

# Middle managers as **change** agents

Action oriented Gender research

*Susanne Andersson Eva Amundsdotter Marita Svensson*

*Ann-Sofie Däldehög*

Susanne Andersson  
Eva Amundsdotter  
Marita Svensson  
Ann-Sofie Däldehög

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## Summary

Fiber Optic Valley is an organisation working to make Sweden a world leader in the development of products and services based on fibre optics. Helping global and local companies to grow is at the heart of our business. The gender perspective therefore plays an important strategic role in Fiber Optic Valley's growth and from the outset has been prioritised as one of the important driving forces, essential to achieving our long-term growth targets.

Thirteen middle managers have taken part in Fiber Optic Valley's Gender Network, whose purpose was to raise awareness of how middle managers do gender in organisations and work to change it. The middle managers have acted as change agents with the aim of

creating gender-aware organisations which enable both women and men to develop and grow. The Gender Network project was part of a Vinnova (the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems) gender awareness research programme and its result has attracted international attention.

### Gender equality hand in hand with gender research

The middle managers come from twelve of Fiber Optic Valley's member organisations in the region between Sundsvall and Gävle with its centre in Hudiksvall. The region is characterised by the hard-working community spirit of its former ironworking heritage, with traditional organisational patterns and few women in management positions. This is also a region which lacks highly-educated employees. If you then ignore 50 percent, you are halving your potential recruitment pool. This argument was crucial to the participation of the organisations in a three-year research and development project in which practical gender equality work went hand in hand with gender research. We've used a method known as action-oriented gender research, in which research is carried out with the involvement of the participants and, as its name suggests, is clearly action oriented. The gender research has been carried out in conjunction with the Centre for Gender Studies at Stockholm University.

### Middle managers – power to change

Middle management are embedded in a network of power relationships with managers above them and staff below them. Middle management are therefore the ones with the power to decide under what conditions their staff work. This means that middle management are an ideal group to work with as agents of change in a project seeking to create gender-aware organisations. For the participants

**“At overall level, greater knowledge and awareness means that concepts such as gender and gender equality are now used in internal discussions within the organisations and in their planning”**

in the Gender Network, the project has helped them to develop as people and as managers. They have become gender aware and have initiated a process of change in their own workplaces. This change may lead to workplaces which are more efficient, achieving higher creativity and creating new business opportunities. The participants have also realised that they are the people with the power to change things.

### Gender and innovation

Fiber Optic Valley’s member organisations have recognised the potential in working on gender equality and gender issues on a daily basis. At overall level, greater knowledge and awareness means that concepts such as gender and gender equality are now used in internal discussions within the organisations and in their planning. Active gender equality work has opened the doors to a whole new way of thinking, partly by questioning prevailing norms. A more open working climate and a broader approach to developing products and services boosts the competitiveness of the individual organisations and the regional innovative environment.



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### Middle managers as change agents

**Text** Susanne Andersson, Eva Amundsdotter,  
Marita Svensson, Ann-Sofie Däldehog

**Cover and graphic design** Total Grp

**Address** Fiber Optic Valley  
Stationsgatan 7  
824 43 Hudiksvall, Sweden  
Tel +46 650-55 66 18

**E-mail address** Susanne Andersson, susannea@kvinfo.su.se  
Eva Amundsdotter, eva.amundsdotter@ltu.se  
Marita Svensson, marita.svensson@fiber opticvalley.com  
Ann-Sofie Däldehog, ann-sofie.daldehyog@fiber opticvalley.com

[www.fiber opticvalley.com/gender](http://www.fiber opticvalley.com/gender)

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## Foreword

Vinnova (the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems) provides national funding for research and development for sustainable growth. Part of Vinnova's remit is also to work for equality between women and men and promote a gender perspective in research. One of the ways in which Vinnova does this is by awarding funding for projects which seek to increase gender equality through R&D in gender studies.

In 2004 Vinnova called for applications for funding on the subject "Gender perspectives on innovation systems and gender equality". Collaboration between several players was a key criterion. The researchers involved were therefore encouraged to work with projects in other Vinnova programmes such as the VINNVÄXT programme for regional growth through dynamic innovation systems.

To facilitate contact between gender researchers and projects in other programmes, Vinnova held a conference in early 2005. The result of this conference was that one such collaborative partner-

ship was formed, which was later to become the Gender Network project.

The project has shown that Vinnova's focus on collaboration was a good idea, though its success rests on the way in which the Gender Network's members themselves tackled and developed that concept. The working model drawn up by the project, with one project leader, one researcher and one process leader with a clear division of tasks between these roles, is an idea which Vinnova has adopted and used in a subsequent call for applications.

The fact that the Gender Network has helped to develop Fiber Optic Valley is amply demonstrated by this publication, but the project has also helped to develop Vinnova's support for gender equality on gender studies grounds and become something of a role model for how work to promote gender equality and growth can be run.

*Stockholm 2009*

Ulla Göranson

PROGRAMME LEADER, THE NEEDS-DRIVEN GENDER RESEARCH PROGRAMME  
WORKING LIFE DEPARTMENT, VINNOVA

01

## Why we need gender-aware organisations

Why are the men expected to be the ones doing the talking at meetings? Why, when minutes have to be taken, are women expected to take on the secretarial role? These are questions which the participants in Fiber Optic Valley's Gender Network have been asking themselves over three years of practical gender equality work and gender research. Gender inequality is largely to do with the expectations we have of each other. And we tend to want to be what is expected of us.

Many companies in Sweden are working to increase equality between women and men, creating equal opportunities for women and men, in other words. However, it is still the case that in most

workplaces men and women work with different tasks, are given different opportunities to develop and have different pay. Nevertheless, most people think that their own organisation does provide equal opportunities for women and men. We fail to perceive the inequalities that surround us because we are so used to the way things are. We need to open our eyes. Besides the fact that it is unfair, not to mention illegal, to treat women and men differently, gender-aware organisations are more efficient than others. This is one of the discoveries made by the managers in the Gender Network. They have also realised that they are the people with the power to change things. It is often about making small changes in the day-to-day routine which have a huge impact. The managers, for example, have started to question their own expectations of different members of staff, they make sure that everyone is given the chance to speak at meetings and that tasks are allocated differently.

Between 2005 and 2008 thirteen middle managers from twelve organisations have participated in the network. These managers have realised that change is essential if their organisations are to be attractive employers in the future. Gender equal workplaces are more creative because working towards gender equality questions prevailing norms, and that, in turn, expands horizons. It is about daring to think something completely new – something which boosts competitiveness.

The organisation of the future is a gender-aware organisation.

### Sweden – a gender equal paradise?

In an international context, Sweden's gender equality is often highlighted as a role model for the rest of the world. We are one of the top ten countries in the world on gender equality, partly to do with the fact that Sweden comes out top on criteria such as numbers of men and women in the Government and in the Swedish Parliament, the Riksdag.



Gender equality has been an area in Swedish politics since the mid-1960s. The labour market's increased need for labour led to a huge surge in the proportion of women in the workforce. In the 1960s Swedes fought for daycare places for everyone and today paid parental leave and good childcare are taken for granted. This makes it easier to combine family life and a career and more women than men go on to higher education. In the past, work to improve gender equality only focussed on women and women's opportunities, but in the last decade it has increasingly come to address men and the male role. Women's opportunities have increased in our society and our view of women has changed as a result of work on gender equality, but there has been less change in the way men and their roles are perceived.

Gender equality has high priority in the EU and is enshrined in the EU Treaty as one of its fundamental aims. The overall objective of Swedish gender equality policy is for women and men to have the same power to shape society and their own lives. One prerequisite for being able to achieve this is for women and men to have the same rights, opportunities and obligations through all the stages of life. In working life, gender equality is regulated in the Discrimination Act (diskrimineringslagen). Employers are to conduct goal-oriented work to actively promote equal rights and opportunities in working life and employers who have 25 employees or more must draw up a plan for their gender equality work.

### **The way we do gender in our everyday lives**

Gender equality means equal conditions for women and men. The aim of the Gender Network has been to create gender-aware organisations which make the most of everyone's opportunities. It is about making the invisible – the way middle managers do gender in their organisations – visible. Gender is a social construct, in other words, gender is something people do. It is something people do

**“I have changed my expectations of my colleagues and push the female engineers to stand up for themselves in a completely different way from before,” says Åsa Claesson**

again and again irrespective of their sex; it happens between women and men, between women and between men. It is about what we are allowed to be like and what we, as women and men, are allowed to do, something which ultimately leads to different conditions and opportunities.

Doing gender can be about the direct exercising of power and about discrimination, but is more often to do with us unconsciously having different expectations of women and men. We give off barely noticeable signals which affect how we behave towards each other every day. Who gets rewarded by the manager with a nod of the head or has their views endorsed, for example, who talks the most at meetings and who doesn't talk at all. And we tend to want to live up to what is expected of us. The way we do gender can explain why men are often given more challenging tasks which lead to higher status or higher pay.

The managers in the Gender Network have had to learn to see how they themselves contribute towards the often unconscious creation of gender barriers in the workplace. One of the people who has been on this journey is Åsa Claesson, department manager at Acreo in Hudiksvall.



### It took time to gain insight

“I have changed my expectations of my colleagues and push the female engineers to stand up for themselves in a completely different way from before,” says Åsa Claesson.

Åsa is one of the change agents in the Gender Network and she has responsibility for fifteen employees carrying out research and development in fibre optics. Åsa is in Acreo’s management team and she thinks it is important to get the management participating in work to make change happen in the organisation.

“Most people in an organisation spontaneously feel that all this gender stuff is a non-issue, that ‘we’ve got equal opportunities here already’. That’s why I think that the management being committed and setting requirements is hugely important for the change process. In the next step I want to help the management team to set targets and guidelines and provide tools for all departments on the basis of a gender approach, such as what to do when recruiting new staff, for example. In our company the management’s commitment will be vital as we now move on to the next phase and involve more people in the process.”

### Assumptions about “neat, deft” lab technicians

All the change agents in the Gender Network started out by analysing their own work from a gender perspective and then went on to use this to draw up action plans for the changes they wanted to implement both personally and within their organisations.

“For me, light dawned in the analysis phase when I realised that I myself was clearly gender-labelling the lab technicians. In my head I thought of them as an overwhelmingly female team, but in reality the mixture of women and men in that group wasn’t particularly different from that at Acreo in general. Here it was our assumptions about ‘neat, deft, female lab technicians’ and ‘logical male researchers’ that got in the way.”

Åsa also described how she came to identify something she calls “distribution power”.

“I have realised that as a middle manager I have the power to ‘distribute’. The way I distribute tasks, for example, shows how I value those tasks. Am I expecting something different from women and men in the organisation purely because they are women or men? How do I distribute my expectations and how do I communicate them to my staff and the organisation? This is an area where I really can affect the way the organisation does gender.”

### Starting up a dialogue in the organisation

One of Åsa’s goals is for all of Acreo to work on the shared values. Work on values is now underway and for Acreo this is a way of setting in motion a dialogue in the organisation, in which gender issues are naturally incorporated into discussions.

“It is easy to get fixated on the numbers, but it’s our values and the way we behave towards each other that are the really important things. That’s why we’re starting to work on values to get everyone involved in the process. We discuss and define the values we stand for and what this actually means in terms of the way we behave towards ourselves, towards each other and towards our customers. Talking about values in general makes gender issues part of the discussion without lots of people ending up on the defensive.”

Åsa finds that the Gender Network gives her a free space in which she can swap experiences with other managers working in completely different sectors. She has also learned that it is important to allow the process to take its time.

“I’ve realised that it’s a good thing that it takes time to reach insights which will result in significant changes, and that’s something I emphasise to other people about to start out on this process. Let it take its time – it’s good for you and it’s good for your organisation.

As a change agent you will probably be a step ahead of your staff and the organisation. Don’t forget to give them time to realise what it’s all about! I’d also emphasise the benefit of having an external network to discuss and exchange experiences with.”

### Fiber Optic Valley – from unaware to gender aware

The innovation system Fiber Optic Valley is a strong research and innovation environment with the task to improve the region’s competitiveness and creating conditions for sustainable growth. It will develop new products and services and bring them to market. This being the case, working on gender equality as an integrated part of the business just makes sense. Active work to promote gender equality opens the doors to the innovative thinking Fiber Optic Valley needs and supports the change processes in the innovation system.

Fiber Optic Valley is one of Vinnova’s Vinnväxt winners for 2004, an arena for researching and developing products and services based on fibre optics. This technology is the foundation for virtually all modern information technology and is a dynamic and rapidly growing industry. The main stakeholders in the innovation system are around twenty co-financers from the region between Sundsvall and Gävle with its centre in Hudiksvall. Combined, these organisations represent the Triple Helix, cooperation between business, research/ universities and the public sector.

Thirteen people, known as change agents, participated in the Gender Network. The majority were middle management from twelve of Fiber Optic Valley’s member organisations. They work in a region characterised by the hardworking community spirit of the old ironworks, with traditional organisational patterns and few women in management positions. In virtually the entire business community and at virtually all levels, it is men who have the power.

This is also a region which lacks well-educated employees. If you then ignore 50 percent, you are halving your potential recruitment pool. This argument was crucial to participation in a three-year research and development project in which practical gender equality went hand in hand with gender research.

### Strategic decision in Fiber Optic Valley

Even when the innovation system was being planned, it was realised that there is a strong link between gender and sustainable growth and that integrating the gender perspective is an important driving force for long-term development in the region. After a needs analysis of the region from a gender perspective, a gender equality strategy was drawn up for how practical gender equality work should be implemented.

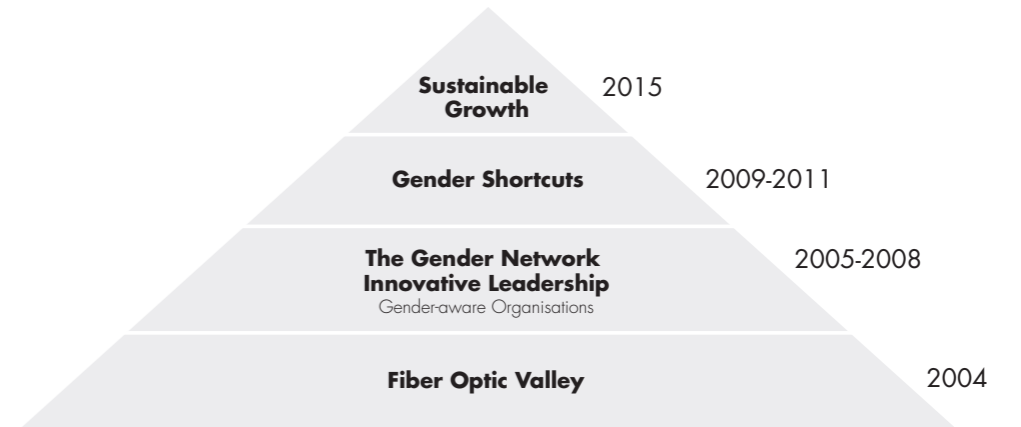
This gender equality strategy has since been an extremely valuable steering document, forming the basis for all the goal-oriented work carried out in the Fiber Optic Valley innovation system and the area of gender and gender equality.

### Analysis paves the way

Creating gender-aware organisations takes knowledge, insight and a willingness to change. People also need to realise that like all other change work, this is a constantly ongoing process which needs time and often comes up against resistance. Changing structures and values means moving from insight and willingness to change to real action.

In the first contacts with our member organisations we were able to see that there was a major lack of awareness of what was actually going on in the workplaces from a gender perspective. Before an organisation can be willing to drive through change, it must first

### Fiber Optic Valley gender equality strategy



be convinced that there are problems that need solving. Our survey and the detailed needs analysis were therefore necessary to be able to set the objectives for our gender equality strategy and to make the gender system visible in the innovation system. Making the organisations aware of what the reality really was, paved the way for comprehensive and lasting change.

### Winners

Within the framework of Vinnova’s call for proposals “Gender perspectives on innovation systems and gender equality” we were allocated research funding for a three-year project: “Drive, change, make equal – crystal clear in Fiber Optic Valley”. This enabled us to work in a target-oriented manner and drive the change process in close collaboration with gender researchers and our member organisations. The project came to be called the Gender Network as the work was primarily carried out in the form of a network. The pur-

## **“I am very proud of the positive attention we have received in the media”**

pose of the project was to raise awareness, based on gender studies, of how gender is done at middle management level and to work to change it. The aim has been to achieve gender-aware organisations. Fiber Optic Valley has acted as an important framework which has created legitimacy for the project. This legitimacy has been strengthened further by Vinnova, in its capacity as the funding body, requiring that the innovation environment must be able to report how the gender perspective has been integrated in the business.

### **Focus on being visible**

“I have seen the managers in the network go from being curious and unaware to becoming leaders who think that gender awareness is essential if you want to be a modern manager. At the first meeting they were nervous and uncertain, three years later they are sitting on a panel talking about gender awareness as a matter of course – that’s great to see!” says Marita Svensson, project leader of the Gender Network and a consultant for Fiber Optic Valley.

Marita has worked with organisational and business development for many years. In the past ten years she has increasingly been working with leadership and women’s career opportunities. Six years ago Marita founded the Qlix network for women managers. This background saw Marita handpicked to produce Fiber Optic Valley’s gender equality strategy.

“Fiber Optic Valley’s then process manager Karin Nygård Skalman saw how important the gender perspective is as a driving force for developing our region and creating sustainable growth, making us the role model we are today. And Vinnova is a role model among



government agencies, demanding that innovation systems are able to demonstrate how they apply a gender perspective in the workplace. The fact that I was also working on Fiber Optic Valley's process management team and have been involved in other processes of the innovation system has been a huge advantage for the project."

### Media spread success

The gender network has become a gender equality phenomenon. The network has been written about in most types of media, from technology magazines to gender science journals and Dagens Industri.

"I am very proud of the positive attention we have received in the media. It feels good that our strategy has worked and that we've had the courage to stick to our goals while also being receptive to finding new paths. We have been open and determinedly focused on communicating our research results. Our successes give other organisations the energy to keep battling on when they see that things are going well for us."

But changing things hasn't always been easy. Marita has had to be able to sense when the change agents lost motivation and wanted to abandon the project, sometimes due to "tacit resistance" which is subtle and hard to deal with.

"It has been a challenge to find arguments to surmount the obstacles and stop them from giving up. People who work with change have to want to do it."

### In demand internationally

There are a large number of development projects in the EU, including some on female entrepreneurship, but working to change structures inside organisations to increase gender equality is an area where we in Sweden are quite unique. Marita realised this when she

was asked to give lectures around the world.

"Our gender project is a trailblazer in an international perspective if you look at what is being published in academic journals. What's unique about our project is that we are working with organisational change and gender research in parallel. Our work cannot be derailed as merely a women's issue. With gender studies behind us, we can show that this is about creating innovative working environments and sustainable growth in the future."

### Marita's tips for getting the management involved in gender equality work

- Start with an analysis of the current situation and show what is really going on.
- Look for role models who have already completed the journey!
- Find other managers who also see what you see. It will be difficult for the management to ignore gender if there are lots of managers who think it is important.
- It is hard to argue against the fact that a modern manager is a gender-aware manager. Who wouldn't want to be a modern manager?
- Needs are different in different organisations. Together with your colleagues you decide which arguments are the most important for your organisation.
- You might need to increase the pool for recruiting skilled labour, increase productivity, become more creative, create new business opportunities or simply become a more attractive employer!





## **Middle managers – power to change. - The results of the Gender Network.**

Our goal was for the middle managers from the participating organisations to find out how they were contributing to the way their organisation did gender. At the same time they would initiate a process of change to achieve gender equality in their organisations. This is why they were called change agents.

Middle management are sometimes seen as a barrier to change. If we start to examine the role of middle management, we find that they are the ones who decide which issues are allocated the largest amount of time and which issues don't get given priority in the day-to-day work of the organisation. They are embedded in a network of power relationships with managers above them and staff below them. Middle management are therefore the ones with the power to decide how much scope their staff are given for work on gender equality. This means that middle management are an ideal group to

work with as agents of change in a project seeking to create gender-aware organisations.

The participants in the Gender Network have shown how middle managers are particularly well placed to drive gender equality at day-to-day level. Their position of power means they can create fairer conditions for women and men in their organisation. Middle managers can, for example, decide who is going to be in particular teams, who is going to lead important projects, who will have the chance to go on a course or who is given the opportunity to speak at a meeting. In other words, middle management have the power to give certain members of staff the opportunity to achieve promotions, pay rises and personal development. In the same way, middle managers can also limit the opportunities of other members of staff. This is precisely why middle managers need to be gender aware.

### **Good examples**

One of the managers in the Gender Network realised that he had had different expectations of women and men. He had had lower expectations of the performance of female team leaders than of male ones and, with the best of intentions, had not asked as much of the women. Once he started making equal demands of the women on his staff, he discovered that they were perfectly able to perform the same tasks as the men and he clearly saw that they grew with the additional responsibility he gave them.

Another example is one of the men who says that before the project started his workplace had a clear division between men's jobs and women's jobs and that some teams were therefore entirely male or female. An important aspect of the changes he introduced at the workplace was what he termed "splitting up single-sex teams". Torbjörn Jonsson, formerly a production manager at Ericsson, now MD of Delsbo Candle, describes his experiences.



**“At Ericsson I saw it as my job to split up the single-sex teams because in my experience groups containing both men and women are more efficient”**

**“My job was to split up the single-sex teams”**

Torbjörn Jonsson has become a gender aware manager who created more efficient teams in which there is no longer any place for internal conflicts or laddish subcultures.

“At Ericsson I saw it as my job to split up the single-sex teams because in my experience groups containing both men and women are more efficient,” says Torbjörn, who was a production manager at Ericsson when he took part in the Gender Network. “The group dynamic changes once you get rid of the jargon and the hierarchies.”

At Ericsson diversity, regarding gender, ethnicity and age, has long been a priority, and Torbjörn thinks that that is why it was important for the company to get involved in the project. Today gender is on the agenda every day in a way that it simply wasn't before.

“The managers below me understood that I prioritised abolishing sex segregation so I didn't even have to bring it up any more. For an industrial company, Ericsson has a relatively good proportion of women, 30 percent, and the company works actively on the way machines are “manned” and on recruitment to ensure a good balance between women and men. But for me personally, the greatest benefit from the network was the knowledge I gained. Putting my gender glasses on and realising how much I'm unaware of in my behaviour has hopefully made me a better manager.”



### “Male” machines are big, hot and noisy

Torbjörn didn't encounter any resistance from his subordinate managers to splitting up the single-sex teams but this job hasn't always been easy.

“You can't just move one woman into a team of blokes. You have to swap several people around at the same time, that's one thing I've learnt. Some women weren't comfortable in that working environment and that can be a difficult thing for managers and other parts of the organisation to deal with. It's a complex issue and you rarely know exactly what's going on down on the ground in the teams.”

Gender-labelled machinery leads to single-sex teams. The machines that are considered to be “typically” female, largely operated by women, are the ones that demand the most monotonous manual labour. The so-called “male” machines, largely operated by men, are large, hot and very noisy. These machines mostly need supervision.

“Women therefore suffer more musculo-skeletal injuries than men because they tend to work at the physically more monotonous machines,” Torbjörn points out. “This is yet another reason why it's a good thing to split up the groups and rotate the jobs, enabling more people to work at different machines.”

### A chance to become a cleverer human being

For Ericsson the next step is about getting more managers on board and giving more people training in gender awareness, to spread the message through the organisation.

“I have worked on some individual issues and we've achieved actual changes in the teams. Now Ericsson has to increase awareness among more managers and employees. I really hope that everyone gets the chance to become a cleverer manager and human being. I get a kick out of understanding what's really going on and I think the gender awareness aspect took the leadership training to a whole new level.”

**“Putting my gender glasses on and realising how much I'm unaware of in my behaviour has hopefully made me a better manager”**

### Management backing vital

In the Gender Network we've seen that middle management, from their positions of power, are able to drive change within their own team. That's something which can considerably improve conditions for women and men alike. But to spread this to the entire workplace, getting the whole organisation to be gender aware, you have to have support and commitment from the management. In our project, this support has proved to be lacking. Although the management sanctioned the work, the majority of organisations have not given it very high priority. The middle managers have had to lead the process of change within the framework of their ordinary work and their normal budgets. They would have liked to see the top management more actively seeking results from the project and communicating this throughout the organisation. The middle managers would also have liked to see more interest from the management in working together to draw up the strategy for change.

It also took a relatively long time before the change agents started any changes at all off the ground in their workplaces. At the beginning the participants felt inhibited in introducing changes because the project management team placed such great emphasis on their having the support of those above them in the organisation.

**“I thought we were a relatively equal organisation because we’ve got roughly the same number of women and men”**

### Gender-aware organisations are more efficient

Even today, we would say that support from top management is essential to being able to drive these kind of changes through, at least if you want to achieve a gender aware organisation. However, there is an important lesson for the project management side to learn here in that they have to tone down their message so that it doesn’t put the middle managers off proposing any changes at all. What we have seen is that the change agents, in their position as middle managers, have the power to drive change through in their own team, without having to have a mandate from their superiors before they can begin. As one of the change agents says: “An innovative manager who wants to create good conditions for development for his or her staff needs to be gender aware”. Together with their employees and with the support of the top management, middle managers can help to create an enabling culture that promotes learning and innovation. For this to become reality for everyone, you need a gender -aware organisation. Moniqa Klefbom, unit manager at the Centre for Development and Learning, CUL, describes how her organisation took the first steps along the way.

### “To succeed, you have to start with yourself”

“I have been given explanations for why teams work the way they do and this awareness has made me a less prejudiced manager,” says Moniqa Klefbom.

Moniqa is head of the Working life and guidance department at CUL, in Hudiksvall. With support from the head of the centre, who thought that increased gender awareness in the organisation was strategically important for the future, Moniqa naturally became one of the change agents in the Gender Network.

“For me personally, the biggest benefit of taking part was that I was given explanations for the things that go on in teams and why we prioritise things the way we do in the organisation. Now I’ve got my gender glasses on, I can put things in context. Before I found out about gender, I thought we were a relatively equal organisation because we’ve got roughly the same number of women and men. The new things I’ve learned mean I can now see how gender-based our jobs are, for example. The women are mostly study and vocational counsellors and assistants, while the men work on the technology side.”

### “Everyone can speak – no one can hide”

Moniqa manages eighteen study and vocational counsellors, labour market consultants and instructors. One prime example of gender awareness in the workplace was the time Moniqa told her team that they had created a gender-labelled recruitment ad. Was the post really only meant for women? Pictures and text needed to be changed to create a gender-neutral advertisement. Another example of change is Moniqa’s experience that it isn’t as easy to get away with clichés in the organisation these days.

“I mean stereotypes and comments like ‘well, you’re a woman, you’re good at multitasking’. We’ve even changed the way we run meetings. Today we rotate the positions of chair and secretary, we have an open agenda at meetings and we always go round the table so that everyone can speak and nobody can hide.”



**“Without gender studies, there’s a risk that you will concentrate on evening out differences in numbers of women and men without changing the workplace culture”**

#### The leader of the future is gender aware

Moniqa talks about how difficult it has been to deal with the silent resistance to change, demonstrated in body language and sideways glances, which she has only felt and not been able to challenge.

“When we move on into the next phase, I’ll need coaching to be able to handle different types of resistance in the right way. I need more committed people in my team and I’ll need to use the Gender Network as a forum for exchanging experiences and getting support. Our leadership training has been based on gender studies, and that’s been incredibly educational. My own awareness has enabled me to go further with my staff and we’ve come quite a way. For me, the leader of the future is a gender aware leader.”

#### Success factors

During the journey with the Gender Network we have been able to identify a number of success factors which are worth highlighting. Possibly the most important thing is realising that working for change on gender and gender equality is predominantly a question of knowledge.

“For us a grounding in gender studies has been important, because otherwise there’s a risk that gender equality work will get it wrong,” says project leader Marita Svensson. “Without gender

studies, there's a risk that you will concentrate on evening out differences in numbers of women and men without changing the workplace culture. This can lead to us emphasising how different we are instead of working on changing the different conditions for men and women.”

### Start at the top

To succeed in achieving gender-aware organisations it is essential that there is an expressed desire to do so and broad-based support and commitment at various levels of the organisation. As others have said, we think it's vital that the top management give their consent, are involved and committed and back the project by allocating financial and staff resources to it. The top management bear strategic responsibility for setting goals and key figures for gender equality work and for ensuring that this work is followed up. Particular attention should be given to whether the top management is also responsible for making the project a high priority in the organisation and giving it legitimacy, and it is here that communication is central. For communication to be trustworthy, it is important that the top management have knowledge about gender, which is often not the case. Leadership training with a gender perspective is therefore necessary.

### Gender training – a necessity

As early as the planning phase of the Gender Network we were able to identify a major need for knowledge on gender issues in Fiber Optic Valley's member organisations.

To support the work of the change agents and to speed up the process, the top management and managers of the participating organisations were therefore offered a three-day tailor-made leader-

ship training course called the “Innovative Leadership” in partnership with the Business Leadership Academy. The aim was to provide a theoretical understanding of how gender affects results and can limit sustainable growth and profitability. The project was funded by the Swedish ESF Council. The leadership programme was designed on the basis of gender studies with a focus on business development, and therefore provided basic information on gender of practical use in strategic and operational work. The training was process-based and incorporated elements of gender theory, business case studies and practical exercises linked to leadership, commercial benefit and strategic business development. Participants were given basic knowledge about gender equality and methods for working to develop their own organisations. The managements which chose to take part understood the importance of all managers having gender training to be able to work together professionally and support each other in working to develop gender equality. The activities in the leadership training created a forum for exchanging experiences between the organisations and new management tools for leading the change process.

### Survey structures and behaviours

One important aspect at the start of a process of change focussing on gender is describing the prevailing situation. This makes the gender order in the organisation visible. In our initial analysis, quantitative and a qualitative analyses of gender equality in the region were carried out. This showed that women and men have different positions in the organisations. Women have a considerably higher level of education than the men, but despite this, there are few women in leadership roles. Well-educated women are also moving out of the region. Well-educated labour is in short supply in the region. In our gender survey, we therefore saw a major need to make the unequal

## Women have a considerably higher level of education than the men, but despite this, there are few women in leadership roles

distribution of power and influence between the sexes visible and found that this is a very important aspect of the gender perspective in Fiber Optic Valley. Excluding competent labour from leading positions has a negative impact on growth. To achieve our growth targets, it is simply necessary to attract expertise to the region and make sure it stays here. Today an organisation's people are the biggest competitive factor in the marketplace and well-educated, motivated and committed staff are becoming increasingly vital to the growth potential of organisations.

Participants in the Gender Network started by analysing their own organisations to set goals and create an awareness of what is actually going on. The analyses are based on Joan Acker's gender theory model, as described in the section on Action-oriented gender research below. The questions looked at gender distribution, interaction in the workplace, symbols, assumptions and expectations.

Some examples include

- Types of employment – Is there a difference between women and men?
- Recruitment processes – What happens? Who participates?
- Pay and benefits – Who gets what?

- Skills development – How is the budget distributed?
- Power and influence – How are responsibilities and authority distributed? Look at the job categories in the organisation, what do you have to do to have status? How many women and how many men work in high-status areas?
- The corporate culture – Look at how gender is done during meetings, for example: Who talks a lot and who are they talking to? Who talks less?

### Find the motivation

Our analysis clearly showed that gender was a non-issue and in general there was little interest in gender equality in our member organisations. Knowledge of what gender is was limited and there was no expressed demand. The task of finding reasons and arguments for why organisations should work to become more gender-aware has therefore been a central issue from the very start of the project.

Each organisation has to find its own motivation for working with gender and the added value this will bring. The strongest motivation in all work towards change is when you yourself understand the benefits to be gained from changing the way things are and maybe even from changing your own behaviour. The message we pass on therefore needs to be clear and carefully considered, highlighting what each individual organisation has to gain. One good way of kicking off a discussion on gender perspectives and approaching the issue of need is to encourage the company to study its current organisational structure and culture and use this as a basis for analysing the need for organisational development. It's important to meet the organisation halfway, starting out from the situation it is in rather than coming in and telling it what to do. Arguments must

be supported by research data and good examples, with the aim of encouraging people to dare to challenge ingrained patterns.

### Argue the benefits

When the project started, we placed great emphasis on meeting all the organisations asked to participate face to face. In meetings with managing directors, heads of department and management teams we presented the project and what it could bring to the organisations which chose to take part. These discussions tended to follow a clear pattern. To obtain enough information to decide whether to participate in the project, people wanted arguments for how the work could help develop their organisations, at organisational and individual level. We therefore built up arguments around the benefits for the organisations as well as for the individual middle management participants. Some important arguments which emerged;

- Become a more attractive employer. A gender-equal workplace is seen as more modern and happier workers lead to increased productivity.
- A wider pool of competent labour.
- More business opportunities. Gender equality work creates innovation by questioning prevailing norms, which in turn creates a more open working climate with expanded horizons, fostering the development of products and services which boost competitiveness.

### Contribute towards sustainable growth

Skills supply proved to be a key issue for many organisations.

Today more and more organisations are realising that if they want to keep and even recruit competent staff, they have to work on gender. Gender equality work is seen as an important personnel strategy and a way of modernising companies, making them more attractive to women and men alike. Today there are many arguments for how active work on gender equality can contribute towards sustainable growth.

### Identify benefits at individual level

Organisations making the most of the skills and experiences of both women and men encourages greater creativity and a broader view of the managerial role. There are also many benefits at individual level for those managers who choose to take part in a project of change. The participants gain knowledge about gender, tools for working with gender in their organisation and a network in which they can both forge new contacts and obtain support and inspiration throughout the change process. Becoming a gender-aware manager is also about developing as a leader and as a person. This type of project facilitates organisational and personal development, while also producing interesting research. Quite simply it's a win-win situation where everybody benefits.

### Choose your organisations carefully

As far as research is concerned, the project seeks to provide a deeper understanding of middle management level from a gender perspective. One important selection criterion was therefore that participants had to be middle managers. When selecting organisations for the Gender Network we applied several criteria which reflected and reinforced the Triple Helix make-up of Fiber Optic Valley. The organisations include traditional processing and primary industry,





**And not any change at all, but change which seeks to increase gender awareness, a task which often feels like a personal challenge and can also come up against resistance from colleagues**

service companies, banks, media companies, research institutes, the university, education and local government. This gave us an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how different driving forces and objectives affect people's view of work to promote gender equality.

### Set up a group of change agents

One of the most important factors if a change project is to succeed is the involvement of committed people who really want to achieve change. And not any change at all, but change which seeks to increase gender awareness, a task which often feels like a personal challenge and can also come up against resistance from colleagues. The change agents are strategically important because it is through their management role that the process of change has been developed and run. The top management suggested people in their organisations who they thought would be suitable. These people were then asked by their managers whether they were interested in taking part in the project as change agents and becoming members of the Gender Network. The Gender Network comprised thirteen people, men and women, all of whom hold middle management posts.



**On the basis of previous experience, we decided to divide the work clearly between one project leader, one researcher and one process leader, in other words three people with three different roles. In research and development projects it is often common for the researcher to take on all three roles**

#### Divide up the responsibilities

Another significant factor in the project's success is the people who form the project leadership team and how project leadership is organised. All of the project leadership team have long experience of running similar processes of change, and the project has been able to draw on this. While research is important in action-oriented gender research, project leadership and process leadership are at least as central, and it can be difficult for a single individual to combine all these roles. On the basis of previous experience, we decided to divide the work clearly between one project leader, one researcher and one process leader, in other words three people with three different roles. In research and development projects it is often common for the researcher to take on all three roles, which can be difficult to reconcile.

#### Three people, three roles

Dividing the work up in this way left the researcher free to concentrate on the research aspect of the project on how organisations do gender. Susanne Andersson was the research leader, responsible for the quality of the project in the field of gender studies. Her role was to document the ongoing process as the Gender Network met, to give lectures and provide information about gender in various discussions and training sessions. The gender researcher is "the critical eye" who intervenes in the process. She has interviewed, observed and shadowed the change agents in their day-to-day work in their organisations. The researcher also has the main responsibility for ensuring that the written documentation of the project is communicated and published in academic reports and articles. Process management has been vital in getting the change process up and running.

The process leader, Eva Amundsdotter has solid experience in process management and is responsible for the planning and the process within the network. She has used tried and tested methods for creating a sense of trust, belonging, and commitment in the group and to get the process off the ground. Furthermore, with expertise in gender studies, she has lectured on gender, gender equality and resistance to change.

During meetings of the network the process leader has acted as a facilitator, creating a favourable climate for discussions and exercises. Project leader Marita Svensson has borne the main responsibility for strategic decisions on the focus of the project and operational project work. It has also been her job to legitimise the project and embed it in the organisations, as well as taking responsibility for staffing issues and the project finances. As the project leader, she has also coordinated all the activities under the Gender Network umbrella and taken responsibility for communication and reporting to the various stakeholders.



## Action-oriented gender research

In the Gender Network we have worked using an approach known as action-oriented gender research. Action-oriented gender research is placed at the intersection between gender research and practical gender equality work, with a grounding in gender research as a central component.

Gender equality projects with no link to gender studies can easily get off on the wrong foot, by focussing on how different the sexes are rather than working to change the different conditions of men and women (Amundsdotter & Gillberg 2003). Another risk if the project is not firmly based on research is that it will only analyse and tackle numerical differences between women and men instead of looking at the culture of the workplace, for example. More women in managerial roles has long been an important goal for gender equality work. In childcare and the education sector the aim has been to increase the number of men. Of course this work is important, but without a grounding in gender theory there is a risk

that this will only lead to a quantitative levelling of the sexes without discussing how the management team or workplace in question does gender. There is a risk that opportunities for women and men will be restricted rather than expanded. Instead of being given more challenging and less gender stereotyped roles or tasks, the work will be divided into traditional male and female jobs. The result will be a division with clear expectations of how women and men should behave and what they are expected to do in the workplace (Norberg 2005).

Another element which is easily missed if work is not carried out on a sound research-based footing is power and power relationships between women and men and also between women and between men. Gender research has shown that it is the person with the power who decides when and how gender becomes important. Highlighting other power systems which are interwoven with gender is a growing field of research in gender studies today.

### Making the invisible visible

The research element is all to do with the network participants' own processes of change in which they are the most important players. After all, they are the ones who will gradually lead the process of change in their own organisations. The process leader shapes learning processes from what comes out of the discussions at network meetings. And it is precisely this which distinguishes action-oriented gender research from other gender research. The research is carried out together with the participants and it is all about participating in the process of change. The aim of this method is to show how the participants do gender in their organisations so that steps can then be taken towards changing this. This may be about the way tasks are divided up, what the pay system looks like, the way people act and speak in an organisation, behaviours which are thought to be

natural. Making visible things which to most people are completely invisible enables us to change them.

### Gender is something people do

In terms of gender theory, the project takes as its starting point an international perspective known as “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Acker, 1992). The “doing gender” perspective has been developed for and been used in studies of organisations. In it, gender is understood as a social construct, in other words, gender is something people do. An interactive activity repeated between people irrespective of their sex. In other words, between women and men and also between women and between men. (West & Zimmerman 1987). It is about what we are allowed to be like and what we are allowed to do as women and men. Doing gender and doing organisation thus go together. When people do organisation, they do gender at the same time and vice versa. How we create gender is integrated in organisational life (Acker 1992).

Studying gender involves looking at how behaviours between people give rise to different conditions for women and men. What sets action-oriented gender research apart is the way it uses activating methods in which participants discuss and carry out analyses together with each other and a researcher. This makes the invisible – different ways of behaving in an organisation that are thought to be natural, and where gender is done unconsciously – visible. This can be an educational process in which participants start to see their own behaviour and that of others, as well as the way the organisation operates, with new eyes.

The way we do gender can be compared to riding a bike. Once we have learnt to ride a bike, cycling is easy, but describing in words what we’re doing when we’re cycling – which muscle groups we’re using, how we keep our balance and so on – is a much more difficult

**“The division of roles with one project leader, one process leader and one researcher is one of our success factors as each of us was able to focus on our own area”**

task. It’s the same with gender. We do gender all the time in our everyday lives without thinking about it so we don’t have any words to describe what we are doing (Martin 2003). The project’s gender researcher Susanne Andersson has long experience of documenting how we do gender in our day-to-day lives.

### Research and change at the same time

“In my role as a researcher, the greatest benefit from this project has been discovering the advantages of an action-oriented approach. Carrying out research together with the participants gives me a broader perspective and a deeper understanding. This in turn provides new knowledge about gender in organisations, and at the same time we’re working to change the patterns we discover that are holding gender equality back,” says Susanne Andersson, the project’s gender researcher at Stockholm University’s Centre for Gender Studies.

Susanne gained her PhD in Education from Stockholm University in 2003. The same year she started working at Vinnova on a range of research and development projects on gender. Susanne and project leader Marita Svensson met in 2005 at a conference about forging contacts between industry, researchers and consultants



working on gender and the rest is history. Today Susanne divides her time between working as a research leader in a new R&D project for Fiber Optic Valley and her job teaching scientific methodology at the Swedish National Police Academy under the auspices of the Swedish National Police Board.

In the Gender Network Susanne has been responsible for carrying out observation studies, documenting the process and bringing knowledge to discussions and seminars as well as keeping a “critical eye” on the network’s processes.

“The division of roles with one project leader, one process leader and one researcher is one of our success factors as each of us was able to focus on our own area. At the same time the work has been challenging for me in my role as a researcher, because I was going against the traditional research role where you are expected to keep your distance from your research subjects. That kind of approach just doesn’t work in this type of project.”

### Discover hidden patterns

Our method is all about showing how the participants do gender in their organisations so that steps can then be taken towards changing this. The managers have had to learn to discover hidden patterns in their organisation and see how they themselves, often unconsciously, have created barriers between the sexes. As a gender coach Susanne has carried out observation studies in the workplaces of the middle managers, followed by discussions.

“When I tell them my interpretation of what happened in a departmental meeting, it becomes clear that what the manager may have thought was showing consideration for a member of staff, I see as marginalisation from a gender perspective.” Susanne describes a concrete example from the book *Mellanchefen en maktpotential* (Andersson, Amundsdotter, Svensson, 2009).

A female middle manager is holding a departmental meeting. Her female assistant is sitting beside her. At the end of the meeting the manager takes the assistant aside and asked her if she has any opinions on what has just been discussed.

“I asked the manager why she did that,” says Susanne Andersson. “Why didn’t she ask that question during the meeting? ‘Because I know that my assistant is so shy that she doesn’t like speaking in front of groups,’ was the answer. ‘But I wanted to know her opinion because I know that she’s always got really exciting and important ideas’.”

“The manager acted with the best of intentions to ‘protect’ her employee from a difficult situation. But this misguided consideration unfortunately did not encourage the staff member’s capacity or give her an opportunity to develop. A different approach would have been to prepare the assistant before the meeting, saying that she would really like to hear her opinion and giving her the support she might need to talk in front of the group.”

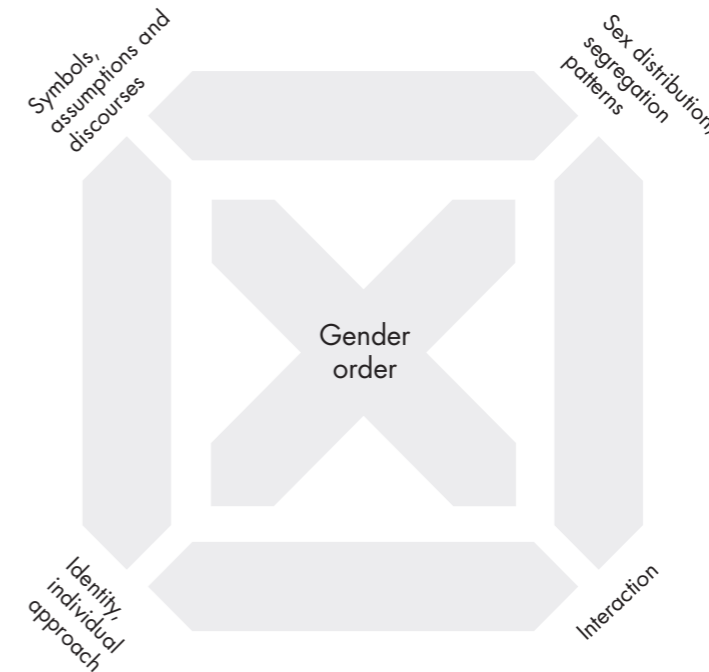
### Middle managers as change agents

The results of the research showed that middle managers play a key role in working towards change. They are the link between the top management and the employees and they make a large number of day-to-day decisions. These range from allocating tasks to deciding who is going to speak at a meeting. But changing behaviour is difficult.

“Many managers who want to work on gender equality merely look at numerical differences between women and men. For change to mean anything they have to go deeper than that. You can start by asking yourself what assumptions do I make about women and men? How can I make conditions more equal for my staff?”

According to Susanne the managers who have been the most successful in working towards change are those who, during the

Joan Acker (1992)



project, became convinced of the benefit of working on gender issues to develop the organisation.

“The ones who made the most progress on gender equality were those who realised how much power they actually had, the fact that they can do a lot even without the involvement of top management. Take Ericsson, for example, where the production manager decided to break up single sex teams to improve efficiency and make the workplace more attractive.”

## Susanne's top tips if you're just getting off the ground

- Form a group which gathers knowledge about gender
- Question your own assumptions about women and men
- Have an "observer" who watches meetings – Who gets to speak the most? Who talks a lot and who are they talking to? Who talks less?
- Look at the pay and benefit systems – Who is given the highest salary or the interesting, high status jobs to do? Who gets pay rises? Who has flexible working hours?
- Comprehensive work on gender equality demands of the support of the management and expertise in the field – call in a gender expert!

## The power of the gender order

The aim of the project has been to develop the participating organisations and also to generate new and interesting research. For this reason we chose to use a special model to show how organisations do gender.

This gender theory model is based on the work of American sociologist Joan Acker (1992). The model has four dimensions, covering four different organisational processes. A gender order arises where these four processes intersect. In other words a permanent order of gender on the basis of segregation patterns, interaction, assumptions and expectations. For example, who has which jobs, who talks most at meetings, how you are expected to dress, talk, etc.

When someone deviates from the system, it is clear that there is an unstated gender order.

The gender order can also be changed in general discussions without actually affecting the way work is divided up between the sexes. One example is the lip service paid by society, where it is emphasised that gender equality is important, while pay differences and the sex-segregated labour market remain unchanged.

## Education and analysis hand in hand

The participants have mainly received information and training and exchanged experiences at the network meetings. During the project period, the Gender Network held 13 meetings and the process was structured as follows:

- Education and analysis hand in hand
- Written reports/analyses, one for each participating organisation
- Drawing up action plans
- Implementing action plans at organisational level

One important aspect at the start of a process of change focusing on gender is to describe the initial situation, in other words making the gender order in the organisation visible (Amundsdotter & Gillberg 2003). At the same time, education is equally important. Education and analysis have gone hand in hand in the Gender Network. The education component comprised tailor-made lectures in which the participants were able to work through the gender theory model step by step. Ahead of the next network meeting the change agents



analysed their own organisations and then discussed these analyses together in the network. The action plans which the participants drew up are derived from these analyses.

In their analyses they used the questions from Acker's sociological model:

#### **A. SEX DISTRIBUTION / SEGREGATION PATTERNS**

##### *1. Vertical sex segregation*

How many women and men have management positions in my organisation?

##### *2. Horizontal sex segregation*

What are the different job categories in my organisation? Are these sex-labelled? If so, how?

##### *3. Internal sex segregation*

Are there specialisations within a job category in your organisation? Are these sex-labelled and if so how? What work has high status? How many women and how many men work in high-status areas?

#### **B. INTERACTION**

Study how gender is done during meetings. Look, for example, who talks a lot and who are they talking to? Who talks less? How can the conversation patterns in meetings be understood in relation to position, age, sex?

#### **C. SYMBOLS, ASSUMPTIONS AND DISCOURSES**

You can, for example, focus on what is considered to be a status-labelled activity in the organisation. Describe how it is talked about. What activities are not paid any attention?



**“Using an action-oriented research approach means that, as a researcher, I need to give more direct feedback on what I see in my analyses. The discussion between me and the change agents makes the learning experience easier for the participants and also provides a wealth of research material,” Susanne Andersson points out**

**D. PERSONAL AND EXPECTED ATTITUDE**

What should an ideal employee be like in your organisation? In what way is this image gendered? The ideal employee and your own attitude?

For those wanting to start working with change in their own workplace, the questions in Acker’s model are excellent tool for producing a description of the initial situation.

**Gender coaching leads to a deeper understanding**

In her role of researcher, Susanne Andersson developed a form of gender coaching for the Gender Network. This is a method which

emerged when she carried out observation studies at the participants’ workplaces. The change agent is given the chance to reflect on actual situations in his or her day-to-day life. Then the change agent’s view of the situation is discussed with Susanne and interpreted in terms of gender perspective. These analyses were then discussed at meetings of the Gender Network. The idea behind using gender coaching in the project was to give participants a deeper understanding of how people in organisations do gender and create a firm foundation for actual change. The method has also generated interesting new knowledge for research into how gender is done in organisations.

**Don’t just show the good side**

Action-oriented gender research enables the researcher to provide clarification and in-depth interpretations in discussions with participants. In individual cases the interpretations have even been revised as a result of these discussions, creating greater validity. Because the participants want to change things, they don’t just show the good side of their own workplace. Instead they bring out the aspects that show it in a poorer light, increasing the validity of the analysis even further.

Using action-oriented gender research has therefore proved to be an excellent approach and an important element of the knowledge process in which we tried to gain a deeper understanding of how organisations do gender.

“Using an action-oriented research approach means that, as a researcher, I need to give more direct feedback on what I see in my analyses. The discussion between me and the change agents makes the learning experience easier for the participants and also provides a wealth of research material,” Susanne Andersson points out.



## What we did – the network group as a tool

For the change agents the network was the base of the project. The participants met outside their everyday lives, usually in a residential setting. The organisations operated in extremely different sectors and the participants came to exchange experiences with each other and work together to build new knowledge.

The fact that the Gender Network is based on gender studies has made it easier for the change agents to cast a critical eye over what goes on and conditions between women and men in their own organisations. While the participants were meeting outside their day-to-day lives at network meetings, they were also working with their own reality in the form of their own studies, reflecting on dilemmas and interpreting their own organisations with their “gender glasses” on.

### Reflecting together

The aim was to achieve shared and critical learning, which is why several methods and perspectives in the network were inspired by the Action learning method (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). This

method is based on the relationship between reflection and action. The participants work in the group – learn from experiences, reflect together and take action. The process should be supportive and challenging. The aim is to create an environment which enables individuals in a group to progress. The challenge lies in questioning things which individuals in the group take for granted and make them visible.

Initially, the network met for two residential days every six weeks. This aimed to create a firm foundation for the group and to look at things in more depth. Gradually the network started meeting twice every six months, the first meeting being over two days and the second for one day. To facilitate feedback and support, regional coaching groups were set up which held their own meetings in between the network meetings. This was an important development to place the project on a regular footing and also to provide support for the participants owning and running the process themselves. The participants in the group took the initiative themselves to decide the subject of their coaching meetings and how they would be run. At network meetings, tasks were set for the smaller groups to perform.

The research itself does not drive the process. This is where process leader Eva Amundsdotter came into the picture.

### “To lead change you yourself need to be changing”

“It’s been incredibly inspiring to have the chance to work with a group for such a long period and really get to know the people and see them develop. This doesn’t happen very often because most gender equality projects are only a year long” says Eva Amundsdotter, process leader and doctoral student at the Department of Gender and Innovation at Luleå University of Technology.

Eva has been working with gender equality issues since the early



**“They are the ones who will have to lead the way in their organisations and to lead change, you yourself need to be changing”**

1990s for the Swedish Government Offices and trade unions and as a self-employed consultant. When Eva leads work towards change, she uses the group as a base. The group, in this case the Gender Network, becomes the fundamental element of the project and therefore in Eva’s view the most important thing is developing the participants as individuals and as leaders.

“They are the ones who will have to lead the way in their organisations and to lead change, you yourself need to be changing. I put a great deal of time into building trust in the group. Trust is essential if the group is to be able to be used as a means of developing the participants. In a group where they feel secure, the participants can support and also challenge each other.”

Self-reflection is the other important element in Eva’s method. The participants have been able to reflect on what they have seen, heard and read. They have been able to think about their own role in “doing gender” in their day-to-day lives – What do I think about men and women? What do I usually do? What expectations do I have?

### Management-led change

Thirteen managers from twelve different organisations met in the network and learned from each other. They have all also been the only representative of their respective organisation, apart from Ericsson, two of whose managers participated.

“Having participants who are the only person from their own organisation is a weakness for the group. They are the only ones who have gained the experiences from the network meetings and then they have to go back and lead the change process by themselves. It has also proved difficult to get the managers to spread their new knowledge through their organisation systematically. Our coaching groups were one way of resolving this, but the best thing would have been to have more people from each organisation taking part in the first place. This is something that we will bear in mind for the future.”

One important aspect of successful change is that it is led from the top. If the management isn't on board, you can't change the organisation. The project management team put a great deal of time into establishing support for the Gender Network among the top management of the organisations, and invited top managers to a leadership training on gender and gender equality entitled Innovative Leadership.

“Now with hindsight I think we could have made clearer demands of the top management in terms of regular feedback and asked them more directly how they intended to back up their change agents in what they were trying to achieve. By doing that we would have shown that we had high expectations of their commitment and involvement. As it was, not all the management teams prioritised the work as we would have hoped.”

### **“If you don't encounter resistance, you're not doing enough”**

Taking the top management with you on the journey is also a way of reducing resistance to change in the organisation.

“Many people wonder how they will cope with resistance in their workplace but you have to realise that it's going to be uncomfort-

able. Gender equality work founded on gender studies is going to be provocative because it means that you're looking at power structures in the workplace and making visible the way a gender order is created through a number of everyday actions in the organisation. You're tackling things that people do, including you yourself if you're part of the organisation. This means that you are leaping into a highly charged area. I usually say that if you don't encounter resistance, you're not doing enough!”

Eva's advice for anyone about to start out on a process of change is to use an investigative approach and let it take its time. It will pay dividends if you take it seriously. But it's important to provide support and enable learning and development. She thinks that lots of people think this sounds difficult and would prefer a “quick-fix”.

“The best thing about the Gender Network is that we have succeeded in turning the participants into gender-aware managers. Our way of working, with the managers' personal development at the forefront and allowing plenty of time for the group to learn together, exchange experiences and reflect, has proved to be a successful way of launching gender equality work in organisations.”

### **Getting the group working together**

The role of the process leader was to get the group working together. Possibly the most important task was getting the participants to want to help each other. Shared learning is all about working together and having a good relationship with each other.

“I don't see a group as a number of individuals stuck together like a jigsaw. That's all well and good, but a group that really wants to be a group can create so much more. Creating this synergy effect often takes hard work. Wanting to help each other, being curious, open and willing to listen are good starting points. Cooperation is the key to getting the group to help each other. The participants in

the Gender Network had a willingness to contribute towards each other's and their own learning process," Eva points out.

This is what Eva sees as the most important aspects in creating a functioning group:

- We had clear rules. The change agents were able to work their way towards the rules they thought the group should follow. The rules were always up on the wall at our meetings. They had to be alive for the group, an approach.
- A clear beginning and a clear ending. When the network met we usually started with a question which went round the group so that everyone had a chance to see each other and to show themselves. One common question was: What are you bringing into the room with you? The answer could be thoughts, feelings, the current situation, stress, joy and so on. This created an opportunity to bring in a personal element, touch base with each other and find out more about each other. We also often did the same thing at the end, often with the question: What do you bring with you?
- Reflection created security. The processes we used when we met involved a reflective way of working, which came to be a habit in the group. Everyone knew that there would be an opportunity to think in more depth about everything that had happened and been said. This recurring reflection created a sense of security. The participants felt that they were seen and their voices heard and they were also able to hear what other people thought.
- Reflection in single-sex groups. Some of the work was carried out in smaller groups, sometimes divided by sex. The work in

single-sex groups was an effective way of deepening our processes in that it gave an opportunity for sharing new ideas and experiences which came out off the cuff in a single-sex context. These ideas were then sometimes shared with the larger group.

- Reflection on themes affecting the group. We carried out processes on themes which affected the group in different ways. One such theme was working on how gender has affected each of us through our lives. Another example was how the gender order affected relationships between women. The group developed trust and openness by working on themes which encompassed joy and sorrow, powerlessness and anger.
- Active listening. We worked consistently on developing everyone's active listening skills. We did this through a method where participants worked in pairs swapping roles, one listening and one speaking. Coaching was another method based on active listening. Swapping roles also put the focus on people's ability to use their own and other people's attention for reflection, experience and learning.
- Integrating theory. This can be done in a number of ways – reflection, listening and learning, as described above, were some of the methods we used. The starting point was giving everyone a chance to integrate gender awareness in themselves. Carrying out gender observations was another way of incorporating gender studies, observing yourself, exchanging experiences with others and linking this to theory.

## Challenging power hierarchies

The aim of the process leader has been to challenge the traditional

patterns which prevail in groups. In practical terms this often meant that the participants went round the group, giving everyone the chance to speak once before anyone spoke twice. The group mainly sat in a circle without a table. We have formed smaller groups and use different methods with different participants. Creating equal relationships between everyone in the room has contributed to a higher degree of the individuals own responsibility for the process. Trust often results in a willingness to take responsibility and to drive processes oneself in different ways. This was an unfamiliar situation; most of us are probably not used to being in groups which become personal and affect us deeply. It can often be more comfortable to listen to a lecturer and take notes rather than take part so actively. Of course this did happen even in this group and then it was important to go back to self reflection or some other method to regain that contact.

### Involving the whole person

Effective learning, involving the whole person, means incorporating emotions, and thoughts as well as actions. All three are important components of the method.

The Action learning method distinguishes between development and learning which lead to improvements and development and learning which lead to fundamental change. The former is achieved by making changes within the framework or norms of something, for example by prioritising or choosing to focus on something. Fundamental change comes out of working on looking at reality in a completely different way. In the Action learning method we brought together systematic learning and change. Gender theory was interspersed with reflection and self reflection on thoughts and emotions. We worked together on analyses and worked on different themes such as superiority and inferiority, oppression, what hap-

### Three processes, Amundsdotter, 2009



pens in single sex groups, etc. We performed role plays on some of these themes and others we talked about, sometimes arousing strong emotions.

### The phases and processes of the network

Work in the Gender Network has been carried out in different phases and processes. The phases of the project were divided into an investigative knowledge phase, followed by implementation and practical work towards change. The network can also be described in terms of three processes; a production process, a mobilisation process and change processes.

#### 1. Process mechanisms – making patterns visible

The key aspect of the introductory process was making gender related patterns visible – the gender order in the different organisations

and in the middle management role.

Different lecturers were invited to speak to the network in this period. The idea was for their lectures to be based on the gender model being used, and for the participants to plan the different stages of their own investigations on the basis of the lecturers and gender literature. We worked on gender observations to increase participants' own awareness, as well as these forming part of their investigations of their own organisations. Then the participants discussed the observations at network meetings and learned from each other.

In the process of mechanism phase participants completed various kinds of surveys and organisational studies from a gender perspective. They held interviews, carried out observations, produced statistics, had conversations and created questionnaires. The studies were then processed together within the network group.

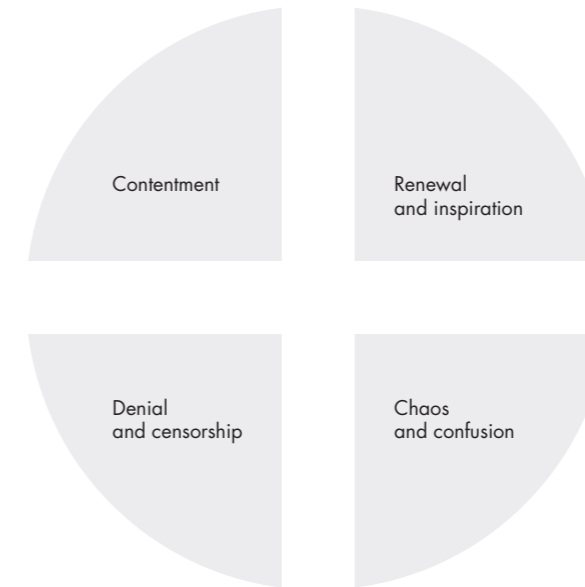
Gender theories were linked to Acker's model about how gender is created in organisations (read more in the section on "Action-oriented gender research"). This involved asking questions on leadership, interaction, segregation, identity and symbolically doing gender.

#### REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT VALUES

In parallel with the participants learning and researching their own organisations they also worked on self-reflection. They also carried out exercises on active values and had dialogues. This was one way of getting them thinking about gender equality, gender and change. The participants also created their own exercises on active values adapted to their own organisations which they used in their workplaces.

In between network meetings the researcher was out in the organisations, observing the participants in their management role. The things that came out of these observations were then discussed at the network meetings. The researcher also carried out gender coaching and focus interviews (read more in the section on Action-oriented gender research).

The four rooms of change, Janssen 2005.



## 2. The mobilisation process – producing action plans

In the next step the change agents worked on the things that had become evident about gender in their own organisations. This was a period of reflection, planning and discussions with staff and top management. The participants made goals and activities in an action plan on the basis of the things they had discovered about their organisation. Several of them drew up two different action plans; one action plan for themselves as middle management and an overall action plan for the organisation. With the help of the Action learning method, the aim was for the action plans to contain im-



provements as well as more fundamental changes. The idea was to challenge the norms on which the gender order was based. This was a demanding period which involved seeing what was actually going on in the workplace and then deciding what could be done about it. At the same time the managers had to start mobilising for change. The action plans became the subject of a “goal workshop” in the network – an opportunity to give each other different perspectives and struggled with what they wanted to achieve in terms of change. Participants gained feedback on their own work while contributing towards everyone else’s.

#### **THE FOUR ROOMS OF CHANGE**

In the mobilisation process we used the tool The four rooms of change to gain a deeper understanding of censorship mechanisms, conflict and areas of tension in general. This model was developed by psychologist and author Claes Janssen (Janssen 2005). As its name suggests, the model contains different rooms of change and looks at what happens in each one and how we can act and move from one to the other. The model has helped the change agents in several different ways, for example it has got them to recognise the power inherent in censoring gender. The model has also helped them to understand what happens when experiencing confusion and conflicting emotions. By helping each other to move on rather than shutting oneself off, the model has helped to break behaviour patterns.

### **3. Change process – from words to deeds**

The third process involved setting in motion practical work towards change on the basis of everything that had been produced, mobilised and formulated in the action plans. Events and dilemmas in the participants’ everyday lives were worked through during network meetings, which turned more into “workshops”. The group’s

meetings were more clearly focussed on what had happened and the needs expressed within the group. Now the participants had to start to take the initiative in their own workplaces on the basis of their action plans. In this phase the discussions often concerned resistance to change and the participants supported and challenged each other, partly by working in reflective teams.

#### **REFLECTIVE TEAMS**

One example was when participants were learning how gender was done during a meeting in one of the organisations. The researcher had been to one of the organisations and observed the two participating middle managers in a meeting. The researcher and the two participants from the organisation concerned sat in an inner circle. Together they reflected on the meeting from a gender perspective. The outer circle were a reflective team who listened. Once the inner circle had finished, the outer circle were able to reflect on what they had heard – or not heard – from the inner circle. This method is based on participants being open, critical and creative, which is why trust is so important to the end result.

#### **AS A MANAGER YOU CAN AFFECT THE WAY GENDER IS DONE**

In the Gender Network we organised a creative knowledge process. This process enabled us to identify a number of things affecting both the gender order and behaviour in the organisations and in the group. One important discovery, for example, was what participants realised about their own behaviour linked to gender in a middle management role – the fact that as middle managers every one of them could affect the way the organisation does gender. Practical knowledge on gender awareness, the ability to listen and communicate, knowledge about processes of change and power systems were something the participants could now start applying in their day-to-day lives.



## From non-issue to growth issue

Fiber Optic Valley seeks to offer a research and innovation environment in which new products and services are developed and commercialised. An innovative environment demands openness and flexibility, bringing together a wide range of experiences and expertise and so generating new knowledge and more efficient ways of working. In innovation systems there is therefore a clear link between gender equality and sustainable growth. Active work to promote gender equality opens the doors to a whole new, and necessary, way of thinking, partly by questioning prevailing norms. A more open working climate and a broader approach to developing products and services boosts the competitiveness of the organisations themselves and the regional R&D environment as a whole.

### Potential from a growth perspective

One important issue is organising the innovation system and the organisations so that their innovative work does not overshadow important areas of expertise and people's experiences.

Technology and related concepts such as innovation and entrepreneurship are labelled as male. The concept of innovation is therefore largely reserved for technology, produced in male-dominated sectors and excludes the innovative capacity of women. But making gender visible sheds new light on the way gender can be used to hinder organisations from becoming more efficient and developing innovative products and services.

There is also potential to broaden the platform for innovation by increasing the proportion of women, making better use of everyone's resources, and highlighting new technology areas and new business opportunities.

### Effects in the innovation system

If we compare where we are now with where we were when we started the project, we can see that several of Fiber Optic Valley's member organisations have now recognised the potential in working with gender equality and gender issues in their day to day operations. At overall level, greater knowledge and awareness means that concepts such as gender and gender equality are now used in internal discussions within the organisations and in their planning.

The project has been used as a strategic tool in several different ways to achieve Fiber Optic Valley's long-term objectives:

- The Gender Network has fostered strong and effective interaction between research, business and the public sector, forging relationships which have gone on to benefit the entire innovation

## **Arenas have been created for meetings, courses and seminars**

system. Participating organisations have been able to draw on the latest research results on gender and organisation, enabling them to grow and develop.

- Creating meeting places and networks is an important element in the Fiber Optic Valley process. The Gender Network is a prime example of an innovative environment in which participants' knowledge and experiences form a vital contribution to the shared result. Stronger relationships between the participating organisations have developed knowledge across organisational boundaries. Arenas have been created for meetings, courses and seminars in which the organisations' managers have been able to exchange experiences and discuss organisational development and gender. This also developed collaboration and strategic relationships on issues which would not otherwise have had a forum of their own.
- The Gender Network has encouraged a demand for knowledge. Something initially seen as a non-issue in several organisations has now become an area that an increasing number of people want to know more about. Several of the organisations are now taking the gender perspective into account in their planning when looking at attractiveness, exploiting expertise, recruitment and organisational culture.
- The Gender Network has created a dynamic and a new way of thinking, thereby helping to increase capacity for innovation.

## **The process of change has begun, and ultimately it will lead to new, internal processes which will boost the competitiveness of the innovation environment.**

The trust and openness in the network combined with the development process is an excellent example of social innovation.

- One of Fiber Optic Valley's most important goals is to increase the attractiveness of our organisations and the region as a whole. The Gender Network has received a great deal of media attention and has been presented in several different contexts at national and international level. It has helped to position Fiber Optic Valley as an active and innovative innovation system which is frequently highlighted as a role model for gender and gender equality.

Helping companies and organisations to grow is at the heart of the work of Fiber Optic Valley. Action-oriented gender research is a highly valuable method in this respect. It has enabled us to increase awareness of the way normative gender thinking can hamper innovation. The process of change has begun, and ultimately it will lead to new, internal processes which will boost the competitiveness of the innovation environment.

Now we're looking ahead and we hope that our experiences might contain lessons which will help others in their journey towards gender equality. Our next project is called Gender Shortcuts and in it we will be continuing our work to create gender-aware organisations.

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## About the authors

## About the authors



**RESEARCH LEADER SUSANNE ANDERSSON,  
STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY, PHD IN EDUCATION,  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, STOCKHOLM  
UNIVERSITY.**

Susanne Andersson is a gender researcher at Stockholm University's Centre for Gender Studies and teaches scientific methodology and diploma work at the National Swedish Police Academy under the auspices of the Swedish Police Board. Susanne has studied organisations from a gender perspective for ten years. In the past six years she has worked on R&D projects aiming to bring about gender-aware organisations.



**PROCESS LEADER EVA AMUNSDOTTER,  
LULEÅ UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY**

Eva Amundsdotter is a gender researcher and doctoral student at the Department of Gender and Innovation at Luleå University of Technology. Eva also works as a consultant with a focus on leading processes in groups, and has many years of experience in working with gender equality in organisations.



**PROJECT LEADER MARITA SVENSSON,  
FIBER OPTIC VALLEY.**

Marita Svensson works as a consultant for Fiber Optic Valley and has strategic responsibility for the gender perspective in the innovation system. Marita has sound experience in organisational development and in leading complex projects with many stakeholders and a strategic focus on growth.



**PROJECT COMMUNICATION ANN-SOFIE DÄLDEHÖG,  
FIBER OPTIC VALLEY.**

Ann-Sofie Däldehög is the communication manager for Fiber Optic Valley Gender and the editor of this publication. She has a degree in media and communications and has spent many years working as a communications consultant at a PR bureau in Östersund. It was here that she developed an interest in gender equality as a result of various information assignments for the public sector.

## About Fiber Optic Valley

One of Vinnova's Vinnväxt regional growth programme winners in 2004, the innovation system Fiber Optic Valley is an organisation working to make Sweden a world leader in the development of products and services based on fibre optics. This technology is the foundation for virtually all modern information technology and is a dynamic and rapidly growing industry. Our core business is to assist the growth of global and local companies. This is achieved through our unique support in the form of research, training, financing, contacts and business development combined with an equally unique test environment for technical and behavioural science studies.

The gender perspective plays an important strategic role in Fiber Optic Valley's work to encourage growth and has been prioritised from the outset as one of the important driving forces, essential to achieving our long-term growth targets. The Gender Network formed a platform for these processes of change. The Gender research has been carried out in conjunction with the Centre for Gender Studies at Stockholm University.

## Participating organisations

Acreo

Bromangymnasiet

CUL, Centre for Development and Learning

Ericsson: Network Technologies

Fiber Optic Valley

Gävle municipality

Gävle Tidningar

Hudiksvalls Sparbank

Iggesund Paperboard

Mid Sweden University

Sverige Bygger

Vasaskolan

**“With a firm grounding in gender studies, we can show that this is about creating innovative working environments and sustainable growth in the future”**

Marita Svensson, project leader, Fiber Optic Valley

Why are the men expected to be the ones doing the talking at meetings? Why, when minutes have to be taken, are women expected to take on the secretarial role? And why is the word “innovation” often associated with technology and male norms? These are all questions the participants in Fiber Optic Valley’s Gender Network asked themselves in this project involving three years of practical work on gender equality hand in hand with gender research. Meet some of the members in the Gender Network, the production manager who split up single sex teams and the head of department who realised she had the power to create change just by the way she allocated tasks. Changes like this make better opportunities for both men and women to develop and grow. At the same time they may lead to workplaces which are more efficient, achieving higher creativity and creating new business opportunities.

The organisation Fiber Optic Valley is a research and innovation environment with its centre in Hudiksvall, Sweden. Our work is all about creating the underlying conditions for sustainable growth by developing and commercialising new products and services in fibre optics. To us, working on gender equality as an integrated part of the business just makes sense.

Our aim is to inspire others to take that first step towards creating gender-aware organisations which attract women and men alike.



[www.fiber opticvalley.com/gender](http://www.fiber opticvalley.com/gender)

