The challenge of implementing the national gender equality norm in IT organizations

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Background & Goal

- Digitalization across sectors increasing the demand for IT specialists

- Women are underrepresented in IT education and work

- The rural region: challenges in recruiting IT specialists in general, women in particular

- Gender equality as a widely accepted norm in Norway

- But... slow (no) changes in IT

- Intervention is necessary: Step one is acknowledging the challenge!

Case study: Attitudes to women's under-representation in IT among IT employers and organizations

Research questions:

- How do IT employers and organizations perceive the underrepresentation of women in IT?

- Do they consider it a goal to increase women's participation in IT?

- If so, which strategies or actions do they have for improving the gender balance in IT work in their own organization?

Case study design

- Dialogue meetings to discuss:
  gender equality in IT, goals and strategies to recruit women

- 12 organizations (13 W/ 10 M)
  - Public, private, trad. IT, research funders, research institutes etc. with IT and digitalization as key area

- Feminist Technology Studies (FTS)
  - co-construction of gender and technology

- Discourse analysis
  - "discursive resource" – how individuals negotiate in their own context

«Fixed points» for the dialogue meetings

- Status: "few women in IT"

- Goal: "more women in IT"

- Suggests that: action is required

- Initial responses agreed:
    - *"The topic is important"*
    - *"We are committed to recruiting more women"*

- But…

4 approaches to negotiating the ideal of gender equality in IT

- "Gender equality is not a challenge"
- "Gender is not a focus"
- "Men and women are different"
- Indifference and passivity

**Approach 1:
Gender equality
is not a challenge**

*a) "We already have gender balance,
but not in IT"*

(typical for public org)

...we have many women in different positions [...], so we don't experience it the same way. I don't think that we have considered it necessary to have more women in IT

Perceptions to fixed points:
- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Invisible**
  - *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Unimportant**
    - *Action required:* **Unnecessary**

**Approach 1:
Gender equality
is not a challenge**

b) "We employ women in other positions"

Our main initiative to recruit more women is to focus more on roles in HR

We have one woman in IT development ... she has other women around in other positions. So that means, perhaps it is not so important to have more women in IT

Perceptions:

- *Situation ("few women in IT")*: **Agree**
  - *Goal ("more women in IT")*: **Unimportant**
    - *Action required* : **Unnecessary**

**Approach 1:
Gender equality
is not a challenge**

c) "We have gender equality"

Everybody is treated the same, we don't think much about it. [...] We don't see any difference between our co-workers

Perceptions:

- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Agree**
  - *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Agree (Everybody are welcome!)**
    - *Action required:* **Unnecessary**

Approach 1: Gender equality is not a challenge

- women's underrepresentation in IT is renegotiated by identifying the challenge as already solved in their organizations

Approach 2: Gender is not a focus

d) "We focus on equality for other groups"

"Our discussion has not been in relation to gender equality, but rather about people with disability and immigrants. That is where we are unable to reach the measures"

Perceptions:

- *Situation ("few women in IT"):*
  Goal ("more women in IT"): **Unimportant compared to other groups**

- *Action required:* **Yielding for other goals**

Approach 2: Gender is not a focus

e) "We avoid focusing on women"

"We don't believe in the typical 'women are encouraged to apply'. That is a bad recipe for making women apply"

Targeting women "will result in the opposite effect"

Perceptions:
- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Agree**
    - *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Agree**
        - *Action required:* **Gender neutral (no) strategies**

Approach 2: Gender is not a focus

- Little knowledge, vague guidelines about gender equality work, and gender equality yielding for other goals

Approach 3: Men and women are different

f) *"Women have other interests"*

"Our greatest challenge is something that we cannot change, and that is the fact that we have a society that makes girls do 'girls' things' and boys do 'boys' things'."

"Do we really need more women in IT?"

Perceptions:
- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Agree**
  - *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Questioning the goal**
    - *Action required:* **Do we *need* women?**

Approach 3: Men and women are different

g) "Men fit IT work better"

"There is a different between the sexes: boys are very single-minded and very focused on their interests … they keep on tinkering with technology and things for so many years before entering higher education and then they have a great advantage in technical subjects"

Perceptions:

- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Agree**
- *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Questioning the goal**
- *Action required:* **Do we *want* more women?**

Approach 3: Men and women are different

h) *"We just want the best"*

"The most important thing is to get the right person, and if that happens to be a woman, that is great"

"As long as we want those who are best qualified, there are few women. It is mostly boys who apply, and they are the ones who are best qualified"

Perceptions:

- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Agree..**
- *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Questioning the goal**
- *Action required:* **Competence before gender**

Approach 3: Men and women are different

- Gender equality norms are "disarmed" or rejected with references to stereotypical perceptions of women and IT

Approach 4: Indifference and passivity

i) *"It will pass"*

"We hope that it will gradually change by itself"

Perceptions:

- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Agree**
- *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Agree**
- *Action required:* **Wasted energy**

Approach 4: Indifference and passivity

j) *"It is not a requirement"*

"We think about it, and we know that we need to stick with ethical guidelines and work for gender equality [...] but it is not an explicit part of our mission now"

Perceptions:
- *Situation ("few women in IT"):* **Agree**
  - *Goal ("more women in IT"):* **Agree**
    - *Action required:* **Not required**

Approach 4: Indifference and passivity

- Agree with everything, but are just not convinced that it is worth the effort and therefore choose passivity
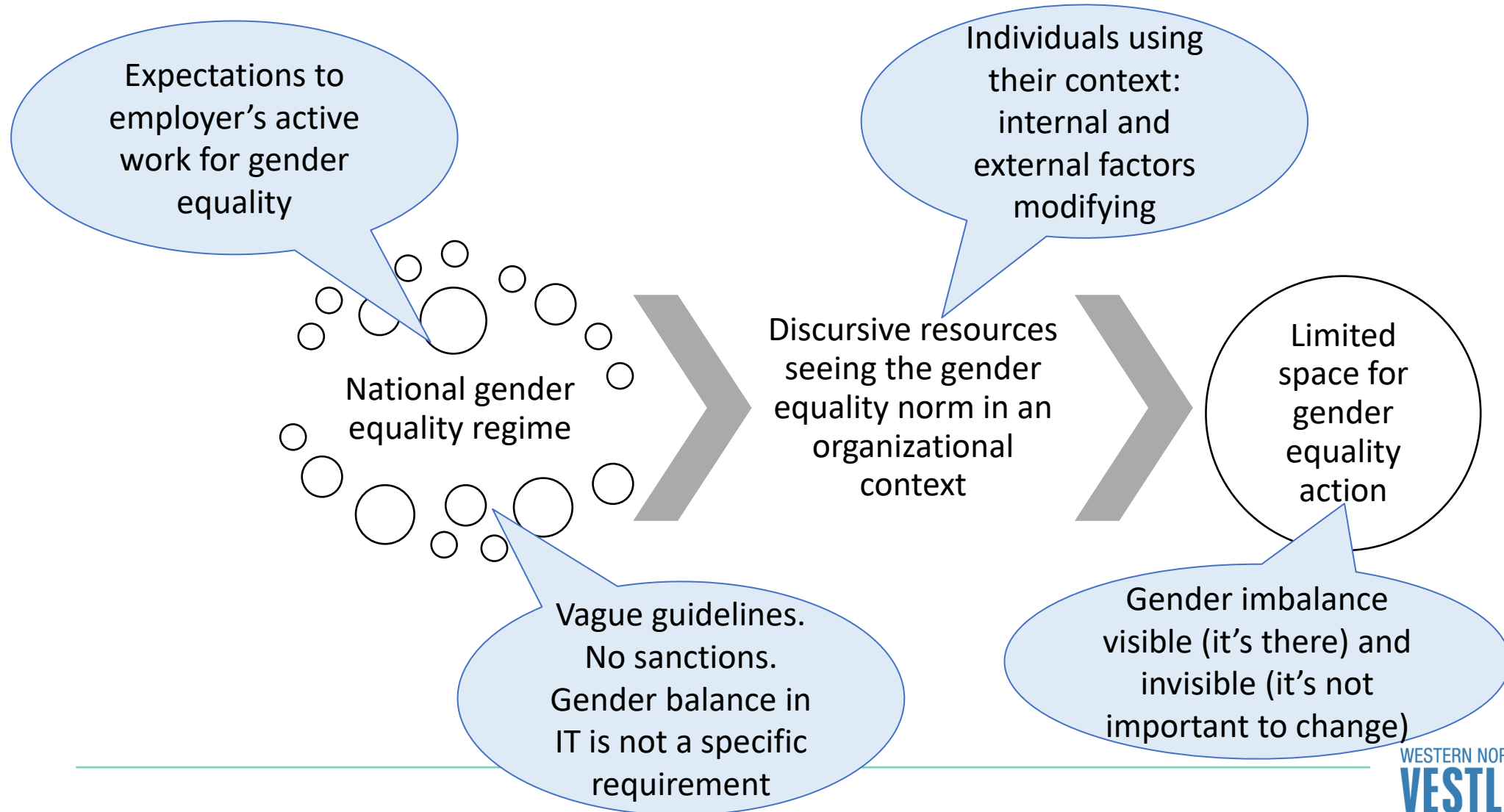
Redefining the call for gender equality in IT

Approaches to gender equality in IT	Organizational context for gender equality	Perception of women's under-representation	Perception of the ideal to increase women's participation	Attitudes towards gender equality action
1. Gender equality is not a challenge	a) "We already have gender balance, but not in IT"	Invisible	Unimportant	Unnecessary
	b) "We employ women in other positions"	Agree	Unimportant	Unnecessary
	c) "We have gender equality"	Agree	Agree	Unnecessary
2. Gender is not a focus	d) "We focus on equality for other groups"	Unimportant	Unimportant	Yielding for other goals
	e) "We avoid focusing on women"	Agree	Agree	Gender neutral (no) strategies
3. Men and women are different	f) "Women have other interests"	Agree	Questioning goal	Do we *need* women?
	g) "Men fit IT work better"	Agree	Questioning goal	Do we *want* women?
	h) "We just want the best"	Agree	Questioning goal	Competence before gender
4. Indifference and passivity	i) "It will pass"	Agree	Agree	Wasted energy
	j) "It is not a requirement"	Agree	Agree	Not required

Renegotiating the gender equality norm within the organization's context

Expectations to employer's active work for gender equality

Individuals using their context: internal and external factors modifying

National gender equality regime

Discursive resources seeing the gender equality norm in an organizational context

Limited space for gender equality action

Vague guidelines. No sanctions. Gender balance in IT is not a specific requirement

Gender imbalance visible (it's there) and invisible (it's not important to change)

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Understanding the mechanisms of continuous gender inequality in IT

- Not only the «extreme attitudes» are barriers for gender equality in IT..

- .. perhaps more problematic is the *recognition* of women's underrepresentation but perceiving it as *unimportant* (even natural)

- The result: the gender equality norm can co-exist with the very attitudes that undermine the norm

- The Nordic Gender Equality Paradox: are women's choices a driver for the paradox?

- A better explanation:
    - the national gender egalitarian norms and ideals are not disputed, but rather confirmed and simultaneously renegotiated to fit the organizational contexts: drained of the potential to produce change

- Analyzing the approaches as "discursive resources" increases our understanding of *how the organizations deal with* gender imbalance/equality in IT in their own organizational context

Read more

- **The challenge of GE in IT organisations**

- Corneliussen, H. G., & Seddighi, G. (2020). The Challenge of Implementing the National Gender Equality Norm in IT Organizations. *IADIS International Journal on Computer Science and Information Systems, 15(2), 1-14.*

- Corneliussen, H. G., & Seddighi, G. (2019). **"**Må vi egentlig ha flere kvinner i IKT?" Diskursive forhandlinger om likestilling i IKT-arbeid**.** *Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning, 43(4), 273-287.*

- Corneliussen, H. G., & Seddighi, G. (2020). Employers' Mixed Signals to Women in IT: Uncovering how Gender Equality Ideals are Challenged by Organizational Context. In P. Kommers & G. C. Peng (Eds.), *Proceedings for the International Conference ICT, Society, and Human Beings 2020 (41-48): IADIS Press.*

- **Related topics**

- Corneliussen, H. G., Seddighi, G., & Dralega, C. A. (2019). Women's Experience of Role Models in IT: Landmark women, substitutes, and supporters. In Ø. Helgesen, E. Nesset, G. Mustafa, P. Rice, & R. Glavee-Geo (Eds.), *Modeller: Fjordantologien 2019: Universitetsforlaget.*

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