

TO ENGAGE OR DISENGAGE: MALE DIRECTORS' EQUALITY- RELATED (IN)ACTIONS

A Qualitative Study of Swedish Male Directors' Perceptions and Attitudes of
Gender Equality

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To Engage or Disengage: Male Directors' Equality-Related (In)Actions

Abstract:

A significant gender-leadership gap persists in Sweden despite the country being one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. This bachelor thesis aims to examine why male board of directors contribute to gender equality in their organizations by exploring Swedish male directors' perceptions and actions related to gender equality. Thus, a qualitative study based on 10 semi-structured interviews with male directors from the real estate sector has been conducted to analyze what motivates or hinders them from engaging in gender equality-related actions. Further, Social Identity Theory, Social Identity Model of Collective Action, and Moral Disengagement Theory are used to comprehend how the directors' social identities and moral motivations influence their (in)actions. The findings reveal a clear discrepancy between the attitudes of Swedish male directors' and their actual actions for gender equality within their organizations. This gap was frequently caused by moral disengagement mechanisms and to motivate male directors to actively pursue gender equality-related action, it is thus essential to address and overcome such mechanisms by implementing moral disengagement interventions.

Keywords:

Gender Equality, Boards of Directors, Social Identity Theory, Social Identity Model of Collective Action, Moral-Disengagement

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Abbreviations

| Abbreviations | Definitions |
|---------------|--|
| BGD | Board Gender Diversity |
| LDP | Leader-Development-Program |
| SIT | Social Identity Theory |
| SIMCA | Social Identity Model of Collective Action |

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Executive Summary

Moral Disengagement is a cognitive process through which individuals restructure their moral standards, thereby enabling them to engage in unethical behavior without feeling distress. Moral disengagement mechanisms can for example involve distancing oneself from the negative consequences of one's action, minimizing personal responsibility, or blaming external circumstances.

A discrepancy among Swedish male directors' attitudes and consequential actions for gender equality in their organizations can be seen. This gap was frequently caused by moral disengagement mechanisms. To motivate male directors to actively pursue gender equality related actions, it is essential to address and overcome these moral disengagement mechanisms.

This research paper seeks to explore the gender-leadership gap in Sweden. Although Sweden being top ranked in terms of gender equality, the country still has a significant underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles on corporate boards. This can be seen as contradictory considering that studies repeatedly demonstrate that gender equality positively affects the triple bottom line - profit, people, and the planet. Given this, there are incentives for organizations to increase the number of women. Interestingly, there is a lack of research on the male director's perspective on gender equality. Thus, the study aims to explore why male boards of directors strive to contribute to gender equality within their organizations. The research was conducted through interviews with male directors in Swedish stock-listed companies in the real estate sector. From a theoretical point of view, it aims to examine how male directors' social identities and moral beliefs impact their motivation and actions related to gender diversity.

The analysis reveals how knowledge about the benefits of gender equality for organizational outcomes seems to affect some male directors' willingness to act. Directors who were exposed to what is perceived as 'female' perspectives were more inclined to recognize the significance of gender equality in their organization. Additionally, some directors were prompted to act on pressure from external influences, such as legal requirements from stakeholders.

Male directors' motivations for why they should contribute to gender equality vary widely; ranging from a genuine desire to change the status quo, to motivations derived from the benefits of having a more gender-equal board. The analysis indicates how there is an interplay between the directors' social identity and morality, leading to different motivations for action/inaction. Importantly, the analysis indicates that moral disengagement is key in terms of the degree of action taken in relation to their different motivations.

The findings of this thesis imply that addressing moral disengagement mechanisms among male directors could contribute to decreasing the gender-leadership gap and encourage them to work more actively towards gender equality in their organizations. This could be achieved by implementing an intervention that have previously demonstrated effectiveness in reducing moral disengagement among participants in another context:

“The Pirate Excuses Exercise”

1. Explain how "pirate excuses" represent justifications for actions. The “pirate excuses” are depicted through pirate illustrations.
2. Give some participants a script containing morally questionable scenarios for them to enact.
3. The other group members are responsible for recognizing and highlighting any moral disengagement by holding up signs with pirate illustrations.

This teaches individuals to identify the process of moral disengagement among others and to identify and manage it within their surrounding situations. It also encourages them to identify moral disengagement within themselves and start exploring alternative moral engagement alternatives. Organizations seeking to promote and work more actively with closing the gender-leadership gap could implement moral disengagement interventions. By doing so, they could help foster a more equitable organization and derive the many benefits associated with having a more gender equal organization.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, containing global data from 163 countries, shows a persistent skew in female representation in the workforce versus leadership positions across sectors. The report also shows that, despite women constituting 41.9 percent of the labor force, the percentage of women in senior leadership positions is at 32.2 percent in 2023. Important drivers for including more women on corporate boards relate to the level of gender equality in political empowerment and institutional settings, legislative or quotation policies, government-regulated parental leave, and cultural variables e.g., in the form of low power distance and individualism (Warner-Søderholm et al., 2023).

Although Sweden ranks fifth in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) 2023, the country still has a significant underrepresentation of women on the boards of major Swedish companies, where 63 percent are men and 37 percent are women (AllBright, 2023). Regarding the composition of chairmen of the boards, nine out of ten are men. Additionally, there are fewer women in leadership positions in Sweden as only 12 percent of the CEOs in Sweden are women of the listed companies (AllBright, 2023). Considering that studies repeatedly show that gender equality affects the triple bottom line - profit, people, and the planet - positively, there should be incentives for organizations to change accordingly (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018).

Furthermore, this gender-leadership gap has been visible through several significant resignations of female top leaders during the recent year in Sweden. Despite the societal support for female career advancement, the number of women in top corporate positions in Sweden is decreasing. Nevertheless, the prevailing norm in managerial positions, such as CEOs or directors, continues to be predominantly masculine (Westman, 2024).

1.2 Research Gap, Purpose & Research Question

Research on Board Gender Diversity (BGD) has rapidly increased during the last decade (Belingheri et al., 2021; Sánchez-Teba, Benítez-Márquez & Porrás-Alcalá, 2020). However, most research within this field explores the effect BGD has on organizational outcomes, and few studies examine how BGD influences gender diversity in management positions below the board level. (Kirsch, 2018; Biswas, Roberts, & Stainback, 2021). While Kirsch's (2021) study on female directors' contributions to gender equality adds to this underexplored area, the author recognizes that advancements in gender equality in the company can also be due to men's perceptions. There is thus a need to explore male directors' contributions to gender equality within the company. This paper adds to Kirsch's '(2021) work and this growing field, by presenting new data on male directors' perspectives on gender equality.

Additionally, Syed et al.'s (2023) review maps the current evidence regarding how the boards of directors' social identity related to their work-related roles affects their behavior in their board oversight role. Considering that research by Wu et al. (2023) displayed that male founders who had daughters were more aware of women's struggles and had more gender-equal boards, it indicates that directors' non-work-related identities are relevant to explore. Thus, this thesis aims to extend Syed et al.'s (2023) framework by investigating if and how male board of directors' non-work-related identities influence their perceptions about gender equality in their organizations.

Research on mobilizing men toward collective action for gender equality is scarce and has often been investigated in terms of social protests (Subašić et al., 2018). Most research on collective action has been made from the viewpoint of the disadvantaged groups and not from the point of view of the advantaged group's motivation to take collective action (Thomas et al., 2020). Radke, et al. (2020) extended the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) to partly address this, however, they did not examine those from advantaged groups who *do not* actively engage in actions which this thesis intends to do.

This thesis aims to contribute to the research field on BGD. It does so by building on and exploring the limitations of Kirsch (2021), Syed et al. (2023), and Radke et al.'s (2020) work. This essay hence aims to explore the following research question:

Why do male directors of boards contribute to gender equality in their organizations?

1.3 Delimitations

The study focuses on Swedish male directors' motivation to contribute to gender equality, not acknowledging the interplay and partnership between men and women. This focus stems from Kirsch's emphasis on women's contributions, leading this report to adopt the alternative perspective of men to contribute to this specific research area (Kirsch, 2021; de Vries, 2015; Childs & Krook, 2009). It is interesting to examine the Swedish context considering how the country is perceived to be a frontrunner in matters of gender equality and is not bound by EU law on gender quotas (indicating a focus on voluntary measures and other regulations such as CSR) (Hövel, 2023; Svanberg, 2023). Furthermore, this study exclusively investigates gender within the binary framework of men and women, thus applying a normative perspective. However, future research can widen its scope including a non-binary perspective.

Furthermore, the study focuses on stock-listed companies' supervisory boards. The reason to investigate stock-listed companies was mainly due to the legal and regulatory compliances they are subjected to in relation to social responsibility, indicating that these companies have more incentives to work with gender equality compared to non-listed companies (Strömmer & Zanetti, 2024). Additionally, supervisory boards have a broader range of professional backgrounds

compared to management boards prompting an expectation of a broad spectrum of directors' behavior concerning equality and social identities (Kirsch, 2021).

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to contribute insights into why there is still a prominent gender-leadership gap in Sweden and what can be done to mitigate this. Considering the extensive literature on gender and leadership, this review identifies and reviews existing and relevant research to better understand where this paper can contribute to the field. Given that this study focuses on the Swedish context, the research area investigating the impact and effects of gender quotas will not be addressed (addressed in section 1.3 Delimitations).

2.1 The Gender-Leadership Gap

Potential reasons for the prevalence of a gender-leadership gap have been investigated by scholars over the years. For instance, various studies argued that men's and women's different approaches and attitudes to workplace negotiation can be one explanation for fewer women in senior positions (Human Resource Management International Digest, 2024). Research on the gender-leadership gap highlights how despite documented gender differences might impact women's pathway to leadership positions, these variances become amplified in the perception and beliefs about female applicants and leaders (Eckel et al., 2020).

2.2 Board Gender Diversity (BGD)

Gender and participation in the board of directors is an increasingly expanding field in gender research (Belingheri et al., 2021). Over the last decade, research in the area has increased rapidly which can be seen to be due to more women holding higher organizational positions in companies (Sánchez-Teba, Benítez-Márquez & Porras-Alcalá; 2020). However, most research has focused on the relationship between Board Gender Diversity (BGD) and the company's financial performance (Kirsch, 2018). Research has also displayed how female representation on the board of directors impacts the firm's business strategy and policies, corporate social responsibility, and ethical behavior. Fewer studies examine female director's effect on gender equality below the board level and the studies that have been conducted primarily focus on demonstrating how there is a clear link between BGD and the appointment of women executives (Kirsch, 2018; Biswas, Roberts, & Stainback; 2021). For instance, studies on US firms demonstrate that there is a positive relationship between equality at lower managerial levels and greater gender equality at higher levels in the organization. Additionally, a positive correlation can be found between gender diversity on boards and the appointment and success of women CEOs (Kirsch, 2018).

Hence, a dominating underlying assumption in existing research is that women automatically will support other women as it is presumed rather than demonstrated that the relationship between BGD and gender equality in organizations is due to female directors having an active role in this development (Kirsch, 2021). One potential explanation for this strong assumption in research studies is that numerous theories in the field, such as critical mass and trickle-down effects, rely on it. Thus, there is a need for more qualitative studies that focus on the psychological and behavioral perspectives to better comprehend the antecedents of how BGD impacts equality in organizations (Kirsch, 2018; Laique, et al., 2023). Kirsch (2018) identified that key factors in explaining why some female directors contribute to gender equality include a sense of responsibility for women in the organization and a shared social group identity among women.

Moreover, Kirsch's (2021) extensive qualitative study explore why some female directors strive to enhance gender equality within their organizations, while others do not prioritize this. She found that these women's actions may not immediately lead to measurable concrete outcomes, such as a decrease in the gender pay gap or an increase in the share of women in management positions in the organization.

Even though Kirsch's (2021) study addresses the assumption that female directors represent women's interests, her study overlooks other potential critical actors on the board, i.e. men's attempts and abilities to advance gender equality. De Vries's (2015) study highlights how men's positional power and benefits granted by their gender identity make them well-positioned to champion change. This calls for more research exploring the boundaries of men's capability and readiness to contribute to dismantling male privilege. In addition, research on Leader-Development-Programs (LDP) also outlines the importance moving forward to encourage and involve both male and female leaders to reflect, acknowledge, and question prevailing gender norms and expectations as well as the circumstances that perpetuate them (Loumpourdi, 2023).

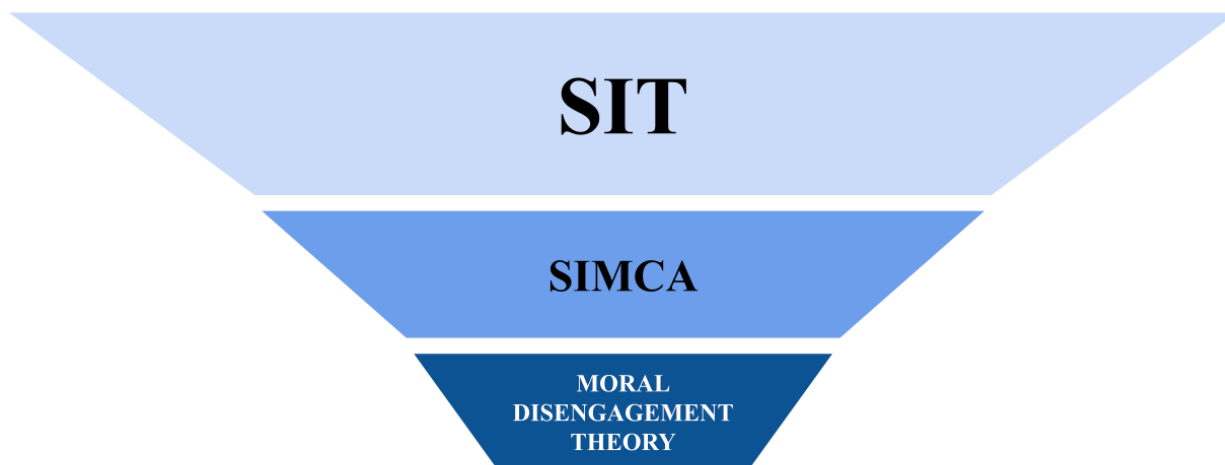
Shifting focus towards critical actors, rather than critical mass theory, is important to get a broader understanding of BGD and gender equality in organizations (Childs & Krook, 2009). Kirsch's (2021) paper recognizes this limitation and identifies it as an area in need of future research as she describes how social identity influences individuals' willingness to contribute and act towards greater gender equality in organizations, making it important to investigate both women's and men's experiences. This thesis thus aims to contribute to the research field by investigating the limitations of Kirsch's (2021) research by focusing on the male director's perspective and how their social identities influence gender equality in their organizations as Kirsch focused on women.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Theory Overview

The theoretical framework of this thesis will utilize three interlinked theories that can be seen to complement each other to deepen the analysis: Social Identity Theory (SIT), Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) and Moral Disengagement Theory. SIT can be seen to be the foundation and the broad overarching theory as it describes how individuals' identities are shaped based on their group membership. Additionally, SIMCA extends SIT by focusing on how social identities influence individuals' decisions to engage in collective actions for social change. Moreover, the Moral Disengagement Theory can in turn be seen to elaborate and offer a distinct perspective on morality (an antecedent in SIMCA for collective action), by suggesting how despite individuals being motivated to act ethically they justify and rationalize inaction or unethical behaviors using various moral disengagement mechanisms (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Theory Funnel



3.2 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social identity theory in leadership delves into the perception of ourselves and how others perceive us, encompassing various aspects of a human being's identity such as socioeconomic status, age, race, ethnicity, and gender (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The theory suggests that humans are social beings who derive a significant part of their identity from group membership and that these group identities in turn influence their attitudes, behaviors, and intergroup relations (SIT; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Syed et al.'s (2023) review maps the current evidence regarding how board of directors' social identity affects their behavior in their board

oversight role (see Appendix 1). Their review highlights three antecedents that enhance and influence the director's behavior.

1. *Self-categorization*: Individuals tend to unconsciously place themselves into social groups based on perceived similarities in social identities, even without direct interaction or acceptance by its members.
2. *Self-enhancements*: Individuals identify themselves with social groups to pursue self-enhancement, aiming to cultivate positive feelings about themselves and to bolster their self-worth through being in in-groups.
3. *Out-group Salience*: How individuals perceive themselves as in-group members and their tendency to compare themselves to the out-group.

Furthermore, Syed et al.'s (2023) meta-study identifies how directors' work-identifications (see Appendix 1) impact their board oversight role and will thus be a part of this essay's theoretical framework (Syed et al, 2023). This essay contributes to the BGD research area by exploring if these work-identifications impact the male directors' perceptions, perspectives, and awareness of gender diversity in the organizations where they sit on the corporate boards. This essay also extends this framework by investigating if and how the male board of directors' non-work-related identifications influence perceptions about gender equality in their organizations since Syed et al.'s (2023) research solely focused on the social identities related to the board of directors' work-roles. A study by Wu et al. (2023) showed how "the daughter effect" (a non-work-related identity) made Swedish male founders more sensitized to the difficulties and gender inequalities women face which in turn had a positive equality effect on the organizations. Thus, there is a need for future research that explores how prior roles and identities affect male directors' motivations to act.

3.3 Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA)

Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears's (2008) integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) can be used to better understand and explain socio-psychological reasons behind collective actions and shed light on the underlying reasons behind what drives advantaged individuals to help disadvantaged groups. SIMCA has been developed within the broader context of SIT but focuses specifically on how social identities influence individuals' decisions to engage in collective actions for social change (Thomas et al, 2020; Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008).

According to SIMCA, individuals engage in collective action when they are strongly committed to a particular group (social identification), when they perceive that the group they identify with is unjustly disadvantaged compared to others (injustice), and when they believe that their actions can bring about change to the current situation (efficacy). Furthermore, SIMCA suggests that

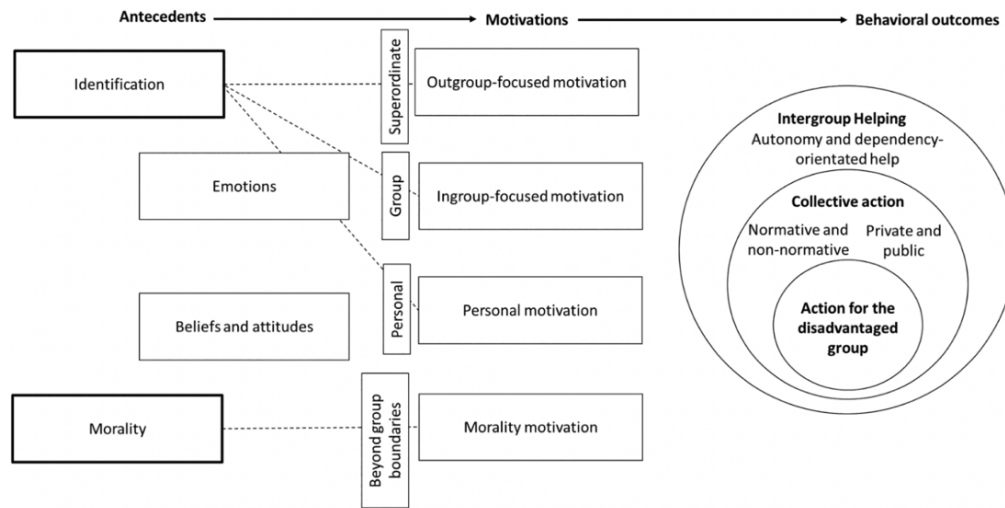
social identification is both a direct- and indirect predictor of collective action since it should amplify perceptions of injustice and efficacy (Maalouf, 2023; Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008). Since Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears’s paper in 2008, SIMCA has been extended to include moral convictions and how that together with identification are seen as core predictors of collective action (Van Zomeren, Kutlaca & Turner-Zwinkels, 2018).

However, most research on collective action has been made from the viewpoint of the disadvantaged groups and not from the point of view of the advantaged group’s motivation to take collective action (Thomas et al., 2020). Radke et al. (2020) tries to mitigate this by building on the extended SIMCA [by van Zomeren et al, 2018] and they add other antecedents that they deem important like emotions. Furthermore, they propose four potential categories of motivations to explain why advantaged individuals might help disadvantaged groups and link potential predictors and behavior outcomes to each of them. See Table 1 for a summary and Figure 2 for an overview:

Table 1 – Summary of Motivations

| Motivations | Definitions |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Out-group Focused Motivations</i> | Genuine desire to improve the status of disadvantaged group. |
| <i>Ingroup Focused Motivations</i> | Support for disadvantaged group conditioned that their own advantaged status is maintained. |
| <i>Personal Motivations</i> | Self-benefit and desire to meet own personal needs by helping the disadvantaged group. |
| <i>Morality Motivations</i> | Actions towards helping the disadvantaged group are driven and aligned by their moral beliefs. |

Figure 2 – Radke et al., (2020) - Extended SIMCA Framework



However, Radke et al. (2020) examined the differences in motivations, antecedents, and behavioral outcomes among members of the advantaged group who *actively engaged* in actions to benefit the disadvantaged group. They did not include those from advantaged groups who *do not* actively engage in actions. There is thus a need to establish how the antecedents and consequences of these motivations might differ when examining action for different causes, considering that the predictions were made in relation to the other motivations. There is also a need to examine how these motivations might change based on the other identities held by members of the advantaged group. Additionally, most international studies have used SIMCA to explore and help establish links between how gender identification among women leads to an increased likelihood to participate in collective action for working towards gender equality (Xiao & Overton 2022; Zhao, Guan & Liang, 2022). However, research focusing on how to mobilize men toward collective action for gender equality is scarce and the research on collective action for other causes (like men supporting #MeToo) has often been investigated in terms of social protests (Subašić et al., 2018). Thus, this furthers the theory by examining Radke et al.'s (2020) extended SIMCA model in relation to male directors.

3.4 Moral Disengagement Theory

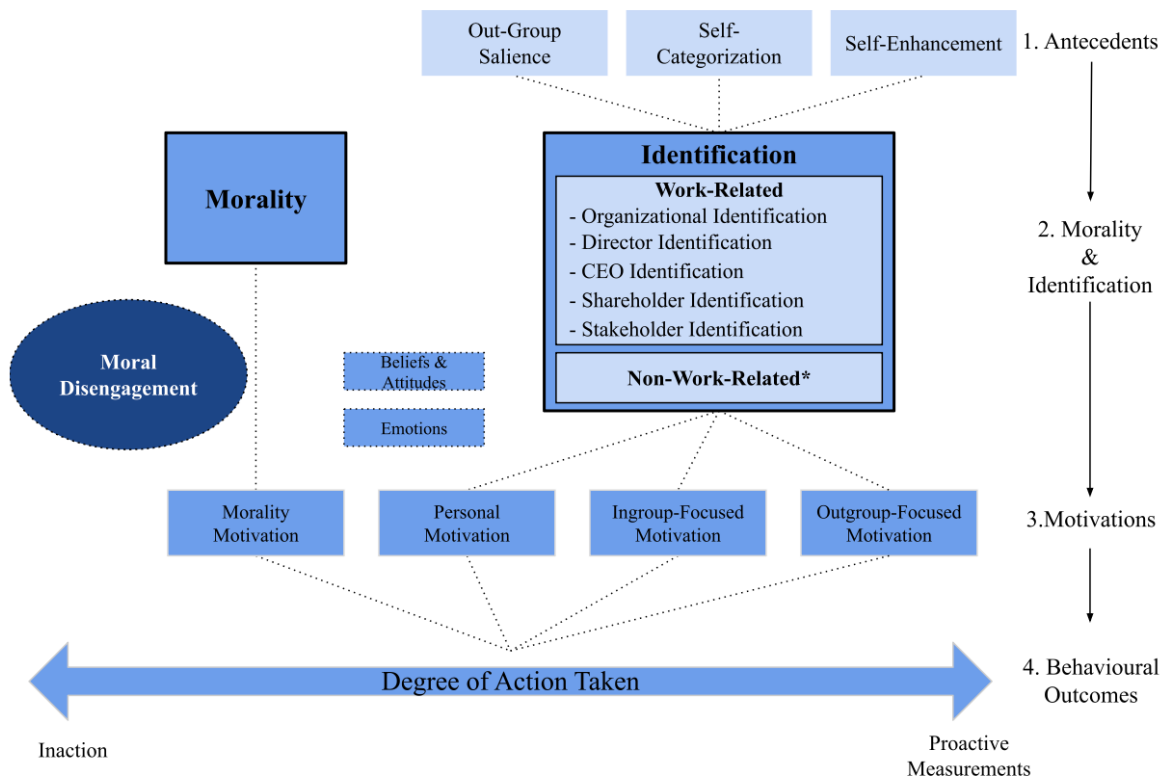
Moral disengagement was first conceptualized by Bandura (1999), as the cognitive process through which individuals restructure their moral standards, thereby enabling them to engage in unethical behavior without feeling distress. However, the precise definition of moral disengagement remains a subject of ongoing debate among scholars (Newman et al., 2019). Schaefer & Bouwmeester (2020) can be seen to clarify and synthesize moral disengagement in their paper by dividing it into two psychological mechanisms: reconstruing morality and

reconstructing agency as well as outline three categories of psychological mechanisms through which the process of moral disengagement functions (reconstructing morality mechanisms, reconstructing agency mechanisms, and dual-function mechanisms). See Appendix 2 for framework definitions and overview.

3.5 Theory Application

To address the research question, the synthesis of the findings and conceptual frameworks by Syed et al. (2023), Radke et al. (2020), and Schaefer & Bouwmeester (2020) will be used. Their conceptual mappings are grounded in SIT, SIMCA and Moral Disengagement Theory respectively. The integration of these frameworks will act as tools to explore and better understand how male directors' identifications, motivations, morals, emotions, beliefs, and attitudes impact why they contribute to gender equality. Syed et al.'s (2023) framework summarizes major antecedents and identities that have been shown to impact board directors' behavior regarding their board oversight role. Further, Radke et al.'s (2020) framework can help map the connection between the board of directors' identifications, motivations, and consequential actions. The framework by Schaefer & Bouwmeester (2020) will be used to analyze potential moral disengagement mechanisms the directors employ. See Figure 3 for an overview:

Figure 3 – Proposed Integrated Theoretical Framework (Berg & Gorosch, 2024)



Note:

- *This essay aims to explore non-work-related identities to extend Syed et al.'s (2023) framework.
- The bolded boxes represent identifications and morality as the key predictors in the extended SIMCA while the dotted lines surrounding “Emotions” and “Beliefs & Attitudes” illustrate the significance of these categories for various motivations (Radke et al., 2020).
- Radke et al. (2020) only explore motivation in relation to action. This paper aims to apply their framework by also investigating the board of directors who do not take any action.
- The dotted lines surrounding moral disengagement indicate its omnipresence (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020).

4. Methodology

4.1 Method

4.1.1 An Abductive & Qualitative Study

Combining an inductive process where existing ideas about gender-leadership have been generalized with a deductive process in which existing choices from previous studies have been narrowed down (Kirsch, 2021), has led to an abductive approach to this study. As the authors found it challenging to grasp the significant factors influencing male boards of directors' willingness to contribute to gender equality within their organizations before conducting the interviews, the study has been conducted through qualitative semi-structured interviews with overarching questions to leave room for flexibility (see Appendix 3). Thus, this approach allowed the authors to be open-minded and curious, exploring factors not thought of in advance to the data collection. Additionally, this approach provides the interview participants with more freedom in expressing their attitudes and thoughts and an opportunity for the interviewers to ask follow-up questions to gain a more in-depth comprehension of the subject. While there are several advantages to a semi-structured interview process, there are limitations such as that comparability between interview subjects may differ (Bell & Bryman, 2019).

The analysis using SIT and SIMCA highlights how there seems to be a discrepancy between the male directors' attitudes and gender-equality-related actions. Furthermore, there appears to be a predominating implicit complacency among the participants regarding actions for gender equality in their organizations, stemming from them cognitively reconstruing or reframing their inactions as being morally justifiable. To better understand and explain the disconnect between the directors' emphasis on the importance of gender equality and their consequent actions/inactions, moral disengagement theory will be utilized to complement and dig deeper into why participants do not act toward gender equality.

4.1.2 Approaches: Subjectivist & Interpretative

This thesis is guided by a subjective ontology, assuming that the natural and external social reality rely on cognitions and consciousness. According to subjectivist ontology, researchers aim to investigate and comprehend how individuals see the world and act in it (Saunders et al., 2022). Consequently, this approach is suitable in seeking a response to the research question as it includes examining social activity and interactions of human behavior of male boards of directors.

Additionally, some epistemological considerations of this paper include how society and organizations are socially constructed. As the purpose of this study is to contribute to the discussion about how to close the gender-leadership gap, one needs to acknowledge that some factors influencing the gender-leadership gap are social constructions such as hidden power structures and norms about gender roles in society. Thus, the study is mostly based on an interpretivist approach where the focus is on social sense-making to identify perceptions, attitudes, and concrete actions among the interview subjects to understand the mechanisms why things occur in social settings (Saunders et al., 2022). However, this study also wants to make broader assertions about why directors contribute to gender equality.

4.1.3 Research Setting & Study Design

Building upon Kirsch's (2021) study of female directors in German stock-listed companies, this qualitative research paper aims to illuminate the importance of organizational and other factors that affect why male boards of directors promote initiatives for the progression of gender equality. AllBright's 2023 report will be utilized as a foundation for gaining an appropriate and wide sample of interview subjects. AllBright (2023) has conducted a study of 361 listed companies in Sweden and they have categorized all companies into three lists: the green-, the yellow- and the red list (see Table 2).

Table 2 - Categorization of Companies (AllBright, 2023)

| Classifications | Definitions |
|------------------------|---|
| The Green List | Green companies have achieved a balanced gender distribution on their board (40/60). |
| The Yellow List | Yellow companies have both men and women on the board but do not achieve a balanced distribution (40/60). |
| The Red List | Red companies do not have any women on the board. |

4.2 Sample

4.2.1 Research Participants

This study is based on interviews with 10 individuals who all work within listed companies in the real estate sector to gain more comparable insights. Three listed companies in each list will be examined for a wide sample. Before reaching out to potential interview subjects, a pilot interview was conducted with a male director in the real estate industry to gain insights into if and how this study should proceed in the following interviews. Subsequently, potential interviewees were contacted via e-mail (see Appendix 4). 13 people were contacted, which led to 11 people responding and 10 interviews. Of the 10 interviews, 4 digital meetings and 6 meetings in person were conducted (see Appendix 5). Like Kirsch's study, a minimum requirement of 2 years' experience on the board was set as it can take time for newcomers to establish their roles on a board (Kirsch, 2021).

4.3 Ethical Considerations & Implications

The authors of this essay have, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, chosen to anonymize the directors by using a coding system. The coding system is based on AllBright's (2023) classification of which type of company the directors serve the board on (green=G, yellow=Y or red=R), followed by the order of their interview (e.g. the second director from the red list would be codified as R-2). See Table 2 for extensive definitions.

Besides this, the interview participants' integrity has been in focus by informing them about the GDPR rules the study follows and requesting the interview subjects to sign consent forms from the Data Protection Office before conducting the interviews. In addition, they were informed that the interviews were recorded and that they could withdraw their consent to participate at any given time without further explanation. These factors have together contributed to an increased likelihood of truthful, non-biased, and reliable responses leading to the dependability of the study.

In addition, the study aims to represent various viewpoints on the gender-leadership gap by interviewing men in different organizations with various backgrounds and experiences to produce fairness and authenticity. With this focus, the hope is that the semi-structured interviews yield transferability and credibility, which in combination could lead to complementing the already existing research conducted by Kirsch on female boards of directors.

4.4 Method Criticism

Factors concerning reflexivity should be critically examined as interview subjects were all acquaintances of one of the author's parents. Thus, it is likely that the authors have applied reflexivity to the research method, which reflects personal theories and values leading to bias in the selection process influencing the forms of analysis. However, the effect of the reflexivity of the study's outcome and results is hard to determine (Bell & Bryman, 2019).

Furthermore, the language aspect is important to consider. Since all interviews were conducted in Swedish, translation was necessary when transcribing the recordings. However, these translations could occasionally lead to misrepresentations of the empirical data due to idiomatic and cultural differences inherent in languages (Vula & Tyfekçi, 2024).

4.5 Usage of Artificial Intelligence

This study has utilized the artificial intelligence tools ChatGPT and TurboScribe. ChatGPT has been used to polish language, structure sentences, and rephrase the study's own written content more academically. Additionally, TurboScribe has been deployed in transcribing the interviews for its time-saving capabilities. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations and implications associated with the utilization of such tools since it potentially could lead to biases and diminished originality.

5. Empirics

5.1 Male Directors Gender Equality Related Actions

Many male directors reported that they had not taken any specific gender equality-related actions, because it was seen as a natural part of the board work and the organization's culture, or that they did not find it necessary because the division was already fifty-fifty on the board and thus would take actions only if problems emerged. Several directors also referred to how gender diversity was a running function in the board through the organization's equality policies, KPIs, or ESG-targets. These factors ensured that the organization was as equal as possible. This can be exemplified by the following quote from one of the participants:

“If it had been unevenly distributed, we would certainly act. Now it's not skewed, so everything is fine. It's a clear dialogue rather because it's equal and that there's a focus on competence”. (Y-3)

Some directors also expressed how they did not understand how they in their role could work with equality questions since *“it's the owners who appoint the board and the board's ruled by that”* (R-1) so *“we have no say in whom we elect to the board”* (Y-3) and that their role solely was to ensure that the organization followed Swedish law on the topic:

“After all, it's the policy that governs and it's the management that must drive it. The board doesn't get involved if the policy document is followed.” (G-3)

Some male directors see equality issues as something they do not have to work actively with since it is the CEO's job and instead refer to policy documents they had in place:

“It’s the operative managers that should take those types of questions [equality-related ones]. The board is included in the work and sets the policies for the HR work. Then it’s the company that must put in place the processes and procedures required to be able to fulfill the policy.” (G-3)

However, others expressed efforts to foster diverse perspectives in the boardroom, beyond gender, by actively seeking candidates outside current and traditional recruitment networks and pools. For instance, one director described how he actively guided the recruitment process by increasing the scope when realizing that the current specifications regarding the industry limited the number of women in the recruitment pool. By doing this, they found many more potentially competent female candidates. Another director also brought up how it was important to avoid biases in the recruitment process by removing gender and name from the applications and how they actively thought of the gender balance in the company:

“If you have two equivalent candidates, then you can think about whether there is an equality issue or a gender imbalance in the management team. Then you might prioritize a woman over a man or a man over a woman.” (G-3)

Furthermore, some directors described how they pay close attention to the company’s statistics on wage setting and compensation packages and benchmarked it against the market. For example, one director described how he actively called friends on other company boards to benchmark and ask for advice. Another described how he tried to actively counter the pay gap that occurs due to maternity leave by giving everyone who had been on maternity leave the same salary audit as the rest when they returned from it. However, this is also an example of a director following the law, despite framing it differently. Swedish law requires that organizations give employees on parental leave the same salary increase rate as if they had been in service (Parental Leave Act, 1995). Additionally, outside of the boardroom, some had engaged in discussions with other male colleagues about the positive shift that they see in more females reaching top positions.

5.2 Male Directors Identities

The interviews revealed a divided view of how the boards of directors perceived their roles in the boards compared to their operational roles. Some boards of directors did not distinguish between their operational role and the work in the board rooms, while others felt like there was a stark difference in formality in the board rooms. In addition, boards of directors with women in their presence were affected by how they perceive or work with gender equality questions. For instance, male directors with daughters all emphasized how having daughters have impacted their view of gender equality. Additionally, male directors with strong women in their households (such as a mother or a sister) also seemed to play a pivotal role in how they perceive gender equality today. Furthermore, there are divergent views about the need to include women

in relation to company performance since some board members express how it has been linked to lower risk, higher return, and increased profitability, while others express doubts or unawareness about this correlation. Another important aspect discussed is how gender equality enhances a company's reputation (see Table 3).

Table 3 - Quotes Illustrating Male Director's Identifications

| Work-Related Identifications | |
|--|---|
| Organization & Shareholder Identification | <p><i>"Empirically, there is evidence that more equal companies and boards have less risk and higher returns." (G-3)</i></p> <p><i>"It's not important what gender someone has, the important thing is the right competence. You want the company to survive and be the best, and then you also want to be the best employee and the best board. Then you have a great chance of surviving." (Y-1)</i></p> <p><i>"I received a photograph when they were having a company party at a subsidiary in the United States. As I look at the photo, there wasn't a single person of color in leadership. That was rather strange. Don't you think so? And there are too few women. What the hell is this? It doesn't look so great, does it?" (R-2)</i></p> |
| Director Identification | <p><i>"Being a board of director is akin to attending a banquet; one tends to sharpen up a bit. Particularly, if you are part of a stock exchange-listed company's board, there is a significant amount of material that must be thoroughly reviewed. It's imperative to read everything and be well-prepared. This level of preparation is not the same as a regular workday where one might simply go to work and carry on with tasks. It's more akin to training before going into a match; that's the difference." (Y-1)</i></p> |
| Non-Work-Related Identifications | |
| Identification Related to Relationship with Females | <p><i>"I have three daughters and I always contemplate about their perspectives." (G-1)</i></p> <p><i>"I can indeed observe how women are sometimes diminished. I believe I am more attuned to this issue due to my responsibility as a father to three daughters." (Y-2)</i></p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p><i>"I have a daughter who is very cautious, and she doesn't stand out. It's tough. I believe a lot comes from school that can be applied here now."</i> (G-1)</p> <p><i>"My mom was the one in charge at home. And my sister, who is also much older than I am, was also in charge. In my home, it has always been the women who decide."</i> (R-3)</p> <p><i>"I was raised by an incredibly strong working-professional mother. My mother has always been out working; she was hardly ever at home on maternity leave. Consequently, I have never held the perspective that women should stay at home. Instead, I view it as a partnership where both parties work. It's not about women staying at home with children."</i> (Y-3)</p> |
|--|--|

5.3 Male Directors Justifications

The interviewed directors all agreed that gender equality is an important topic in society and when enquiring further about what they specifically could do to contribute to make their organizations more equal, the following themes emerged throughout the interviews:

5.3.1 Competency & Diversity

Several emphasized how gender equality work came naturally and was not something that was widely discussed since it is the merits of the person that matter and what is ultimately the best for the shareholders. Competency was consistently emphasized by all directors as the most important thing that they focus on when hiring new employees or directors. In other words, most directors believed that it did not matter what gender job applications had. This can be exemplified by the following quotes:

"We just have competence in our heads. It would be sad if we hadn't." (G-2)

"I see that there are excellent competent women and men. It's not in their gender it resides, but it's in their heads it resides." (Y-1)

There were also some concerns among the directors about how men might potentially be discriminated due to all focus on women and how the real-estate sector compared to other industries is on the forefront regarding gender equality.

"In the real estate sector, it's almost a problem in the other direction. There are too many women, so men are underrepresented. Equality can swing the other way in this scenario. It's not actually women who are in short supply; it's men who are in short supply." (G-3)

“I actually believe that some discrimination [towards men] occurs.” (R-1)

Although there is a focus on meritocracy, many of the males noted that there is a need to not only focus on gender diversity in the recruitment process of boards but also raise questions and educate people about the benefits of all types of diversity in the organization.

“Choosing Gunilla over Gunnar might offer a new perspective, but I'm skeptical. They're cut from the same cloth, with similar backgrounds and experiences, more alike than we might think. This, I believe, is where many go wrong, simplifying gender equality or diversity without deeper consideration. I strive to avoid this trap by fostering broader thinking. Discussing and emphasizing the importance of, as well as the reasons behind, diversity and gender equality is crucial.” (R-3)

5.3.2 Self-Regulation

A common view among the male board directors was that the gender equality issue in terms of the gender-leadership gap was a problem that would self-regulate over time. Several brought up how they could see a shift towards more women working in the real-estate industry compared to when they first started working and how it was then entirely male-dominated. This shift was mostly attributed to the trend they saw during the last decades of more women pursuing higher education and being part of the workforce. Many described how this would lead to more female leaders over time since being a CEO or board member role requires extensive experience and knowledge in the field. Furthermore, the fact that females in general have higher grades than males will gradually contribute to women being recruited before men in the selection processes since recruiters always should focus on competency. These factors point to self-regulation due to easier recruitment as there will be a larger female talent pool with time. This type of self-regulation description was used by male directors to justify inaction regarding gender equality in their organizations.

“By advocating for gender equality within companies at all levels, it logically follows that, over time, there will be an increase in the number of candidates who are eligible. In my view, this issue will naturally resolve itself; however, it will require time.” (G-3)

“And I believe that this will even out. Not because we have a dialogue about it, but because it will take care of itself. Because the knowledge transfer [more women pursuing higher education] is increasing.” (G-2)

“It's sort of self-regulating, and if I'm right with my assertion that women are twice as good as they think, then they'll soon realize it, and there will be a positive excess on the women's side perhaps in 30 years, who knows.” (Y-1)

Others raised the point that the “old guard” of potential blockers would also either be faced out or retire and how the emergence of female role models inspires young women to pursue leadership positions and start their own companies. Additionally, societal structures such as being a mother, in combination with trying to make a career, were frequently emphasized as an obstacle for women in general.

“Certainly, it’s acknowledged that for operational work, there must be an appreciation for the demanding nature for women of managing a private life, especially when there are young children involved, alongside pursuing a career.” (Y-2)

In contrast, one participant pointed out that there is nothing in modern society today that hinders women from excelling to the same extent as men.

“The problem is that women tend to leave. This is due to the nature of the workload. It’s not the working hours that are blamed; those can be chosen. However, the tasks themselves are demanding. It’s not possible to change this so those who take on this job understand what it entails. But that’s just the way it is.” (G-2)

5.3.3 Possible Explanation of the Gap

As pointed out before, some male directors mention female role models, societal structures, and the “old guard” when contemplating the perceptions of gender equality and the possible explanation of the gap. Additionally, several male directors argue that there are not as many female boards of directors due to common stereotypes about gender. This can be seen through the following quotes:

“I believe that there are genetic differences that are genetically determined to some extent and then also environmentally determined. It certainly varies.” (Y-2)

“The man is competitively inclined. If you know what I mean. In the role as well if you read the Bible. It’s the man who is out fighting. It’s the man who is out hunting. It’s the man who has the physical strength.” (R-2)

“There aren’t many women who think it’s fun to work in a mine. If it can be avoided. Or a steel mill.” (R-2).

Other male directors emphasized that there is a need to work with women’s self-esteem at a young age to avoid common stereotypes about how women should behave.

“So I think that [women’s confidence] is a cultural issue you must work on early on, already in kindergarten. However, it’s also important for women to feel that they do not have to always perform at 110 percent. Additionally, it’s crucial for men surrounding

women to accept this notion. Many men believe they can do everything when they may only be capable of half. (Y-3)

While most male directors believed that some sort of self-regulation will take place, a minority of the interviewees emphasized the importance to at the same time work with the female perspective through mentorship programs and increase awareness of gender equality.

"I believe it's crucial to also focus on the female perspective. Engage in mentorship and work on fostering support among women. We worked with mentors. Additionally, I contributed by purchasing a competition boat. I lent it out for free to women. This way, women or girls could come and say, I think I can, but I'm not sure. Then they could go out [with the boat] with a mentor. And perhaps we should consider establishing a mentor academy specifically for women." (Y-3)

"I acknowledge that I'm not the best and don't work with it [gender equality] enough, but I'm very aware, if I may express it that way. I believe there has been a significant change in the boardroom. There seems to be an increased awareness among men." (Y-2)

6. Analysis

6.1 SIT & SIMCA

6.1.1 Work-Related Identities

Several board members identified with what was best for their organization (*organizational identification*) or their shareholders (*shareholder identification*) by repeatedly referring to the importance of competency and thus profitability as their primary focus areas. These identifications were both used to motivate their need to take gender-equality-related actions in the boardroom. For example, director Y-3 talked about establishing mentor academies specifically for women, being aware that initiatives like this will lead to greater gender equality and thus affect the company positively (*organizational identification*). The same director is driven by *personal motivations* as he explains that greater diversity will lead to increased profitability, but he also employs *out-group-focused motivations* where he has a genuine desire to improve the status of women. Contrastingly, R-2 expresses more of a *shareholder identification* as he gets angry upon receiving a photo from a company event lacking diversity. His concern stemmed from *personal motivations* rather than a genuine commitment to gender equality, as he feared it could affect himself and the company bottom line negatively (indirectly shareholders). Despite being motivated to act toward gender equality, most directors were unable to describe concrete actions taken.

Additionally, ‘the old guard’ is mentioned frequently in the empirics as a form of generational blockage that does not work with questions like gender equality. When talking about the ‘old guard’, directors tend to employ a form of *out-group salience* where they perceive themselves as in-group members that cannot change the beliefs and actions of the out-group (‘old guard’). There is also a prevalent norm within the in-group of directors that the old guard will soon disappear (due to retirement/being phased out) and that any gender equality issues will thus self-regulate. Moreover, directors who felt like there was an enormous difference in formality between their operational role and their role in the board rooms, also employed *out-group salience*.

6.1.2 Non-Work-Related Identifications Connected to Women

Directors with strong *non-work-related identities* tended to have a more nuanced understanding of the need for gender equality in their organization. Many of the directors who brought up important women in their lives (e.g. a mother or sister), being a father to a daughter, or having female role models, seemed to be more aware of struggles and problems women might experience. This can be seen as a type of *self-enhancement* cultivating positive feelings about themselves when helping people they hold close. This creates a strong genuine desire to improve the status of women (*out-group-focused motivations*). The directors’ *non-work-related identities* are key to increasing awareness and the willingness to contribute to equality. However, this does not consistently translate to actions, displaying a discrepancy between the values and actions of the male directors.

6.1.3 Morality – Justifying Inaction

Morality appears to significantly influence directors' motivation whether they actively work towards gender equality or remain passive (*morality motivations*). Most directors explain that they solely focus on competency and that it does not matter what gender people have. In other words, they choose to not see gender as they believe that this truly is the fairest. Thus, the analysis also reveals how *moral motivation* may be an important underlying reason behind the director’s inaction. The moral belief that competency is most important prompts them to not take any specific action regarding gender equality since they perceive that they do what is best for the disadvantaged group by only focusing on competency.

Moreover, some directors expressed concerns that the focus on women could lead to discrimination against men, leading to inaction toward gender equality and advocacy for focus on competence only. This can be seen as a combination of *personal motivation* (prioritization of one's own needs first) and *in-group motivation* (where supporting the disadvantaged group is contingent on maintaining their own status).

On the other hand, some directors express a genuine desire to help women as they believe this is the right thing to do (*morality motivation* combined with an *out-group-focused motivation*).

However, many directors use diverse ways to morally disengage and thus not act despite finding equality important. In other words, an implicit complacency emerges when interviewing the male directors about gender equality in their organization. While many male directors, through their social identities (e.g. being a father to a daughter) and moral beliefs (e.g. genuinely wanting to help females), see the importance of gender equality, they rationalize their actions as sufficient or status quo being beyond their direct influence.

6.2 Moral Disengagement

6.2.1 Reconstruing Morality

Throughout the empirics, it can be seen how many male directors reconstrue morality by shifting from the moral judgment that not acting for gender equality is morally wrong to that it is not immoral. This can be observed by male directors *morally justifying* their lack of specific actions regarding gender equality by referring to that they do what is best for the company and their shareholders by focusing on meritocracy. Thus, several directors frame their lack of gender equality-related actions as being fair by focusing on competency and not “seeing gender”.

This process that many directors engage in can also be related to the reconstrue morality mechanism of *moral exclusion of victims* since it contributes to overlooking and minimizing the challenges women face in the workplace. Considering how some directors do not “see gender”, the female interest is framed as irrelevant in the context of organizational priorities. Some directors can also be seen to morally exclude themselves from women by using genetic differences and societal stereotypes to explain the lack of female representation.

Additionally, male directors can be seen to *minimize, ignore, or misconstrue the consequences* of gender inequality within their organization by describing how this will self-regulate over time. Subsequently, this can potentially downplay the pace of change and the current consequences gender inequality has on women’s opportunities and experiences in the workplace. A few male directors also motivate their inaction by *condemning the condemner* when they express how the focus on gender equality might discriminate against men. Thus, they are challenging the legitimacy of the gender inequality criticism by suggesting that it might lead to unfair treatment of men instead of women.

One director can also be seen to compartmentalize their role on the board from their personal beliefs about gender equality by being involved in a female sailing mentorship program in their free time. This *fragmentation of the actor’s identity* can be seen to justify inaction in the boardroom by doing commendable behaviors in other domains. Many directors also try to *refocus the attention* by engaging in advantageous comparison by describing how their organization, for example, has a relatively balanced gender distribution compared to other companies or industries. This can be seen to minimize the importance of further action on gender equality by making the status quo seem more positive in comparison to other industries and

companies. Conclusively, participants thus employ various reconstruing morality mechanisms to morally justify their inaction on equality issues within their organizations.

6.2.2 Reconstruing Agency

Reconstruing agency mechanisms can be seen among many directors who reframe that the moral judgment of not taking actions for gender equality is morally wrong to that they are not responsible for not acting towards gender equality.

Several directors *displace their responsibilities* by referring to how working with equality questions is the CEO or owner's responsibility. Thus, inaction is a result of directors avoiding personal responsibility and instead attributing decision-making power to authorities above them in the corporate hierarchy. Further, a *diffusion of responsibility* is present among the directors as many see the responsibility for gender equality as a societal problem, thereby minimizing their role and accountability. This is evident as the directors mention that gender equality will 'self-regulate' over time as more women enter the workforce.

Similarly, many directors attribute the lack of gender equality to the characteristics or actions of women themselves, thereby using an approach where they *blame the victim* (women) and thus reduce their responsibility to act. For instance, a common argument is that the underrepresentation of women in board rooms is not a result of systematic barriers or biases within the organization, but rather due to women's competencies or personal choices (e.g. motherhood or other external circumstances). By utilizing reconstruing agency mechanisms, directors psychologically distance themselves from the responsibility, and thus involvement, of gender equality questions.

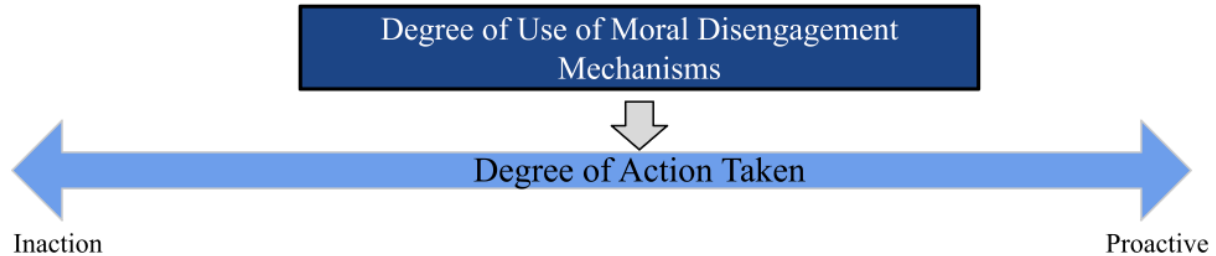
6.2.3 Dual-Function Psychological Mechanisms

There are also disengagement mechanisms where directors both reconstrue morality and reconstrue agency, resulting in a combined effect (i.e. dual-function psychological mechanism). This is evident in the form that directors often *regress to legality*, deflecting criticism of their inaction by emphasizing their responsibility as solely being defined as maximizing shareholder value and complying with the law. As a result, the directors indirectly outsource their ethical and moral responsibility to the lawmakers and regulatory bodies.

Furthermore, *vicarious self-defense* is evident when some directors justify ethically and morally questionable actions/inactions by claiming these are essential for the company to protect against unfair market conditions. An example of this is when one director seems unwilling to provide a more flexible work environment for women making it less difficult for them to balance work- and family life. Thus, external pressures, such as industry norms, are used to safeguard the company's future and remain competitive.

Similarly, directors use *the inaction of others* mechanism to justify their inaction by saying how they are better at working with gender equality in comparison to other industries. Thus, they justify their own inaction as not standing out and maintaining the status quo since no one else is acting. Conclusively, the degree to which moral disengagement mechanisms are utilized influences the level of action taken (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Moral Disengagement vs Action



7. Discussion

7.1 Answering the Why

This qualitative study has examined male directors' perceptions and attitudes towards gender equality in their organizations. Empirical data from 10 semi-structured interviews with male directors were analyzed using SIT, SIMCA, and Moral Disengagement Theory with the purpose of answering the research question: *Why do male directors of boards contribute to gender equality in their organizations?*

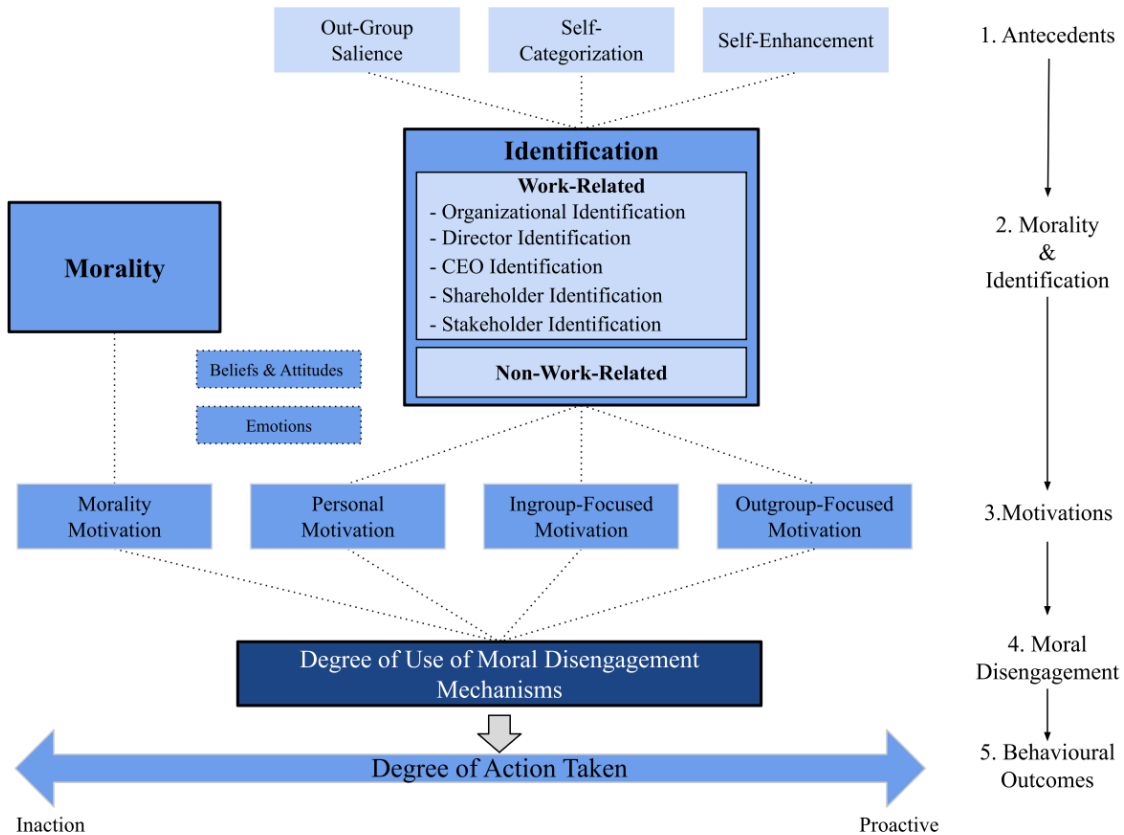
7.1.1 Why Do They Contribute or Rather Why Not?

The analysis reveals how knowledge about the benefits of gender equality for organizational outcomes seems to affect some male directors' willingness to act. Directors exposed to female perspectives, with strong non-work-related identities, were more inclined to recognize the significance of gender equality in their organization. Additionally, some directors were prompted to act when there was pressure from external influences, such as legal requirements or requirements from stakeholders.

Furthermore, male directors' motivations for why they contribute to gender equality vary widely; ranging from moral convictions and out-group-focused motivation relating to a genuine desire to change the status quo, to personal- and ingroup motivation leading to benefits derived from having a more gender-equal board. The analysis indicates how there is an interplay between morality and social identity, leading to different motivations for action/inaction. Importantly, the analysis indicates that moral disengagement is key in terms of the degree of action taken in

relation to their different motivations. Based on the analysis, the following integrated theoretical framework by the authors can be utilized to better understand how the male directors' social identities, perceptions, attitudes, and morality impact their actions in relation to gender equality:

Figure 5 - Integrated Theoretical Framework (Berg & Gorosch, 2024)



Note:

- The Integrated Theoretical Framework is based on SIT (Syed et al, 2023), SIMCA (Radke et al, 2020), and Moral Disengagement Theory (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020).
- The bolded boxes represent key variables and core predictors to answer the research question.

7.2 Discussion & Contributions to Existing Literature

As discussed in the literature review, most research on BGD has not focused on the psychological and behavioral perspectives to comprehend the antecedents of how BGD impacts equality in organizations (Kirsch, 2018; Laquie et al., 2023). This study can be seen to complement Kirsch's (2021) study and contribute to existing research on social identity theory in relation to BGD by its exploration of how *male board directors'* social identities and morality

affect their willingness to engage in gender-equality-related issues. The findings of this thesis reveal how male directors seldom act beyond what is required and tend to morally justify their inactions. Thus, this thesis adds to Kirsch (2021) by including the male perspective and underscoring the underlying discrepancy between male directors' beliefs and actions towards gender equality driven by moral disengagement mechanisms.

Even though Syed et al.'s (2023) framework captures how work-related identities impact directors' oversight roles, the findings of this study indicate that scholars should seek to explore not only how work-related identities, but also how *non-work-related identities* impact their willingness to act. This is important as this study found that male directors with strong non-work-related identities, where they were exposed to females' perspectives, tended to have a more nuanced understanding of the need for gender equality in their organization. This effect was also documented in a study by Wu et al. (2023) where they explored how having daughters made Swedish male founders more exposed to the difficulties of gender inequalities women face, which in turn had a positive gender equality effect on the organization's board of directors. Consequently, this essay can be seen to extend the boundaries of the daughter effect by highlighting how other social identities/exposure to other family members (e.g., mothers and sisters) could contribute to increased awareness among the male board of directors about gender equality issues women face. This is in line with Loumpourdi (2023) who critiques leadership programs solely for women and who outlines how there is a need to raise both women's and men's awareness about gender biases and norms in leadership programs. Thus, this essay adds support to the importance of including males in leadership programs to increase their awareness.

Similarly, the utilization of Radke et al.'s (2020) framework shows how there is a disconnect between the male directors' motivations and their actions. Thus, there seems to be a layer of consistent moral disengagement prominently used among the male directors to justify their inactions. The moral justification that the male directors engage in can be linked to Tremblay, Gendron, and Malsch's study (2016) on gendering in the boardroom, where they describe how removing gender from the sensemaking process (degenderizing) can on a first-level basis enhance females' position and legitimacy within the boardroom. However, they underscore that downplaying gender in favor of individual knowledge risks encouraging masculine domination and ignoring societal structures.

7.3 Implications for Practice & Areas of Future Research

This thesis findings indicate how there is a discrepancy among Swedish male directors' attitudes and their consequential actions for gender equality in their organizations - a gap frequently caused by moral disengagement mechanisms. This has important implications for practice since it implies that to motivate male directors to actively pursue gender equality related action, these moral disengagement mechanisms need to be addressed. However, limited studies have

examined preventative approaches regarding moral disengagement (Newman et al., 2019). Thus, this thesis calls for further research on this in relation to BGD.

An interesting area of future research would be to apply Bustamante and Chau's (2014) moral engagement intervention in the context of male directors to see if it significantly decreases their moral disengagement. Their study implies that an intervention focusing on social regulation and critical thinking strategies could decrease male directors' tendencies to morally disengage by teaching them to:

- 1) Identify the process of moral disengagement among others,
- 2) Identify and manage it within their surrounding situations, and then,
- 3) Identify it within themselves and exploring alternative moral engagement alternatives.

For instance, organizations could implement Bustamante & Chau (2014) study's intervention where "pirate excuses" represent justifications for actions and are depicted through pirate illustrations. Some participants are then given scripts containing morally questionable scenarios for them to enact. The other group members are responsible for recognizing and highlighting any moral disengagement by holding up signs with pirate illustrations.

7.4 Limitations

The study is limited to male directors in the real estate sector as the authors had access to this industry due to personal connections which potentially could affect the representativeness of the findings as perspectives and experiences of directors in different industries might vary (due to various external- and internal dependencies). Further, this study could not distinguish between the different types of directors (chairman of the board versus board-member) as some directors held both roles in different organizations, potentially impacting their perspectives and the replicability of the study. Additionally, considering the sensitive nature of the topic, the respondents might have idealized, overemphasized, or excluded information about their contribution to gender equality. This can impact the validity and reliability of the collected data.

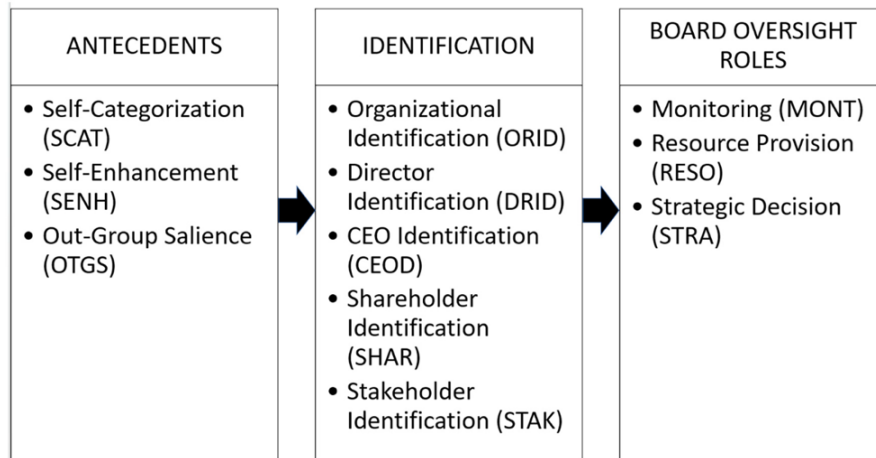
7.5 Conclusion

This study reveals a complex interplay of professional identities, personal beliefs, and societal norms influencing male directors' actions toward gender equality. Some factors driving directors' contributions to gender equality include work-related and non-work-related identities, societal norms and external pressures from both stakeholders and legal requirements. While some male directors believe they actively promote gender equality through proactive recruitment policies and recognizing the strategic benefit of gender equality, others rationalize inaction or display complacency through moral disengagement. These directors often claim that issues regarding

gender inequality will self-regulate over time or are beyond their influence. Moreover, directors possessing a strong non-work-related identity connected to women's perspective tend to be more receptive and proactive towards gender equality. However, this found awareness does not necessarily translate into action, underscoring a discrepancy between beliefs and actions, where the male directors employ moral disengagement mechanisms to justify their inactions. Hence, there is a need to identify moral disengagement behaviors and then proactively address them to enhance the directors' willingness to contribute to gender equality. Therefore, increasing knowledge and awareness about moral disengagement mechanisms by implementing targeted interventions could be an effective method to increase gender equality initiatives. This thesis thus calls for studies on moral disengagement mechanisms interventions in relation to board gender equality.

8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1. Social Identity Theory - Boards of Directors (Syed et al., 2023)



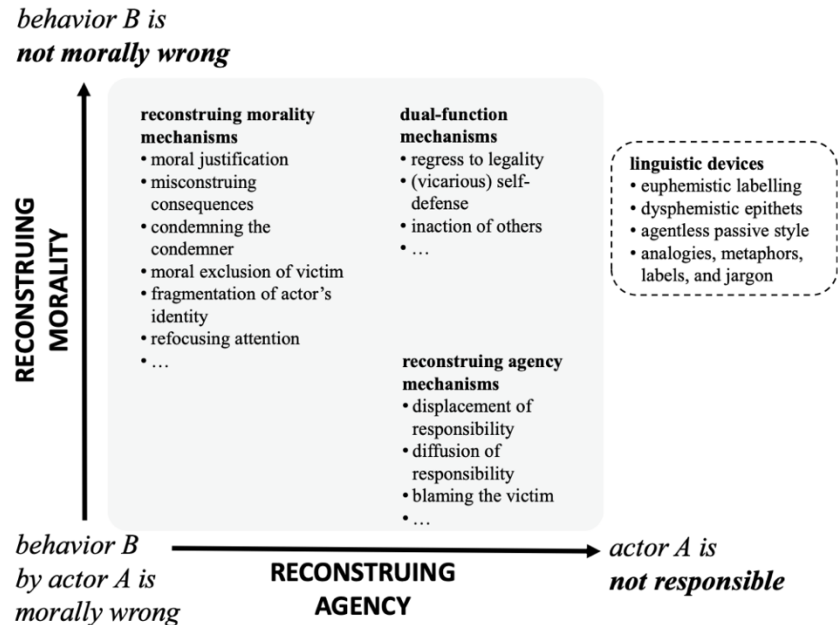
8.2 Appendix 2. Definitions & Overview: Moral Disengagement

| Reconstructing Morality Mechanisms | Definitions |
|--|--|
| Moral Justification | “People morally justify a behavior by invoking an alternative moral frame, for example by referencing a religion, an ideology, or a higher obligation to a specific community that obligates an actor to commit the behavior in question.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.534). |
| Minimize, Ignore or Misconstruing Consequences | “Misconstruing consequences may render immoral behavior as being venial or amoral. It may also operate to support a consequentialist moral justification, for example when the behavior in question is construed as the lesser of two evils, given an alternative behavior with (putatively) more detrimental consequences. In this case, misconstruing consequences becomes a special case of moral justification.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.534) |
| Condemning the | “(…) whereby people challenge the validity of others’ moral condemnation by disputing condemners’ legitimacy.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.534). |

| | |
|---|---|
| Condemner | |
| Moral Exclusion of Victim | “(…) allows people to qualify victims as undeserving of the same moral status. Victims are dehumanized (Bandura 1999) or the difference between actor and victim is psychologically exaggerated (Haney 1997). Through moral exclusion, people psychologically divide individuals into those inside and outside the moral domain.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.534). |
| Fragmentation of Actor’s Identity | “(…) people psychologically compartmentalize their lives (e.g., private versus public; family versus work), allowing themselves to behave unethically in one domain of life while offsetting it with commendable behavior in another.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.535). |
| Refocusing Attention | ”Furthermore, people may reconstrue morality by refocusing attention away from negative aspects of their behavior. ”People “may willfully deemphasize, compartmentalize, or suppress knowledge of their acts in favor of more normatively redeeming features of their work” An effective method to refocus attention is to engage in advantageous comparisons (Bandura 1999), which may have the effect of reconstruing problematic behavior as petty, trivial, or irrelevant” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.535). |
| Reconstruing Agency Mechanisms | |
| Displacement of Responsibility to Authorities | “(…) people refer to explicit or implicit orders from legitimate authorities, thereby avoiding the taking of responsibility for their own behavior.”(Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.535). |
| Diffusion of Responsibility | “(…) people are able to reconstrue agency by diffusing responsibility across collectives (e.g., Bandura 1999), thereby minimizing their own agency. When people tell themselves that everyone is doing what they are doing, that they only contribute to a small, insignificant degree to an unethical behavior, or that they acted as a member of a decision-making collective, they are psychologically distancing themselves from having to accept responsibility.”(Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.535). |
| Blaming the Victim | “(…) whereby “the status of the victim qua victim is refuted” (Ashforth and Anand 2003, p. 19) and, consequently, responsibility for the actor’s behavior is diminished. Victims of transgressions are presented as complicit (inviting the behavior), as cause (having provoked it first), or as being deserving of the |

| | |
|---|--|
| | behavior (e.g., in the case of revenge). (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.535). |
| Dual-Function Psychological Mechanisms | |
| Regress to Legality | <p>”when they claim that explicit laws can be the sole test to evaluate whether a behavior or practice is legitimate. Allegations of immorality beyond the test of legality are discredited as having no relevant foundation. In regressing to legality, people reject the moral frame invoked to evaluate the behavior in question as immoral and argue that the law, as an alternative moral frame, can be the exclusive base for deciding what is right and wrong.</p> <p>Alternatively or complementarily, via a regress to legality, people may displace responsibility for a behavior with lawmakers. People reconstrue agency by arguing that it is lawmakers’ obligation to ensure legal frameworks, and that if inconsistencies or gaps exist, lawmakers are responsible for the behavior exploiting these.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.535).</p> |
| (Vicarious) Self-Defense | <p>”To illustrate, executives may argue that paying bribes is an act of self-defense to protect their organizations from losing out when competitors would do the same. Alternatively or complementarily, when people reconstrue behavior as self-defense, they frame their behavior as a reaction triggered by others. Agency is reconstrued when the responsibility is thus displaced onto others, for example other companies that are willing to bribe or buyers demanding them.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.536).</p> |
| Inaction of Others | <p>”People reconstrue morality when they reason that the inaction of others gives them reason to conclude that a behavior can be considered the right thing to do. Alternatively or complementarily, the inaction of others provides a basis to reconstrue agency. Bystanders’ inaction may lead to placing own responsibility onto the larger group of bystanders, for example by arguing that they share responsibility for not objecting, not intervening for not speaking up.” (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020, p.536).</p> |

Fig. 1 The open inventory of psychological mechanisms of moral disengagement



8.3 Appendix 3. Interview Guide, Translated to English

Follow-up questions were prepared after each main question to ensure concrete, useful, and tangible answers. These added inquiries also facilitated the interview subjects to initiate their answers at times.

Main Questions:

1. Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?

- What is your marital status?
- Do you have children? If so, what are their genders?
- How long have you been serving on the board?
- What was your occupation before assuming this position, and what has been your path to this position?

2. How would you describe your role on the board?

3. How would you describe the significance of gender equality within the organization?

- Do you believe gender equality issues are important for the company you serve on the board for, and if so, why?

4. Have you personally been involved in or initiated actions regarding gender equality issues within the board?

- Please provide examples and explain the motivation behind your decisions.
- If no, why not?
- For instance, can you tell us about how the board recruited and selected candidates for a board position?

5. How does the group dynamic look like when making decisions regarding gender equality issues or when these questions are brought up?

- Can you provide specific and concrete examples?
- Can you give examples of instances where conflicts arose, and what you did to handle those situations?
- What is the distribution of speaking time between men and women at meetings? Have you reflected on this?

6. Where do you believe gender equality issues fall on the agenda in your board work?

- Is it perceived as important in relation to other strategic issues (e.g., the company's upcoming 3-year budget, sales targets, etc.)?
- How do you view this issue?
- Do you think it is adequately addressed?

7. Would you say that your background and experiences influence your perspective on gender equality and how you work with it on boards?

- If yes, how? Please provide concrete examples.
- If no, why not?

8. Do you feel that anything in your board work prevents you from taking initiatives on gender equality issues?

- If yes, what?
- If no, how do you take initiatives/work with gender equality?

9. Do you experience any difference in how you work with gender equality issues when serving on the board compared to your daily operational role?

- If yes, how? What do you think this is due to, and what can be done about it?
- If no, how do you work with gender equality?

10. Do you feel that you adopt a different role/identity when entering the boardroom compared to your daily operational role?

- If yes, how?

11. Approximately 65% of board members in Sweden are men - why do you think the distribution is as it is?

- What can you do about this issue?

12. Is there anything else about this topic that you believe is important but has not been discussed yet?

8.4 Appendix 4. E-mail to Prospective Interview Subjects

Hi [board member of company X],

I recieved your contact details from my father/mother, YY/ZZ, and I am contacting you in your capacity as the chairperson of the board at [company X].

I am studying at the Stockholm School of Economics and I am writing my bachelor's thesis in Management together with a classmate. Currently, we are in the startup phase and are seeking board members to interview for our qualitative study where we explore gender equality and diversity in companies and boards.

As an important decision-maker in the real-estate sector, it would be incredibly valuable to gain insights from you through a short interview of about 30 minutes.

We are flexible with dates and can meet digitally if that makes things easier. Anonymity is promised if desired.

What does your calendar look like in the coming weeks? Is it possible to schedule a time?

Many thanks in advance!

Kind regards,

[Leah Gorosch/Alice Berg]

8.5 Appendix 5. Information About Interviews

| Number | Code | Date | Length | Place |
|--------|-------|------------|--------|------------------|
| 1 | Pilot | 2024-01-24 | 32:44 | Firm Office |
| 2 | Y-1 | 2024-02-21 | 38:51 | Video Conference |
| 3 | G-1 | 2024-02-21 | 36:29 | Firm Office |
| 4 | R-1 | 2024-02-22 | 28:36 | Phone Call |
| 5 | G-2 | 2024-02-26 | 37:00 | Firm Office |
| 6 | R-2 | 2024-02-29 | 54:36 | Video Conference |
| 8 | Y-2 | 2024-03-01 | 54:59 | Firm Office |
| 9 | G-3 | 2024-03-01 | 29:31 | Video Conference |
| 10 | Y-3 | 2024-03-05 | 41:35 | Firm Office |
| 11 | R-3 | 2024-03-11 | 27:19 | Firm Office |

Minimum: 28:36

Maximum: 54:59

Median: 36:45

Average: 37:30

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