

# “Not a Gender Thing.”

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A Qualitative Study of How Gender is (Re)produced and Concealed in a Civil Society Organisation

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## Abstract:

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are widely assumed gender-neutral given their egalitarian missions, female-majority workforces, and participatory structures, yet gendered inequality persists. Gendered-organisations literature targets male-dominated bureaucracies; civil society research has largely declined to treat the sector as gendered. How gender is reproduced in everyday conduct, and how the gap between egalitarian mission and gendered practice is sustained, remains underexplored. This study asks: *How is gender (re)produced and concealed in civil society organisations?* Through a critical realist, abductive approach, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted at Save the Children Sweden across three hierarchical levels. The analysis combines Martin's (2003, 2006) practising gender with Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) institutional work along a reflexivity continuum. The study identifies a feminised institutional template, feminine-coded norms presented as professional value rather than as gendered, whose maintenance is asymmetric: feminine-coded conduct is embedded as routine and masculine-coded deviation is policed, while structural male advantage in accountability, voice, and career pathways remains unpoliced and unrecognised as organisationally produced. Maintenance is also demographically contingent, with the consensus norm collapsing in all-male contexts. Within the template, mission-driven dedication reproduces Acker's disembodied worker in feminised form. The refusal to recognise these patterns as organisationally produced itself constitutes maintaining work, placing the practising of gender beyond the reach of disruption. The study shows (re)production and concealment as co-dependent mechanisms sustaining gender in organisations claiming to have moved beyond it.

## Keywords:

civil society organisations, gender, practising gender, institutional work, intentionality, feminised organisations, concealment

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*Adelina & Linda*

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# Definitions

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**Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)**

Organisations with a stated commitment to egalitarian or social-justice missions, a non-profit focus and flatter, more participatory structures than those of conventional bureaucracies (Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023; adapted by Fadiloglu & Wahlberg, 2026).

**Agency**

Action or a state of being in action, regardless of intention, and being perceived as acting, regardless of intention (Martin, 2003).

**Intentionality**

How actors are self-aware both when responding to current pressures and norms, and when imagining and working towards different futures (Lawrence et al., 2011).

**Feminised**

Characterised by the dominance of culturally feminine-coded norms, traits, and worker profiles, such as warmth, care, empathy, listening, and consensus (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly et al., 2020). The term refers to the cultural coding of an organisation's norms rather than to the numerical composition of its workforce.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

Civil society organisations (CSOs) occupy a distinctive place in modern societies as vehicles for grassroots mobilisation, value diffusion, and democratic participation (Rothschild, 2000; Rothschild & Milofsky, 2006; Nelson & Dorsey, 2018). They are also significant employers whose workforce is disproportionately female, with women concentrated in mission-critical roles (Lanfranchi & Narcy, 2015). The relationship runs deeper than employment: women's economic and political empowerment drives the development of the sector itself (Themudo, 2009; Evans et al., 2018).

CSOs are also distinctive in their stated values. Explicit commitments to social justice, human rights, and non-discrimination are widely assumed to translate into more equitable internal arrangements (Themudo, 2009; Dema-Moreno, 2008; Sampson & Moore, 2008; Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023). Combined with a predominantly female workforce and flatter, participatory structures, this has lent CSOs a reputation as gender-neutral organisations (Dema-Moreno, 2008; Lokot, 2021), reinforced by a sector-wide framing of gender inequality as a problem of the contexts CSOs intervene in, not of the organisations themselves (Dema-Moreno, 2008).

A contradiction exists. Gender inequality persists in CSOs across wages, career progression, and board composition (Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023). Only 25 % of CEO roles in large non-profits are held by women, who remain concentrated in smaller, lower-resourced organisations (Lee, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2021). Pay gaps endure after controlling for organisational size and governance accreditation (L'Herrou & Tynes, 2020), and glass ceiling dynamics persist with education, age, and experience held constant (Themudo, 2009). These patterns hold even in organisations with explicit equality commitments, in what the literature describes as a values paradox (Themudo, 2009; Sampson & Moore, 2008; Damman et al., 2014). The paradox is sharpened by feminisation itself: the mass presence of women is read internally as evidence that equality has been achieved, depoliticising gender and discouraging reflection on how routine practices remain gendered (Dema-Moreno, 2008).

## 1.2. Research Gap

Two gaps stand out. First, the gendered-organisations literature has been developed largely with reference to hierarchical, male-dominated bureaucracies (Williams et al., 2012), and how this theorising translates to organisations whose workforce, values, and structures depart from that template remains underexplored. Civil society research has in turn largely declined to treat the sector as gendered, prompting calls for theories attentive to its distinctive governance and practices (Schwabenland et al., 2016; Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023).

Second, where gender in CSOs has been studied, the work has been overwhelmingly quantitative and outcome-focused, counting women in management, on boards, and across pay distributions (Themudo, 2009; L'Herrou & Tynes, 2020; Lee, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2021). Such studies establish that inequality exists but defer the question of how it is produced and sustained in everyday organisational life. By treating gender as a fixed individual attribute rather than something continuously enacted (Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023), the literature documents gendered outcomes without accounting for the agency through which they are reproduced or contested.

### 1.3. Aim and Research Question

This study addresses these gaps through a practice-oriented approach, examining how gender is enacted through routine practices, discourses, and interactions, and how the persistence of gendered arrangements is reconciled with the egalitarian self-understanding of the sector. Accordingly:

*How is gender (re)produced and concealed in civil society organisations?*

### 1.4. Main Focus and Delimitations

Civil society research is dense with competing definitions of the sector and its organisational forms. This thesis adopts CSOs as an umbrella term capturing the features most relevant here: stated commitment to egalitarian or social-justice missions, a non-profit focus, and flatter, more participatory structures than conventional bureaucracies (Mastracci & Herring, 2010; Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023). The term flattens meaningful differences between humanitarian international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), grassroots associations, and social enterprises; the analysis draws on studies across this range while remaining attentive to divergences.

Following Martin (2003, 2006), gender is treated as continuously practised rather than a fixed individual property. The analysis works with the binary categories of women and men used by participants and available in the secondary data.

The study is conducted in Sweden, and gender is understood as a context-dependent institution whose meanings vary across settings (Acker, 1992; Hofstede, 2001). Sweden is consistently ranked among the most gender-equal countries (World Economic Forum, 2024), with gender equality a national goal for decades (Lane & Jordansson, 2020). This makes it an appropriate setting in which to examine the paradox at the heart of this study: the national context mirrors the egalitarian self-image of CSOs themselves, allowing the question to be posed where one would least expect to find it.

## 2. Literature Review

This review is structured to (1) define gender as an organising principle, (2) narrow the lens onto CSOs as an understudied field in relation to gender, and (3) frame gender as everyday conduct within that field.

### 2.1. Gender as an Organising Principle

In the study of organisations and gender, following Kanter's (1977) placement of gender on the analytical map of organisational behaviour, Acker's foundational contribution was to reconceptualise gender not as a characteristic workers carry into neutral workplaces, but as a constitutive principle of organisational life (Acker, 1990; Martin & Collinson, 2002; Bridges & Messerschmidt, 2016).

Most notably, Acker (1990) establishes the concept of the disembodied, ideal worker: an organisational subject whose presumed sustained availability, undivided commitment, and detachment from the demands of private life are presented as neutral professional standards while remaining masculine-coded in their underlying assumptions. The disembodied worker functions as part of a foundational organisational logic that shapes decision-making and design beneath the level of explicit gendering, holding workers accountable to a template that systematically advantages those whose lives can be organised around organisational claims (ibid).

However, Acker's framing of the "worker" as inherently masculinised risks downplaying how actors do their own gendering through identity and interaction; instead, it should be examined whether, how, and to what degree organisations are gendered in specific contexts (Britton, 2000; Kantola, 2008). Yet most theorising draws on hierarchical, male-dominated bureaucracies (Williams et al., 2012; Boone Parsons et al., 2012), leaving open how individuals reproduce gendered arrangements in organisations that depart from this template.

### 2.2. Gender in Civil Society Organisations

A branch of scholarship has turned the gendered-organisations lens onto a different category of workplaces: organisations staffed predominantly by women (Holgerson & Hvenmark, 2023), built around egalitarian or social-justice missions (Gibelman, 2000; Mastracci & Herring, 2010), driven by what has been described as a voluntary ethic logic (Van Til, 2000), and often adopting flatter, more participatory structures than their for-profit counterparts (Mastracci & Herring, 2010). The voluntary ethic logic is assumed to pervade most practices in the CSO sector and includes interconnection through relationships, self-sacrifice on behalf of others, participation in agency and community decision-making, care in both physical and emotional registers, and varied commitments to social justice (Bandali, 2020). These features distinguish CSOs sharply from the bureaucratic workplaces that have anchored most theorising on gendered organisations, and they motivate three conceptual reference points described below.

#### 2.2.1. Communal Qualities and Gendered Cost in CSO Workplaces

Where bureaucratic workplaces have been theorised around an image of "successful, forceful masculinity" (Kanter, 1977), the more feminised and mission-driven CSOs have been characterised by

a different set of qualities. Agentic qualities, such as being aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-confident, and competitive, are ascribed more strongly to men and the traditional bureaucratic organisation, while communal attributes, such as being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle, are ascribed more strongly to women, and the CSO sector (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly et al., 2020). To accommodate the dominant qualities while preserving recognition of their costs, women in masculine contexts are shown to both deny gender shapes their experience and describe its many effects (Mease & Neal, 2023).

The communal orientation of CSO workplaces does not, however, suspend the disembodied-worker condition. A cluster of female workers in the CSO setting is organised around "feminised self-sacrifice," which is characterised as self-sacrificing, self-monitoring, and self-blaming work (Baines et al., 2012). In these contexts, female workers internalise responsibility for unpaid overtime and unmet targets, while male workers tend to maintain tight boundaries around their hours and do not exhibit comparable self-blame (ibid). Where male workers engaged with the voluntary ethic, they tend to do so from management positions rather than through hands-on, relational work with clients (ibid). In CSO workplaces, then, communal qualities are valued, while the structural costs of organisational demand fall unequally along gendered lines.

### 2.2.2. Consensus Culture and Participatory Decision-Making

A second feature of the CSO workplace is consensus-based decision-making, with roots in feminist organising practices (Zilber, 2002). It appears in the routine expectation of careful listening, diplomatic communication, and reaching consensus before decisions are made, and operates structurally as a flattening mechanism: by distributing decision-making across participants and reducing status differentiation, consensus practices remove the managerial layers through which authority would otherwise be channelled (ibid).

Yet the participatory norm has been shown to produce paradoxical inequities. Foundational feminist-organising scholarship argued that informal structures form inevitably in groups committed to structurelessness, and that informality without accountability "becomes a way of masking power" rather than dispersing it: the rules by which decisions are made become known only to those embedded in informal networks, and influence accrues to those who fit dominant cultural criteria for participation rather than to those with the strongest claim by competence or commitment (Freeman, 1972, p. 152). This observation is extended to contemporary flatter organisations, where informal in-group dynamics disadvantage women through asymmetric workload allocation and reduced perceived fit (Hurst et al., 2024).

### 2.2.3. The Paradox of Egalitarian Mission and Gendered Outcomes

Despite the high female representation of the workforce, women remain underrepresented in upper management and on boards, encounter glass-ceiling dynamics, and make the transition to management more slowly than men (Themudo, 2009; Lee, 2019).

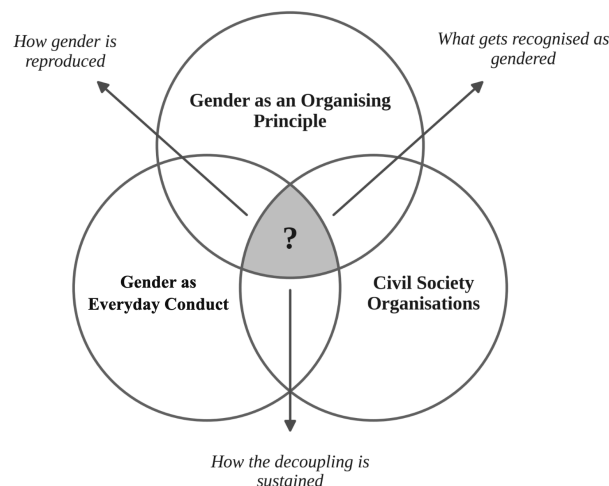
Within CSOs, the presumed gender-neutrality itself reproduces inequality, rendering gendered patterns invisible while making departures from traditional norms hypervisible (Dema-Moreno, 2008; Lokot, 2021). The gap between mission and practice can be read as a form of decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977): the formal structure of espoused values is loosely coupled to the everyday practice of the

organisation. CSOs profess care, equality, and consensus; their members nevertheless produce gendered patterns of advancement, voice, and labour (Dema-Moreno, 2008; Lokot, 2021).

Skewed sex ratios have been shown to make gender more salient (Kanter, 1977). In male-dominated organisations, women become hypervisible as tokens, and silence about gender emerges as a way of coping with the costs of naming it (Kanter, 1977; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). On the other hand, male tokenism is more often associated with an advantage, such as the assumption that men are better suited than women for leadership, sponsorship and greater career advancements, referred to as the glass escalator effect (Williams, 1992). But gender remains salient in female-majority workplaces too, and imbalance in the form of male or female majority produces comparable negative effects for women (Yoder, 1991; Steffens et al., 2019). Numerical representation alone therefore cannot produce equality: where cultural logics privileging the masculine and devaluing the feminine continue to operate, female majority composition can conceal rather than dismantle gendered arrangements (Childs & Krook, 2008; Zimmer, 1988).

### 2.3. Gender as Everyday Conduct in CSOs

CSO research has largely declined to treat the sector itself as gendered (Schwabenland et al., 2016), paying comparatively little attention to the organisational processes through which gendered outcomes are (re)produced (Mastracci & Bowman, 2015; Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023). Conceptual tools developed for stable, hierarchical workplaces require rethinking when applied to sectors with different structural conditions (Williams et al., 2012). What remains unanswered is how, in everyday conduct within CSOs, gendered arrangements are reproduced; how the decoupling between egalitarian mission and gendered practice is sustained, leaving gender concealed; and how female-majority composition interacts with mission-based depoliticisation to shape what gets recognised as gendered in the first place.



**Figure 1.** The Research Gap (Fadiloglu & Wahlberg, 2026).

Structural accounts are critiqued for offering a limited account on how gendered arrangements are sustained or unsettled in everyday conduct (Gibelman, 2000; Damman et al., 2014). A response to the limits of structural accounts has been to reconceptualise gender as a routine interactional accomplishment continuously enacted in organisational life rather than a fixed individual property

(West & Zimmerman, 1987; Deutsch, 2007). This lens is particularly relevant in the CSO setting. Where hierarchies are flatter, decision-making is more participatory, and roles are more loosely formalised, what individuals do, say, and normalise shapes organisational outcomes more directly than in bureaucratic workplaces; and the lived contradiction between egalitarian missions and gendered outcomes must be navigated, accommodated, or contested in everyday conduct rather than absorbed by formal structure (Dema-Moreno, 2008; Lokot, 2021).

Addressing this question requires a framework capable of capturing both the production of gendered patterns through everyday conduct and the work through which those patterns are reproduced or concealed.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study combines institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) with Martin's (2003, 2006) practising gender. Institutional work provides a vocabulary for the purposive action through which gendered arrangements are maintained or disrupted, but its emphasis on intentionality is incomplete for habituated, nonreflexive conduct. Martin's framework addresses this gap by foregrounding the rapid, often inarticulate practising of gender that occurs at the threshold of liminal awareness.

#### 3.1. Practising Gender

Martin (2003) distinguishes between gendering practices and practising gender. Gendering practices are the class of activities available culturally, discursively, and physically for people to enact in accordance with or in violation of the gender institution, while practising gender refers to the literal activities through which gender is done, displayed, asserted, narrated, performed, mobilised, and manoeuvred in real time, locating gender in the micro-interactional practising dynamics through which masculinities and femininities are continuously brought into being (Martin, 2003).

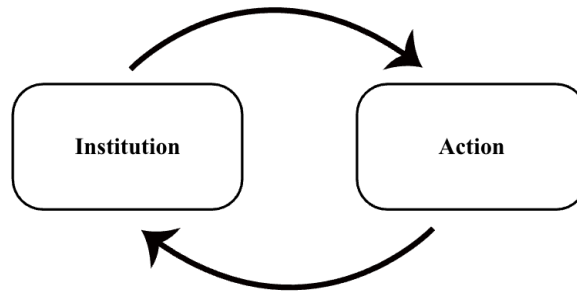
Three features of practising gender are central to this study. First, practising gender is typically nonreflexive, unfolding rapidly and directionally, "in the blink of an eye" (Bourdieu, 1990; Martin, 2006). Awareness operates at what Martin terms liminal awareness: a threshold at which actors know, tacitly, how to "act like a man" or "act like a woman" without being able to articulate what they are doing (Martin, 2003, 2006). The conduct is experienced as "second nature," sustained both by what actors have habituated through years of socialisation, which makes them "skilled" in these practices, and by the accountability pressures others hold them to (Martin, 2003; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Second, practising gender is enacted in concert with others (Martin, 2003). Both request and compliance are coordinated and nonreflexive, producing patterns no participant aimed at.

Third, practising gender produces effects that exceed intention (ibid). Because it is fast, embodied, and barely conscious, it frequently generates outcomes that actors did not aim at and may not recognise (Martin, 2003, 2006).

#### 3.2. Institutional Work

Institutional work is defined as "the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). "Institutions are enduring elements of social life" that provide templates for action and impose costs on nonconformity (ibid, p. 216).



**Figure 2.** The permanent recursive and dialectical interaction demonstrated (Fadiloglu & Wahlberg, 2026, based on Lawrence et al., 2011).

Intentionality is central to the framework: actors are conceptualised as reflexive in responding to current norms and in working towards alternatives, though their efforts often interact with social and structural conditions in unpredictable ways (Lawrence et al., 2011).

Institutional work fits this study by treating gendered arrangements in CSOs as constituted through actors' more and less reflexive action rather than as structures standing above practice (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). It foregrounds the reflexivity and skill with which individuals navigate institutional norms (Lawrence et al., 2013). At the same time, it insists that even action aimed at disrupting institutional arrangements occurs within institutionalised rules where no actor steps outside practice (*ibid.*). This helps understand how gendered arrangements in CSOs can be maintained and concealed even by actors who recognise them, since both the conduct that sustains those arrangements and the moves that would disrupt them unfold within the same institutionalised terms.

The original typology distinguishes nine forms of work across three categories: creating, maintaining, and disrupting (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This study focuses on maintaining and disrupting work as these provide insight into current institutional rules and norms (Gidley, 2020). Creating work is excluded because gender is not an emergent institution but one of the most deeply inscribed in social life (Martin, 2004; Lorber, 1994).

### 3.2.1. Maintaining Institutions

Maintaining work refers to the purposive action through which actors support, repair, and recreate existing institutional arrangements with the aim to ensure compliance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Maintaining work falls along a continuum of comprehensibility (*ibid.*). Work that maintains rule systems, such as policing, is highly comprehensible: actors are aware of its purpose. Work that maintains norms and belief systems, embedding and routinising, is less comprehensible: actors engaged in it are largely unaware of its origins or outcomes.

Within the context of reproducing and concealing gender in CSOs, maintaining work captures how gendered arrangements within organisations are actively held in place. Angus (1993) illustrates this in a Christian Brothers school, where machismo was maintained through valorising of athletic success and demonising of those who fell short. At the level of everyday interaction, maintaining work appears in smaller forms. Policing operates through small everyday corrections: a comment, a look, a reframing, that signal what conduct is acceptable. Embedding and routinising appear when individuals

describe certain ways of working as simply obvious, having infused the normative foundations so deeply into practice and everyday routines.

### 3.2.2. Disrupting Institutions

Disrupting work refers to efforts aimed at undermining the mechanisms that lead actors to comply with institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This work is often discursive, redefining and problematising the symbolic boundaries that constitute institutions (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Within the context of reproducing and concealing gender in CSOs, disrupting work captures the moments in which actors undermine the gendered arrangements their organisation otherwise treats as obvious. This occurs through disassociating the moral foundations that legitimise gendered practice, or undermining the assumptions and beliefs that make gendered patterns appear natural. Zilber (2002) shows feminist therapists in a rape crisis centre disassociating everyday work from its founding moral foundation by reframing therapeutic practice in professional rather than activist terms.

Rather than treating the framework as a closed dichotomy (Lawrence et al., 2011), this study develops it bottom up through the micro-level adaptation explained in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The original definition and micro-level adaptation of institutional work used.

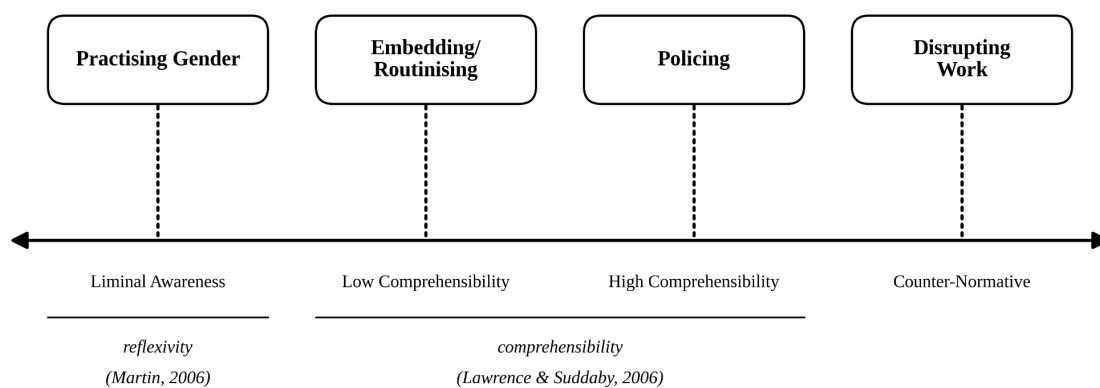
Category of work	Original Definition	Micro-level adaptation
<b>Embedding &amp; routinising</b> <i>(maintaining)</i>	“Actively infusing the normative foundations of an institution into the participants' day to day routines and organizational practices” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 230).	Norms sustained through everyday practice (reflexive or unreflexive) and structural conditions.
<b>Policing</b> <i>(maintaining)</i>	“Ensuring compliance through enforcement, auditing and monitoring” (ibid).	Compliance enforcement at the interactional level, both informal peer correction and formal sanction of deviant conduct.
<b>Undermining assumptions</b> <i>(disrupting)</i>	“Decreasing the perceived risks of innovation and differentiation by undermining core assumptions and beliefs.” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 235).	Individual articulation challenging a taken-for-granted belief; may not translate into changed practice.
<b>Disassociating moral foundations</b> <i>(disrupting)</i>	“Disassociating the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation as appropriate within a specific cultural context” (ibid).	Individual reframing that lowers the moral cost of differentiation, even if differentiation does not follow.

### 3.3. Combining the Frameworks in the CSO Setting

A combination of practising gender and institutional work responds to recent calls within institutional scholarship to refine theories of intentionality and effort, and to develop a more empirically grounded

account of how reflexive and nonreflexive action operate together in particular institutional settings (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2013; Grzelec, 2024).

In the combined framework, practising gender (Martin, 2003, 2006) serves as the mechanism of production, accounting for how gendered patterns are continuously brought into being through aggregated, largely nonreflexive practice in everyday interaction. Institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) serves as the mechanism through which produced patterns are actively maintained or disrupted, via the purposive work of maintaining and disrupting institutions. The frameworks meet on a reflexivity continuum that runs from the liminal awareness of practising gender, through maintaining work, to the counter-normative work of disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Martin, 2006). Within maintaining work, comprehensibility ranges from its low end, where embedding and routinising operate below actors' recognition of their origins, to its high end, where policing proceeds through conscious enforcement.



**Figure 3.** The reflexivity continuum (Fadiloglu & Wahlberg, 2026).

Practice-driven institutionalism addresses institutional work's tendency to focus on field-level entities rather than individual practitioners by taking "work" more literally, avoiding the separation of "micro" and "macro" and exploring instead the recursive influence through which institutional dynamics are constituted in the everyday work of practitioners (Greenwood et al., 2017).

### 3.4. Discussion

Reflexive intentionality is difficult to capture empirically and conceptually (Lawrence et al., 2013). The original definition of institutional work with an emphasis on purposive action emphasises planned, projective agency, and risks detaching analysis from individuals' practical work; most actors do not set out to affect the institutional arrangements around them, but to cope with the practical exigencies of the situations they find themselves in, even where such coping has institutional reverberations (Greenwood et al., 2017). This study addresses the limitation by extending the reflexivity continuum through Martin's practising gender, allowing the analysis to attend both to acts that explicitly invoke institutional arrangements and to acts whose institutional character becomes visible only in what they produce.

Second, the combination raises a conceptual question about where institutional work ends. Practising gender is, by definition, enacted at liminal awareness (Martin, 2003, 2006), placing much of it outside the purposive action institutional work was built to capture. Rather than treating this as a dichotomy

between intentional and unintentional action, the framework follows Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) and Greenwood et al. (2017) in shifting attention to the *object* of intentionality: conduct firmly aimed at accomplishing practical work, while not “purposive” in the narrow sense of targeting institutional change, is not for that reason unintentional. Institutional reverberations follow from action aimed at coping with practical exigencies, not only from action aimed at institutions themselves. This reframing is what allows the reflexivity continuum to include the unreflexive practising of gender without collapsing the distinction between maintaining work and the practice it works on.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1. Research Philosophy and Approach

#### 4.1.1. Critical Realist Philosophy

The study aims to explain why gendered arrangements persist by identifying the mechanisms that sustain gendered outcomes even when actors do not consciously recognise them (Acker, 1990; Martin, 2003). To achieve this, follow-up questions were used throughout the interviews to move participants from general evaluations towards specific examples that uncover patterns. Because mechanisms interact with context (Sayer, 2000), this study remained open to gender manifesting differently in Save the Children Sweden's (STC) feminised setting. Knowledge is treated as fallible and socially produced; individual accounts and the interpretations of them are approximations of reality rather than direct reflections, which is why reflexivity was maintained across the full research process.

#### 4.1.2. Abductive Approach

This study began with institutional theory and Acker's gendering processes as orienting lenses, while remaining open to revising or expanding them as interviews surfaced unanticipated patterns. Data that did not initially fit the framework but offered relevant insights into the research question was not excluded; instead, the framework was adjusted to account for what was discovered. This flexibility was important given that gendered practices are often implicit and difficult to anticipate.

### 4.2. Research Design

#### 4.2.1. Qualitative Design

A qualitative design is best suited to exploring how gendered arrangements are reproduced and concealed through everyday organisational practices. The approach prioritises participants' lived experiences and accounts of organisational routines, while offering the flexibility to pursue emerging themes (Saunders et al., 2023). This is particularly important given that institution as a concept has been criticised for being ill-defined (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019) and for underspecifying the individual level (Reay et al., 2006). A quantitative design was rejected as it would obscure the interpretive, processual nature of gendering the study seeks to surface.

#### 4.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Institutional work is often language-centred, as maintaining and disrupting institutions involves practices of speaking, narrating, and framing aimed at influencing the institutional context (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Semi-structured interviews bring these discursive practices to the forefront while allowing participants to describe how gender is "done" through processual and interactive dimensions (Bruni et al., 2004). Compared to fully structured interviews, this format permits follow-ups that probe contradictions; compared to ethnography, it remains feasible across regional offices within thesis constraints.

### 4.2.3. Design of Interview Questions

Questions progressed from concrete (roles, task division, decision-making) to interpretive (whether gender played a role, what could be more equitable), grounding reflections in everyday experience first.

Three risks shaped the design. Participants in a rights-focused organisation might dismiss gender as already addressed, so concrete questions about practices preceded any direct framing of gender. Socially desirable responses were mitigated by anchoring questions in specific situations rather than general evaluations. The sensitivity of discussing colleagues' conduct was addressed through earlier rapport-building questions and anonymity reminders before reflective questions.

## 4.3. Data Collection

### 4.3.1. Case Selection

STC was selected on two grounds. Women have constituted 75–78 % of the workforce in recent years (Save the Children Sweden, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024), creating conditions for feminine-coded norms to institutionalise while inviting the presumption of gender-neutrality that a female majority typically produces. Its value-driven identity reinforces the egalitarian self-image under which gender is presumed already addressed.

### 4.3.2. Sampling Strategy

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted across various offices of STC, following a purposive sampling strategy guided by three criteria relevant to the research question:

1. Distribution across three hierarchical levels to capture how gender operates between positions.
2. Roughly balanced gender representation with consideration of the organisation's female majority, since hearing from both men and women is necessary to understand how gendered arrangements are sustained.
3. Sufficient organisational tenure, with priority given to those who had attained their roles through internal progression rather than external recruitment.

Initial contact was established through an existing connection who distributed the invitation internally. As the study progressed, a snowball element was introduced, with interviewees recommending colleagues whose perspectives they considered relevant (Bell et al., 2019). Snowballing risks creating a bubble of respondents from similar social groups, so respondent selection remained reflexive about whom to include and how their identities shaped their perspectives. At the eleventh interview, thematic saturation was judged to have been reached, with new interviews reinforcing rather than generating substantively new patterns (Bell et al., 2019).

### 4.3.3. Interview Process

Interviews were conducted digitally given participants' distribution across Sweden, ensuring consistency in interaction format. Each lasted 30–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent,

then transcribed verbatim. The interview guide structured each conversation while permitting follow-ups, consisting of five thematic blocks: role and background; organisational culture and values; everyday practices and underlying assumptions; professional identity and self; and change, tension and challenging. Questions were open-ended to avoid leading responses. The full guide is provided in Appendix 1. Interviews were primarily in English, but Swedish was offered to ensure language was not a barrier; three were conducted in Swedish (see Table 2). Translation introduces some loss of nuance, which was mitigated by translating collaboratively and retaining Swedish terms where direct equivalents were unavailable. Code names were assigned based on role as the first letter, followed by the order of interview as the number (see Table 2).

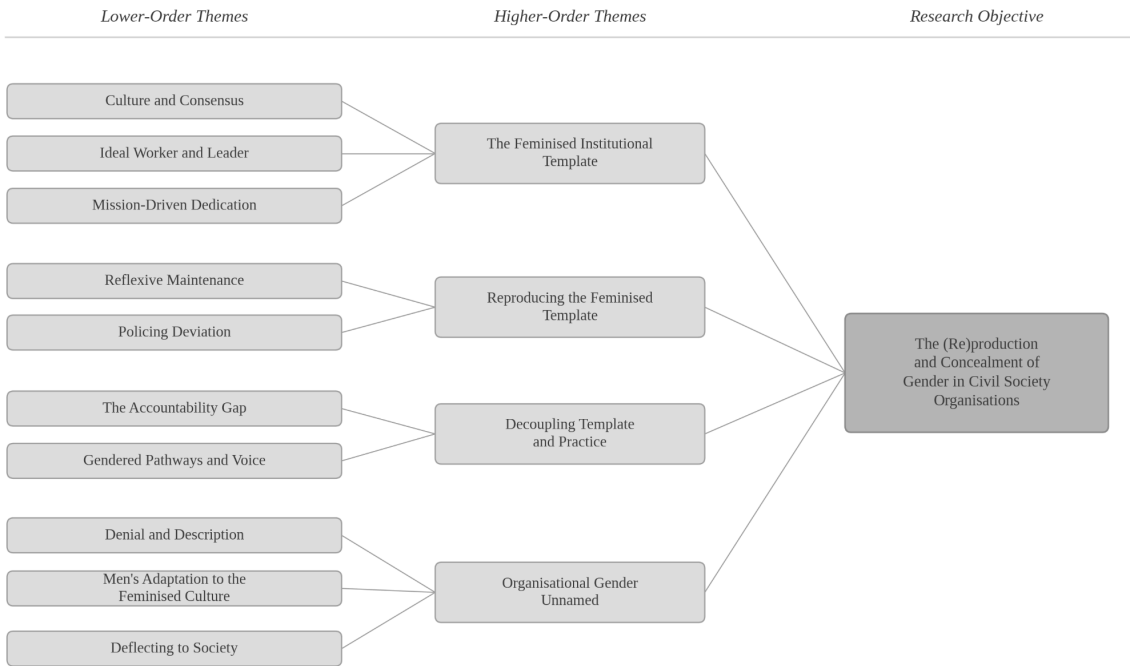
**Table 2.** Interviewee Data.

<b>No.</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Language</b>
1	O1	Operational	Female	English
2	E1	Executive	Female	English
3	M1	Middle Management	Male	English
4	O2	Operational	Female	English
5	E2	Executive	Female	Swedish
6	O3	Operational	Female	English
7	M2	Middle Management	Male	English
8	M3	Middle Management	Male	English
9	M4	Middle Management	Female	Swedish
10	O4	Operational	Female	Swedish
11	E3	Executive, Volunteer	Male	English

#### 4.4. Template Analysis

Template analysis aligns with abductive reasoning, organising data through iterative coding (Saunders et al., 2023). It brought institutional work and practising gender to bear without imposing a rigid predetermined structure, remaining open to patterns emerging from the data itself. Grounded theory was considered but rejected as inconsistent with prior theoretical commitments, and purely deductive thematic coding was rejected as too restrictive given the implicit nature of gendering.

Both authors independently coded all transcripts, generating lower-order themes that were then compared and grouped: ten lower-order themes were consolidated into four higher-order themes. These were interpreted through the institutional work framework, providing the analytical lens through which gendered reproduction and concealment are explained.



**Figure 4.** Thematic map (Fadiloglu & Wahlberg, 2026).

## 4.5. Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study is evaluated through four pillars: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in addition to the ethical considerations.

### 4.5.1. Credibility

Triangulation was employed by cross-referencing accounts from participants at different hierarchical levels and regional offices, allowing the analysis to distinguish individual experiences from organisational patterns. Where multiple interviewees described the same dynamic from different positions, the finding was treated with greater analytical confidence.

### 4.5.2. Transferability

A thick description of the organisational context, participant profiles, sampling rationale, and analytical process is provided to enable readers to judge applicability to comparable settings. The diversity of participants across levels, offices, and gender, combined with the shared organisational mission and employment conditions, strengthens the basis for contextual comparison.

### 4.5.3. Dependability

The full interview guide (Appendix 1) and thematic map (Figure 4) document the progression from raw data to conclusions (Tobin & Begley, 2004), allowing evaluation of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The flexible but structured nature of template analysis meant coding decisions were made through an iterative, documented process of comparison and verification against transcripts rather than arbitrarily.

#### 4.5.4. Confirmability

As two female researchers with an interest in gender and organisational theory, we recognise that our perspectives shaped both how questions were designed and how responses were interpreted. To address the double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1982), participants' own sense-making was held at analytical distance: where interviewees described gendered patterns and simultaneously denied gender's relevance, both the description and the denial were treated as data, rather than being resolved in favour of either. Participants' descriptions were never raw data but already filtered through their own understandings of gender, culture, and institutional belonging. To address this, ongoing reflexive discussion was maintained throughout analysis, with each author challenging the other's interpretations and surfacing alternatives. Markers for theoretical, methodological and analytical choices are explained throughout (Koch, 1994).

#### 4.5.5. Ethical Considerations

Asking about personal experiences in relation to gender can make respondents vulnerable to uncomfortable memories. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the study's purpose and format, their right to withdraw at any time, and that no question required a response. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by de-identifying all participants in reporting. Foregrounding gender in an organisation where it is rarely questioned risked unsettling employees' self-understanding; this was handled by keeping the interview frame open and letting participants set whether and how gender was relevant. All sensitive data was securely stored with access restricted to the research team and will be deleted following thesis assessment.

### 4.6. Use of Artificial Intelligence

ChatGPT and Claude were used for brainstorming and clarification during the initial stages of the study, and to assist in identifying potentially relevant research articles for the literature review. They were also used later to improve language and to rephrase and shorten text to increase the quality of the paper. Transcripts were produced using the automatic transcription in voice memos and subsequently verified by both authors against the original audio recordings, ensuring the accuracy of the raw data on which the analysis rests.

## 5. Empirics

Save the Children Sweden is a member of the international Save the Children federation, employing approximately 450–500 staff across a Stockholm head office, regional offices, and local chapters. Its work spans international development programming and a domestic programme serving children in Sweden affected by poverty, migration, and violence. Employees operate under goal-directed working time, managing their own schedules around deliverables. Men have been historically overrepresented in leadership, a gap that has narrowed considerably, and remain concentrated in finance, IT, and institutional fundraising, while women concentrate in the domestic programme.

### 5.1. Feminised Institutional Template

This section establishes what the *Feminised Institutional Template* at STC looks like — the cultural norms, worker profile, and leadership expectations that the following sections show being reproduced, enforced, and concealed.

#### 5.1.1. Culture and Consensus

Interviewees described the culture in relational and emotionally attentive terms:

“We’re very open talking about how things make us feel. [...] I’ve learned how important it is to make other people feel safe and heard instead of going for the agenda.” - O4

“Most people say they feel a very warm culture. People trust you. People are very nice and friendly.” - E1

The same register extended to decision-making, where consensus was a defining feature:

“It is the kind of organisation where we want to reach consensus as far as possible. [...] If that does not happen, people think you are not being a good listener.” - O2

M2 added that demands on leaders are unusually high “because it’s such a democratic workplace,” where people petition management or the governing board.

#### 5.1.2. Ideal Worker and Leader

Interviewees converged on a single profile of who succeeds:

“Fairly good at listening, relatively calm, diplomatic. [...] We do not engage in heated discussions. We let many have their say” - O2

E1 recognised herself in this Template and named it:

“If you are the ‘good girl’, the one who likes working [...] I love taking initiative. I don’t need close management. [...] I’ve probably ended up in the positions that I’ve ended up in because [of that]. I’ve never felt that I’ve had to be more firm.” - E1

The leadership ideal mirrored this profile across genders. E2 described her style as “coaching” while M2 framed it more effortfully:

“You need to be a sensitive person. You need to try to listen [...] You have to be empathetic because you need to get people to follow you [...], and I think in general, women are better at empathy than men.” - M2

### 5.1.3. Mission-Driven Dedication

The mission functions as a basis for professional identity, with M3 noting that people are “dedicated, both their working and even the private life, into this kind of endeavours” because they are “not committed with the bonus, [...] the salary” but “with the result that you would like to see in society.”

Yet dedication translates into overwork, framed differently across interviewees. E1 named it as organisationally expected:

“It was basically expected — you’re supposed to be available a lot, you’re supposed to work a lot. [...] I used to work like 60 hours a week, all the time.” - E1

M4 located the same overwork in individual choice:

“I don’t think [overwork] it’s the organisation’s fault. I think it’s more like individuals. For me, for example, I have a lot of overtime, quite often, and that’s kind of my fault in the end.” - M4

The costs are not evenly distributed:

“It is often women who get burned out.” - O3

## 5.2. Reproducing the Feminised Template

### 5.2.1. Reflexive Maintenance

Women maintain the *Template* on themselves. E2 and O4 identify gendered care expectations they continue to perform:

“I think from the female gender, one perhaps expects more care and consideration for private matters. [...] I do not think they would expect that from a male manager. [...] I see it as my responsibility. I think a man should take the same steps as I do. But possibly he might not.” - E2

“I’m expected to be more kind, more understanding, softer [...] People expect me to ask, ‘How was your weekend?’ But honestly, I don’t really care how their weekend was, but I’m expected to ask to show them that I care. And I don’t think my male colleagues have the same expectations.” - O4

O1 described an inability to disengage, with the organisation selecting for this capacity without equipping people to manage it:

“Some people don’t know how to leave it there [...] how can you not feel for this child? [...] You give all of yourself to this. And I don’t know if that’s always the right thing to do. [...] I don’t

think we can say, ‘you are too devoted, then you can’t work here.’ But you have to prepare us, you have to give us more tools from the beginning.” - O1

When the *Template* becomes unsustainable, the response itself is gendered:

“It feels like women often have [...] good girl syndrome. [...] women often overachieve just to prove something. [...] women are more like, ‘my fault that I’m stressed because I’m not doing enough,’ while the man would say, ‘this workplace sucks because I have too much to do.’” - M4

## 5.2.2. Policing Deviation

The *Template* is also enforced through direct sanction when conduct — primarily men’s — deviates from it. Policing operates through social correction:

“I feel that the male colleagues have expectations on them to be maybe a little bit more feminine, [...] Since we’re so many women, there is a culture of a [...] softer tone. [...] Some men, when we’re in a meeting and maybe they’re like two, three guys there and the rest are women, they wait their turn, and I can feel that they want to say something, but I think they’ve been schooled to do it the right way. Because what they’re saying is not more important than what their colleagues are saying.” - O4

M1 described the same dynamic from the receiving end:

“[...] if it’s a male leading it [the meeting], it’s more likely that people just speak out. [...] We have all stated out loud that the meeting dynamics are different when it’s all-male meetings versus when there’s women. [...] There is significantly less time invested talking about social things. [...] But there are expectations [for that] when I’m in a meeting with a woman. [...] And if you attempt to bypass it, sometimes you’ll get corrected. [...] But I’ve never had a correction from a man. [...] Men in general in the organisation are bending to the want and the size of the majority culture.” - M1

At the most visible extreme, deviation is met with formal consequence:

“The sort of typical manager man who loses his temper and perhaps even act aggressively — that has never existed here. I do know it existed once, and he was let go in two weeks.” - M1

## 5.3. Decoupling Template and Practice

### 5.3.1. Accountability Gap

Interviewees described a recurring pattern in which the expectations defining organisational fit applied unevenly by gender:

“A woman would never get away with doing the things that men are doing. The men are generally working less hard [...] we give the men slack. [...] They can be the dude with a vision [...] who doesn’t really do the hard work. There’s always a woman picking up behind.” - E1

“[...] we needed to report to funders. And there was one man who never did it. He got away with it. And we, or I at least, had to clean up all the time. He was great out meeting other people, but coming back and documenting and filling in lists, that was not done in the same way.” - O2

“[...] female colleagues, they feel responsible for their work and for the people that they work with. [...] I was working with two other colleagues, one man and one female [...] I felt that she was, like, embarrassed of her colleague, the male one, and she compensated for him [...] she answered for both of them. [...] And maybe she’s used to him working that way, not communicating [...] I really felt like she was taking responsibility for his behaviour. [...] I have not asked her about it.” - O4

The pattern recurs across levels and offices, suggesting it is organisational rather than incidental.

### 5.3.2. Gendered Pathways and Voice

Interviewees described gendered patterns in careers, decisions, and voice. E1 described two pathways to leadership divided by gender:

“[...] either [women] have long periods [of leadership] from other organisations and are recruited in, or they have worked through the organisation, day and night. Or it is a man who has not done that. It has happened way too often.” - E1

M1 described encountering the same logic from the organisation’s side:

“I did have it come back to me as an argument, like, ‘we’d love to keep you, because you are one of two men in an organisation of 50’ at the time.” - M1

The consensus norm does not apply uniformly. M1 described how it breaks down in male-dominated settings:

“[...] decisions are made significantly faster. [...] When it is more male-dominated or when there [are] maybe no female or women involved, the consensus [culture] breaks down, and it is more akin to ‘let’s make a decision and go with it.’” - M1

Gendered dynamics also surfaced in meeting interactions:

“Every time I said something, the person turned to my male colleague. My male colleague did not realise this, so I spoke to him. [...] So the next time, I said something and was ignored. And then my male colleague said the same thing and the person said, oh, good idea. [...] He was like, oh my God, how could I not see that before?” - E1

“We were in a meeting, one man and the rest of us were women. He said, I feel like people are trying to cut me off. [...] And then the whole room, instead of continuing what we were doing, we had to apologise to him and make sure he was okay. I did not even notice what had happened. [...] According to me, men always take up more space. It doesn’t matter if they are a minority or not. [...] And they want to be heard.” - O4

In O4’s account, numerical minority produces centring rather than marginalisation.

## 5.4. Organisational Gender Unnamed

### 5.4.1. Denial and Description

When asked directly whether gender had shaped their professional experience, interviewees typically dismissed its relevance — and frequently pointed to the female majority itself as the reason gender was not a factor:

“If you are looking for situations connected to gender, I do not think that I have any. Maybe it’s because percentage-wise we are so many women.” - E1

“I should probably say yes [that gender has shaped my experience], but no. There are so many women here. [...] You do not talk about women and men. Rather, an equal workplace.” - O2

“Maybe because we are a female-dominated workplace [...] I don’t know. I think it’s the same.” - M4

The same interviewees went on to provide detailed gendered accounts elsewhere in their interviews.

### 5.4.2. Men’s Adaptation to the Feminised Culture

A distinct pattern emerged among male interviewees.

M3, when asked whether being a man in a female-dominated organisation affected his experience, responded:

“Nothing that I have been feeling like, okay, this is because I am a man [...] I do not even think about it anymore.” - M3

When asked whether he had needed to adjust to the culture, he dismissed the premise entirely:

“No, well, I would say it applies for everyone, but in Save the Children, everyone is like 80 % women in that sense.” - M3

M2 went further, describing his identity in explicitly feminised terms:

“I think I could be quite a lot the same if I was a woman. [...] And I think, actually, in many ways, I am a woman. What I mean is that I have several female traits. [...] because in most civil society organisations, the majority of people are women. So I’m quite used to [those] workplaces. [...] Since I’m a man in a predominantly female organisation, [it] makes me think about what is it to be a man?” - M2

E3 articulated a similar dissolution:

“I don’t feel very male in Save the Children, I feel human. I think gender is not very important in Save the Children. [...] It’s not a positive thing to be a male, it doesn’t give me more power than if I was female. And it’s nothing negative either.” - E3<sup>1</sup>

Across all three accounts, adaptation to the feminised culture is so complete that gender ceases to register as a structuring category.

### 5.4.3. Deflecting to Society

When interviewees recognised gendered patterns within STC, their cause was located outside the organisation:

“Even though we have few male employees, they find their way to management positions. That is how it always is. Just because we are a good CSO does not mean we are not a mirror of society.” - O2

“I have a very strong belief that we are not equal from the beginning, in society. [...] I wouldn’t say it’s different at Save the Children than in the rest of society.” - M4

O3 named the *Accountability Gap* directly but attributed it externally:

“People are raised by societal gendered norms and bring those in, but I would not say it’s the organisation.” - O3

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<sup>1</sup> E3 is affiliated with the members’ organisation rather than the main staff body; this quote is included because it describes personal identity experience rather than organisational structure.

## 6. Analysis

The analysis draws on the frameworks of practising gender (Martin, 2003) and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). It is organised around higher-order themes identified in the empirical material, each structured through lower-order themes that capture how the gendered structures and practices at STC are maintained, decoupled, and unnamed; in 6.1., these themes integrate the *Feminised Institutional Template* (5.1.) with the reproduction mechanisms documented in 5.2. *Reproducing the Feminised Template*.

### 6.1. The Feminised Institutional Template and Its Reproduction

The authors conceptualise the culture, ideals, and practices at STC as a *Feminised Institutional Template* — a set of culturally feminine-coded norms (Eagly et al., 2020), expectations, and worker profiles defining what counts as legitimate professional conduct at STC. Drawing on Martin's (2003) practising gender, the *Template* emerges from femininities practised unreflexively at scale by a numerically dominant female workforce, held in place through maintaining work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) running in two directions: feminine-coded norms embedded as routine, masculine-coded deviation policed. Articulated disruptions surface across the empirics but fail to translate into action, leaving the *Template* intact.

Interviewees describe the dominant culture in feminine-coded terms, openness about feelings, warmth, trust, embedded in everyday femininity practice and presented not as gendered but as professional value, captured in O4's account of learning “how important it is to make other people feel safe and heard.” The *Consensus* norm (Zilber, 2002) extends this register into how decisions are made, sustained through normative maintenance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Bypassing it is policed informally, marked as “not being a good listener” (O2), and formally, through petitions to the governing board. The policing can be gendered: M1 reports being corrected when he attempts to bypass the social talk preceding meetings, but never by a man. In O4's words, men are expected to be “more feminine”, the norm embedded as expectation, and “schooled to do it the right way,” policed to practise femininity.

The *Ideal Worker and Leader* profile, described across interviews, reinforces a communal rather than agentic pattern (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001), characterised by traits such as “listening,” “calm,” “diplomatic,” “coaching,” “sensitive,” and “empathetic,” which E1 captures as “the good girl.” The *Template* is practised across gender, though differently. E1 captures the unreflexive practice of those who already practise femininity skilfully: “I've never felt that I've had to be more firm.” M2's framing of empathetic leadership as something one needs to and has to do, and empathy as something women are better at, reveals the effortful quality of men's practising femininities without prior skill. The contrast places E1 and M2 at different positions on the intentionality continuum, with practice at liminal awareness versus reflexive enactment of unfamiliar conduct.

Masculine practice is policed through formal sanction: M1 describes how “a typical manager man who loses his temper” was met with rapid removal. Embedding operates through what the authors term *Reflexive Maintenance* — the gendered expectations interviewees describe as placed on female leaders, sustained reflexively by women themselves. E2 internalises the relational work through moral identification, asserting that men “should take the same steps” while predicting they won't, articulating a disruption by undermining the assumption (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) that care work is women's

responsibility. The disruption remains discursive, she does not translate it into changed practice. O4 experiences the same expectation as gendered, with male colleagues facing no equivalent, and performs it anyway. The combined effect is a reconfiguration of gendered norms: the communal pole becomes incumbent for women, the agentic pole impermissible across gender.

The *Mission-Driven Dedication* described across interviews resembles Acker's (1990) masculine-coded disembodied worker, with total devotion and constant availability subordinating private life to organisational claims. At STC, this is enacted through femininity practice, with care for children framed as moral commitment rather than organisational extraction, making the demand harder to recognise as gendered. Interviewees frame it as intrinsic, though E1 names it organisational, "basically expected." The cost falls disproportionately on women, with O3 noting that burnout is gendered.

The norm is maintained through embedding: the cause itself carries the expectation, requiring no enforcement, reinforced by recruitment for emotional capacity and the absence of infrastructure to manage its costs. O1 captures the mechanism, "how can you not feel for this child?", but also articulates disruption, disassociating moral foundations (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), by detaching total dedication from moral rightness. When the embedded norm becomes unsustainable, the response is gendered. M4 names "good girl syndrome" as a structural pattern, tracing socialisation through overachievement to self-blame, femininity practice at every step. Baines et al. (2012) find the same gendered split in non-profit work: female workers internalise responsibility, male workers maintain boundaries. By reframing overwork-related stress as organisational overload rather than personal failure, M4 discursively disrupts by undermining the assumption (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) that sustains self-blame, lowering the cost of differentiation. However, the disruption is fragile. M4 reproduces the pattern she names — "kind of my fault in the end," uttered before her diagnosis; awareness is unstable. O1 leaves the recruitment logic intact. Neither translates articulation into action; women absorb the strain individually rather than disrupting the institution, sustaining the disembodied worker through the femininity practice that conceals it.

## 6.2. Decoupling Template and Practice

The *Feminised Institutional Template* espouses care, equality, and consensus, yet everyday practice at STC produces unequal accountability and gendered advantage, a decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The care expectation traced earlier is one case of this pattern; this section develops two more. Seen through Martin's lens, men and women practise masculinities and femininities unreflexively, aggregating into structural male advantage. The *Decoupling* persists through the asymmetry of the maintenance work that sustains the *Template*, with overt deviation policed and gendered advantage operating in unpoliced registers. Two forms of gender reproduction run simultaneously, in opposite directions.

The *Accountability Gap* described across accounts names a gendered division of labour in which women absorb operational and administrative work that men leave undone, with the omission unpoliced. Practising gender emerges on both sides: men treat the admin work as if it belongs elsewhere, being "great out meeting other people" instead, while women absorb it as if it is theirs, always "picking up behind" the underperforming colleague. The work that gets absorbed is the least visible: documentation, follow-up, administrative coordination. Interviewees recognise the pattern but do not intervene.

Policing targets visible deviation from the *Template* (bypassing consensus, aggressive leadership conduct) but leaves the *Accountability Gap* unaddressed. Women's absorption can be read as the same internalising-responsibility pattern (good girl syndrome) that sustains the *Template*. O4 frames it as women feeling "responsible for their work and for the people that they work with." This links absorption to its gendered cost: when work becomes unsustainable, responsibility produces self-blame for "not doing enough" rather than externalising overload. On the men's side, the practice runs in the opposite register: when overworked, men externalise stress as organisational overload (M4's distinction) and do less work without guilt. Women see men as slacking rather than as operating in a different register; men do not see the mechanism that absorbs their workload, or what it costs their female colleagues. The misrecognition forecloses disruption: the unpoliced registers fall below the threshold of purposive recognition, leaving the institution that produces this pattern unchallenged. The asymmetric reproduction is the engine of the *Decoupling*: women reproduce the *Template* fully; men reproduce only its overt requirements, not the internalising-responsibility register that sustains it.

The *Gendered Pathways and Voice* reveals the consensus norm as conditionally maintained. In all-male contexts, M1 reports that "people just speak out," decisions are made "significantly faster," and consensus "breaks down." In mixed settings, men "want to say something" but are held back (O4). This surfaces a boundary condition not addressed by Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) framework: informal institutional norms maintained through interactional policing require the presence of those who police them.

Yet the same mixed settings that constrain men's airspace also amplify their authority and centre the room around them when they speak. E1's contributions are ignored until repeated by a male colleague who had not registered the dynamic. O4 describes a meeting in which the sole man's expressed discomfort at feeling interrupted prompted "the whole room" to suspend its agenda to reassure him, and noted that men "take up more space" regardless of minority status. The *Template's* prescription of attentiveness configures the room around whoever explicitly registers a need: men's discomfort, expressed openly, triggers the care response. Both sides practise gender unreflexively — E1's colleague is surprised when the pattern is named; O4's room shifted to accommodation without deliberation. The asymmetric advantage runs through the *Template* itself: men comply with what is policed and benefit from what is not.

Combined with the visibility asymmetry from the *Accountability Gap*, these patterns may compound into gendered career pathways resembling the glass escalator (Williams, 1992). E1 describes two routes to leadership: women working their way up over years of sustained effort, and men reaching the same positions without equivalent track records. M1 confirms the structural dimension, told explicitly that his gender was a reason the organisation wanted to retain him. The numerical-minority position functions as a resource rather than a barrier. This extends Damman et al. (2014), who attributed gendered career progression gaps in humanitarian INGOs to occupational sex segregation, by showing where the sorting begins: in everyday accountability and voice patterns that channel work into capital that accumulates differently in visibility and reward.

### 6.3. Organisational Gender Unnamed

The embedding and policing that sustain the *Feminised Institutional Template* converge in a collective condition where gender ceases to register as a structuring force. What is absent at STC is not gender but its recognition as organisational — neither the *Template*, the disembodied-worker logic it sustains, nor the male-advantaging practice it produces are available for critique because none is recognised as

something the organisation itself produces. This invisibility aligns with the low-comprehensibility end of maintenance work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), where embedding operates precisely because participants no longer recognise its normative origins.

*Denial and Description* emerged across interviews as a refusal of gender as an analytical category even where the *Template's* feminine coding and the male-advantaging practice it produces appear in interviewees' descriptions. The *Denial and Description* coexist without apparent contradiction, resembling the denial/acknowledgement paradox Mease and Neal (2023) identify in masculine contexts. The dynamic extends to female-dominated settings, where the move conceals the male-advantaging practice that the *Template's* policing does not reach. The female majority is cited as why gender does not apply, but numerical representation alone cannot produce equality where masculine-privileging cultural factors intervene (Childs & Krook, 2008; Zimmer, 1988): beneath the denial, the unreflexive practising of femininities and masculinities continues, producing male advantage and reproducing the inequality that presumed gender-neutrality itself sustains (Dema-Moreno, 2008; Lokot, 2021). The female majority does not neutralise gender; it conceals it. M4 is the limit case: she has the analytical vocabulary to name "good girl syndrome" as gendered structure yet still denies that gender shapes her professional experience. Reflexive intentionality alone does not aggregate into disrupting work; without purposive action, the institution stays intact.

*Men's Adaptation to the Feminised Culture* is where embedding and policing reach their fullest effect, and where both the *Template's* feminine coding and the male advantage it produces become least recognisable as gendered. Conformity is read by interviewees as evidence that maleness no longer confers advantage, foreclosing recognition of where it still does. M3 reframes the feminised culture as universal, saying he no longer thinks about being a man. M2 states that "in many ways, I am a woman," an adaptation so complete that conformity is experienced as identity. What the analysis reads as the outcome of sustained institutional work, M2 experiences as natural absorption. E3 dissolves gender as a category altogether, recasting the *Template* as simply human, the most effective form of concealment. Men do not resist the *Template's* visible demands; they practise femininity, eroding the masculine-coded conduct that policing targets. Yet this very success prevents gender from being recognised as organisational: if men perform the same norms, the norms appear gender-neutral rather than feminine-coded. In the registers where policing does not reach, both men and women continue to practise masculinities and femininities unreflexively, reproducing male advantage. Surface conformity buys men fit in the feminine majority; unpoliced practice preserves masculine advantage beneath it. Men gain on both sides.

*Deflecting to Society* completes the unnamings when patterns are recognised: their cause is located outside the organisation. The move ranges from passive mirroring, through pre-organisational attribution "we are not equal from the beginning, in society" to active exoneration, where O3 names the *Accountability Gap* but attributes it to socialisation rather than organisational practice. The deflection exempts the organisation from the analytical frame in which it could be recognised as a site of gender production.

## 7. Discussion & Conclusion

### 7.1. Answering the Research Question

The analysis aims to answer the following research question:

*How is gender (re)produced and concealed in civil society organisations?*

The empirics reveal (re)production and concealment operating through interlocking institutional processes, where concealment allows reproduction to persist.

#### 7.1.1. (Re)production

Gender is (re)produced through a *Feminised Institutional Template* defining legitimate professional conduct at STC. The *Template* surfaces in three registers: a feminine-coded *Culture and Consensus* norm, a communal *Ideal Worker and Leader* profile, and *Mission-Driven Dedication*. The third mirrors the disembodied worker but is enacted through femininity practice. It is sustained by maintaining work: embedding these norms as routine and policing masculine-coded deviation.

The maintenance is asymmetric: overt deviation is policed, but male advantage is reproduced through the unreflexive practising of femininities and masculinities in unpoliced registers — a *Decoupling* between what the *Template* espouses and what its practice produces. Women reproduce the *Template* fully, including its internalising-responsibility register; men reproduce only its overt requirements. Discursive disruptions are fragile; reproduction continues.

#### 7.1.2. Concealment

Gender is concealed through *Denial and Description*, *Men's Adaptation to the Feminised Culture*, and *Deflecting to Society*, converging to exempt STC as a site of gender production. The female majority is cited as proof gender does not apply, but numerical representation conceals rather than neutralises; men's minority status functions in reverse, as resource rather than barrier. Men's surface conformity makes the *Template's* norms appear gender-neutral, while recognised gendering is deflected to society. Local diagnosis fails to aggregate into disrupting work, and gendering not seen as organisationally produced goes unchallenged.

The two connect in the asymmetric maintaining work: policing and men's adaptation produce the gender-neutral surface concealment needs; advantage in unpoliced registers produces the male benefit it hides. Gender (re)production and concealment are co-constitutive.

### 7.2. Literature and Theory Contributions

This study contributes to debates on gendered organisations, institutional work, and gender in civil society.

First, the findings extend Acker's (1990) framework to organisations it was not developed to describe, responding to Britton's (2000) call to treat the content of gendering as an empirical question. The study identifies a *Feminised Institutional Template* — feminine-coded norms governing culture, the

ideal worker, and leadership that present as simply how a good organisation operates, gender-neutral in precisely the way Acker described for masculine-coded organisations. *Mission-Driven Dedication* is the sharpest case: Acker's masculine-coded demand for total commitment persists, enacted through femininity practice as moral commitment to children's rights and thus harder to recognise as gendered. Concealment also operates discursively, extending the denial/acknowledgement paradox Mease and Neal (2023) document in masculine contexts. High female representation can conceal rather than dismantle a gendered substructure.

Second, the findings identify a boundary condition unaddressed in Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) typology: informal norms sustained through interactional policing require the presence of those who police them. At STC, the consensus norm collapses in all-male contexts. Personnel composition is a condition of the mechanism, not a neutral backdrop. Third, Dema-Moreno (2008) argues that presumed gender-neutrality closes off gender as a topic for organisational critique. The combined framework reframes this as institutional work — something actively produced rather than a passive byproduct of the egalitarian self-image.

Extending institutional work along the reflexivity continuum to include the unreflexive practising of gender (Martin, 2003), the analysis locates male advantage in the registers maintaining work does not reach, attributed outward to society. The attribution itself performs maintaining work, placing the practising of gender beyond disrupting work's reach and sustaining the *Decoupling*. This responds to calls (Lawrence et al., 2013; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) to account for how reflexive and nonreflexive action operate together. *Decoupling* durability rests on advantage below purposive recognition, unreachable by interventions targeting only the deviations policing selects.

Collectively, these contributions extend gendered-organisations theory to feminised settings, specify a demographic boundary condition of institutional work, and identify the asymmetric mechanism by which (re)production and concealment are co-constitutive.

### 7.3. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the single-case design in Sweden enabled analytical depth but limits transferability to other CSOs, sectors, and national contexts. The Swedish setting, where gender equality is widely assumed substantively achieved, may intensify the invisibility mechanism identified; the same dynamics could operate differently where gender inequality is more openly acknowledged. Secondly, the sample of eleven from approximately 500 employees skews female, with effectively three male organisational interviewees. Dynamics are reconstructed primarily through women's accounts; claims about men's experience rest on a narrow base, with M1 carrying disproportionate weight. Thirdly, the analysis relies on interview accounts rather than direct observation. Practising gender occurs rapidly and nonreflexively, difficult to recover from retrospective description — a constraint on claims about practising gender as it unfolds.

### 7.4. Future Research

Future research could compare the *Feminised Institutional Template* across other female-majority value-driven sectors — schools, healthcare, social services — to test whether *Mission-Driven Dedication*, which conceals masculine-coded demand, is distinctive to rights-based CSOs or generalises wherever care work carries moral weight. Cross-national work in settings less invested in egalitarian self-image could further clarify whether the concealment operates the same way where

presumed gender-neutrality is weaker. The demographic contingency of maintaining work could be tested where personnel composition shifts — restructuring, mergers, hybrid teams — and beyond gender, to establish whether the boundary condition generalises to informal institutional maintenance more broadly. Finally, the analysis identified articulated disruptions that did not aggregate into purposive disrupting work; longitudinal observation during organisational change or equality interventions could capture the conditions under which such disruption translates into action, opening empirical access to how the self-sustaining structure might be unsettled.

## 7.5. Conclusion

This study examined how gender is (re)produced and concealed in a Swedish CSO whose egalitarian mission, predominantly female workforce, and participatory structures are presumed to make gender irrelevant. A *Feminised Institutional Template*, feminine-coded norms governing culture, the ideal worker, and leadership, was maintained through embedding and policing of masculine-coded deviation, presenting as simply how a good organisation operates. Within it, *Mission-Driven Dedication* reproduced the disembodied-worker logic in feminised form, with care framed as moral commitment obscuring its gendered structure.

Maintaining work was asymmetric and demographically contingent: overt deviation was policed where the female majority was present to enforce it. Male advantage accumulated in the unpoliced registers of the *Accountability Gap* and *Gendered Pathways and Voice*, never recognised as something the organisation itself produced. This unrecognition itself performed maintaining work, placing the practising of gender beyond the reach of disruption. (Re)production and concealment thus maintained each other, with implications for how gender operates in precisely those organisations that believe they have moved beyond it.

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## 9. Appendices

### 9.1. Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

#### **Section 1: Introduction & Ethical Considerations (5 min)**

- Hi [Name], how are you doing?
- Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today!
- We are writing our bachelor's thesis now about how organisations work with questions related to gender in their everyday practices — things like culture, norms, and how people experience their professional roles.
  - So we are very interested in hearing about your experiences and reflections.
- Just a few practical things before we start:
  - Everything you share will be anonymised. You won't be identifiable in our thesis.
  - Participation is completely voluntary. You are free to skip any question you don't want to answer, with no explanation needed.
  - Third, we would like to record this interview so that we can transcribe it afterwards. It'll only be used for our analysis and won't be shared. Is that okay with you?

*(Wait for consent — start recording)*

- Great, thank you.
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

#### **Section 2: Background & Role (5 min)**

- Could you tell us a bit about yourself and your role here at Save the Children?
  - How long have you worked here?
  - What does a typical week look like for you?
  - What made you want to work at Save the Children specifically?

#### **Section 3: Organisational Culture & Values (10 min)**

- How would you describe the culture at Save the Children?
  - What values would you say are most emphasised here?
  - How do those values show up in practice — in how people talk, behave, or make decisions?
- When you think about the kind of person who is seen as successful or as a "natural fit" here, what comes to mind?
  - Are there particular qualities or traits that seem to be especially valued?
  - What does the leader look like in this organisation? What kind of person tends to end up in leadership?
  - Has the image of "success" here changed over time, or has it remained fairly stable?
- Can you walk me through how decisions are typically made here — for instance, who gets assigned to what projects, or how leadership roles are filled?
  - Are there informal criteria that matter beyond formal qualifications?

- Have you noticed any patterns in terms of who tends to end up in which kinds of roles?
- Does gender play a role in this, in your experience? In what way?
- Save the Children has a mission centred on children's rights and equality. How do you think that mission shapes how gender is talked about or dealt with internally?
  - Is there a difference between how the organisation presents itself externally and how things work internally?
    - Can you give an example?

#### **Section 4: Everyday Practices & Underlying Assumptions (10 min)**

- What does it look like to be a "dedicated" or "committed" employee here? What's expected?
  - How does the organisation handle work-life boundaries — for example around parental leave, flexibility, or working hours?
  - Are there assumptions about availability or commitment that you think are gendered, even if not explicitly?
- Are there any informal norms or unwritten rules about how things work here that a new employee would need to learn?
  - How are meetings run? Who tends to speak, and how are ideas received?
  - Do you think those norms affect men and women differently?
    - Can you describe a specific situation where you noticed this?

#### **Section 5: Professional Identity & Self (8 min)**

- How would you describe yourself as a professional — what kind of colleague or worker are you?
  - What is your leadership style?
  - Do you feel that your gender shapes how you experience your professional role? In what ways?
  - Do you feel that there are expectations placed on you as a leader that wouldn't be placed on a leader of the other gender in the same position?
- Have you ever felt that you needed to adjust how you present yourself or behave in order to fit in or be taken seriously here?
  - Can you describe a specific moment?
  - Was that adjustment related to gender, or to something else?
- In leadership meetings or senior contexts, have you noticed dynamics around gender — who speaks, whose ideas are taken up, how authority is perceived?

#### **Section 6: Change, Tensions & Challenging (5 min)**

- Has anything about how gender works here — in terms of culture, expectations, or everyday practices — changed during your time at the organisation?
  - What prompted that change?
  - Were there any tensions or resistance around the change?
- Is there anything about how the organisation works that you think still needs to change when it comes to gender?
  - What do you think makes that difficult to change?

- Have you or others tried to raise this? What happened?

### **Section 7: Closing (2 min)**

- Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't touched on?
- When we interview others, are there any questions that you thought we should add or remove?
- Do you know a colleague that might be interested in participating that we should contact?

## 9.2. Appendix 2 – Participant Brief

Hello,

We are Adelina Fadiloglu and Linda Wahlberg, students at the Stockholm School of Economics, and we are looking for interviewees within Save the Children for our study on organisational culture and gender in civil society organisations.

### **What the study is about**

We are examining how organisational culture in civil society organisations (CSOs) is shaped by gender. Although many CSOs actively work with gender equality in their external programmes, there is surprisingly little research on how gender shapes internal organisational culture – for instance, what values and norms prevail, how leadership is perceived, and what expectations exist around work and commitment. Our study aims to help fill that gap.

### **What the interview involves**

The interview is an open conversation about your experiences of working within the organisation. We will ask questions around themes such as:

- How you experience the organisational culture – what values, norms, and images of leadership and "the good employee" characterise the workplace
- How commitment and performance are perceived and valued
- How work is distributed and what expectations exist around availability, responsibilities, and career
- How you experience your own role and identity in the organisation – and how you navigate expectations in your professional role
- Whether and in what ways gender plays a role in these contexts

There are no right or wrong answers – we are interested in your experience and reflections.

### **Practicalities**

- The interview takes approximately 30–60 minutes and will be conducted in English
- It can be held in person or online – we adapt to your preference
- We would like to conduct the interviews during weeks 10–12

- All participation is fully anonymous – neither your name nor any identifying information will be included in the thesis
- All data handling follows GDPR

### Why participate?

Your participation would be invaluable to our research, and we hope to have the opportunity to hear your experiences. The interview is a chance to reflect on organisational culture in a way that is rarely given space in everyday work life. We are happy to share the finished thesis with you – the insights may be valuable for understanding and developing your own organisational culture.

Have any questions? Feel free to contact us directly:

Adelina Fadiloglu / 25987@student.hhs.se

Linda Wahlberg / 25933@student.hhs.se

Thank you! Adelina and Linda

Bachelor's students, Stockholm School of Economics

## 9.3. Appendix 3 – Interview Specifications

No.	Code	Role	Sex	Language	Date	Duration
1	O1	Operational	Female	English	03/03/2026	0:58:58
2	E1	Executive	Female	English	04/03/2026	0:59:13
3	M1	Middle Management	Male	English	05/03/2026	1:00:24
4	O2	Operational	Female	English	12/03/2026	0:46:34
5	E2	Executive	Female	Swedish	13/03/2026	0:41:44
6	O3	Operational	Female	English	13/03/2026	0:48:11
7	M2	Middle Management	Male	English	13/03/2026	0:53:08
8	M3	Middle Management	Male	English	17/03/2026	0:48:18
9	M4	Middle Management	Female	Swedish	25/03/2026	0:52:04
10	O4	Operational	Female	Swedish	25/03/2026	0:51:37
11	E3	Executive, Volunteer	Male	English	13/03/2026	0:53:10

**Average duration:** 0:52:07

**Maximum duration:** 1:00:24

**Minimum duration:** 0:41:44