

The effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards

A feminist post-structuralist perspective

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Abstract

Based on my research aim of covering a gap in the literature on corporate gender equality standards, I research the effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards through a feminist post-structuralist perspective using the case study of the EDGE standard. Based on a qualitative research design, I build an analytical framework on Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to be' (WPR) approach to analyze the material in form of the five assessment areas of the EDGE standard. Based on the feminist post-structuralist perspective, my analysis showcases that the EDGE standard as a governance tool is not guided by tangible 'problems' that exist 'out there' but rather through the representation of 'problems' as framed in the EDGE standard. The EDGE standard is thus a productive force that give shape and meaning to various problems of gender inequality which at the same time, the standard is also meant to address. I conclude that in some cases, the EDGE standard can have positive effects. However, the lack of an intersectional approach limits the EDGE standard too. This thesis contributes to the field by closing a research gap in the academic literature on the effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards analyzed through a feminist post-structuralist lens.

Keywords: Gender; Feminist Post-Structuralism; Corporate standards; Workplace Gender Equality; CSR; Certifications.

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List of acronyms

Athena SWAN – Athena Scientific Women’s Academic Network

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

EDGE – Economic Dividends for Gender Equality

FSC – Forest Stewardship Council

GEEIS – Gender Equality for European and International Standard

ISO – International Standardization Organization

GRI – Global Reporting Initiative

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNICEF – United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund

WPR – What’s the Problem Represented to be

1.0 Introduction

The globalized world of increasing collaboration, mobility, and foreign direct investment across borders have challenged the post-Westphalian understanding of nation states' ability to rule and sanction. The rise of business standards and certification schemes on environmental management, human rights and labor standards illustrate what Scherer and Palazzo (2008) and Rasche (2010) describe as a paradigm shift sparked by globalization that has left the nation state with limited power to govern.

Alongside increased demand for corporate social responsibility (CSR), the number of corporate governance tools such as certifications and business standards have increased at the same time. These governance tools are similar in function to classic instruments such as standards developed by the International Standardization Organization (ISO) that one can find labeled on almost any wrapping of any good in local supermarkets and convenience stores. In addition, our workplaces are in most cases also certified in accordance with standards of ISO 14001 and ISO 9001 on environmental management and quality assurance.

The proliferation of standards is a trend that started in the 1990s. Today in 2019, governance tools that are ready-made available through a third-party audit have gone from mostly focusing on safety, quality assurance, and environment to human rights, ethics, and gender equality, which is the topic of this thesis. Indeed, gender inequality within the workplace has been documented numerous times through figures showing a consistent gender pay gap, a thick glass ceiling, as well as gender bias in recruitment and promotion (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Roseberry and Roos, 2014). Furthermore, studies have proven that there is a sound business case based on economic and financial incentives for closing this gender gap (Mckinsey & Company, 2018).

Therefore, understood as a business opportunity, corporate gender equality standards have emerged. While some research has been conducted about the limits of corporate gender equality standards, a research gap exists in also assessing the *effects* of these from a feminist post-structuralist perspective. Hence, this thesis seeks to research both the effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards using the feminist post-structuralist perspective to carve out the effects by analyzing the problem representations.

Having identified a gap in the academic literature on corporate gender equality standards, this thesis thus sets out to research the effects and limits of corporate gender equality from a feminist post-structural perspective using the EDGE standard as case study.

1.1 Research aim

As a feminist and professional working in the development sector on corporate gender equality standards, I am particularly interested in exploring how such standards frame problems of gender inequality. Against this professional backdrop, my interest is particularly sparked by the research gap in the field in which corporate gender equality standards analyzed from a feminist post-structuralist perspective have been left unattended. This research gap will be further accounted for in the literature review in chapter two. In order to realize this research aim of covering the gap within the research on effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, four research questions are presented below.

1.2 Research Questions

Aligned with my research aim to explore the research gap on the effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, I present the following analytical research questions (RQs):

1. What is the ‘problem’ represented to be in the EDGE standard?
2. What presuppositions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’ in the EDGE standard?
3. What is left silenced in the EDGE standard’s representation of the ‘problem’?
4. What effects does the EDGE standard produce from this representation?

The analytical research questions are based on Bacchi’s (2010) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) approach but have been adapted to fit the aim of my research. To answer my research questions, I will start out by defining corporate gender equality standards in chapter two and account for the literature that has been produced within the field. I will furthermore present the material to be analyzed by introducing the case of the EDGE standard. In chapter three, I develop the research design in which I will argue for the choice of a single case study and how it enables

me to conduct feminist research. I will also elaborate on the four analytical research questions that enable me to accomplish my research aim. Following the analysis of my material through the above four research questions in chapter four, I will discuss the findings in chapter five, and conclude and present my research contributions in chapter six.

1.2 Situatedness

For the purpose of writing this thesis and engaging in the topic at hand, I want to demonstrate my situatedness within the topic to shape a process of reflexivity by illustrating that my research is not produced in a vacuum but rather is a dynamic process influenced by specific circumstances.

I highly support the standpoint that when research, and thereby the researcher, is reflexive this improves the overall outcome of the research, as it “allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). In the process of consciously accounting for my position, I therefore actively seek to avoid doing the ‘god trick’ of seeing everything from nowhere, as coined by Haraway (1988). Rather I want to acknowledge that everything I analyze and conclude is influenced by the positioning of me within society. The development of the theoretical position of limited knowledge and rejection of an all-objective truth is well aligned with feminist post-structuralism and the genealogies where different strands of thoughts and theories have built on the rejection of the patriarchal perspective and hegemonic masculinity (Lykke, 2010).

In positioning myself as a researcher, it is relevant to consider and reflect on that I am a student of gender studies, I am white, and I identify as a cis-gender woman. The post-structural feminist perspective is of interest to me from an academic standpoint, as the approach allows for the identification of blind-spots. Taking a critical approach to material and assessing other sources of meaning making adds additional layers to the material in question. As such, there is no final authoritative meaning or perspective, yet there are locations and positions which bring about meanings (Lykke, 2010).

With this in mind, it is highly relevant for the production of knowledge and for the understanding of my perspective that I live in Jordan working in the development sector on gender inequality issues including processes of standardization of gender equality policies. I therefore have not only a personal, but also professional feminist interest in understanding the blind spots of corporate gender equality policies, as these are currently being debated and promoted as an

effective way to commit to and integrate gender mainstreaming within the workplace. Working in the development sector, I also know that such tools are of high interest for development stakeholders and understood as a process that can initiate change and deliver promises to governments about gender equality and women's empowerment.

2.0 Corporate gender equality standards

This section provides a definition, a literature review, as well as an introduction to the EDGE standard, which will be used as case study in the analysis to answer my research questions.

As stated in the introduction, corporate gender equality standards are closely related to the concept of CSR, which is a notion that is used to describe how corporations integrate environmental and social concerns into their business operations. Through CSR policies, companies are able to account for issues they may be exacerbating in their supply chains (Rasche, 2010). While gender has not previously been considered within the scope of CSR, companies are now increasingly encouraged to report on issues relating to gender inequality within their own operations (Alderman, 2018, April 4; Perraudin, 2019, February 28). It is on the shoulders of CSR that the new platform of gender equality standards has emerged, and which has brought standards into existence such as UNDP Gender Equality Seal, Athena SWAN, Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE), and Gender Equality for European and International Standard (GEEIS) Label.

To reach a common understanding of what corporate gender equality standards are, I propose the following definition which is based on the definitions of CSR and corporate standards in general (Gilbert, Rasche, and Waddock, 2011; Rasche, 2010). Corporate gender equality standards are essentially organizational policies and standards which are benchmarked against a universal performance level. The level of performance is assessed through a certification system that verifies performance against the universal set of benchmarks. While there is largely no difference between a policy and a standard, the former indicates some level of localization and context which can be unique to that organization and the latter signifies international universality governed through a monitoring tool such as a certification scheme or accreditation system.

While the majority of corporate standards and certifications relate to quality assurance, environment, and upstream value chains in the coffee and garment industry, the market for

corporate gender equality standards is still relatively small and I will argue that more standards are yet to emerge on the scene.

Today, companies are paying large sums to become certified in accordance with these standards. It is estimated that an ISO certified standard runs from a few thousand US dollars to hundreds of thousands (9000 Store, 2019). It is likely that this cost is similar for organizations that wish to standardize and certify their gender equality policies against a global standard. At the same time, it is worth keeping in mind that an organization will have to update their certification every so often ranging between one and every three years, which adds another layer of financial burden. In the next section, I will account for the literature within the field of CSR, standards, and certification schemes.

2.1 Literature review

The proliferation of global corporate standards that are universal in nature and which are implemented through monitoring and certification schemes are argued to have emerged due to a gap in transnational regulation of environmental and social issues (Gilbert, Rasche and Waddock, 2011). In the absence of regulation, international standards have emerged which leaves companies to choose which kind of regulation they want to be guided by. As the regulation i.e. the corporate standard is a voluntary mechanism and since companies are not accountable under nation state hard law regulation in the areas that most standards govern, the standards are meant to increase companies' accountability and reliability by voluntarily agreeing to a governance mechanism. As such, through benchmarking and rating, standards on gender equality can increase corporations' trustworthiness with consumers.

Furthermore, it is argued that it may not be a coincidence that the rise of global corporate standards and certification schemes happened at the same time as the internet's growing popularity as it has increased activists and consumers' knowledge of corporations' activities – whether good or bad – across the globe and regardless of location (Gilbert, Rasche, and Waddock, 2011). Therefore, the rise in corporate standards is not only linked to the gap in nation states ability to govern due to globalization, it is also driven by increasing demands from citizens who want to hold organizations and companies accountable for their actions whether these relate to the environment, human rights violations, or gender inequality.

While there is an overwhelming amount of literature on CSR and its related corporate certification schemes for the environment, fair trade and supply chain standards, and human rights, and which have been developed and researched since the 1990s there is only a limited amount of academic research on corporate gender equality standards. Corporate standards that have been covered by academic research on CSR include United Nations Global Compact, Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), ISO standards, Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as well as a number of individual business standards and codes of conduct established internally within global companies and multinational corporations (Locke, 2012; Moon et al., 2011; Rasche, 2010; Ruggie, 2008; Scherer and Palazzo, 2008; Young, 2008; Zadek, 2004).

While most of these standards are gender-blind, there are many examples of past research that take on a gender perspective to uncover the impact of standards on women and children (in the global South mostly). Grosser and Moon (2005) and Pearson (2007) have researched how gender equality can be better integrated into corporate social responsibility. Lyon (2008), Rajana (2011) and Smith (2013) accounted for the level of gender equality in the supply chain within organizations that operate under fair trade coffee and forest certifications in India and Nepal. It has also been documented how gender equality within the fair-trade regime may create opportunities for women but at the same time disregards standards for decent work (Ranjana, 2011). Another study looks at the impact on gender equality from certified tea value chains in Tanzania (Loconto, 2015). Moreover, previous research has also explored how food standards such as Fairtrade and UTZ certification can serve as vehicles to promote gender equality in the small farm sector (Meemken and Qain, 2018). What these studies have in common is that they take on a gender equality perspective in assessing impact of gender-blind certification schemes and programs meant to primarily target the environment, supply chains, human rights, and/or labor standards.

While voluntary corporate standards on human rights and the environment have been around since the 1980s and 1990s, there are only very few corporate gender equality standards and most of them only date back 10 years from today. Addabbo, Facchinetti, Mastroleo, and Lang (2009) assessed different methods and systems' usefulness in evaluating companies' level of gender equality. Sampson (2012) criticized gender equality standards at Swedish universities calling it 'new public management' in which power is taken away from the individual and placed with a

system of performance management which arbitrarily overrules existing structures of knowledge and competency leaving staff unjustly stripped of professional judgment.

Moreover, Mallado, Espinosa, and da Silva's (2018) recent research indicates that certifications are issued regardless of compliance with essential indicators related to the gender mainstreaming approach and essentially concluding that such standards are redundant. Their research thus concludes that standards can be limited. However, the study does not apply a feminist post-structuralist lens to assess the actual effects. Moreover, in a recent critical examination of the SWAN Initiatives, Tsouroufli (2019) questions the effectiveness of gender equality certification processes in eradicating sexism in academia and creating gender equality. This is also Pearce's (2017) findings in their research on Athena SWAN. Similar to Mallado, Espinosa, and Da Silva's (2018), Tsouroufli's concludes that gender equality standards have limited impact on reversing gender inequality and sexism, however, she does not analyze the potential productive force of the standard leaving research on the standard's effects untouched.

The literature review shows that most of the research is limited to uncover the experiences of women within gender-blind systems of CSR standards related to the environment, fair trade, and overall sustainability standards. Moreover, previous research has focused purely on identifying the weakness of standards in ending gender inequality in the workplace. As a result, I believe my research is highly relevant and comes in due time as there is a research gap in feminist and post-structuralist perspectives of standards such as UNDP Gender Equality Seal, Athena SWAN, Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE) Certification, and Gender Equality for European and International Standard (GEEIS) Label.

While some research has looked into the gendered experience (from a binary perspective though) within standards on supply chains, the problematization of these standards are limited as they do not research how gender inequality is framed through the governance tool itself. Rather the standards appear to be de-linked from issues of gender inequality as if they exist in two different spheres where a standard can either successfully promote gender equality or fail to do so. Yet, the standard is never analyzed or perceived as a mechanism that is productive of gender inequality by for example giving shape and meaning to binary gender concepts. The lack of feminist problematization of the field illustrated partly by the lack of reflexivity and partly by the lack of post-structuralist conceptualization of analytical frameworks is thus an obvious gap in the research.

As a result, the research aim and the research questions presented herein are conveniently positioned to bring about new knowledge and insights to the root problem by problematizing a field which has not yet been under such scrutiny.

2.2 EDGE Standard

To focus my arguments and to provide a specific example, I will use the example of the EDGE standard as my material to analyze in order to answer my research questions. More specifically, I choose to focus on EDGE for two reasons. First, it is one of the most widespread global corporate gender equality standards. EDGE certified organizations include SAP, IKEA, L’Oreal, Pfizer, and UNICEF. Second, EDGE is global and can be applied to any industry, organization, and corporate entity in the world (EDGE, 2019). Its universality makes it an interesting case to study given the little research in the field. While I will focus on the EDGE standard, the arguments that I present herein could be equally applicable to other corporate gender equality standards such as the Gender Equality Seal or GEEIS Label.

The EDGE standard was launched in Davos, Switzerland during the World Economic Forum in 2011. It is the Edge Certified Foundation that oversees the EDGE Certification system. The approach of EDGE is a “business rather than a theoretical approach that incorporates benchmarking, metrics and accountability into the process.” In line with this, the name of EDGE is an abbreviation of Economic Dividends for Gender Equality. Evidently, EDGE associates itself with the economic and managerial argument for gender equality, which is becoming an increasingly popular argument for gender equality. In this perspective, gender equality is framed as an economic necessity rather than a matter of justice and human rights.

The EDGE standard has three levels of certification: EDGE Assess, EDGE Move, and EDGE Lead. The certification itself is conducted by a third-party who has been licensed to certify for EDGE (EDGE, 2019). The methodology for implementation has four phases: 1) measurement, 2) benchmark, 3) certification, and 4) communication. Under the process of measurement, EDGE assesses sources of information about the current situation of the organization. This includes statistics on data relevant to gender equality, implemented policies related to gender equality, and finally an employee survey displaying experiences of gender equality in the organization. Based on the findings, the organization will compare results with the EDGE benchmark and prepare an

action plan to achieve the benchmark of EDGE. Third, organizations will be certified through a third-party entity that will assess if the organization has achieved the said benchmarks. And fourth, upon successful certification, the company can brand itself through the EDGE standard, as it “enhances the brand’s credibility.” (EDGE, 2019).

With the research aim of this thesis in mind researching the effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, I will focus on the five different key assessment areas that the EDGE standard engages in when assessing policies, practices, and numbers in organizations and what they benchmark against. The five key assessment areas are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

EDGE key assessment areas
Equal pay for equivalent work
Recruitment and promotion
Leadership development, training and mentoring
Flexible working conditions
Organizational culture

Source: EDGE Certification (2019)¹

These five areas are at the core of EDGE as policies, practices and numbers across these are what matters in terms of what is being measured. Based on an organization’s commitment and performance according to those five areas, the organization can achieve the EDGE Assess, EDGE Move, or EDGE Lead as a symbol of accomplishment.

Finally, I want to emphasize that the analysis of EDGE is written in an affirmative spirit. As a feminist, I remain positive and confident about the increasing focus on the need to increase gender

¹ I have inquired with EDGE if I could possibly receive the metrics of the EDGE Certification Global Standard that relate to the listed five areas of work and I am currently waiting for a reply. If I do not receive the metrics I will move ahead with the analysis regardless.

equality in the workplace and across sectors. I do not view the industry of corporate gender equality standards as redundant nor do I hold anything in particular against the EDGE standard or any other global corporate standard. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to highlight and underline the limits of such global standards and policies in order to push for radical change to current structural inequality. Therefore, the analysis and critique should be seen as a contribution to the field of corporate gender equality standards in order to continue its development and future positive impact in creating sustainable change.

3.0 Research design

This chapter develops the research design of my thesis and contributes to developing the theoretical framework, philosophical positioning, and the choice of the case study as method. Based on the solid foundation of a thorough research design, I will be able to undertake my analysis and engage in answering my research questions. While it may be logic to separate the theory of the WPR approach from the chapter of research design to provide the theory with its own chapter, I will argue that the theoretical framework is better suited to be presented in close consideration with the theory of knowledge and the method. Indeed, I view the components to be presented within the sections below as one holistic and iterative process rather than separate components.

3.1 Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism describes sets of theories which emerged in the 1960s by philosophers such as Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze and later on Butler (Lykke, 2010). Post-structuralism essentially challenges the idea of any uniform experience, feeling, or situation and allows for inter-contextual and inter-textual interpretations of material moving from a binary understanding of phenomena to deconstruction. As such any analysis of material whether this is discourse, power, or knowledge can never be final and it requires attention towards the social and embodied experiences of the subject. Bacchi (2010) argues that the poststructuralist perspective is a shift in understanding of fixed meanings of material to a political dimension of meaning making activities. This meaning making makes material unstable and the post-structuralist approach can at any time question or contest the particular meaning that is extracted from the material under analysis.

Particularly interesting for this thesis is feminist post-structural theory which is especially engaged with the specific process in which individuals become gendered subjects of the binary kind. Through analysis of material, feminist post-structuralist approaches are engaged with deconstructing the gender binary and make visible the power relations that are maintained by granting normality to the dominant part in a binary (Davies & Gannon, 2005). As such, post-structuralism in the feminist perspective “...breaks with theoretical frameworks in which gender and sexuality are understood as inevitable, and as determined through structures of language, social structure and cognition” (Davies and Gannon, 2005, p. 36). At the same time, agency is not presumed free of discursive regulation or regulation of or by itself. Instead agency lies in the ability to understand and call into question such discursive, social, and historic regulation. As such, the opportunity that I see in applying a post-structuralist perspective is to move beyond what is already known. This includes moving beyond visible characteristics or perceived differences between women and men to deconstruct these identities and look beyond differences to understand that the power constructing the binary and what plays out materially is discursively constructed.

Central to the feminist influence on post-structuralism is Judith Butler. Her work on the resignification and subjectivities within different discourses have made her a pioneer within the theoretical development of feminist post-structuralism. Butler is especially engaged in theorizing how discourses do not originate within subjects yet individuals will take them on and defend them as if these discourses are part of themselves - simply think of discourses and heated debates on gender and sexual orientation (Butler, 2011; Davies and Gannon, 2005).

Similar to Butler, the Australian scholar Carol Bacchi also builds on post-structuralism in developing her feminist theoretical concepts. The ‘What’s The Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) approach is therefore a theoretical framework that can be applied to fulfill my research aim of covering the gap within the research on effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards from a feminist post-structuralist perspective. This approach will thus help me to understand how gender inequality which manifests materially and spatially can be understood as discursively constructed through the construction of policy problems.

3.2 What’s the Problem Represented to be

To fulfill my research aim, I thus build on the feminist post-structural theoretical framework based on Carol Bacchi’s original approach to policy analysis asking ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ also known under the acronym of WPR (Bacchi, 1999; Bacchi and Eveline 2010; Hankivsky, 2010; Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery, 2019). In the feminist post-structural perspective “The underlying proposition in thinking about policies as productive, or as constitutive, is that policies and policy proposals give shape and meaning to the ‘problems’ they purport to ‘address’” (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010, p. 111). As argued for in my definition of corporate gender equality standards, there is essentially no difference between a policy and a standard. Bacchi’s WPR approach to critical feminist policy analysis can therefore also be applied to critically analyze a corporate gender equality standard, as in the case of this thesis.

WPR consists of six questions which can be applied to uncover the representation of a problem. The questions are useful for uncovering how governance may not always be guided by ‘problems’ that exist ‘out there’ in society but through the representation of problems framed by these policies. While past research on the topic of corporate gender equality standards have mostly focused on the limits of these standards, I will, through the WPR approach, focus on what the effects of the ‘problem’ representation is. In order to expose these effects produced by policy problems, my four research questions as presented in the introduction build on the original WPR approach by Bacchi as illustrated in Table 2 below. My adapted approach, which make up my four research questions, is illustrated in Table 3 further below.

Table 2

What’s the Problem Represented to be? An approach to policy analysis
1. What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated, and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Bacchi and Eveline (2010)

The adapted set of analytical research questions presented in Table 3 provides a thorough analysis of the EDGE assessment areas and will enable me to fulfill the research aim of covering the gap in research on post-structuralist perspective on corporate gender equality standards. In the adapted version of the WPR approach, I leave out two questions that focus especially on context, production, and dissemination of the problem representation. This does however not weaken my analysis, as my four research questions feature the context throughout the four questions.

The questions below illustrate the adapted version of the analytical research questions adapted for the specific purpose of this thesis’ research aim.

Table 3

Analytical research questions
1. What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in the EDGE standard?
2. What presuppositions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’ in the EDGE standard?
3. What is left silenced in the EDGE standard’s representation of the ‘problem’?
4. What effects are produced by the EDGE standard’s representation of the ‘problem’?

Adapted from Bacchi and Eveline (2010)

In her work, Bacchi argues for the need to distance herself from sociologists engaged with the dominant sociology of an approach to ‘social problems’ (Bacchi, 1999). Bacchi objects to the narrow focus on ‘problems’ and calls attention to the ‘facts’ we leave out when we discuss ‘social problems’ such as the discourse that frames what we perceive as problems. I will argue that the reasoning behind Bacchi is well aligned with the arguments of standpoint theory that conceptualizes how knowledge stems from social positioning. As such, it is important to understand ‘problems’ from a bottom-up approach rather than from a “privileged position of no location”, as I call it.

Similar to post-structuralism, which we know theorizes how discourses do not originate within subjects themselves, yet subjects will take them on and defend them as if they are part of themselves, the underlying proposition in conceptualizing WPR is to think of policies as productive

which in other words mean ‘constitutive’, a term also used by Davies & Gannon (2005). In other words, policies in fact give meaning and shape to the so-called problems that they are meant to address (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010). Similar to gender and social identities, so-called problems simply do not occur as a concept in communities and societies before they are shaped by the policies that are meant to also address them.

At the same time, the post-structural theoretical conceptualization should not be seen as an attempt to ignore traumatic and life-threatening issues such as misogyny, gender-based violence, and femicides. Bacchi and Eveline (2010) argue that rather their theoretical conception of WPR targets so-called problems that are discursively produced. The WPR approach thus presents itself as a timely tool which can support the discovery of how policy problems can be understood, not as a set of fixed meanings of material but rather as a political dimension of meaning making activities.

3.3 Theory and philosophy of knowledge production

In my previous encounters with academia – that is before gender studies – my academic essays and research papers were expected to materialize and be developed in an unbiased fashion to provide ‘objective’ conclusions that would pave the road for impartial recommendations about the truth related matter that was under research. Today, I perceive my research and academic work as very much in hard opposition to anything that resembles objective knowledge or truth. In consequence, within my research I deliberately seek to challenge positivist notions through the rejection of objectivity, depersonalization, or unexamined epistemological positions. Indeed, such perspectives will only contribute to the positivist and hegemonic perspective also known as “... the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere ...” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581).

What constitutes knowledge is governed by systems of power which are not innocent or separate from the oppressive system of patriarchy. What is universally and uncritically accepted as knowledge about a particular subject can also be a falsely generated standpoint which influences and impacts discourses, science, and the law from the position of the man (Braidotti, 1994). I interpret Braidotti’s writings in ‘Nomadic Subject’ as a tribute to the importance of developing a radical epistemology, which gender studies opens up to, for feminists with tools to confront the issues that constitute power and knowledge in the traditional male and European perspective. Further to this, I will argue, in line with my interpretation of Braidotti, that the positioning and the

identification of a standpoint and feminist epistemology can be a platform for the production of power under a feminist theory which will be able to not only resist but also repeat and mimic already established schemes of 'knowledge production' and in this way challenge hegemonic and patriarchal sense of knowledge through subversion strategies (Braidotti, 1994).

Indeed, I see this mimic of 'knowledge' and the subversion in standpoint theory which rather than abolishing the idea of knowledge and objectivity reinterprets it by stating that knowledge is situated and depends on positioning. As such, the idea of 'knowledge' remains, however, through a strategy of resistance and repetition, the meaning of what 'knowledge' is, is subverted. Through feminist standpoint theory and the contributions to it by Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding, and Donna Haraway, standpoint theory offers a feminist perspective on what constitutes knowledge and how it is produced (Lykke, 2010).

In feminist post-structuralism, knowledge and experiences are derived from the social and bodily positioning of the subject. Essentially, this affects how knowledge is produced and thus also what we perceive as legitimate knowledge. Rather than talking about objectivity and objective knowledge, feminist post-structuralism knowledge as positioned rationality. Haraway argues for the 'embodied objectivity' and "... for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (1988, p. 589). As such, knowledge can be rational yet on the condition that the knowledge is understood as embodied objectivity and as something which is always situated. In similar terms, Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) refer to knowledge as always situated but also 'something negotiated' and thus only 'approximate', as in a dialogical relation drawing on the concept of situated imagination.

Practically, standpoint theory presents a methodology for acquiring knowledge through a legitimate feminist lens that allows the author, in other words me, to make and draw conclusions that are conditioned by the standpoint and situatedness of myself. This situatedness was also presented in chapter 1 and the thesis is thus also a product of my situatedness. My epistemological and ontological assumptions of gender and other social identities are aligned with the poststructuralist perspective. In this position, the understanding of the epistemological and ontological positions moves beyond the structuralist perspectives such as that of Marxism and

psychoanalysis to a position where core social and cultural norms are considered to impact human ability to act (Fox, 2014).

The next section will outline the method applied within this research, as well as the limitations that my research design comes with.

3.4 Method and limitations

For any choice of theory follows a set of limitations. In this section, I account for the method I apply as well as the limitations that follow from this approach. For research purposes, the qualitative approach of a case study fits well with my research aim of covering the gap within the research on effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards from a feminist post-structuralist perspective. Historically, the qualitative method has been preferred when conducting critical feminist research. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) support this perspective and argue that qualitative feminist methodological approaches to analysis are useful and distinguish themselves from other approaches by unveiling (male) power that is normally taken for granted.

In alignment with this perspective, the qualitative approach of a single method to critically study and assess the benchmarks of the corporate gender equality standard is very appropriate and as a result is also one of the most popular methods used when conducting feminist research. I will argue that qualitative research can be considered especially feminist because the method offers the opportunity to investigate context, bias, and stereotypes through lived experiences of gendered bodies. While I also agree with Reinharz and Davidman (1992) that there is no politically correct feminist method, as a method's usability depends on the perspective and research agenda behind, the qualitative approach remains especially relevant for feminist research.

To accomplish the aim of the research, I have chosen the case study approach. Denscombe (2007) argues that the starting point for a case study can be just one occurrence or event which is then to be investigated. Gerring (2010) argues in accordance with this that by studying just one case, it will enable the researcher to infer generalizations among a larger set of cases as long as these are of the same general type. Furthermore, if the case that is being studied is either *critical*, *unusual*, *common*, *revelatory*, or *longitudinal* then the choice of a case study is highly recommendable (Yin, 2014). Since corporate gender equality standards are becoming an increasingly common phenomenon, I will argue that the single case study choosing the EDGE

standard is a highly appropriate method for contributing to the research on the effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards, as it will enable me to say something about the broader context, yet derived from the intensive focus of only one case.

Limitations

With any choice of method follows also limitations and opinions about the perceived validity of such method. To scholars that are particularly fascinated with the quantitative approach and who follow a strict positivist research philosophy, the validity of the inferences that I make based on this case study will have little acknowledgement from that side of the table. I foresee especially that the idea of inferences could be argued to only apply for quantitative methods in which statistical figures constitute the material of analysis. Nevertheless, I argue that as long as I am in line with my theoretical foundation of feminist post-structuralism, my findings will be as valid as any positivist approach, also keeping in mind that from a feminist post-structural scientific approach, the objective truth is not a valid positioning.

While I throughout the thesis seek to situate myself and my awareness, I do also realize that situating oneself is a continuous and iterative approach and as such situating myself never ends. In accordance with post-structuralism, meaning is always read and understood from behind: what is constituted is historically specific. In other words, my agency is contingent on my understanding of it historically. I will thus always only be able to resist and rewrite old narratives and thus not what is *now*. As such, there will always be limitations to my ability to fully situate myself.

Finally, it is important to note that due to intellectual property rights, EDGE only shares benchmarks with organizations that have purchased the right to the EDGE “certification package” which makes me unable to analyze specific benchmarks of their methodology. However, the non-disclosure of their metrics system should not restrict analysis, as the five assessment areas that EDGE engages will provide enough basis for an analysis and discussion about the ‘problem’ framing of gender equality.

4.0 Analysis

This chapter opens the analysis of the material i.e. the EDGE standard. The analysis will cover the five EDGE key assessment areas as presented in chapter two, which are illustrated in the table below.

Table 1

EDGE key assessment areas
Equal pay for equivalent work
Recruitment and promotion
Leadership development, training and mentoring
Flexible working arrangements
Organizational culture

Source: EDGE Standard (2019)

EDGE key assessment areas are the five aspects of organizational performance which the EDGE standard measures organizations against. Due to intellectual property rights, I was not able to obtain the specific numerical benchmarks and indicators of achievement behind the five key assessment areas. Nevertheless, the analysis of the five areas is still highly appropriate as the assessment areas can be understood as framing and constructing ‘problems’ when analyzed through the lens of feminist post-structuralism.

To arrive at a conclusion following the analysis and discussion that fulfills my research aim, the five EDGE key assessment areas will be analyzed through the lens of the four analytical research questions as presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Analytical research questions
1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in the EDGE standard?
2. What presuppositions underlie this representation of the 'problem' in the EDGE standard?
3. What is left silenced in the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?
4. What effects are produced by the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

Adapted from Bacchi and Eveline (2010)

In the following five sections, I will therefore analyze each of the EDGE assessment areas (Table 1) using the four analytical research questions (Table 3) in order to arrive at a possible discussion and conclusion to achieve my research aim of covering the research gap on the effects and limits of corporate gender equality standards from a feminist post-structuralist perspective.

4.1 Equal pay for equivalent work

Equal pay for equivalent work is the first assessment area of the EDGE standard.

What's the 'problem' represented to be in the EDGE standard?

The problem that is represented in the assessment area of equal pay for equivalent work is that of the pay gap between women and men in which women consistently earn less than men. Statistics indicate a persistent gender pay gap between women and men suggesting that women earn approximately 82% of what men earn using the example of the US (Graf, Brown and Patten, 2018). Studies furthermore suggest that only 25 – 50% of the wage gap can be explained through educational levels and years of employment which leaves the remaining unexplained (Evelyne and Bacchi, 2010; Kalev and Deutsch, 2018).

Various research finds that the gap can be explained through the undervalued work of women and work considered feminine as well as sexism, attitudinal barriers, and bias, and how the family as an institution of unremunerated work is a considerable factor in holding down women's salary

after child birth (Acker, 1989; Connor and Fiske, 2019; Pocock and Alexander, 1999; Evelyne and Bacchi, 2010).

As a result, the representation of the problem is that of “equal pay to equivalent work” in its strictest form, i.e. when two employees do similar work they need to be compensated equally. In other words, the representation of the problem is only concerned with the gender pay gap in sectors with employees doing similar work. Nevertheless, in this analysis, I will go beyond this discourse and uncover invisible issues in the subsequent three questions.

What presuppositions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’ in the EDGE standard?

The presuppositions that underlie this representation of the problem through the discourse of equal pay for equivalent work is that the gender pay gap can be solved by ensuring that women and men are paid equal amount of money for the same work. The presupposition is that the gender pay gap is only relevant to discuss in the situation when women and men are working in similar jobs. Moreover, the representation assumes a male norm and objective for what is considered ‘work’ by limiting the issue to ‘equal work’ and thereby not presuming that maternity leave and so-called ‘work gaps’ to do child rearing or caring for elders can constitute same level of work as ‘paid work’.

What is left silenced in the EDGE standard’s representation of the ‘problem’?

What is left silenced in this representation is the issue the gender pay gap goes beyond that of equivalent work and is biased against women in feminine jobs. As an example, women in feminine jobs are paid less than men with the same educational background and years of experience in jobs that are considered more traditionally ‘masculine’ (Eveline and Todd, 2010). The monetary value and paid compensation in jobs traditionally perceived as feminine are thus left invisible. Moreover, Eveline and Bacchi (2010) argue that “...no gender mainstreaming approach can reduce the gender pay gap without thoroughly considering specific industrial and social conditions and developments.” (p. 164). As such, simply ensuring equal pay for equal work renders invisible the socially complex and gendered bias against women which consistently devalues and undermines work of women. This representation of the problem leaves little comfort for the secretary or the

part-time executive assistant. Equal pay for equivalent work is therefore not an effective tool in fighting the bias against perceived feminine sectors.

What effects are produced by the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

The effects that are produced from this representation is that an issue of a gender pay gap exists and that it can be solved by paying employees equal pay for equal work. Nevertheless, as discussed above this does not give any insights into the pay gap between feminine industries and that perceived as masculine industries. Since women and men are not paid the same in those industries and while their work is not necessarily similar, how can the problem framing account for this?

Moreover, the representation of the problem as something the individual company can solve becomes a reductionist approach which overlooks the binary power relations between feminine and masculine sectors which go beyond the individual company. Through the discourse of equal pay for equal work, women's unpaid work and women's internalized costs of the productive economic sector of the care economy is silenced and effectively limits the debate for it to only take place in a forum that under the patriarchal system does not see 'care' as 'work' which companies themselves benefit from as long as it is an internalized cost by women. As a result, as long as the discussion of the gender pay gap is restricted to the discourse of "equal pay for equal work", the patriarchal order will thrive as the unpaid and internalized costs of women's care work remain invisible and will remain uncompensated. Moreover, an effect that may also emerge from this problem framing is the HR activity of wage mapping. Nevertheless, the question remains what happens after such mapping since the global unequal distribution of resources will not be solved through a mapping exercise.

4.2 Recruitment and promotion

Recruitment and promotion is the second assessment area of the EDGE standard.

What's the 'problem' represented to be in the EDGE standard?

The problem represented to be is that recruitment and promotion are key to advance gender equality in the workplace. Entry level positions, while also depending on the industry and sector, tend to be more gender balanced than more senior positions where a 'leaking pipeline' facilitates a lower rate

of women than men (Roos and Roseberry, 2014). To achieve gender equality and for companies to be committed towards this, it is therefore necessary to benchmark organizations' recruitment and promotion strategies making this one of the assessment areas in the EDGE gender equality standard.

What presuppositions underlie this representation of the 'problem' in the EDGE standard?

The presupposition that underlies this representation of the problem is that unbiased promotion procedures can increase gender equality. As such it is presupposed that such a thing as unbiased promotion and recruitment strategies exist. More specifically, the assumption is that the leaking pipeline and the issue of the glass ceiling can be solved if quality of recruitment and promotion is increased. As Roseberry and Roos (2014) account for, the leaking pipeline is a result of companies not promoting women at the same speed or ratio as their male peers are promoted. As such, it is presupposed that if we assure the quality of an organization's current procedures and bring recruitment and promotion to a new level, the issue of gender inequality might be solved.

What is left silenced in the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

What is left silent in the representation of recruitment and promotion is the link to demotions. While it is important to ensure fair and equal recruitment and promotions, it is equally important for companies to ensure that they have the right tools in place to demote or lay off employees and especially under-performing and unqualified employees. It is especially important to look at the other side of the coin because without looking inwards and questioning the employees and personnel that are currently inside the organization, the effect of increasing quality in recruitment and promotion may only have limited effect. Moreover, the concept of affirmative action is also left silenced and the question remains whether unbiased recruitment would allow for affirmative action. However, since the male norm is the default, I will argue that unbiased recruitment and promotion is impossible to attain without using affirmative action as a tool.

What effects are produced by the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

While it is important to ensure the quality of recruitment and promotion, the results will have little if no effect if the representation of the problem does not go any deeper than focusing only on

recruitment and promotion. What is interesting about this assessment area is that at the same time as it is presented as an assessment area it is also promoted as a solution. The effects that are produced from this representation focus on the intake of new employees as being the issue rather than the current structure and the employees that make up the organization. In this way, focus is put on the lack of qualified outsiders rather than the lack of qualified insiders. The result is thus the construction of an assessment area that protects the current structure of the system through interventions that focus on the intake and lower ranks of employees. From a post-structuralist perspective, this is an example of how a problem is being constructed and at the same time the standard facilitates the status quo. Finally, the gender-neutral perspective that the assessment area sets out may result in concealing the issue of the need for fundamental change to move away from the default of the male norm to a more inclusive perspective.

4.3 Leadership development, training, and mentoring

Leadership development, training, and mentoring is the third assessment area of the EDGE standard.

What's the 'problem' represented to be in the EDGE standard?

Women's under-representation in management and leadership has been documented in numerous studies (Billing and Alvesson, 2009; Roseberry and Roos, 2014). In the example of the US, the representation of the lack of women in senior leadership positions is illustrated through the fact that more men in CEO positions in S&P 1500 firms are named John than the total number of women CEOs (Miller, Quealy and Sanger-Katz, 2018, April 24; Wolfers, 2015, March 2). The problem that is represented in the formulation of leadership development, training, and mentoring is the need to target employees with training opportunities for them to develop and become leaders. The problem represented is thus the lack of leadership skills, knowledge and network but which the EDGE standard can make up for by monitoring the companies' activities ensuring that development and training opportunities are available for employees.

What presuppositions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’ in the EDGE standard?

While the key assessment area does not define what kind of leadership development, training, and mentoring and to whom it is suggested to benefit, I assume based on my own extensive research within the field of corporate gender equality standards, that this key assessment area is meant to target women employees within the workplace with the purpose of upgrading their skills. The presuppositions that underlie the representation of the ‘problem’ is that of women’s lack of skills, which ultimately prevents them from climbing the career ladder. At the heart of this representation it is thus presupposed that women do not have the skills or training to be capable leaders. Moreover, it is assumed that training and mentoring will be efficient and actually have a positive effect in creating gender equality in the workplace. The training will help women to ‘lean in’ and assume the male norm as *the* norm. While some research points to findings that mentorship can be an important component of supporting more women in choosing a leadership career, the structure and set up of such programs is highly important as this will define the level of success of such programs (de Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006). As a result, the presuppositions that underlie the representation of the problem is that if employees i.e. women have access to better training tools and development, they will be able to ‘lean in’ and become better leaders while organizations will excel in gender equality.

What is left silenced in the EDGE standard’s representation of the ‘problem’?

What is left silenced in this representation of the problem is that men may not have the right leadership skills or training background either. Moreover, the set of leadership skills required and what is assessed as being the right leadership skills is also left out of this representation. Since EDGE does not disclose its indicators, it is essentially not possible to know what ‘good’ leadership skills are assumed to be or who needs training to obtain these leadership skills. The current presentation of this area of assessment by EDGE is therefore silencing what poor leadership skills are. Essentially, this representation thus silences the male privilege by suggesting that the reason why there is not yet gender equality in the workplace is because of lack of career development tools and mentoring.

What effects are produced by the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

If leadership development, training, and mentoring is only directed at women in the workplace then the effects from this representation is that women are being blamed for their own failure in the workplace. The issue of skills become that of the individual. This representation of the problem is part of reproducing one of the most important traits of privilege: invisibility. As long as the failure to perform is portrayed as an issue of learning and training, the problem is an internal and individual dysfunction which can only be solved by the individual deciding to learn and train their way into leadership.

This perspective feeds into the idea of the reliance on the existing male norm in regard to what is considered leadership which helps us in making sense of the gendered workplace. Needless to say, from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, the male norm and understanding of what constitutes leadership is not something that *we are*, nevertheless the subject has been affected by this and internalized such understanding to an extent where we cannot separate ourselves, bodies and minds from this construction. However, from the post-structuralist perspective, it is possible through resignification, to challenge the norm by focusing on the need for men to also be mentored and trained. As such, the EDGE standard is to a certain extent successful by not mentioning the gender that is targeted by the leadership development training. However, as long as the discourse on the topic does not specifically address any gender, the male norm will rule and be the default perspective in a gender-neutral approach. In the post-structural perspective, training should focus on deconstructing the gender binary and the default understanding of what qualifies as good leadership and unhealthy masculine behavior.

4.4 Flexible working arrangements

Flexible working arrangements is the fourth assessment area of the EDGE standard.

What's the 'problem' represented to be in the EDGE standard?

Flexible working arrangements are broadly understood and defined by the ability of employees to work different hours than the traditional 9-5. As an example, organizations may have flexible working arrangements that allow for telecommuting, working from home, or office hours from 7-3 or 10-6. In addition, some workplaces may offer child caring facilities for parents inside the

workplace. Runté and Mills (2004) argue that the increased discourse on flexible working arrangements emerged out of *work-family conflict* that has been sought to be reconciled. Nevertheless, the work discourse, they argue, remain privileged over family. In the EDGE standard, the representation of the problem is that flexible working arrangements can increase gender equality in the workplace.

What presuppositions underlie this representation of the 'problem' in the EDGE standard?

The presupposition that underlie this representation idealizing flexible working arrangements is the idea that the modern workplace and the home-life are two separate spheres. On the one hand, the workplace is where time is restricted, deliverables need to be executed, and processes need optimization. On the other hand, the family is portrayed as an affective space where people wind down from work and relax. Nevertheless, these two spaces are in their lived reality not existing in two distinct spheres. Just ask yourself how relaxing family life really is and whether you really manage to wind down during your weekends while trying to manage play dates, cooking, and exercising? In the human resources literature, however, the objective has been to seek routes for individuals – the human resources of the company – to reconcile these two supposedly distinct areas of life (Runté and Mills, 2004). I will argue that deeply rooted within this perspective of a division between family-life and workplace is the assumption that only financially remunerated activities are considered work. The work within the family: child rearing and parenting is not work and thus belongs to a different category than 'real' i.e. remunerated work.

Another presupposition within this assessment area of EDGE is that employees will successfully adopt flexible working arrangements. Nevertheless, research shows that staff may not take on these new possibilities for flexible work scheduling because flexible working arrangements also limits 'face time' which is the behavioral expectations in the workplace of physical presence (Perlow, 1998; Runté and Mills, 2004).

What is left silenced in the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

In the current representation of flexible working arrangements as a driver of gender inequality in the workplace is the silencing of the reconciliation of family-life and work-life as being on the terms of the workplace. Effectively, the discourse relies on the need to mitigate and manage the

very divide between paid and unpaid work even though such divide may not necessarily be the lived reality of employees and especially not women employees who do the highest share of unremunerated work (Roseberry and Roos, 2014). Thus, from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, the exploitation of women's time is left silenced by exacerbating the idea that unpaid work does not belong to the category of work-life. Essentially, this only serves to facilitate the company in managing their employees rather than supporting women employees in bridging the gender gap and create better working conditions.

What effects are produced by the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

What remains interesting about this assessment area is that the problem is framed as 9-5 work in one place. As a result, flexible working arrangements becomes the solution. However, what remains is that working hours are not flexible. As such, the standard also constructs and reinforces the problem. The effects from this representation is that life is essentially divided into spheres of paid and unpaid work. The flexible working arrangements support and assist employees is managing this divide in the best possible way through flexible working arrangements, work-life balance policies, and telecommuting. However, from a post-structuralist perspective, the very discourse of flexibility reinforces the very inflexibility that the assessment area was meant to address. In accordance with the WPR approach, the corporate gender equality standard is thus constructing the very issue that it is meant to govern.

In agreement with this perspective, Schultz (2010) also argues that “workplace flexibility may end up valorising new forms of insecurity and inequality” (p. 1221) and calls for greater caution in advocating for policies that instead of solving real issues of gender inequality perpetuates and creates inequality through a neoliberal discourse that justifies injustice over real equality. While this is the theoretical stand, I will also argue that the opportunity for flexible working schedules may also offer a chance to resignify what the modern workplace looks like and may offer women and men an opportunity to resignify understandings of *what* constitute work. In consequence, the effects that are produced from this representation are not clear. I will argue that the WPR approach may perceive the effects as construction of problems, yet the post-structuralist perspective also allows me to view this as an opportunity to resignify the meaning of remunerated work.

4.5 Organizational culture

Organizational culture is the fifth and final assessment area of the EDGE standard.

What's the 'problem' represented to be in the EDGE standard?

Through the framing of 'organizational culture' as an assessment area of EDGE, it is represented to constitute a potential problem to the advancement of gender equality in organizations. However, at the same time organizational culture can also be understood as a solution to a *problematic* organizational culture. Exactly which one of these two that EDGE imagines it to be remains unclear. In their work, Alvesson and Billing (2009) argue how there are 'many faces' to how gender roles, norms, and performances play out inside organizations. In turn these different faces are part of shaping the organizational culture and social sphere within. Alvesson and Billing (2009) further argue that there are two motives for taking up gender in organizations: injustice and profitable management. EDGE makes no excuses for their position on this spectrum, as they brand themselves as taking a business rather than a theoretical approach. Moreover, the name EDGE is an abbreviation of Economic Dividends of Gender Equality (EDGE, 2019). From the viewpoint of the profitable management perspective, it therefore makes good sense to consider the gender lens when addressing inefficiencies linked to organizational cultures in order to challenge irrational thinking and shaping of gendered behavior that effectively holds 50% of the talent pool back. Yet, this perspective also reinforces gender inequality, as the unequal distribution of resources is one of the drivers of gender inequality and a perpetuator of gendered roles (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Roseberry and Roos, 2014). As such, workplace culture and how it affects gender roles is from the post-structuralist perspective an important perspective because organizational culture is part of constructing gendered meanings. In other words, organizational culture can also *deconstruct* gender if we allow for resignification of what it means to be an individual within the workplace. This also follows Butler's (1992) argument that gender identity markers provide a frame for expected behavior which correspondingly limits behavior and options for variety in performance. This performance is in turn shaped and shapes the organizational culture in the workplace producing assumptions about masculine and feminine activities and behavior.

What presuppositions underlie this representation of the 'problem' in the EDGE standard?

In the EDGE material that is publicly available, the EDGE benchmark on 'organizational culture' is described as measuring against an "inclusive company culture." The presupposition that underlie the representation of the problem is thus that a non-inclusive culture drives gender inequality. In other words, an inclusive company culture will increase gender equality. The way that this will be measured and benchmarked according to the EDGE methodology is through the reflection of "employees' high ratings in terms of gender equality" (EDGE, 2019). It is however not elaborated further what constitutes gender equality and what questions would be asked to employees to capture this.

Another presupposition is that the before mentioned four assessment areas of EDGE i.e. equivalent pay for equivalent work, recruitment and promotion, leadership development, training, and mentoring, and flexible working arrangements will feed into the fifth assessment and create an inclusive company culture. Nevertheless, as Alvesson and Billing (2009) argue, gender inequality and company culture have many faces, and it may be premature to expect that a company's culture simply turns inclusive if the four other benchmarks are met. This is especially the case as long as the EDGE methodology rests on the assumption that profitable management can be a driver of gender equality.

What is left silenced in the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

In the current representation of inclusive workplace culture, the various ways of defining what an inclusive company culture is, is left silenced. While staff surveys can identify issues, it may not be able to identify issues that they do not know how to measure for. At the same time, it would be useful to understand what is considered inclusive. While women and men are mentioned there is zero accountability for the topic of race and class and the impact of these on gender dynamics. While gender is an important social category to account for, it is never at play on its own. As such, race and class play crucial roles in either exacerbating or mitigating the consequences of being a gendered subject. As a result, the silence of race and class make these categories invisible and the companies not accountable for the consequences of these social categories in their workplace.

What effects are produced by the EDGE standard's representation of the 'problem'?

The effects that are produced from this representation of the 'problem' is that gender inequality is not an intersecting issue of race and class since none of these issues were part of the four other assessment areas. As such, the framing of the problem leaves the solution to be one which is strictly focusing on gender and which leaves out factors which may exacerbate this. Therefore, with the lack of focus in the other four assessment areas on intersecting identities, the goal of creating an inclusive company culture misses the point as gender as a tool of dominance is highly interwoven with the categorization of individuals according to race and class. The effect of this representation thus reinforces the idea that the four previous areas of assessment will be sufficient in creating a culture of inclusivity which can be measured and benchmarked according to employees' satisfaction with the level of gender equality within the organization. Through the post-structuralist lens, I therefore want to ask if this assessment area of EDGE helps us in moving from a binary understanding of the phenomena of gender inequality towards deconstruction of inequality? Based on the lack of intersectional considerations within the assessment areas, I will argue that this assessment area does not contribute towards deconstruction, but rather the representation reproduces gender as a non-intersecting category of oppression.

5.0 Discussion

In this section, I will summarize my findings of the analysis and discuss the implications of these. First of all, the analysis showed that the theoretical approach of the WPR approach is helpful in understanding the effects and limits of a standard which is a productive force of 'problems' itself. The WPR approach was thus useful in facilitating a critical perspective from a feminist post-structural lens on the assessment areas of the case of the EDGE standard, a corporate gender equality standard.

Based on the analysis, there are three overall findings. First of all, the assessment areas render intersectionality invisible. Intersectionality is a term coined by Crenshaw (1989). In simple terms, intersectionality is a conceptualization of person's combined level of advantage or disadvantage depending on the crossing of social identities such as race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1993). Fundamentally and especially in the context of workplace equality, intersectionality is about inclusivity. Analyzing a situation from an intersectional perspective would allow us to

assess blind spots. As a result, the EDGE standard ought to be doing this. As an example, the EDGE methodology could apply Matsuda's (1991) and Davis' (2014) approach to intersectionality by asking 'the other question'. In this way, we allow ourselves to 'complicate' gender and look beyond 'global' and white feminism to discover issues such as racism and classism which gender/power dynamics exacerbate. In the context of the EDGE standard which leaves no rooms for race or class, there will be natural limits to the level of inclusivity in terms of the number of staff that will benefit from such standard since there is no understanding of the impact of racism and classism on gender/power dynamics.

Second, there is a misalignment between the goal of gender equality and the assumption of reaching this goal through a lens of profitable management. Third, the issue of unpaid work reemerges in several parts of the analyses. In combination, these findings show that the effects that are produced from such representation within the standard are constructing gender inequality through the creation of policy problems.

Co-construction of so-called problems

The representation of the problem may result in the co-construction of so-called problems. Evidently, the analysis shows how 'problems' framed only became problems because they were framed as such. One example of this was discovered during the analysis of equal pay for equal work which essentially frames a non-issue an issue. In reality, equal pay for equal work is the law in most places around the globe. As such, the standard does not add anything new to the table. Rather, what would have been relevant and interesting would be the framing of the gender pay gap in general as being the problem, i.e. the problem that women in feminine jobs are being paid considerably less than men in masculine jobs. Indeed, what standards and policies are good at is to create and construct policy problems. Therefore, it is important to realize *what* problems we want to frame to get the most out of a standard.

Another example of framing problems is flexible working arrangements and organizational culture. From the post-structuralist perspective, these assessment areas are both a construction as well as a reflection of the environment that they exist in. In other words, the assessment areas become constitutive as well as they are productive. The meaning of flexible working environment in fact gives meaning to and shape the so-called problem of *inflexible* working arrangements that

it is meant to address. This also applies to the understanding of the so-called problem of organizational culture where the inclusive workplace gives shape and meaning to the *non*-inclusive workplace. The discourse thus depends on the binary and the power which it produces.

On the other hand, I will argue that the material, and through this theoretical lens, is never stable and is always changing. Since nothing can be understood outside of its context, flexible working arrangements will take on new meanings as the context changes. It is during these ongoing changes that we allow for resignification of meaning by challenging the conventional. As an example, I argue that despite a critical perspective on flexible working arrangements with the post-structuralist lens, the application of it in an effective and consistent manner can resignify the understanding of what work is or at least from where it is conducted. At least, I will argue that we should not sit down and wait for unpaid work to become remunerated but rather we can start from the other side of the table focusing on remunerated activities and what makes up paid work. Starting little by little and through resignification of the work space to also include paid work from home may over time deconstruct the separate spheres of paid work-life and unpaid work-life.

Moreover, there is evidence which suggests that interventions to increase gender equality in organizations many times are ineffective and may contribute to prejudice and incorrect assumptions about the ‘nature of groups’ that suffer under the regime of gender inequality (Kalev, Kelly, and Dobbin, 2006; van den Brink, Benschop, and Jansen, 2010). This perspective leaves us at the end of the analysis with the question whether measuring the benchmark of organizations’ performance in accordance with EDGE’s five areas of assessment will make a difference at all.

From the feminist post-structuralist lens, many of the assessment areas render invisible the already neglected topic of women’s unpaid care work which is a productive economic sector but which is currently undervalued, underpaid, and under-estimated. The focus on flexible working arrangements is one of the areas that from the feminist post-structuralist perspective contributes to building the economic dividends of the organizations but which is failing in taking into consideration the long-term consequences. On the other hand, I will argue that holding on to the feminist post-structuralist perspective while rejecting the idea of the area having any positive impact for single mothers and other women, is classism and borderline elitist. Indeed, I also need to situate myself as a student of gender studies: an academic who values theories but who does not have children. However, real life is not always about theories. I will therefore argue that employees,

working mothers and fathers are benefiting significantly from an employers' policies on flexible working arrangements. In other words, the standard can be implemented with great effect. While this may be a short-term gain on the micro-level, it does not mean that this assessment area should be dismissed as ineffective.

6.0 Conclusion

I have researched corporate gender equality standards through a feminist post-structuralist perspective using the case study of the EDGE standard, a corporate gender equality standard as example. The research aim of the thesis was to cover the gap in the research on corporate gender equality standards which up until now has not focused on effects and limits from a feminist post-structuralist perspective. Based on the feminist post-structuralist perspective, my analysis showcases that the EDGE standard as a governance tool is not guided by 'problems' that exist 'out there' in society but rather through the representation of 'problems' as framed in the EDGE standard. This perspective is a result of the post-structuralist lens in which problems do not exist 'out there' waiting to be solved but rather they are produced and constructed through productive forces such as gender equality standards which give shape, voice, and meaning to various 'problems'. The analysis shows that the standard has significant effects and that implementing a gender equality standard in theory and understood through the post-structuralist approach can have multiple effects. As an example, this is illustrated in so-called flexible working arrangements, regardless whether this is perceived as helpful or not. The limits however appear once the blind spots of intersectionality emerges in the analysis. As such, the reliance on a binary gender understanding and non-intersectional approach causes natural limits to the ability of the EDGE standard to be inclusive to all identities within a workplace.

In reaching this conclusion, the post-structuralist approach was crucial in opening up for an analysis that takes into account processes in which individuals become gendered subjects that are constraint by the gender binary. Through the analysis of the EDGE standard, the feminist post-structuralist approach thus supported the process of deconstructing the binary by making visible the power relations that are maintained within the EDGE standard by granting normality to the dominant part in the binary i.e. the male norm.

6.1 Research contributions

This thesis contributes to the research field by researching an area previously not accounted for. Especially, the research undertaken as part of this thesis contributes to the literature by taking a feminist post-structuralist perspective on corporate gender equality standards and analyzing assessment criteria based on an adapted model of the ‘WPR’ approach. Hopefully, my research contributes to a growing field of research which critically reflects on the effects and limits of workplace gender equality standards while making critical feminist thought the center of analysis. While the market for corporate gender equality standards keeps developing, I am positive that the academic interest in the field will follow suit.

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