# Transformational change towards gender equality: An autobiographical reflection on resistance during participatory action research

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## Abstract
This article contributes to the academic debate about gender equality change by conceptualizing resistance to gender equality change as characteristic of a system where gendered organizations tend to move back to an equilibrium when confronted with change. It explores the role of change agents and change recipients in challenging this equilibrium using autobiographical reflections on three events of resistance during participatory action research aimed at gender equality in Dutch universities. It argues that resistance can be understood as stakeholders' articulated defence of the organizational identity when research results threaten gendered organizational norms, beliefs and values. Organizational change cognitively and emotionally challenges not only change recipients but also change agents. Reflection on and sharing of personal experiences in groups of researchers may be sources of empowerment, enabling gender equality change agents to continue the conversation with change recipients. This conversation may transform not only change recipients but also change agents.

## Introduction

Transforming organizations in the direction of gender equality is difficult to reach because of stakeholders' misunderstandings of causes of gender inequality and their lack of commitment in addressing them (Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000). Case

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studies on gender equality change projects report these as coming with large resistance (Benschop and Verloo, 2006, 2011; Cavaghan, 2012; Connel, 2006). Examples include men opposing the entrance of women into previously masculine domains and stakeholders denying that gender inequality is a problem or using research as delaying tactics (Benschop and Verloo, 2006: 286). Since resistance seems an intrinsic part of gender equality change, understanding its dynamics is necessary in order to support transformational change. This article contributes to the debate about gender equality change by conceptualizing resistance as a characteristic of a system where gendered organizations tend to move back towards an equilibrium when confronted with change. Moreover, it examines the role of change agents and change recipients (Ford et al., 2008) in challenging this equilibrium, deeming the continuation of their conversation despite emotional conflicts as a source of transformational change (Bareil, 2013). In order to do so, this article applies autobiographical reflections on events of resistance during participatory action research (PAR) aimed at gender equality in Dutch universities from the perspective of a change agent.

## PAR

The events of resistance are selected from a series of PAR projects aimed at gender equality in academia in the Netherlands between 2008 and 2017. The first two PAR projects were initiated by a senior woman researcher at a Humanities University in 2008 and by the same colleague and another senior woman researcher at the University of Technology in 2010. The third (2012–2015) and fourth (2014–2017) PAR projects, at a comprehensive university, were initiated by myself with a consortium of international research partners supported by European Union (EU) research grants. In all four PAR projects, I was involved in designing the research, collecting and analysing data and disseminating results. In the last two projects, I also coordinated the research. All research teams consisted of mainly Dutch women and some Dutch men researchers.

The research fitted Lewin's (1946) classical definition of action research as 'research leading to action' (p. 35). Lewin developed the term for his research aimed at addressing the discrimination of minority workers in the United States; considering the development of knowledge as a powerful instrument for improving the situation of minority groups and supporting the democratization of society in general (Lewin, 1946: 44). Our action research is indeed aimed at democratization, namely, fostering gender equality in academia. Moreover, as researchers with a feminist agenda, we were involved in this change process ourselves, fitting the definition of 'insider academic research' (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Finally, we actively involved organizational stakeholders in the research process in order to support commitment to the results (Bleijenbergh and Van Engen, 2015). With a mixed-methods approach, we held focus groups with stakeholders to validate preliminary results in the first three action research projects, and we involved stakeholders in Group Model Building (GMB; Vennix, 1999) to develop a common problem analysis and identify leverages for change in the second, third and fourth action research projects. For the purpose of this article, I define PAR as a research effort aimed at involving stakeholders in addressing the material (hierarchical positions, pay) and immaterial (norms, symbols) dimensions of gender inequality in organizations. PAR is aimed at gender equality in academia, fitting a tradition set by American (Bailyn, 2003) and European scholars (Bendl and Schmidt, 2011; Katila and Meriläinen, 1999, 2002).

## Autobiographical reflection

PAR calls for reflection and critical self-assessment of the researchers' motives and actions (Swantz, 1996: 125). To explain my role as a change agent, I need to provide some autobiographical details. I was born and raised in the Netherlands, growing up in the countryside in a White

middle-class family with a liberal Catholic background. My father was an engineer and my mother a homemaker. When I was 15 years, my parents split up and a heavy divorce battle ensued. Following the divorce, I lived with my mother and brother in a lone-parent family until I was 17 years and went to college. My father refused to financially support my studies and initiated a lawsuit to end his child support obligations towards me. After that, I lost contact with him for 18 years. I completed a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's degree in social sciences, with majors in gender studies, research methods and philosophy. With some financial support from my mother, who had returned to employment, I paid for my studies by working part-time. My interest in gender studies was motivated by an urge to understand the developments between my parents and how they were influenced by societal changes.

The events of resistance I reconstruct in this article are based on personal observations, recorded in notes, emails, conversations with colleagues and memories. I selected them because I spontaneously associate these events with resistance, meaning they were emotionally compelling to me. The events relate to verbally articulated objections by a dean, a rector and a director to preliminary results of the PAR. This neither implies that I limit resistance to verbal objections against research results nor that resistance is only articulated by senior White men (I would argue against this). It only means that I felt most affected by these events. In this article, I scrutinize my role in the PAR, comparable to the approach used by Katila and Meriläinen (1999, 2002) and Swantz (1996). It is an autobiographical, inductive and reflective approach (cf. Van den Brink, 2015), in which I derive analytical meaning from the events of resistance by consciously reflecting on the interplay between cognition and emotions, comparing the idiosyncratic details with theoretical categories.

## Events of resistance

### *'Methodologically not sound'*

The first event of resistance took place at a Humanities University. At the time, in 2008, this university had a small proportion of women full professors (9%) compared to large proportions of women students and PhD candidates (56%). To support the university board in addressing this gender imbalance, we performed a large mixed-methods research, involving 44 semi-structured interviews and 10 focus groups with staff of the five different schools and statistical analysis of the university personnel database. During the research process, we continuously reported to an Advisory Board of key stakeholders, like the diversity officer, the rector and deans of all schools, aiming to validate our findings and support commitment with the results.

My colleague and I experienced resistance when we presented the preliminary results of our qualitative analysis to the Advisory Board. We reported about each school separately. At one school, several interviewees had expressed concerns about whether output norms would be adjusted for taking care leave. Therefore, the preliminary analysis was 'At school X, employees feel insecure about adjustment of output norms for care leave'. This met with an angry reaction by the dean of this school. He stated that our research was methodologically not sound, arguing that his school had clear rules about compensation for leave, so it was impossible that we had reached this finding. We responded by stating that several interviewees had reported this, without providing details because we promised confidentiality. I felt humiliated by the accusation that our research was methodologically not sound. Just having been tenured as assistant professor in research methodology, this accusation by a respected dean in front of other members of the Advisory Board threatened my academic reputation. My colleague was even more desperate since her reputation was threatened in her own organization. I still recall lying awake in the night after the meeting, thinking about the conversation and other possible responses I could have given. Afterwards, we had several

meetings with this dean and the diversity officer, in which we discussed the issue and underpinned our findings. Finally, after intensive deliberation, my colleague and I decided to stick with the results, nuancing them slightly. We formulated it as follows: 'At School X, some employees experience a lack of clarity regarding the compensation of care leave'. The dean accepted the results.

## 'Below the quality of a PhD thesis'

The second event took place at a University of Technology. At the time, in 2010, the university had a small proportion of women full professors (6%) versus a medium proportion of women students (27%). Based on good press about the first PAR, the Board of Executives hired us for a medium size mixed-methods research, with 14 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with staff of two schools, complemented by statistical analysis of the university personnel file database. The board explicitly aimed to increase proportions of women academics at all hierarchical levels. Like before, an Advisory Board was installed, including the diversity officer, the rector, representatives of the two schools and the chair of the women full professors' network.

We experienced resistance when we presented the preliminary results of our quantitative analysis to the Advisory Board. After calculating the flow through of academics between academic ranks, we concluded that women academics in temporary positions (PhD candidates, postgraduates) hardly ever flow through to tenure track positions, while some men academics do. This caused the rector to respond angrily. He stated that 'This research is below the quality level of a PhD thesis'. He referred to the university policy to send all PhD candidates abroad after finishing their thesis, so neither women nor men PhD candidates could have been promoted to assistant professorships. The disqualification caused feelings of anger with me and my two colleagues. This rector, a full professor with a good academic reputation, directly threatened our academic reputations with his public disapproval. The patronizing way he expressed this was humiliating, but we remained polite. We emphasized that our preliminary conclusions were underpinned by data, but we were not able to convince him. After the meeting, my colleagues and I talked for hours, expressing frustration, confusion and combativeness. We organized a series of follow-up meetings with the rector and the diversity officer, underpinning our quantitative analysis with figures and calculations. After I left the country for a research sabbatical, my two colleagues did the hard work of convincing the rector of the soundness of our results. Being confronted with the detailed calculations, he reluctantly accepted that at his university indeed all women left after finishing their PhD, but some men stayed and were given tenure track positions and finally tenure.

## 'Botched work'

The third event took place at the Science faculty of a comprehensive university. With a low proportion of 9% women full professors, the faculty lagged behind within the university. To support gender equality in this faculty, I coordinated PAR supported by an EU research grant. We collected documents and questionnaires and performed 10 GMB sessions with 63 stakeholders, including faculty board members, directors and academic staff of five research institutes. Using GMB (Vennix, 1999), we facilitated them in building causal models explaining gender inequality in their research institutes. GMB calls for a large time investment of stakeholders (Bleijenbergh and Van Engen, 2015), who participate in two 4-hour modelling sessions, checking preliminary versions of the model in between. I experienced resistance after we sent participants the results of the first session. A director of a research institute, who had been actively participating in the first session, sent the research team an email which stated that

> My research is about making software models, so I know how difficult this is. I do understand you want to let us make a model – as part of the training – and there is nothing wrong with that, as long as we all agree that this is 'botched work'.

This reaction caused me feelings of surprise and humiliation. I felt that classifying our work as 'botched' threatened my academic reputation. I was relieved, however, that he only sent the email to the researchers, not to the other GMB participants. We discussed the message within the research team and, after expressing our indignation, decided that a face-to-face reaction from me as the project coordinator would be the most suitable response. I thus had an informal conversation with the director during a break in the second meeting, where I exclaimed that 'of course, I don't agree with your classification of the model as botched work'. Then I emphasized the constructivist character of our modelling approach, in which we aimed for a common understanding of gender inequality processes among the participants. I contrasted this to the positivist character of his own computational modelling. We agreed that we used modelling for different purposes, and he continued to participate actively in the next meetings.

## Reflection

Why did I consider the events as resistance? As Ford et al. (2008) argue, actions only become resistance after 'change agents assign the label resistance to them as part of their sense-making' (p. 371). I considered them resistance because key organizational stakeholders refused to accept the knowledge we produced as valid. Although we played the rules of the game – collecting and analysing data according to academic standards – our results were disqualified. Since we derived the results via different research methodologies, namely, qualitative interviewing, quantitative analysis and facilitated modelling, the resistance was not caused by a particular methodology, but rather by the knowledge we produced (cf. Cavaghan, 2012). Why did I feel affected by the resistance? The resistance was articulated by men in senior positions who formally cooperated with the research, and in retrospect, I had been hoping for their approval and recognition. So, unconsciously I may have transferred (Diamond and Allcorn, 2003) my need for fatherly approval onto them.

Coping with the resistance took a lot of energy. However, working together in research teams helped, providing a platform to discuss doubts and express frustration. Together, we knew more and we scrutinized our work while emotionally supporting each other. We were proud when research was published and translated into policies. Moreover, when time passed, I established emotional distance. When a senior colleague asked me to lecture about resistance during gender equality change projects, I began to more systematically reflect upon the events. By recalling them; rereading notes, emails, documents and interviews; and comparing them with academic literature, I gave meaning (Thomas et al., 2011) to them. My understanding grew that our (preliminary) research results had been challenging organizational norms, beliefs and values (Benschop and Verloo, 2011) that can be understood from a systemic theory of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990: 140). The system consists of interacting processes of the gender division of work, daily interactions, the construction of symbols and images and people's identities (Acker, 1990). Organizational change scholars made me understand resistance as a system concept that indicates that organizations have feedback loops that push back to equilibrium when confronted with change (Dent and Galloway, 1999: 40; Lewin, 1946). Combining these insights, I found that our PAR threatened the norms, beliefs and values of gendered organizations and that change recipients tried to restore them, showing how gendered organizations have a tendency to move back to an equilibrium as well.

## Moving back to an equilibrium

During the first event of resistance, the shared belief in the organization seemed to be that *we have a women-friendly climate*. The dean who disqualified our preliminary results had stated in an interview that his organization was a good employer that protected motherhood. Our suggestion that faculty felt insecure about compensation for care leave probably threatened this belief. After first denying the results, organizational stakeholders seemed eager to repair this belief, as illustrated by the university board's reaction to our final research report. The board introduced 3-months full-time research sabbatical after maternity leave. Although we had recommended to also grant fathers a research sabbatical after taking parental leave, the board only implemented it for mothers, herewith re-emphasizing the protection of motherhood. So, the implicit value of the gender division of paid and unpaid work, recognized by Acker (1990) as a dimension of gendered organizations, was reconfirmed.

During the second event of resistance, the shared belief in the organization was that *we treat men and women PhD candidates equally*. Our suggestion that no women but some men PhD candidates entered tenure track positions, threatened the value of providing fair procedures. This was illustrated by the university board's reaction to our final research report. The rector proudly announced a fellowship for 10 women academics that would attract female talent from all over the world. Herewith, university policies compensated for unfair procedures by providing extra tenure track positions for women academics. The norm that PhD candidates have to go abroad after finishing their thesis was not altered. Instead, female talent was attracted from abroad rather than promoted within the organization. The university continued to underutilize the relatively large pool of women PhD candidates, maintaining the gendered division of labour (Acker, 1990) in place.

The third event of resistance showed a shared belief in evidence-based policies. By assessing our methods according to positivist standards, the director of a research institute firmly advocated this belief. Our method of facilitated modelling with stakeholders, fitting a subjectivist approach (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007), did not meet values of objective science. The shared belief was reconfirmed in the follow-up to our intervention. The director initiated a gender and diversity policy plan for the Science faculty. The plan emphasized that it was 'evidence based' and quoted *Nature* and *Science* papers to underpin the recommended measures. This increased the status of the policy plan, but implicitly downplayed our tailor-made PAR. The construction of symbols and images, which Acker identified as the third dimension of gendered organizations (1990), remained intact. So, resistance to gender equality change can be understood as an articulated defence of the organizational identity by organizational stakeholders. Their reactions suggest that they have incorporated gendered organizational norms, beliefs and values in their own identity. This shows that gendered organizations are systems with a resilience to change and a tendency to move back towards an equilibrium.

## Transformational change

Reflection taught us that our confrontations with organizational stakeholders ultimately supported their involvement in gender equality change. Actually, they eventually transformed into change agents. This adds to research suggesting that resistance shows a higher psychological involvement than acceptance of change (Ford et al., 2008: 369). At the humanities university, the dean who earlier disqualified our results earned a university board position. He started to pay symbolic attention to gender equality in public events. Moreover, he regularly asked PAR researchers for advice. The percentage of women professors at the university increased from 9% (2008) to 15% (2013). At the University of Technology, the formerly critical rector became an active defender of gender

equality policies. He announced three rounds of a fellowship programme for women academics, increasing the percentage of women full professors from 6% (2008) to 10% (2013). Moreover, he publicly defended the programme in an equal treatment lawsuit and invited the PAR team as 'experts'. Finally, the director who was critical about our methods became actively involved in implementing gender and diversity policies, regularly asking for input from the PAR team. So, the change recipients we experienced as articulating resistance became academic leaders publicly defending gender equality as a core value of their organizations.

In retrospect, the events had triggered emotions of humiliation, anger and fear about my academic reputation. I may have unconsciously selected these events specifically *because* my professional identity was at stake. This contributes to the theoretical debate about organizational change that it emotionally and cognitively challenges not only change recipients (Bovey and Hede, 2001) but also change agents. Ultimately, the events transformed me as well, as I and my colleagues learned to patiently but determinedly defend our research results. By continuing the conversation with stakeholders after they disqualified our work, explaining the empirical support, methodology and epistemology behind it, we negotiated their acceptance of it. We became 'tempered radicals' (Bendl and Schmidt, 2011) articulating our cause within the norms and values of the dominant culture. Moreover, I am not afraid anymore, like Swantz (1996: 122) who reported about how PAR changed her. Actually, learning to cope with the resistance of powerful men during PAR evolved strikingly parallel with learning to cope with the anger of my divorced father. After 18 years without contact, during which I went through all phases of mourning, we reconciled when I was 36. By then, I had learned to remain calm when my conversation partner was angry, making sure that I heard him. I had also learned to calmly explain my own standpoint, have patience in waiting for a reaction and repeating this communication cycle several times. Finally, I had learned to swallow my pride (which remains the most challenging part). Ultimately, I was able to deal with emotional conflicts that come with resistance (Ford et al., 2008). I support Van den Brink's argument (2015) that it is important to continue sharing stories about being a feminist academic with a change agenda. Both reflection about personal experiences with resistance and sharing and exchanging of these experiences in groups of researchers are sources of empowerment for gender equality change agents, which may enable them to continue the conversation with change recipients – resistance thus being a resource for transformational change (Bareil, 2013).

## Acknowledgements

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