THE GLASS FLOOR

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FEMALE MANAGEMENT REPRESENTATION THROUGH THE LENS OF DOMINANT NARRATIVES

Emma Sandin

Hilda Hardell

Bachelor Thesis

Stockholm School of Economics

2021

The Glass Floor - A Qualitative Study on Female Management Representation Through The Lens of Dominant Narratives

Abstract:

Previous studies have shown positive implications on firm performance as a result of gender diverse teams. Commonly the research on women-in-management is centered around the difficulties women face when attempting to reach top management positions. This study aims to examine another situation within a case organization in which women are overrepresented at top management level in relation to middle management. Although ambitious goals of increasing the share of female managers have been set, no development has been made in the last decade. Using the concept of dominant narratives with a focus on sensemaking processes, this interpretivist, qualitative study examines how people within the organization speak about and make sense this issue and the subsequent causes. A secondary level of the thesis includes the study of how dominant narratives could potentially impact change processes. Though six dominant narratives were identified, it could not be concluded that these narratives hindered change processes regarding women in management by limiting the sensemaking abilities of the organizational members. It could however be suggested that this inertia was caused by a lack of coherent connection to long-term goals concerning women-in-management within the narratives.

Authors:

   Emma Sandin (24128)
   Hilda Hardell (24108)

Supervisor:

Pernilla Bolander, Assistant Professor, Department of Management and Organization

Examiner:

Laurence Romani, Associate Professor, Department of Management and Organization
Bachelor Thesis

1. Acknowledgements

We wish to extend a special thank you to our supervisor, Pernilla Bolander. Thank you for challenging us, for calming us down in stressful times and for introducing us to the world of research in such an inspiring manner.

Further, we wish to thank the dear fellow students of our supervision group. We are deeply grateful for all the feedback and support that has been provided to us all along he wa A massive thank you to:

Malin Almkvist and Rebecka Mannerford

Louise Dahlström and Maltilda Hagström

Louise Ljungälv and Maja Sjöblom

A huge thank you to our fantastic proofreaders: Jack Arkesteijn, Simon Wießner, Luca Koch, Johanna Baek, Johanna Juelsson, Marvin Pflug and Oliver Sharp. Also, thank you Niko Michl for editing one figure and three tables.

Last but definitely not least, we wish to thank everyone within the business area at studied, who participated in interviews and showed such a genuine and motivating interest in our study. Thank you, Ulrika, for helping us reach all these inspiring people and for your enthusiasm for our work.

Glossary

Table 1. Definitions

Phrase	Definition
Business area	Our case business area Alpha constitutes one business area within a large industrial company.
Division	Alpha is divided into three different divisions, with unique manufacturing processes and final products.
Dominant narrative	A dominant narrative will, for the purpose of this study, be defined as being a narrative produced by many people.
Lower management position	First line manager (Wentling, 2003)
Middle management position	As defined by every company according to their annual reports. Commonly the positions below the corporate board and C-level positions down to the management position directly above first-line management. (Wentling, 2003)
Top management position	As defined by every individual company's annual reports that were part of the benchmark (see section 1.1 and 3.2.1.). Commonly includes the corporate board and the C-level positions.

Abbreviations

TMP = Top management position
MMP = Middle management position
LMP = Lower management position

TML = Top management level
MML = Middle management level
LML = Lower management level

TMT = Top management teams
MMT = Middle management teams

Table of contents

2. Introduction

2.1. Background

Gender diversity and female representation within management is a highly relevant subject of today. Historically, leadership and business success has been strongly connected with masculinity and the people holding management positions has been predominantly men. (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020) Most research has proven gender diverse management teams to have a positive impact on firm performance (Dixon-Fyle, et al. 2020), both in terms of direct financial implications and decision-making processes (Philips et al. 2010), but also in terms of corporate image and the stakeholders' view on companies' legitimacy (Lückerath-Rovers, 2013).

Yet, despite the benefits of diversity, women make up about 39% of management groups in Sweden whilst still being half of those employed in the labour market (Ekonomifakta, 2020). According to the latest report by Allbright (2020), 25% of the board members in Swedish listed companies were female. Although there is an encouraging trend regarding awareness of gender diversity issues, this development has been accompanied by an increasing level of horizontal gender segregation; the concept that women, to a great extent, enter already female-dominated fields, such as healthcare and education (Bettio & Verashchagina, 2009).

The discourse is often centered around *the glass-ceiling*, i.e., that women cannot reach senior management positions with the same ease that men do (Fernandez & Campero, 2017). Although female representation in top management positions[1] (TMP:s) is an important step to achieve gender equality in business, we are suggesting that solely focusing on recruiting women in top-leadership positions is a performative act if the overall company is still heavily dominated by men.

In line with this reasoning, we have been in close discussion with a business area[2], pseudonym Alpha, constituting a part of a big Swedish manufacturing company operating within a male-dominated industry. Initial discussions with the business area showed a situation wherein Alpha was struggling with increasing female representation at the TMP

---

[1] See Table 1 for definition (section 2)

[2] See Table 1 for defitnition (section 2)

level. Despite its goal of increasing the share to 30% women at TMP level by 2030, no improvement had been made during the last ten years and the business area was stagnating at a share of 19% females on TMP:s. This stagnation could be seen as a great issue itself and is a situation that researchers have tried to explain through concepts such as the mentioned the *glass ceiling.*

An initial analysis of Alpha showed an interesting phenomenon: the share of women within TMP:s was higher than at middle management level (MML). After an initial benchmark with Alpha's main competitors, the existence of this trend in other companies sparked our interest, since the baseline in the discourse regarding gender equality in management is often that women cannot reach top management. It seemed to us like the concept of *the glass ceiling* held seemingly no bearing at these companies and that another phenomenon was present. The topic of interest thus developed into investigating how people within Alpha speak about this phenomenon; why are there less women at MML and what is their explanation as to why this is?

Taking an interpretivist approach, we wish to analyse the dominant narratives[3] in the business area, i.e., the stories are getting told regarding the underlying reasons why there is a higher share of women on top management level (TML) in comparison to MML. In this study, narratives are viewed as a tool which constructs an organizations' identities (Brown, 2006) and is a part of an integral storytelling system through which change takes place in organizational life (Boje, 1991).

In addition, we wish to analyse how the narratives affect organizational change processes, on gender diversity, within the business area.

2.2. Purpose and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to study how employees within our case business area, Alpha, speak about the fact that there is a higher share of women at TML in relation to MML. More specifically, one or several dominant narratives will be identified and analyzed. The narrative(s) will be closely related to the social context in which the respondents exist.

---

[3] See Table 1 for definition

The primary research question is thus:

What dominant narrative(s) exist(s) regarding female representation in top management positions versus middle management positions in a male-dominated, Swedish industrial business area?

A sub research question is also added to analyse how the dominant narratives impact organizational change. The sub question is thus defined as:

How does the dominant narrative/narratives comply with organizational change processes?

2.3. Expected research contribution

Previous research on female representation in different hierarchal levels within an organization is centered around factors hindering women to advance to top management (see section 2.1). Yet, our observation within Alpha demonstrates a setting in which a diverged state is observed with overrepresentation of women in TMP:s in relation to MMP:s. Thus, this study covers an area within research on women-in-management which has previously been dismissed or gone unnoticed. We hope to contribute with a new perspective that generates a foundation for other theoretic concepts to evolve.

Furthermore, we aspire to contribute with new insights for companies within male-dominated industrial industries struggling with gender diversity measures. Firstly, by examining the cause of the issue through narratives. Secondly, by analyzing their implications for organizational change. As mentioned in the previous section of this thesis, there is an evident trend of less women on MMP:s than on TMP:s not only within Alpha, but within several other companies operating in the same industry.

2.4. Delimitations

The interviews were conducted at a business area, Alpha, within a Swedish industrial company. It can thus be defined as a case study and the conclusions drawn will heavily depend on this specific business area's external and internal environment. The delimitation to Sweden was well-motivated based on differences in societal structures and norms across countries (see section 3.3.2).

Another aspect to highlight is the scope in terms of its horizontal delimitation. Our research question has a vertical focus, comparing the female representation on two different hierarchal levels. The horizontal dimension could have been included by analyzing if there is a gender bias in terms of what type of occupation that men versus women hold. Previous studies have shown that women usually take on job positions that have a more supportive and caring nature, such as HR or assistants (Oakley, 2000) The vertical focus was chosen because the research question originates from an observation that is substantially different from previous studies on women-in-management, as most research on female representation on different management levels are centered around the glass ceiling. In contrast, our research question is based on an observation which portrayed a diverging phenomenon; women on TMP:s are overrepresented in relation to MMP:s.

3. Theoretical background

3.1.   Previous research on women-in-management

During the last decades, the focus on women-in-management has increased rapidly. Prior to this, the issue of women being underrepresented in management positions was highly neglected in research, which contributed to a distorted description of reality. (Wahl et al, 2018) The initial studies on gender in management was centered around differences between women and men and that women were required to adapt to become eligible for holding management positions. This perspective was later criticized as it did not capture the factors causing the issue of female underrepresentation (Harragan, 1977). Today, there are two large focus areas within the research on women-in-management.

Firstly, it is the studies investigating the underlying factors causing the underrepresentation of women within TMP:s. Van Fleet (1993) differentiates middle managers from top managers in the following manner:

> "Middle managers are those who implement strategies and policies, whereas upper level manages are those who develop strategies and policies."

Numerous studies have analyzed factors which hinder women to reach TMP:s (Arulampalam et al., 2007; Brown et al., 2020; Cotter et al., 2001; Fernandez & Campero, 2017; Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020; Morgan, 1998; Oakley, 2000). The collection of these barriers is commonly referred to as the *glass ceiling*, i.e., the factors which hinder women to advance above the MML (Fernandez & Campero, 2017). Women are thus excluded from discussions where the organizational strategy is discussed (Wentling, 2003). Additionally, several studies analysing alternative factors contributing to this lack of women on TMP:s have been conducted. One example is research on the concept of *sticky floors*[4]. (Smith, 2021)

A second large area within this field is the study of the impact on firm performance when management teams and corporate boards are gender diverse. Most studies confirm an improvement in financial performance (Krishnan & Park, 2005; Lückerath-Rovers, 2013)

---

[4] Sticky floors refer to a situation where women, for numerous reasons, at the start of their career are more likely to choose occupations with worse financial compensations and less managerial power. ((OECD, 2018)

both in terms of direct financial implications and decision-making processes (Philips et. al. 2010; Landry et al., 2016). In addition, other positive aspects of gender diverse teams have been highlighted by scholars, such as an improved corporate image and more actions oriented towards corporate social responsibility (Landry et al., 2016).

Although both branches within women-in-management studies are highly relevant when discussing this topic, neither provides an explanation for our initial observation within the industry of Alpha, i.e., that women on TML are "overrepresented" in relation to MML. On the contrary, studies on this phenomenon seem to be almost non-existing.

3.2. Theoretical Lens

3.2.1. Organizational storytelling and sensemaking

The performance of a story can be defined as an exchange between two or more parties during which "*past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged*" (Boje, 1991, p. 111). Stories within organizations can be studied in a myriad of ways. Stories can be viewed as organizational symbolic elements, verbalizations of unconscious hopes and intentions, tools through which organizational learning takes places and expressions that reveal power dynamics and the political landscape within organizations. It is widely agreed that storytelling is an integral part of studying sensemaking processes when one wishes to investigate the meaning rather than the facts behind the stories. (Gabriel, 2000)

Studying stories enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the organizational culture, the political climate and change processes within a company. By studying members' different account of events and topics, one can understand how stories are constructed and which events generate stories, which in turn shines light on members' realities and experiences. In other words, it allows us to study how events are viewed and spoken about by the people who have experience with them. (Gabriel, 2000). An important function of storytelling is therefore that the plots told invoke meaning in sequences of events that otherwise would not be present (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001).

3.2.2. Dominant narratives

The concept of narratives and stories in organizational research is multifaceted. Narratives can be viewed as instruments which constitute organizations' identities (Brown, 2006) and stories have been described to be part of an integral storytelling system

through which people make sense of and introduce change in organizational life (Boje, 1991). A narrative can be described as a discursive construct though which a story gets told, i.e., a specific way to describe a series of events (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021).

As for organizational storytelling, it has been suggested that it is through storytelling that an organization's collective memory is re-interpreted and revised as the tellers incrementally make sense of changes and the past (Boje, 1991; Dawson and Buchanan, 2005). The previously mentioned definition of a story performance as an exchange between two parties: "*past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged*" suggests that stories are also co-produced, meaning the meaning and version of any given story is co-created (Boje, 1991, p. 111).

Moreover, narratives have been described as constitutive building blocks of organizations (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009) with multiple narratives co-existing within organizations (Brown, 2006; Boje, 1991). These multiple narratives could therefore bring nuance to stories, but could also bring on an effect of hegemony, where a narrative is established ad a "regime of truth" at the expense of other narratives (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009). The concept of dominant narratives (i.e. narratives reproduced by many people) will in this study be used to identify and analyze which stories are getting told within the organization regarding the underlying reasons for why there is a higher share of women on TMP:s in relation to MMP:s.

3.2.3. Organizational storytelling and change

This study considers change as continuous and ongoing as opposed to episodic. Viewing change as episodic indicates the existence and implementation of planned modifications, whereas regarding change as an ongoing process invites analysis of micro-processes that constitute this continuous change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Viewing change as episodical has been criticized as resulting in a lack of knowledge regarding how change is accomplished (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). One reason for this is the lack of knowledge about the micro-processes that constitute evolving, emergent, and dynamic change. Simply viewing change as a *before* state and *after* state overlooks the micro-changes that cause plans of change being converted into action and thus are being adapted and adjustment themselves (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). This view of change as ongoing offers study of storytelling processes as a tool to maintain perceptions of stability through change in that stories carry meaning through which stability can be constructed (Peirano-Vejo and Stablein, 2009).

This view on change as ongoing within organizations, further invites analysis of sensemaking processes, since this state of constant change triggers attempts at sense-making (Weick et al., 2005). In Tsoukas and Chia's words: "*Change, we argue, is the reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action to accommodate new experiences obtained through interactions. Insofar as this is an ongoing process, that is to the extent actors try to make sense of and act coherently in the world, change is inherent in human action, and organizations are sites of continuously evolving human action.*" (2002, p. 567) This view of change as an ongoing process mirrors the discussion regarding the characteristics of dominant narratives (see 2.2.3), insofar that stories are constantly getting revised and re-told.

Since the business area that is to be analysed has reported issues with stagnation in the number of female middle managers, the effects of change efforts (or lack thereof) are therefore of interest. The stories told and the subsequent narratives have been chosen to be the lens through which to reveal these change processes. It has been previously discussed that hegemonic stories, or dominant narratives, may take the position of an absolute truth (see 2.2.2). The existence of such narratives may, due to this restrictive position, hamper change and bring about inertia (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009; (Näslund & Pemer, 2012)). Other stories that are not congruent with this dominant narrative will then be viewed as unpalatable and thus not accepted by the members of the organization. The sensemaking processes themselves will be constructed in line with this dominant narrative, which then require change processes to be congruent with the accepted, dominant narrative (Näslund and Pemer, 2012). It has also been argued that the unwillingness to listen to alternate stories hinder fundamental change completely by limiting the ability to question the status quo of doing things, which hinders the ability to bring in new innovative perspectives (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009).

Another aspect of narratives' potential effect on change is elaborated upon by Weick et. al. (2005): "People do not need to perceive the current situation or problems accurately to solve them; they can act effectively simply by making sense of circumstances in ways that appear to move toward general long-term goals." This suggests that narratives do not have to accurately depict the sequence of events to be able to bring about change. What determines whether a narrative will have an effective impact to change is merely a coherent connection to long-term goals rather than its link to the how events indeed transpired.

14

3.3.   Theory discussion

3.3.1.   Integration of previous research and theoretical lens

This study aims to further add to the research on women-in-management by analysing the phenomenon of overrepresentation of women on TML in relation to MML:s. Dominant narratives, with the added focus on its connection to sensemaking processes, has been chosen as the theoretical lens through which to examine this situation. Sensemaking concepts was introduced due to its close theoretical proximity to the production of narratives. Change processes was included to enable analysis of the recognized stagnation of women in management positions.

With the dominant narratives as the first level of analysis of this study, the second level of analysis further puts the dominant narratives in relation to theories on organizational change. Our two levels of analysis build upon the research questions in the following manner:

> First level analysis: What dominant narrative(s) explain(s) the higher share of women on TMP:s in comparison to MMP:s?
>
> Second level analysis: How does the dominant narrative/narratives the organizational change processes?

3.3.2.   Research gap and contribution to previous research

As previously noted, previous research on women-in-management has focused on the implications on firm performance with a more gender diverse top management team and the factors hindering women to advance to TMP:s. In contrast, this study takes a different position, analysing the dominant narratives which explain the relatively high share of women in TMP:s in relation to MMP:s. This is a highly relevant phenomenon to analyze, as the imbalance is an observed trend within Alpha's industry (see section 1.1).

The second level of analysis, connecting theories on dominant narratives with concepts regarding organizational change, further enhances the relevance of the study. This is due to Alpha's inertia in terms of stagnating numbers of females on management positions, despite clear KPI targets. Hence, the study aims to not solely discuss an overlooked or

unnoticed phenomenon within previous research on women-in-management, but further analyzes the factors causing the persistence of this observation.

3.3.3. Delimitations of the theoretical framework

It is important to mention that although the concept of narratives is used as a theoretical tool of analysis, this study does not adopt the methodological approach of narrative inquiry within the branch of discourse analysis. Hence, dominant narratives constitute a part of our theoretical lens, but does not constitute a methodological approach. Rather, the aim of this study is to, through an interpretivist approach, where every answer is related to the individual's subjective interpretation of the world, define a narrative/narratives that exist within case business area (see section 2.2.2 and 3.1.1). (Elliott, 2021)

4. Method

4.1. The Research Approach

4.1.1. The research paradigm

The study follows an interpretivist epistemological stance, as we are aiming to gain a deep, nuanced understanding of the dominant narrative(s). As mentioned in the theoretical background, stories stem from the realities of the members' experiences and are thus bounded by subjective parties acting in a social context. Adopting an interpretivist approach is thus natural considering the theoretical sphere in which this study operates. As for our ontological constructivist position, we assert that the production and maintenance of narratives and their assigned meanings are accomplished as a social action. (Bryman & Bell, 2018)

Due to the nature of the research objective, a qualitative method will be applied, as this technique will ensure an in-depth understanding of the employees' highly subjective perceptions and insights regarding the current dominant narratives. Adopting qualitative techniques with semi-structured interviews will allow us to be dynamic in our approach during data gathering, as the respondents will be free to elaborate on their answers. As the aim is for the respondent to share values, norms, and shared meanings, fostering a dynamic data collection process is therefore useful to manage the complexity and multi-faceted nature of both the questions and the answers.

Moreover, an abductive approach of reasoning was adopted, as it was suitable given the research objective our research process, starting with an observation. In line with this, Alvesson and Kärrman (2007) endeavored to welcome unexpected insights from the data, as there is inevitably a myriad of factors that contribute to creating organizational reasoning that result in a lack of top management female representation. An abductive approach thus facilitated us to accept unforeseen answers and refer to theory (see 4.2.).

Although the concept of dominant narratives could be used to study power dynamics through a critical lens, this thesis does take this approach into account. We acknowledge that this perspective could have been relevant since the interview sample consist of people from different hierarchal levels and divisions (see section 3.3.2). This choice was made since the aim of this study is not to identify groups of people whose produced dominant

narratives may hinder or cause change, but rather which dominant narrative/narratives has the power to do so (see section 2.2.3).

4.2. The research process

4.2.1. The stages of the research process

In line with an abductive research strategy, our research process was initiated by an observation which translated into several questions (Bryman & Bell, 2018). To identify if this observation was an outlier or a part of a larger trend, we performed an industry benchmark. The six companies selected for this benchmark are defined by Alpha as its main competitors within Sweden, according to our contact person within Alpha. In addition, they are categorized within the same industry based on the Swedish Standard Industrial Classification (Statistics Sweden, 2020).

The second stage of our research process was a literature review after which the research question established. The third stage consisted of in-depth interviews with employees working within HR in Alpha. The respondent's explanations diverged greatly, causing us to complement our theoretical background with theories on organizational change, as the stagnating share of women on TMP:s and MMP:s was continuously mentioned in the interviews.

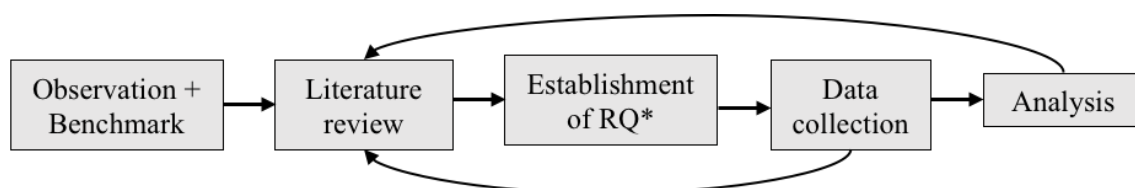**Figure 1:** The abductive research approach

Figure note: Constructed by Emma Sandin and Hilda Hardell. *Research Question.

The research method and design are further described in detail below.

4.3.   The selection processes

4.3.1.   Selection of Alpha

The business area was chosen partly because of convenience; one of the authors had contact to a gatekeeper within the central HR department of Alpha. Moreover, Alpha's history and reputation as an old industrial company proposed interesting research questions on the topic of organizational structures and norms. During initial meetings with the contact person, we asked if there were any issues within Alpha that would be relevant for us to study. Hence, our initial ideas for a research question developed through these pre-interviews where current issues at Alpha were touched upon.

One might argue that the chosen research question was biased by our contact person's personal definition what an "issue" is. Yet, his/her description of the stagnating share of women on management positions was confirmed through the annual reports, thus perceived as a valid area of study.

As seen in Figure 2, Alpha constitutes a business area within a large industrial company. The company is one of the largest in Sweden within its industry and has been operating for over 100 years. Apart from the central overarching board, Alpha consists of 3 divisions with its own production units. Each division has its own stab functions in terms of an IT, HR, legal and finance department. In addition, Alpha has a central HR team which is not connected to a specific division but works on an overarching level.

Figure 2. Organizational chart of Alpha
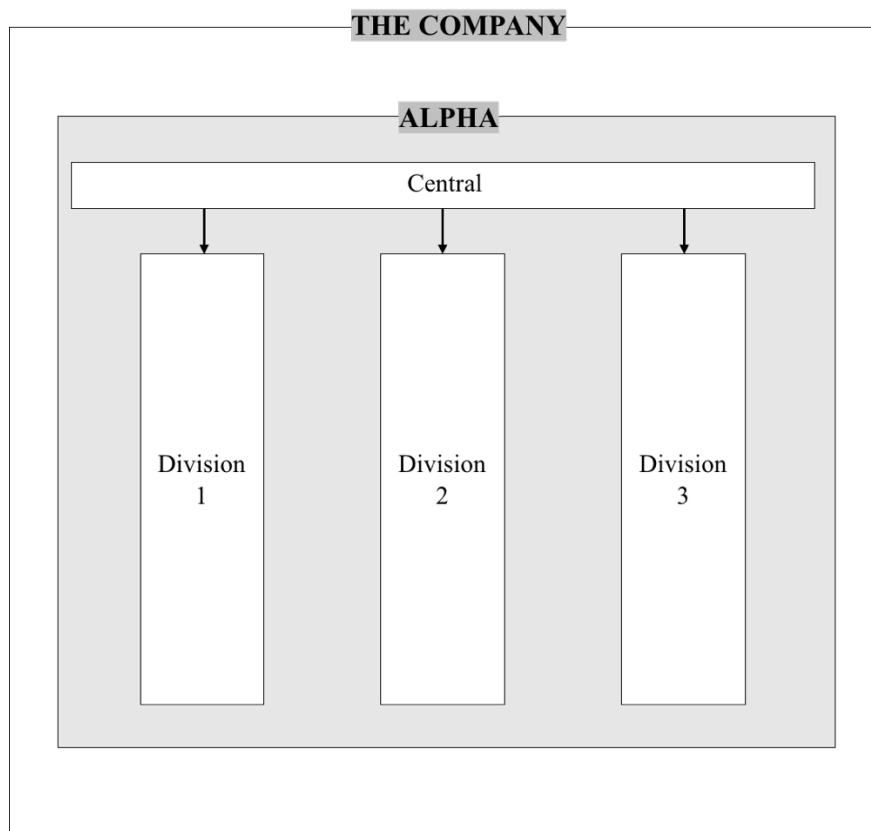
Figure note: Constructed by Emma Sandin and Hilda Hardell

4.3.2. Selection of interviewees

Building upon a purposive sampling method, we initially adopted a snowball sampling method where our contact person connected us with potential participants. This sampling method also had the characteristics of a criterion sampling, as all the people we selected worked within HR but at different hierarchical levels management (note that there are no HR managers on lower management positions[5] (LMP:s) in Alpha) and within different divisions within the central organ (see Figure 2 section 4.3.1). Since our contact person possessed great insight into the workforce, the snowball sampling was perceived as legitimate despite their ability to influence the sample.

When conducting interviews, it became apparent that the dominant story within the HR population was incoherent. The interviews pointed towards the existence of several

---

[5] See Table 1 for definition (section 2)

dominant narratives. Following a contingent sampling approach, we modified our sampling criteria to increase the variety in our sample, by adding interviewees working within other functions than HR. In addition, we tried to ensure that the added interviews varied in terms of hierarchal level and division.

The aim to increase variety shifted the sample method to more of a maximum variation sample approach, but still limited to our snowball method and the connections through our contact person. In conclusion, we adapted our sampling strategy along the way, to gain more of a variety in our sample and enhance our ability to interpret the dominant narrative(s) in Alpha through employees' sensemaking processes.

After 10 interviews had been conducted, many explanations to our studied phenomenon had been repeated by several respondents. Three more interviews were conducted to increase the variety in gender, function, division and hierarchal level further. The three additional interviews did not provide us with previously unfamiliar explanations. Table 2 presents the final version of the list of respondents.

Table 2. List of respondents

Date	Pseudonym	Gender	Department	Division	Level	Length
22 Feb. 2021	Ida	Female	HR	Central	TMP	46 min
23 Feb. 2021	Elvira	Female	HR	Central	MMP	43 min
25 Feb. 2021	Felicia	Female	HR	Central	TMP	44 min
03 Mar. 2021	Greta	Female	IT	3	Non-manager	31 min
04 Mar. 2021	Daniel	Male	Central	Central	TMP	48 min
08 Mar. 2021	Bertil	Male	HR	Central	Non-manager	47 min
08 Mar. 2021	Harriet	Female	Production	2	LMP	47 min
10 Mar. 2021	Charlotte	Female	HR	Central	MMP	32 min
10 Mar. 2021	Alva	Female	Central	1	MMP	40 min
11 Mar. 2021	Beatrice	Female	HR	2	MMP	38 min
12 Mar. 2021	Adam	Male	Sales	1	MMP	35 min
19 Mar. 2021	Denise	Female	Finance	2	MMP	24 min
19 Mar. 2021	Carl	Male	IT	3	MMP	34 min

4.3.3. Delimitations to the sample

Although Alpha has a global presence, the sample is limited to the workforce operating in Sweden. It became evident at an early stage that the view on gender diversity is highly influenced by societal norms and structures. The respondents from employees in an Asian country differed greatly from respondents in Sweden in that they referenced wildly

different societal and political structures that were specific to this country. To minimize the influence of this independent variable and generate conclusions that would better reflect companies within the Swedish industry, the sample was narrowed down to interviewees located in Sweden.

4.4. The interview process

4.4.1. Development of interview structure

The purpose of the interviews has been to study narratives and storytelling as processes through which the interviewees assign meaning to their experiences. Thus, the interviews have been semi-structured, to allow for the interviewee to elaborate and formulate narratives. Narrative interviewing therefore results in a shift in how the participators view their roles: the interviewer becomes a passive listener rather than active enquirer and the interviewee becomes a narrator rather than someone who simply answers predetermined questions. Narrative research has been described as a process through which: "[...] stories are collected, analysed, and unpacked in order to understand how meaning is discursively constructed through storytelling and to explore the story as a meaning-making device." (Kartch 2017, p. 5)

The interview questions were open-ended to invite the interviewee to share their stories (see Appendix 2 for interview guide). During the interview, follow-up questions have been asked, to ensure the obtainment of richer empirical data. (Kartch, 2017) The interviewer has also functioned as a facilitator, prompting the interviewee to tell more by saying for example "What happened next?". An important aspect of narrative interviewing is to be perceived as emotionally available, attentive and to build a connection with the interviewee (Kartch, 2017). To achieve this, verbal and non-verbal cues have been used to show appreciation for the interviewee's story, such as nodding in agreement. In addition, the interviewers communicated during the start of each interview, and continuously pointed out throughout the interview, that all answers would stay anonymous and that there were no "correct" answers. On the contrary, we clarified that the aim of the interview was to get an understanding of how people *perceive* female representation and the factors evolving around this concept.

4.4.2. The interview and transcription process

A pilot interview was conducted to test our interview guide and adjustments were made to ensure an interpretivist approach with open questions which still captures the research

topic at hand (see Appendix 1 for interview guide). All interview subjects received an individual email invitation (see Appendix 2 for email invitation).

All interviews were conducted and recorded via video calls and both authors were present. One of the authors took notes whilst the other conducted the interview. The reason we decided to participate both of us in all interviews was to enable the one asking questions to fully focus on the interview subject, ask suitable follow up questions and thereby communicate a sense of authenticity and empathy despite the potential distancing due to the video format. In addition, it enabled the one taking notes to draft a first version of the interviewee's explanations to our research question, which could be later compared to our transcripts.

The interview subject was at the beginning of the interview informed about his/her right to see/edit/delete the recording at any time, to ensure a feeling of safety and to comply with GDPR. After all interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed. We then searched for explanations in the transcrips that she had not herself transcribed that was the foundation for the coding process.

4.4.3. Development of coding process

Since the purpose of the study is to understand which stories get told within the organization about female representation, the end stage of the coding process was to produce these narratives. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, a thematic process was chosen to organize and generate these narratives, as shown in Figure 3. The coding process has followed the structure of open coding, axial coding and structured coding referred to by Saunders et al. (2009), applying a grounded approach.

As shown in Figure 3, the open coding process entailed identifying codes in the form of explanations that several interviewees had referred to, i.e., these repeated explanations constituted our first level category of our coding process. The axial coding process then consisted of seeking connections between these open codes to identify themes, i.e., our second level category. A connection between one explanation and another was defined whether they shared a common argumentation pattern. For example, the category *Lack of Female Competence* consists, among others, of the explanations *Women Don't Study Engineering* and *Women Are Not Technically Knowledgeable.*

These themes were then sorted into narratives, i.e., our third level category. This sorting process was conducting by assessing whether the themes were often used in conjunction

24

with each other during the interviewees and thus together made up a coherent narrative being told within the organization. Two themes were directly translated into narratives without being combined with another theme. The logic behind this was that the themes covered a broad subject steaming from several explanations and could directly be translated into a comprehensive narrative. Moreover, to keep the dominant narratives mutually exclusive, no single theme was included in more than one dominant narrative.

The coding structure itself can be described as follows:

Figure 3. The coding process
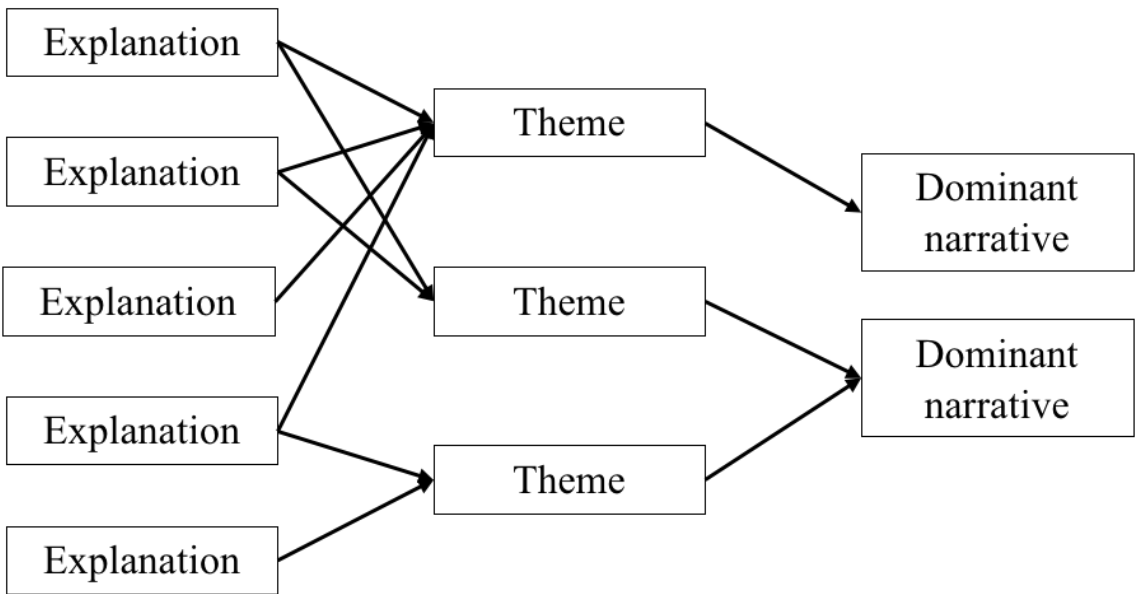
A total of 91 explanations were found where 52 of these were direct explanations to the imbalance of women on MML vs. TML. The additional 49 were indirectly connected, explaining the reasons for the low share of female representation on a more general level within the company. Out of these 91 explanations 24 first level codes were derived (see Appendix 3). 24 codes generated 10 themes which in turn resulted in 6 dominant narratives.

4.5.   Rigor and ethical considerations

This study mainly relies on the well-established criteria for achieving trustworthiness published by Guba and Lincoln (1985), which has been suggested is fundamental in the pursuit of writing academic papers characterized by rigor (Rheinhardt, 2018). These

criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This framework was chosen due to these criteria acknowledging subjectivity in the empirical results, which is in line with the interpretivist approach taken (Bryman and Bell, 2018).

To increase credibility, measures were taken using the respondent validation technique (Bryman and Bell, 2018). The interviewees were shown transcripts of the interviewees and given the opportunity to adjust to confirm the validity of their accounts. The interviewees were also contacted during the transcription process to clarify if their descriptions were ambiguous. The thesis could however be criticized for the lack of triangulation methods. The semi-structured interview method allows respondents to elaborate on their experiences and were not steered to obtain multiple descriptions of specific events. No secondary sources were analyzed. These factors negatively affect the validity of the presence and identity of the defined narratives and subsequently the credibility of the thesis overall.

The transferability of the thesis could also be criticized. We acknowledge that the outcomes of this study are highly contextual in nature and dependent on a unique social setting, decreasing the usefulness of the conclusion in other fields. To minimize the negative effects on the perceptions of quality of the study, the lack of transferability has is highlighted to ensure transparency, avoid confusion for the reader and enable accurate assessments regarding transferability of the study (Rheinhardt, 2018).

In terms of dependability, an auditing approach has been adopted. Detailed records of the material used have been kept throughout and have been discussed intensively with peers in a supervision group manner. Attempts to increase confirmability have been made by clearly stating reasons for decisions, to showcase objectivity. The peer review system has also contributed to the establishment of objectivity, in that all decisions regarding the process have been intensively discussed with objective parties to reveal possible personal biases and inclinations.

Reflexivity has also been highlighted as an integral part of qualitative research (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). It is important to highlight that the authors are not unfamiliar with gender diversity as it takes place in sociopolitical discourse and believe that it is an important subject to promote. This could have influenced how we stated the research question and aim, but possibly also how the interviewees perceived our personal values regarding the topic. We state this to allow for transparency in our production of research and in the collection of empirics. To mitigate this issue and maintain objectivity before interviewees, we were careful to not use any value-laden words that could indicate our

personal opinions, especially when presenting the topic. To increase objectivity during the treatment of the empirics, we attempted to stay very close to actual transcripts and quotes throughout the whole categorization and analysis process, to minimize the risk any faulty interpretation swayed by personal values.

Another aspect is our close connection to our contact person in the eyes of the interviewee. We acknowledge the fact that our contact person is a highly influential person within the company and that they facilitated the initial contact with the interviewees. This could have given the impression that we are in alliance with higher ups within the company and may have caused the interviewee to not speak as freely as they would have otherwise about any shortcomings on top management's part or the company as whole.

The interviewees were informed of the fact that they would be anonymized and they could opt of participating at any moment. They signed a consent form where they agreed that we would handle their personal information, which was stored on a password protected drive to protect data rights. They had to verbally agree to being recorded during the interview.

5. Presentation of empirical results

5.1.   Presentation of dominant narratives; third level category

For description of the codes which from the explanations (first level category), see Table 4 (Appendix 3). For description of the themes (second level category), see Table 5 (Appendix 4).

Table 3: Second level themes building up narratives

Second level themes	Narratives
• Top management is the issue • Lack of support and pressure from HR	*1st Narrative: The power is with top management and HR:* People are unable to change because they lack the power required to do so. The groups who could increase the number of female middle managers are top management and HR and due to lack of effort from their side, the number is still low.
• The supply of women applying is too small because they feel like they wouldn't fit in • Lack of female interest in middle management positions	*2nd Narrative: Women don't want to work here:* The issue is that women lack interest of have pre-conceived, negative notions about the work environment. This is mainly founded in women not wanting to work within technical areas and/or they are uncomfortable working in a male-dominated environment. The lack of female middle managers is therefore that many women do not *want* to be hired.
• Patriarchal, gender normative, societal structures that are beyond Alpha's control • Patriarchal, fender normative, societal structures that exist within the business area	*3rd Narrative: The problem is societal factors and norms:* The reason as to why there is a low share of female middle manager is due to women finding it more difficult to be viewed as good managers, the idea that men recruit men as well as women not being attracted to male-dominated, heavy industrial companies. It is thus not the fault of the woman; the reason is that men or male-dominated environments hinder the promotion of women to female managers. Some of these norms and structures can be controlled by Alpha, such as requiring men to hire women, but some are beyond Alpha's scope

	of control, e.g., the fact that women do not consider working in the industry Alpha operated in.
• Lack of female competence	**4th Narrative:** *Lack of female competence*: Women do not pursue the type of degree that is required for middle managers, such as engineering and therefore lack this competence. This leads to women not being hired as the recruiters in general deem them less competent than their male counterpart, even though the middle management position does not specifically require a, for example, engineering degree. This also includes women not being promoted due to their lack of technical knowledge, despite having strong leadership skills. Women are therefore not able to be middle managers, even though they might want to, and Alpha also encourages this.
• Production is the issue	**5th Narrative:** *Production is the issue*: The culture, jargon and work climate in production is the reason for the lack of women in production overall, which leads to lack of female middle managers within production. This also includes lack of diversity awareness or neglective attitude toward diversity specifically within production. The issue cannot be solved until changes occur within production.
• Neglective attitude toward diversity • Lack of diversity awareness	**6th Narrative:** *People are not aware of or do not care about diversity*: There reason for the low share of female middle managers is because people to not value or are unaware of the benefits that could come from increasing the share of women. They are not trying to change this because they do not view lack of middle managers as an issue, regardless of whether they are aware of diversity benefits or not.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis is two-folded. Firstly, dominant narratives are derived from the 24 codes. Secondly, we looked at the dominant narratives on an aggregate level and put them in relation to research on organizational change.

> **First level analysis:** What dominant narrative(s) explain the higher share of women on TMP:s in comparison to MMP:s?
>
> **Second level analysis:** How does the dominant narrative/narratives affect the organizational change processes?

6.1. First level analysis

> **First level analysis:** What dominant narrative(s) explain the higher share of women on TMP:s in comparison to MMP:s?

The initial idea was to find one or several dominant narratives within the group of people working within HR at Alpha. However, as it became evident early in the process that their explanations diverged, we increased the variety in our sample by adding respondents from other departments and distinguished several narratives in our collected data.

6.1.1. 1st Narrative: The power is with top management and HR:

This narrative is rooted in issues regarding a perceived lack of effort from top management and HR personnel. Among several other respondents, interview subject Alva commented:

> "There is a lack of pressure and support from higher ups/leaders to recruit women."
> *– Alva*

Two main issues with top management were brought up as a part of this narrative. Firstly, lack of clear guidelines from top management regarding how to reach target regarding increased total number of female managers was highlighted.

Daniel commented:

> "We have not defined what we actually need to do to reach our target of 30%
> female managers. […] It is only a KPI and no action plan behind it." – *Daniel.*

Secondly, the interviewees expressed a lack of effort by HR and top management put into educating employees regarding the benefits of employing more female managers:

> "People in general do not actually fully understand or agree with why gender
> diversity actions could be beneficial, it needs to be genuine and not just a KPI." –
> *Felicia*

As for HR:s part in this narrative, it was further highlighted that the HR departments want to priorities this issue, but due to lack of resources, they have been unable to. Ida commented:

> "Lately, we have had a lot of focus on physical safety, which has limited HR's
> ability to focus upon diversity issues etc." – *Ida*

Thus, due to different priorities at TML, HR has not been able to work with supporting and pushing recruiting managers to hire women. This narrative has been presented both from top management, HR as well as by employees in other departments and was unclear whether this narrative was dominant within a specific demographic or sub-group of employees. This narrative is also rather broad in its problem scope as the interviewees chose to respond to the questions regarding lack of female middle managers with answers regarding lack of female managers in general. When there are more managers in general, regardless of hierarchical level, the number of female middle managers will correspond to that of female top managers.

6.1.2. 2nd Narrative: Women don't want to work here

This narrative is rooted in the belief that women are not being hired as middle managers because they do not wish to be hired. It is therefore not the fault of Alpha, since the number of women applying is too low to significantly increase the share of middle managers. The respondents referring to this narrative state that women don't want to be hired for two different reasons: women not wanting to be working in a heavy, industrial

male-dominated environment and that MMP:s do not offer women the flexibility the require due to their family lives. Greta states the following in her interview:

> "I think middle management level is a very tough job. It takes a lot of time and energy. […] If I look back a few years when I had small kids, then I would not have liked such a job because it takes so much time and energy. And I think it is a classic female phenomenon. On top management I think it is different. There they still have a lot of work, but they are not responsible for a group of employees in the same way. And also, you are a bit older then, so you do not have small kids." –
> *Greta*

They also highlight that women have no interest in pursuing the degrees necessary to work as a middle manager, such as engineering. Beatrice said:

> "If you look at the top management level within Alpha, it is a lot of HR, legal and finance. If you look at middle management level, there are a lot of civil engineers. […] I am not sure what it looks like at technical universities today, but when I checked the statistics a few years ago it was 25% women." – *Beatrice*

A third reason is that women do not feel like they possess the competence level required, even if they formally do. For instance, Bertil states the following:

> "A woman who fulfils eight out of ten application requirements does not apply, but a man who fulfils 6 out of 10 applies. This is definitely a question about gender that I concretely can witness in my job." – *Bertil*

The issue here is therefore external to the company itself. This narrative, unlike the one previously mentioned, does therefore not include an implied solution to the problem of low share of female middle managers. There is also not a specific group within the company that is being "blamed" for this current situation, which many other narratives include. Surprisingly, many women, themselves middle managers, promoted this narrative. They stated that women in general don't want to work in this position, however because they viewed themselves as being significantly different from the average woman, they were happy being middle managers.

6.1.3. 3rd Narrative: The problem is societal factors and norms

This narrative is quite broad in the sense that the societal factors and norms referred to differed quite substantially. it's more difficult for women to be viewed as good managers, which is why they do not get hired. Another cause for the low share of female middle managers is that men in general recruit men. One interviewee stated:

"Sometimes we have 'open market' recruitments, but it can still happen that you have a favorite candidate before the recruitment process has started, [...] I think it is very common that the favorite in the back of the recruiters' head at the start, will get the job […] And of course it is often then a white, middle aged man like me." – *Daniel*

This narrative, unlike the 2nd one, also includes women not being attracted to male-dominated environments. The difference between these two is that the previous one states that women make an active choice to not operate within male-dominated environments. This one however makes it clear that women, due to societal factors, do not even consider working in male-dominated environments.. Greta said:

"I think the reason why we have so few women is because Alpha is a classic industrial company with a workforce historically being dominated by men." – *Greta*

This narrative is nuanced in that some interviewees say that these societal factors can be changed by Alpha and some say that it is beyond Alpha's scope of control. There is not clear culprit that the people using this narrative blame the re-production of these norms on and there is also no clear solution presented. This narrative also includes patterns of argumentation related to lack of women within the company in general and the interviewees reproducing this narrative generally switch between referring to the two different topics.

6.1.4. 4th Narrative: Lack of female competence

This narrative is rooted in the belief that women may want to become middle managers, but do not possess the competence level unofficially required. It may be that they do not

pursue the degrees required, although the underlying reasons for this is in and of itself to elaborated upon. This leads to women not being hired as the recruiters in general deem them less competent than their male counterpart, even though the MMP:s does not specifically require a, for example, engineering degree.

Interviewees also often mention that women do not get hired to be middle managers due to the lack of technical knowledge, even if the position does not require a high degree of technical knowledge and the woman possesses strong leadership skills. Bertil stated:

> "I have seen a few times; a woman being neglected a managerial position in favor of a man on grounds which are not legitimate. A classic example from Alpha was when a woman had the best CV for a position, but then she was still neglected the position because the recruiters started to question 'can she really build a moped?'. The technical skills were highly prioritized and then also questioned since she was a girl." – *Bertil*

Charlotte's comment further builds upon this injustice, stemming from a patriarchal structure:

> "I think it there is this natural feeling of competition to advance within Alpha and reach middle management positions. Since we are in a patriarchal structure, [...] men are favored over women in this competition." – Charlotte

This narrative builds upon two main belief systems: women do not possess the competence required or recruiting managers deem the women as less qualified than men. The issue is therefore twofold: either women need to obtain qualifications or recruiting managers need to assess the women differently. This narrative focuses solely on MMP:s and does not directly include lack of women in general.

6.1.5. 5th Narrative: Production is the issue

This narrative builds upon the belief that the production department is the root cause of the lack of female managers but is varied in exactly how production is causing these issues. Examples include: the culture, jargon and general work climate is inhospitable to women and causes low numbers of women overall in production. Beatrice stated:

> "Within our production unit we have one woman, and she thinks it is very hard to feel included in the group. [...] It becomes this sort of group think among men you know." – *Beatrice*

This in turn leads to few women female managers, since many middle managers begin their career as floor workers in production and then are promoted to middle managers. Charlotte said:

> "On TMT level we recruit more externally whilst middle management positions are more internal recruitment, i.e., organic growth. And we have too little women applying to low level positions, main issue is with production positions." – *Charlotte*

This narrative also includes lacking diversity awareness and neglecting attitudes within production. For instance, Harriet stated:

> "There is a general attitude in the workforce within production that their work is nothing for a girl, and that a girl would never be able to make it" – *Harriet*

This narrative is very specific regarding middle managers, and it is also obvious that people are specifically blaming one department within the company as being the people who cause the issues. The argument is that once production changes, the issue of lacking share of female middle managers will subsequently also change. This narrative is produced by both people within production and people in other parts of the company.

6.1.6. 6th Narrative: People are not aware of or do not care about diversity

This narrative is rooted in the belief that people, in different professions and departments, are unaware of the benefits of gender diversity or are aware, but do not value it high enough to make changes to increase female representation. This narrative is also quite broad as it defines the core issue to be low numbers of female employees in general, but once this changes, there is a belief that the number of female middle managers will also increase. Felicia notes:

"People in general do not actually fully understand or agree with why gender diversity actions could be beneficial, it needs to be genuine and not just a KPI."
Felicia

There is no clear solution within this narrative other than the change needs to be fundamental in nature. There is also a tendency to mention that this is an issue not only within Alpha but within the industry at large:

"There is a need for a culture change in the whole industry, including Alpha to attract women." – *Elvira*

As for people who are aware of the issue, but do not priorities it:

"I would claim that the gender diversity issue is discussed, but I would wish for it to be discussed more. [...] But it does not matter how much we (within HR) discuss it if it does not go down in the organization and reaches the managers there. It is obvious that it is very individual among recruiting managers in terms of how much they value diversity, or how much energy they put into the issue though different actions." – Charlotte

Here it is highlighted that the power is with the recruiting managers specifically but recruiting managers overall and not within specific professions or departments.

6.2.   Second level analysis

Second level analysis: How does the dominant narrative/narratives affect the organizational change processes?

Although, several narratives reproduced by a significant number of people have been identified, it cannot be concluded that they are dominant in the sense that they hinder alternate explanations of the issue and thereby cause inertia. This is because these narratives, that are in many ways conflicting (ex. *The power is with top management* and *HR* vs *Production is the issue*), are often told by the same interviewee. It is also not possible to argue that the narratives somehow hinder change because they are more prevalent in certain groups than others. For example, had employees within HR had all

produced the same narrative, then it could be argued that this narrative blocks the acceptance of alternative explanations and the accompanied hypothetical solutions within this specific group. This would have supported previous research regarding dominant narratives causing inertia through an unwillingness to listen to alternative stories and thereby preventing change. Since no such trend can be drawn from our data collection, it does not function as an answer to the stagnating change process within Alpha, based on previous research on dominant narratives and organization change. (see section 2.2.3).

Based on this analysis, the cause of the inertia rather seems to stem from another source than a dominant narrative generating unwillingness to listen to alternative stories and thereby restricting change. Still, it is evident within Alpha that the issue of gender diversity is yet unresolved. One explanation draws upon the issue of a disconnect between narratives and organizational long-term goals when attempting to implement change (see 2.2.3.). It could be argued that the narratives lack clear connected to long-term goals regarding women-in-management and that this is a cause for inertia. For example, even if it is not an accurate description to name production the culprit (see 5.1.5.), this narrative does not include any clear connection to goals that can be achieved when remedying the issues identified within the specific narrative. There is a tendency in the narratives to mainly put blame on different groups and not substantially include goals regarding how to mitigate the negative effects of these groups' actions.

6.3.   Answer to the primary research questions

The following six dominant narratives emerged from the interviews in this study:

1)   The power is with top management and HR

2)   Women don't want to work here

3)   The problem is societal factors and norms

4)   Lack of female competence

5)   Production is the issue

6)   People are not aware of or do not care about diversity

6.4.   Answer to the secondary research question

How does the dominant narrative/narratives impact the organizational change processes?

In line with previous research on organizational inertia and dominant narratives, the conflicting dominant narratives on an individual level in our sample, and the lack of coherent dominant narratives suggests that the identified dominant narratives are not the causes for inertia in that they hinder change by limiting the sensemaking possibilities (see 2.2.3). Instead, it is suggested that the lack of coherent connections to long-term goals regarding female representation on MML present within the narratives is the cause for inertia.

6.5.   Implications

Each individual narrative suggests possible explanations for the lower share of female middle managers, and hence implies areas for future research as well as possible practical solutions for companies by mitigating the presented issues. As mentioned previously, previous research has shown that gender diverse teams have several positive organizational consequences. Hence, there are several benefits with gender diverse teams and by analysing the narratives of this thesis companies struggling with gender diversity may find effective options.

In addition, the conclusion that the dominant narratives presented in this study don't necessarily generate an unwillingness to adopt adverse narratives, implies that there is potentially something else hindering change within the organization which may play a useful insight for future change agents.

6.6.   Limitations of the study

Limitations of this study has been covered the following subsections (see 1.4, 2.3.3, 3.5 3.5). In addition, due to the research approach and research design generalization is not the aim of the study. Since the explanations were interpreted and compromised into narratives by the authors, personal bias to some extent cannot be concluded to be absent (further discussion see 3.5)

7. Conclusion and future research

7.1.   Conclusion

This study has portrayed several thorough explanations, expressed through dominant narratives, as to why the share of women on MMP:s is lower than the share of women om TMP:s in an Swedish industrial industry. These narratives are based on employees sensemaking processes on an aggregate level.

In addition, the empirics have constituted a foundation for analysing the implication of tabportrays conflicting dominant narratives, the research on dominant narratives as a source of inertia by excluding adverse narratives has not been confirmed. However, it could be suggested that dominant narratives that lack clear links with goals and intention could hinder change processes.

7.2.   Future research

As mentioned in the previous two sections, the dominant narratives' impact on organizational change in this study is vague. In line with research on change management, a suggestion for future studies would be to analyse the impact of conflicting narratives on change processes. A potential research question is: *how does the lack of a common understanding of the cause of the studied issue in this thesis, impact the ability to change*?

A second suggestion for future research within change management would be to focus in on each narrative in more depth and analyse its implications on change processes. For example: *how does our 6th narrative (People are not aware of or do not care about diversity) comply with change management theories on motivation?*

A third suggestion would be to replicate the study through a critical lens by analysing: "How do power bases impact respondents' explanations to factors causing the ´the glass floor', a concept stipulated by Hardell and Sandin (2021)."

8. List of references

Amanda Lundeteg, Claes Hemberg, Maija Inkala, Max Hällström, Omar Bellini, Sofie Mattsson och Tove Dahlgren. (2020). *Allbrightrapporten 2020: Pandemin backar bandet.* ().Stockholm,Sweden: Allbright. Retrieved from: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5501a836e4b0472e6124f984/t/5f7c35bdcc6429688a1996fe/1601975751529/Allbrightrapporten2020.pdf

Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2007). Constructing mystery: Empirical matters in theory development. *Amr, 32*(4), 1265-1281. doi:10.5465/amr.2007.26586822

Bettio, F., & Verashchagina, A. (2009). Gender segregation in the labour market. root causes, implications and policy responses in the EU doi:10.2767/1063

Boje, D. The storytelling organization: A study of story performance in an office-supply firm. Administrative Science Quarterly, 1991, 36, 106–26

Brown, A. D. (2006). A narrative approach to collective identities. Journal of Management Studies, 43(4), 731-753.

Brown, J. V. E., Crampton, P. E. S., Finn, G. M., & Morgan, J. E. (2020). From the sticky floor to the glass ceiling and everything in between: Protocol for a systematic review of barriers and facilitators to clinical academic careers and interventions to address these, with a focus on gender inequality. *Systematic Reviews; Syst Rev, 9*(1), 26. doi:10.1186/s13643-020-1286-z

Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2018). *Business research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

Corlett, S. & Mavin, S. (2018). Reflexivity and researcher positionality. In *The sage handbook of qualitative business and management research methods* (pp. 377-398). SAGE Publications Ltd, https://www-doi-org.ez.hhs.se/10.4135/9781526430212

Dawson P and Buchanan D (2005) The way it really happened: Competing narratives in the political process of technological change. Human Relations 58(7): 845–865.

Dixon-Fyle, Sundiatu et al. *Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters*. 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters. Accessed 8 Mar 2021.

Ekonomifakta. 2020. *Kvinnor i chefsposition - Ekonomifakta*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ekonomifakta.se/fakta/arbetsmarknad/jamstalldhet/kvinnor-i-chefsposition/> [Accessed 15 May 2021].

Elliott, J. (2021). Using narrative in social research; pages 17-35. (). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi:10.4135/9780857020246

Retrieved from https://methods.sagepub.com/book/using-narrative-in-social-research

Fernandez, R. M., & Campero, S. (2017). Gender sorting and the glass ceiling in high-tech firms. *Industrial & Labor Relations Review, 70*(1), 73-104. doi:10.1177/0019793916668875

Gabriel, Y., 2000. *Storytelling in organizations*. Oxford [etc.]: Oxford University Press.

Geiger D and Antonacopoulou E (2009) Narratives and organizational dynamics: Exploring blind spots and organizational inertia. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science 45(3): 411–436.

Harragan, B. L. (1977). Games mother never taught you: Corporate gamesmanship for women. New York: Warner books.

Kartch, F. (2017). Narrative interviewing. In M. Allen (Ed.), *The sage encyclopedia of communication research methods* (Vol. 3, pp. 1073-1075). SAGE Publications, Inc, https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n369

Krishnan, H. A., & Park, D. (2005). A few good women—on top management teams. *Journal of Business Research, 58*(12), 1712-1720. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2004.09.003

Landry, E. E., Bernardi, R. A., & Bosco, S. M. (2016). Recognition for sustained corporate social responsibility: Female directors make a difference. *Corporate Social-Responsibility and Environmental Management; Corp.Soc.Responsib.Environ.Mgmt, 23*(1), 27-36. doi:10.1002/csr.1358

Lewellyn, K. B., & Muller-Kahle, M. (2020). The corporate board glass ceiling: The role of empowerment and culture in shaping board gender diversity. *Journal of Business Ethics, 165*(2), 329-346. doi:10.1007/s10551-019-04116-9

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.

Lückerath-Rovers, Mijntje. (2009). Female Directors on Corporate Boards Provide Legitimacy to a Company: A Resource Dependency Perspective. Management Online Review.

Lückerath-Rovers, (2013). Women on boards and firm performance. *Journal of Management and Governance, 17*(2), 491-509. doi:10.1007/s10997-011-9186-1

Morgan, L. A. (1998). Glass-ceiling effect or cohort effect? A longitudinal study of the gender earnings gap for engineers, 1982 to 1989. *American Sociological Review, 63*(4), 479-493. doi:10.2307/2657263

Oakley, J. G. (2000). Gender-based barriers to senior management positions: Understanding the scarcity of female CEOs. *Journal of Business Ethics, 27*(4), 321-334. doi:10.1023/A:1006226129868

OECD. (2018). *Time is money: What drives income mobility?* doi:https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264301085-5-en

Peirano-Vejo M and Stablein RE (2009) Constituting change and stability: Sense-making stories in a farming organization. Organization 16(3): 443–462

Phillips, K., Liljenquist, K. and Neale, M., 2010. *Better Decisions Through Diversity*. [online] Kellogg Insight. Available at: <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/better_decisions_through_diversity> [Accessed 16 March 2021].

Rheinhardt, A., Kreiner, G., Gioia, D. & Corley, K. (2018). Conducting and publishing rigorous qualitative research. In *The sage handbook of qualitative business and management research methods* (pp. 515-531). SAGE Publications Ltd, https://www-doi-org.ez.hhs.se/10.4135/9781526430212

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2009). *Research methods for business students* (5th ed.). Perntice Hall.

Smith, V. (2021). *Sociology of work: An encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, California: doi:10.4135/9781452276199

Statistics Sweden. (2020). Svensk näringsgrensindelning. Retrieved from http://www.sni2007.scb.se/

Tsoukas H and Chia R (2002) On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. Organization Science 13(5): 567–582.

Tsoukas H and Hatch MJ (2001) Complex thinking, complex practice: The case for a narrative approach to organizational complexity. Human Relations 54(8): 979–1013.

Wahl, A., Holgersson, C., Höök, P., & Linghag, S. (2018). *Det ordnar sig : Teorier om organisation och kön*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Weick KE, Sutcliffe KM and Obstfeld D (2005) Organizing and the process of
   sensemaking. Organization Science 16(4): 409–421.

Wentling, R. M. (2003). The career development and aspirations of women in middle
   management – revisited. *Women in Management Review, 18*(6), 311-324.
   doi:10.1108/09649420310491486

9. Appendices

9.1. Appendix 1: Interview guide

Date:

Name of interviewee:

Role within Alpha:

Length of Interview:

- Could you please tell us a little bit about your career story within Alpha and how you ended up at your current position?

- What do the recruitment processes look like within Alpha?
  - Do they differ depending on hierarchal level, division or function?

- What is your perception of female representation within Alpha?

- What do you think has led to the trend we see today (with a higher share of female managers om TMP:s than MMP:s)?

- What processes/structures actors do you think has contributed to the low share of female middle managers?

- What is your perception of the discourse in Alpha on female representation?
  - Does it differ depending on hierarchal level, division or function?

- Do you think that there is a genuine value base around diversity?

- What do you think has to be changed in order to increase the share of female manages within Alpha?

      ○   And on middle management level specifically?

9.2.   Appendix 2: Email invitation to interview subjects

Booking of Interview

Dear AA (name),

First of all, thank you for accepting BB's (contact person's) offer to participate in our project. We truly appreciate your contribution and time.

We are two students from the Stockholm School of Economics specialising in Management Science. Currently, we are writing our BSc thesis on the topic of female representation and Gender Diversity Management Systems, with CC (company) being the case organisation and the DD (Alpha) our main business area of focus.

As our study is qualitative in nature, we wish to conduct **interviews with DD's employees**. The purpose of the interviews is to gain an understanding of your perceptions about the Gender Diversity Management Systems. within AA. The interview will take **30-45 minutes** and we are planning on conducting interviews during **week 9-10** (March 1-12).

Please use the following link to book in a time sloth for an interview: EE (link to Microsoft booking)

If you have any questions about the interviews or our work, please don't hesitate to get in touch. We really appreciate your time and look forward to meeting you!

Vänliga hälsningar/Best Regards,
Hilda Hardell & Emma Sandin

9.3. Appendix 3: Explanations leading up to the codes

Table 4: Explanations leading up to codes (first level category)

Explanations	Code (first level category)
"I was in a board meeting for our division where the manager of the sales department and the manager of our production unit almost went into a verbal fight on the subject of gender diversity. The sales manager claimed that the production manager was totally unaware of questions connected to diversity, whilst the production manager claimed that he was fully aware. [....] We need to build a better foundation, more awareness, definitions and what this (gender diversity and inclusion) means to us. It became very evident after the discussion between our sales manager and our production manager that they had very different perceptions of what the topic means." – *Beatrice* "One challenge is the recruiting managers have the last word in the hiring process and may not have an objective person to argue against hiring a man in favour of a woman." – *Elvira*	Lack of diversity awareness in recruiting managers (overall; not all)
"I would claim that the gender diversity issue is discussed, but I would wish for it to be discussed more. [...] I think it is very dependent upon what area of the company you are looking at. But it does not matter how much we (within HR) discuss it if it does not go down in the organisation and reaches the managers there. It is obvious that it is very individual among recruiting managers in terms of how much they value diversity, or how much energy they put into the issue though different actions." – *Charlotte* "People are middle management level do not feel the need to recruit women because they don't think it would be beneficial and they do not view the lack of women as an issue." – *Adam*	Neglecting attitude towards gender diversity among recruiting mangers (overall; not all)

"When the subject diversity management is brought up within some areas of the company, there is an instant anti reaction. They are like: 'what kind of mambojambo is this? We are producing tubes; can we focus on production instead of this gender talk?'. We need to communicate the value of gender diversity more on a daily basis to convince this area of the company of the value of gender diversity." – *Bertil* "There is a general attitude in the workforce within production that their work is nothing for a girl, and that a girl would never be able to make it" – *Harriet*	Neglecting attitude towards gender diversity within production
"Within our production unit we have one woman, and she thinks it is very hard to feel included in the group. [...] It becomes this sort of group think among men you know." – *Beatrice* "I mean the region where Alpha is from, it is very local, there are rumours and a history of a tough work, a tough jargon. And you have grown up with your dad, uncle or grandpa working within production at Alpha, so you have a quite clear picture in your head already of the company and it is very hard to change." – *Charlotte*	Male-dominated jargon and culture within production
"There is a need for a culture change in the whole industry, including Alpha to attract women." – *Elvira* "In some departments, there is no focus on working with gender diversity and they might just 'check off the KPI box, if they even do that. They do not feel like this question is relevant." – *Bertil*	Lack of diversity awareness overall
"There is a lack of pressure and support from higher ups/leaders to recruit women." – *Alva* "People in general do not actually fully understand or agree with why gender diversity actions could be beneficial, it needs to be genuine and not just a KPI." – *Felicia*	Higher ups not pushing the diversity agenda

"A lot of women had to leave when we need to lay off people because of LAS (Swedish law). People have worked for a long time and the company has been male dominated for a long time." – *Carl* "Women who actually have been hired have recently been fired due to not having worked there for a long time due to LAS (Swedish law)." – *Elvira*	Swedish laws on layoffs, forced women to leave
"On TMT level we recruit more externally whilst middle management positions are more internal recruitment, i.e., organic growth. And we have too little women applying to low level positions, main issue is with production positions." – *Charlotte* "A lot of people who become managers at middle management level (within production) have worked within production as a non-manager and because of the lack of women in production, they do not become managers." – *Adam*	No women in production results in no female leaders (organic recruitment) and there are no women at the bottom
"If you look at the top management level within Alpha, it is a lot of HR, legal and finance. If you look at middle management level, there are a lot of civil engineers. They are more focused on production, market and sale with a more technical background. I am not sure what it looks like at technical universities today, but when I checked the statistics a few years ago it was 25% women." – *Beatrice* "Certain jobs (HR, Communication etc.) that are more female dominated do not exist at middle management level." – *Alva*	Women do not specialise (study) within middle management fields but rather top management
"I think it there is this natural feeling of competition to advance within Alpha and reach middle management positions. Since we are in a patriarchal structure, and middle management positions are assigned through internal recruitment, men are favoured over women in this competition." – *Charlotte* "Alphas history lays in a patriarchal structure, and being a manager has always been connected to masculinity ." – *Alva*	Patriarchy causes men to be more likely to be viewed as good managers.

"There is an unconscious bias among men. They do not realise or analyse, when recruiting, why they do not feel like they want to hire the woman instead of the man." – *Alva* "Sometimes we have 'open market' recruitments, but it can still happen that you have a favourite candidate before the recruitment process has started, [...] I think it is very common that the favourite in the back of the recruiters' head at the start, will get the job [...] And of course it is often then a white, middle aged man like me." – *Daniel*	Men's unconscious bias
"I think the reason why we have so few women is because Alpha is a classic industrial company with a workforce historically being dominated by men. An industrial industry is a very manly industry." – *Greta* "Our industry, i.e., forest, mining etc. is associated with tradition and heavy dirty work which is very dominated by men. This image and its rumours make it hard to attract women to our industry." – *Daniel*	This industry does not attract women
"People who are the best leaders (she's suggesting women are sometimes better leaders) do not always get promoted, but rather those who have the most technical knowledge." – *Alva* "I have seen a few times; a woman being neglected a managerial position in favour of a man on grounds which are not legitimate. A classic example from Alpha was when a woman had the best CV for a position, but then she was still neglected the position because the recruiters started to question 'can she really build a moped?'. The technical skills were highly prioritised and then also questioned since she was a girl." – *Bertil*	People who are technical get promoted (within production), not necessarily the best leaders.

50

"Gender diversity is really an area in which we need to improve, and I think we are measuring our KPI in a very strange way. We only measure the final number (30% women on top management level) but we have no plan on how to actually reach this target. – *Charlotte* "We have not defined what we actually need to do to reach our target of 30% women in TMT:s. It only says that we need to 'recruit more women', but an idiot would understand this. It's a bit 'what gets measured gets done', but we have not discussed with managers how to really act in order to reach the target. It is only a KPI and no action plan behind it." – *Daniel*	No clear guidelines on how to reach gender diversity target
The problem is more that women do not want to apply to Alpha, and maybe it is connected to how we brand ourselves to the public. Does it look like a tough and dirty workplace or cooler and more exciting? I do not want to generalise and say that women do not want to work where it is tough and dirty...but it is obvious that this has historically attracted more men to us. – *Charlotte* "Alpha is connected with production. And production is associated with rough and dirty work which does not attract women to the same extent." – *Adam*	Women are not attracted to the company because it's seen a rough and dirty
"On middle management level it is more internal recruitments than on top management level where it is more external recruitment. And I think it is more common within internal recruitments to have men recruiting men." – *Bertil* "Sometimes we have 'open market' recruitments, but it can still happen that you have a favourite candidate before the recruitment process has started, [...] I think it is very common that the favourite in the back of the recruiters' head at the start, will get the job […] And of course it is often then a white, middle aged man like me." – *Daniel*	Men recruit men

"There is a higher churn rate on top management positions then on middle management positions. Hence it is harder to improve the statistics on middle management level." – *Charlotte* "People have worked for a long time on middle management level and the company has been male dominated for a long time." – *Carl*	Higher churn rate at TML than on middle management level. Middle managers have been working for a long time
"Women have children and therefore want flexibility, which is not possible at middle management since you need to be very present." – *Adam* "I think middle management level is a very tough job. It takes a lot of time and energy. I can just look at my boss and how much he works. If I look back a few years when I had small kids, then I would not have liked such a job because it takes so much time and energy. And I think it is a classic female phenomenon. On top management I think it is different. There they still have a lot of work, but they are not responsible for a group of employees in the same way. And also, you are a bit older then, so you do not have small kids." – *Greta*	Women have children and therefore want flexibility, which is not possible at middle management since you need to be very present
"Women are not attracted to Alpha partly due to is manly reputation." – *Elvira* "Alpha does not attract women, maybe because we are not advertising ourselves as a fun company to work for." – *Carl*	Alpha does not attract women
"Our busines area (Alpha) are lacking a bit in our recruitment processes. A few years ago, we decided to separate our recruitment processes from the central processes of the company. But since that separation, our business area has gone through layoffs and some other challenges, resulting in a situation where we have had too few people within HR developing our recruitment processes and support gender diversity on middle management level but also in the business area as a whole." – *Bertil* "Lately, we have had a lot of focus on physical safety, which has limited HR's ability to focus upon diversity issues etc." – *Ida*	Lack of resources for HR to support diversity

"Already in kindergarten we get influenced by societal norms about what is masculine vs. feminine which impacts the way an industrial company like Alpha is later evaluated by both gender groups, i.e., as more of a manly workplace." – *Alva* "To a large extent our issue with gender diversity is rooted in societal factors. For instance, I went to a toy store a few years ago to buy presents to kids in the family, and the store offered this blue package with cowboy toys, adventure toys and violent toys such as weapons. Then they had the pink box with like cleaning equipment. And it is probably 20 times more likely that we give the pink box to a daughter than to a son. So, it is very evident through this example that there are things on grassroot level that leads to this gender diversity issue." – *Bertil*	Societal factors, like upbringing make women not applying to many jobs at Alpha
"People do not discuss the matter because it's so obvious to everyone that the company should be gender diverse." – *Carl* "People in general do not actually fully understand or agree with why gender diversity actions could be beneficial, it needs to be genuine and not just a KPI." – *Felicia*	People don't see lack of women as an issue
"A woman who fulfils eight out of ten application requirements does not apply, but a man who fulfils 6 out of 10 applies. This is definitely a question about gender that I concretely can witness in my job." – *Bertil* "It is evident that women get more scared off by superlatives in hiring adds. They are much more self-critical than men." – *Ida*	Women who are competent do not apply if they do not live up to all requirements, whereas men do
"We need to increase the share of women in our company. Because if there are more women in our company, we will be able to change	Because we have so few women, it's harder to get

53

from the inside because then more people (i.e., women) will recognise that the situation is wrong with such a low share of women on MTM positions. Now it is only a lot of middle age men who intellectualise and do not recognise the problem". *– Daniel* "Because we have so few women, it's harder to attract more women because then you have no women to identify yourself in." *– Felicia*	more women to come here. Once we have more female employees, it'll be easier

9.4. Appendix 4. Description of themes; second level category

Table 5: Description of themes (second level category)

Themes (second level category)	Description
Neglective attitude toward diversity	People are aware of diversity issues, but do not make efforts to increase the number of female middle managers.
Lack of diversity awareness	People are unaware of diversity issues and why it is important.
Production is the issue	The culture, jargon and work climate in production is the reason for the lack of women in production overall, which leads to lack of female middle managers within production. This also includes lack of diversity awareness or neglective attitude toward diversity specifically within production.
Top management is the issue	Lack of effort and guidance from top management is the cause for the low share of female middle managers.
Lack of support and pressure from HR	Lack of effort from HR is the cause for the low share of female middle managers.
Lack of female competence	Women do not pursue the type of degree that is required for middle managers, such as engineering and therefore lack this competence. This also includes women not being promoted due to their lack of technical knowledge, despite having strong leadership skills.
Lack of female interest in middle management positions	Women are not interested in becoming middle managers, due to either lack of flexibility and work-life balance or lack of interest in pursuing the academic degrees necessary, such as engineering.
The supply of women applying is too small because they feel like they wouldn't fit in	Too few women apply to work for the company or for middle management roles, one reason for this being that they do not feel like they possess the competence level required. In addition, women do not apply because they assume that they would feel misplaced or not accepted within the industrial part of the company (i.e. below top management) due to the dirty, rough and male-dominated environment. Hence, it is not related to a lack of interest but rather women being hesitant about applying due to, for instance, company characteristics.

Patriarchal, gender normative, societal structures that exist within the company	Societal structures rooted in patriarchy and gender discrimination is the cause for the low share of female middle managers, e.g. it is more difficult for women to be perceived as good managers than men. It includes the idea that women want flexibility and work-life balance due to their family duties, which a middle management role will not allow for. This also includes men recruiting men and being swayed by male unconscious bias when recruiting.
Patriarchal, gender normative, societal structures that are beyond Alpha's control	Women are not attracted to the industry or the company in general, due to the inherent nature of the perceived heavy industrial environment, which is closely associated with masculinity. This also includes difficulties getting women to apply to the company because of the small share of women currently; once the population of female employees has increased, it'll be easier for other women to apply because they will no longer feel like a minority. This creates a catch-22 scenario; lack of female employees currently causes women to not consider applying.