it as related to "increased attention", both within

the organisations and its surroundings. Repeated in the data are also how the increased attention, in particular, relates to the #slutavverkat, #MeToo and the establishment of the NYKS-network. What this may mean in practice is described by one participant, emphasising how the increased attention directed to gender equality during her years as a forestry student has made the issue more mainstream and normalised. While in the beginning of her studies, “more people perceived it as a provocative and limited issues (for ‘difficult feminists’)”, today, the majority accept it as important. The same person says that:

I sense that today it is more okay to talk about gender equality issues with your classmates, co-workers, in your team and with your boss compared to when I first started studying. Now, it’s no longer okay to simply disregard [gender equality]. When I started studying, I was tip toeing around the issue to get people to listen to what I said instead of being caught up by the fact that I mentioned words such as “gender equality”. I don’t know how much has changed in practice, but it feels good to be able to talk about gender equality without having to be afraid of being “judged” for it when you are in a subordinate power position (such as during individual meetings with your boss).

(Under 30 years old, forester student)

Described in the extract is how before, “gender equality” constituted a word that was best to avoid explicitly articulating if you wanted people to listen to what you had to say. Today, gender equality has become a possible topic of conversation that can no longer simply be ignored. While she also says that she is not sure how much has changed “in practice”, she emphasises that it “feels good” to be able to talk about gender equality without risking reprisals. One possible interpretation is that while before, talking about gender equality came with the risk of being seen as a “difficult feminist”, but this has changed during recent years to some extent.

Recurring in the data are how recent changes in forestry in terms of a “change in the wind” have made it more “correct” and “trendy” to talk about and promote gender equality, compared to before when it was met with “sighs”, “hostility” or simply “ignored”. One participant said that when she started working in the forestry sector ten years ago, the lack of women in the industry or in the organisations was mainly perceived as a PR problem. She says:

It gets better (even if it is not simple). When I started on the local union board eight years ago and we tried to argue from the perspective of gender equality, nobody understood where we were coming from. Such an argument never got us anywhere. Today, gender equality is an aspect to count on in every situation. I can’t say that it is in the top of mind for everybody, but to not even consider it is embarrassing. Additionally, it is a more natural part of the agenda, both locally and at the managerial level. However, it is still women’s issues that are perceived to be by and for women and that are best advocated for by women.

(31–40 years old, large private company, forester, 6–10 years in forestry)

Described in the extract is, on the one hand, a type of change during which issues of gender equality have become part of the agenda, to the extent that failing to consider gender equality is embarrassing. On the other hand, she also describes that gender equality remains perceived as a “women’s issue”. Hence, this suggests that while gender equality has become a focus, it is a particular form of gender equality with an emphasis on women rather than on organisational issues.

This theme has made evident how emphasising the changes taking place requires a certain way of interpreting both the industry and its problems, as well as the gender equality interventions implemented in the sector. These both emphasise change related to specific initiatives and improvements, but also change related to the process of solving these issues. This could be understood both as optimism and as a way to

assign value to the initiatives implemented. Highlighting increased awareness can also be understood as a way to emphasise and assign responsibility. To a certain extent, this could push awareness as a prerequisite for action. However, this responsibility seems, according to some of the participants, to often be assigned to women based on their experiences of and interest in combating gender inequalities. Drawing on the data, the specific meanings and interpretations of gender equality constitute an object of resistance that pushes further efforts based on alternative meanings of change and gender equality.

### 3.2. Emphasising stability and absence of change

Narratives expressing a more pessimistic perception stressed, instead, the perceived status quo in relation to the gendered terms of the sector and the perceived lack of practical, concrete actions taken in regard to gender equality as well as emphasising the stability and persistence of gender inequality.

Descriptions in the empirical material acknowledged that while gender equality is now advocated for in words, it does not necessarily translate into actions. Put forward by such meaning-making is how testimonies of gender inequality are understood as something entwined in the dominating structures and cultures of forestry that, despite the increased focus on gender equality, remains uncontested and unchallenged. Related to the questions of how gender equality has changed in recent years in forestry, one participant emphasises the following:

Hard to say. Feels like many managers are talking about gender equality, but what happens? It is not described where we are and where we are going - and how we get there. Just that we should work in a gender equal way. Then, no change takes place.  
(31–40 years old, forest owner association, degree in economics, less than 5 years in forestry)

Articulated in the extract is a perceived distinction between, on the one hand, (managers’) talk about gender equality as something that should be part of what they do and, on the other hand, the lack of both an explicit definition of the problems (current solutions) or future vision. Talking about gender equality does not necessarily mean that management in organisations listens to experiences and perspectives that challenge the organisational self-image, as one of the informants points out:

It is difficult, they (organisational management) want to open this up for discussion, but they don’t listen; when you then raise the issue or start discussing, they get in a defensive position against the issues we raise and do not see the problems. The norms are so strong, and it is so clear when we are discussing. They employ women but do nothing to make us stay, to retain us. They say that we must get more women employed by the forest industry. We point out that the problem is not to hire women but to retain women in the industry, but they do not even want to listen to it. They think they are right!  
(Under 30 years old, middle-sized private company, Bachelor of Science in forestry, less than 5 years in forestry)

What is suggested here is that the organisational approach to gender equality does not include being self-reflexive or addressing workplace norms; instead, gender equality is perceived as something that can be added as a side stream to organisational practices and processes rather than allowing gender equality to alter said practices and processes. Change is mainly implemented by employing women. Similar meaning-making was also proposed by another participant:

It is hopeful to see that there are many initiatives that draw attention to gender equality issues, e.g., NYKS. Then again, I think the approach is in line with a classic forest sector agenda, gender equality is implemented to achieve even numbers but organisational norms that reward men are not questioned to the same extent; but it feels more like we should all be adapted to the same norm.



(Under 30 years old, forester student)

According to the participants, gender equality work is now focused and practised through various initiatives but does not necessarily imply challenging norms; instead, it encompasses an understanding of gender equality as a means to even out the numerical gender imbalance. This could be understood as “an increased focus on gender equality” has become part of, or could be included in, the dominant forest norm, but without challenging the gendered basis and practices of the norm. This is partly facilitated by framing gender equality as a numerical gender imbalance and focusing actions on attractiveness and recruiting women. Although “talk” is emphasized as a positive change that has the potential to open space for additional change, “talk” also constitutes an “object of resistance” in relation to strategies, actions and measures.

The lack of change is described not only by the respondents as a lack of actions or initiatives but also in terms of resistance in various forms. Given the increased awareness and focus on gender equality, the space for active resistance to related work and initiatives seems to decrease depending on context. Instead, the participants highlight the passive resistance that is often manifested in a lack of engagement, interest, or knowledge, which within organisational processes and practices contribute to negotiating change by undermining the relevance of the issue and, to a certain extent, actions and measures. One participant described experiences of resistance to gender equality as follows: “It feels like everybody agrees when issues of gender equality are addressed, but when it all comes down, few actually do something”. Another participant similarly described that “Although most support gender equality in general, I sense that when it comes down to it, the brave, inclusive, decisions that may be needed do not happen, like in the appointment of influential positions”. It is also described that resistance, both active and passive, is harder to identify, call out and confront due to the increased consensus on gender equality.

According to the participants, the forms and extent of resistance to gender equality vary among different contexts and organisational settings (e.g., professional areas that are increasingly male-coded). This highlights the significance of organisational and discursive space and relations for the articulation and practice of resistance. The framing of gender equality largely in terms of numerical gender balance focused on recruiting women into a men-dominated sector seems to provide openings of specific forms of resistance and articulations. Just the presence of women within the sector, also in higher positions, is taken as a basis for claims “that the problem is exaggerated”, but also gives rise to assimilation articulations in the intersection between inclusion and personal responsibility. The strong masculine norms, the men-domination of the sector and different workplaces and an increased presence of, and focus on, women as the object of gender equality/change also seem to produce women as the object of resistance with regards to gender equality/change. Participants emphasise narratives that “women are taking over”, constituting “a threat to their jobs” or being a product of affirmative actions (cf. Johansson et al., 2019). However, women, as the object of gender equality/change, seem to become an object of resistance not only for men but also for women within the sector. One of the participants emphasises that:

When I point out the problems, there are many women who are quick to say that they have never been subjected to anything as if it were shameful that someone else had behaved badly toward one. I feel that they are the same people who are not interested in being involved in driving development forward – ‘I have never encountered anything, it is just a joke, no one means anything bad, and therefore I do not intend to spend time contributing to any gender equality work’.

(Under 30 years old, forester in forest owner association, less than 5 years in forestry)

The strong association between gender equality and women seems to contribute to women within the sector, in different situations, attempt to

resist related narratives on women’s inclusion in the forest sector. What the extract above highlights is how some women in forestry seem to distance themselves from gender equality by drawing on their own personal experiences of not having experienced sexism or, according to the participant, not having acknowledged sexism when exposed to it. This also highlights the complexity of categorising women as a group and as both specific and collective agents within gender equality work.

#### 4. Concluding discussion

Gender equality is composed of and situated within specific organisational relations, logics, structures and contexts (Magnusson et al., 2008), with the capacity to provide space for change but also to close off such potential (cf. Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Andersson and Keskitalo, 2018). This study has analysed how women professionals describe and make sense of change with regard to gender (in)equality in the Swedish forestry sector. The findings show that the majority of participants describe that there has been an increased focus on gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector. On the one hand, descriptions emphasising change and positive outcomes suggest that the increased focus on gender equality in the Swedish forest sector has meant that overt, explicit sexism is no longer, or at least is less, tolerated. Many of the participants identified the creation of such a discursive space for speaking up against sexist jokes or comments as one of the major changes within forestry (cf. Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Johansson et al., 2018). On the other hand, descriptions emphasising stability and absence of effects suggest that increased awareness and commitment do not automatically translate into actions (cf. Wahl and Höök, 2007). Rather than making gender equality the same as the abolition of overt, explicit sexism, such meaning-making seems to call for the structural organisational transformation of gendered structures and cultures. In this way, the varying perceptions of change put forward by the participants seem guided not by their organisational affiliation in the sector, but by how the participant makes sense of and negotiates gender equality and related efforts in the forestry sector (cf. McCabe, 2019; Kelan, 2018; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998).

The study adds insights to the various forms of power, conflict and resistance involved in the negotiation of gender equality (Mouffe, 2005; Acker, 2000). Resistance can materially be understood not only as a practice of resisting inequalities, discrimination and sexism (cf. Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Callerstig, 2016; Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013) but also as a practice to promote change beyond the present pace and measures (cf. Thomas and Davies, 2005; van den Brink and Benschop, 2018). More institutional forms of resistance are also highlighted in the material, where the lack of clarity about the meaning and interpretation of gender equality and related strategies seems to, according to the participants, contribute to the lack of measures and undermine implementation (cf. Daly, 2005). Through these acts of resistance, the material also shows a negation of the meaning and interpretation of gender equality (cf. Magnusson et al., 2008), which is influenced and shaped by organisational contexts (cf. Wahl, 2014). The “talk” and articulation of gender equality also close spaces, as the issue is produced as a more routine-oriented matter and the act of talking with the primary focus on the symbolic value of gender equality (cf. Rose, 1999). Through this, gender equality is also rendered an organisational practice that can be included in present organisational structures and norms without any direct or transformative change (cf. Wahl and Höök, 2007; Rönnblom, 2005; Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009). This specific representation of the “problem” has an effect on both responsibilities (cf. Calás et al., 2014; Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013) and implementation (cf. Bacchi, 2017). However, practices of resistance are not limited to descriptions emphasising stability and the lack of effects. Descriptions emphasising change and positive outcomes can also, we suggest, be interpreted as involving resistance, although a more transformative form of resistance that highlights progress and awareness to enable responsibility related to gender inequality and sexism. Such acts call out meaning and

interpretation of both existing and future measures of organisational activities (cf. Tsoukas, 2005) on the basis of actions and the lack of actions (cf. Wahl and Höök, 2007). Our analyses of the constitutions of gender equality, thus, focused on the various forms of power, conflict and resistance involved (Mouffe, 2005; Acker, 2000). This way of understanding both the calling out the lack of change and (a potential) exaggeration of change achieved as resistance highlights the complexities in the concept. Thus, our analyses of the constitutions of gender equality focused on the various forms of power, conflict and resistance involved (Mouffe, 2005; Acker, 2000).

The study also shows how the representation of the problem of inequality includes constituting political subjects. In the promotion of gender equality in Swedish forestry and based on the specific ways the sector gives meaning and “does” gender equality, women are frequently rendered both the agent and object of change (e.g. Johansson et al., 2020). The dominant notion and strategies on gender equality as equalling a skewed gender ratio and including/recruiting women has specific implications for change and implementation (Squires, 2005: 366), which inevitably privilege particular conceptions of gender relations (Squires, 2008), interests (Hobson, 2003) and groups of women (Franceschet, 2003). These hegemonic gender equality discourses frame issues as cultural or individual rather than structural (cf. Calás et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2017; Colley and White, 2019), where the responsibility of management and organisation is displaced (cf. Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013) as an integrated part of the construction of “women” (cf. Ainsworth et al., 2010). This suggests that gender equality discourses run the risk of further contributing to women being constituted as the other/different in relation to dominant norms and organisational practices and processes (cf. Billig et al., 1988; Goot and Rowse, 2007), reinforcing the political and social status quo. The creation of women as different can also be seen as the basis for the narratives on women “taking over” and as a “threat” that participants emphasise (cf. Johansson et al., 2019). Highlighted in the material, this representation affects both the individual self-perception of members of these discriminated groups and their ability and choice to identify with the group (Bacchi, 2004; Bacchi, 2005). Therefore, as both the subject and object of gender equality/change, women seem to become an object of resistance not only for men but also for women within the sector.

Analysing open-ended survey questions circulated via the NYKS network provides the study with certain merits and limitations. The qualitative focus means that the study does not measure the extent of change and progress with regard to gender equality and the Swedish forestry sector in general. Neither do we claim the findings to be representative of all women in the Swedish forestry sector. Rather than in terms of “how many” and “how often”, the study’s merit lies in the possibility of describing and analysing patterns of meaning-making that help to insert nuance into the understandings of changes taking place with regard to gender equality. Of additional importance is that the survey format does not allow for any follow-up questions or further reflections in interaction with the researcher. While most of the answers given by the participants were short and to the point, they constituted performative “messages” of notions and assumptions that guided their understanding of their profession and industry. The analysed data provide important insights, but more quantitative and qualitative research is needed to provide a more nuanced assessment of the changes in gender equality and how these changes are negotiated in forestry in general as well as in specific parts of the forestry industry. Just as further research is needed, practical recommendations drawn from our study is the need of policy makers to pay attention to the implementation process, change at different levels and to continuously monitor and assess quantitative and qualitative aspects of gender equality on sector and organisational level.

In conclusion, the meaning-making of women analysed in this study confirms that there is increased attention to and increased awareness of gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector. Given that forestry has been one of the most gender-segregated labour forces in Sweden and

that the pace of change has been slow, this marks an important, necessary condition for a more equal and progressive sector. That being said, this study makes evident that the increased focus on gender equality has encompassed a transformation of the more implicit masculine structures and cultures of the sector only to a very limited extent. Hence, while the discourse on gender equality seems to have a general influence on management and their “everyday walk and talk” (Wahl, 2014: 132), but with emphasis on the “talk”. The participants’ testimonies articulate the discrepancy between what organisations ‘do’ and what they ‘say they do’ (cf. Ahmed, 2007), where “talk” also becomes an “object of resistance” in relation to activities of gender equality (cf. Courpasson et al., 2012). However, talk is also a crucial component of change because silent change is not possible (cf. Benschop and Van den Brink, 2014). In that sense, “talk” comes in many forms. An institutional speech act that proclaims the importance of gender equality in a general sense may not, as Ahmed (2006) argues, constitute a performative act. However, a speech act that specifically objects to a particular (sexist) practice in time and space (such as the production and distribution of a calendar objectifying women) involves action. To truly promote gender equality in the Swedish forestry sector, researchers and policy-makers must continue to make visible, address and challenge the complex practices and processes involved in organisational transformation. Of particular importance is the continuous design and implementation of gender equality actions with the capacity to scrutinize and change masculine structures and cultures.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Kristina Johansson:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Maria Johansson:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Elias Andersson:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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