ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Myriad potential for mentoring: Understanding the process of transformational change through a gender equality intervention

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This article contributes to understanding transformational change towards gender equality by examining the transformational change potential of a mentoring programme for women, a type of gender equality intervention both criticized and praised for its ability to bring about change. Drawing upon an empirical case study of a mentoring programme for women academics in a Dutch university, we explore three dimensions of transformational change: organizational members (i) discussing and reflecting upon gendered organizational norms and work practices; (ii) creating new narratives; and (iii) experimenting with new work practices. Our findings indicate five specific conditions that enable transformational change: cross-mentoring, questioning what is taken for granted, repeating participation and individual stories, facilitating peer support networks and addressing and equipping all participants as change agents. We suggest that these conditions should be taken into account when (re)designing effective organizational gender equality interventions.

KEYWORDS
academia, gender equality, mentoring, organizational interventions, transformational change

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite a growing body of scholarly work on organizational change towards gender equality (e.g., Coleman & Rippin, 2000; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016; Ely & Meyerson, 2000a; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2016; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012), little is still known about the process of transformational change and what type of gender equality interventions are actually effective (Benschop, Holgersson, Van den Brink, & Wahl, 2015; Benschop, Mills, Mills, & Tienari, 2012; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Vinkenburg, 2017). Ely and Meyerson (2000b) and Meyerson and Kolb (2000) criticize traditional gender equality interventions for being slow, partial and/or superficial (e.g., Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008) and argue that transformational change requires interventions that involve a continuous discussion and revision on the (gendered) norms that underlie work practices in organizations. However, their theoretical approach is largely untested as yet. Moreover, an emerging group of scholars shows that there is actually potential for transformational change in these traditional gender equality interventions (Benschop et al., 2015; De Vries, 2010; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016; Grada, Ní Laoire, Lineham, Boylan, & Connolly, 2015; O'Connor, 2014). Therefore, we aim to further unravel the process of transformational change towards gender equality, by examining the transformational potential of a mentoring programme for women as a particular type of traditional gender equality intervention.

Scholars have been criticizing mentoring programmes for their focus on 'fixing the women' (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b; Liff & Cameron, 1997); these programmes imply that women need training (in masculine competencies) to be more successful, while paying limited attention to changing gendered organizational norms and work practices that reproduce persisting gender inequalities (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Since mentoring relationships can be reciprocal and collaborative (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004), mentors can benefit from participating in the programme as well (e.g., Ghosh & Reio, 2013) and may become potential change agents in transforming gendered norms and practices (De Vries, 2010; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016). We further explore how this process of transformational change unfolds and identify the conditions that enable transformational change to occur in a typical case of a 'gendered' organization (Acker, 1990, 2006) in which mentoring programmes are increasingly applied as a gender equality intervention: a university in the Netherlands. We first elaborate on the concepts of transformational change towards gender equality and mentoring programmes as a particular type of gender equality intervention, before we present our case and methodological approach.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Transformational change towards gender equality

Transformational change towards gender equality draws upon a definition of gender differences as socially constructed and aims at assessing and revising the 'system of oppressive relations reproduced in and by social practices' in organizations (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b, p. 107). This system involves gendered norms and work practices that prescribe the most appropriate and effective ways to define and accomplish work, recognize and reward 'talent', and how to interpret behaviour. It appears to be gender neutral, but in reality (re)produces a gendered social order in which (men and) particular forms of masculinity dominate and gender inequalities persist. Traditional gender equality interventions that focus on 'fixing the women', 'celebrating differences' or 'creating equal opportunities' (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b) often fail to change these gendered norms and work practices (Benschop et al., 2015; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). Transformational change thus targets these gendered norms and work practices, which necessarily involves the transformative learning of individuals through a process of critical reflection (Henderson, 2002). We consider the process of transformational change both a means and an end to organizational gender equality interventions (De Vries, 2010; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016; Ely & Meyerson, 2000b; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). It is an ongoing change process away from the *status quo* (means), involving individuals

who continuously identify and revise gendered organizational norms and work practices, and ultimately become more reflective about their assumptions, attitudes and behaviour and act upon those, in order to realize that gender is no longer an axis of unequal power relations in organizations (end).

This process of transformational change should involve a continuous, 'emergent, localized process of incremental change' (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b, p. 107) consisting of three dimensions: an *identification and critical discussion* of gendered organizational norms and how they influence work practices, a *revision of the narrative* and *experimentation* with new work practices (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). Critical discussion and reflection is crucial (Coleman & Rippin, 2000; Henderson, 2002) to engage organizational members in identifying work practices in their organization that (re)produce gender inequalities. In so doing, organizational members may revise their narrative about their own and others' organizational experiences in order 'to subvert prevailing notions of the organizations gender-neutrality' (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b, p. 138; Murgia & Poggio, 2009). Finally, organizational members may experiment with changing the way work is defined, executed and evaluated through work practices. Experimenting with changing work practices is crucial to following up the process of critical discussion and revising the narrative (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Henderson, 2002). Nevertheless, while gendered norms and work practices are often taken for granted and not all organizational members necessarily experience an urgency to change these, this process often also involves resistance to change and reinforcement of dominant gender orders (Acker, 2000; Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Coleman & Rippin, 2000; Hearn, 2000; Murgia & Poggio, 2009; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

We define the potential for transformational change as the ability of gender equality interventions to enable organizational members to challenge — and change — gendered norms and work practices in order to decrease systematic inequalities in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes (Acker, 2006; Benschop et al., 2015; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016). It ranges from identification and discussion of gendered norms and work practices, revision of narratives, to experimentation with new work practices aimed at decreasing (gender) inequalities. We will examine if and how a mentoring programme involves these three dimensions of transformational change and identify the conditions that enable these dimensions of transformational change to occur.

2.2 | Mentoring programmes as gender equality interventions

Mentoring programmes, and mentoring programmes for women in particular, are popular organizational interventions in different types of organizations (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Snoeren, Raaijmakers, Niessen, & Abma, 2016). These programmes aim to facilitate women in building formal mentoring relationships with senior mentors, regularly complemented with workshops and peer group mentoring, in order to provide them with access to relevant knowledge, networks and information to advance their careers (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014). Studies do show that mentoring contributes to the development of women's strategic career planning, networks, visibility, efficiency, job satisfaction and performance (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, 2007; Grada et al., 2015; Van der Weijden, Belder, Van Arensbergen, & Van den Besselaar, 2015). Mentoring programmes also benefit the organization in terms of high retention and promotion rates, and higher numbers of research grants and publications (e.g., Gardiner et al., 2007; Van Balen, Van Arensbergen, Van der Weijden, & Van den Besselaar, 2012). But, despite these positive results for individual women and their organizations, scholars have questioned the effectiveness of mentoring programmes in promoting gender equality and addressing power relations (e.g., Darwin, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000b), because they are implicitly based on the idea that women lack skills, traits, knowledge and experiences to compete in the organizational 'game'. The programmes may focus too much on assimilating women to the existing culture ('fixing the women'), leaving the system with its gendered norms and work practices intact (Darwin, 2000; Grada et al., 2015; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000).

Scholars increasingly pay attention to reciprocity in the mentoring relationship and the effects for mentors (e.g., De Vries, 2010; Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2006; Ehrich et al., 2004; Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Snoeren et al.,

2016). Studies also report positive effects on mentors' job satisfaction, network building, job performance, turnover intent, organizational commitment and career success (Ehrich et al., 2004; Ghosh & Reio, 2013). When the mentoring relationship moves from being instrumental to developmental (De Vries, 2010; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016) or relational (Ragins, 2016), the mentors mutually learn from hearing the mentees' questions and issues (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Ragins, 2016; Van der Weijden et al., 2015). Moreover, 'high-quality mentoring relationships' can form 'a safe space to ask questions and engage in conversations that raise consciousness and awareness about diversity' for mentors (Ragins, 2016, p. 240). Mentors report learning about the role of gender in sustaining inequalities and are activated to become change agents by emphasizing their capacity to provoke long-term commitment to changes in their daily organizational work environment (De Vries, 2010). In this way, with a 'bifocal approach' to mentoring programmes, both individual change and organizational change are foreseen (De Vries, 2010; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016).

We further explore the potential for transformational change by examining if and how a mentoring programme enables the different dimensions of transformational change: (i) facilitating critical discussions among both mentees and mentors on (gendered) organizational norms and work practices; (ii) enabling both mentors' and mentees' individual learning and creating new narratives; and (iii) encouraging and equipping both mentees and mentors to experiment with and change gendered organizational norms and work practices during or after the mentoring programme. These dimensions are studied in a particular type of 'gendered organization' (Acker, 1990) where gendered norms and work practices (re)create gender inequalities, namely in academia.

The academic work culture draws upon gendered norms around the 'ideal academic' and academic 'excellence' that materialize in formal and informal gendered work practices. The norm of the 'ideal academic' represents 'the dedicated intellectual, who lives and breathes academia, and is engaged in his (naturally) studies practically 24 hours a day' (Benschop & Brouns, 2003, p. 200), which is gendered since it leaves little room for caring obligations (Bleijenbergh, Van Engen, & Vinkenburg, 2012). Academic 'excellence' is a social construct that implies that academics should excel in all qualifications, emphasizing masculine-gendered traits as independence and competitiveness represented by lengthy publication track records, research grants and international mobility (Herschberg, Benschop, & Van den Brink, 2018; Lund, 2012; Rees, 2011; Uhly, Visser, & Zippel, 2017; Van Arensbergen, Van der Weijden, & Van den Besselaar, 2014; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011, 2012). This creates an increasingly competitive culture of 'publish or perish' in which academics are mainly focused on securing their individual results (Vinkenburg, 2017). These gendered norms and work practices should therefore be the target for transformational change in academia when implementing an organizational gender equality intervention.

3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Case description

Our case study involves a mentoring programme for women academics at a university in the Netherlands. This is a broad, internationally oriented university with more than 20,000 students and nearly 3000 academic staff members of whom 46.8 per cent are women (Annual report 2016). In comparison with other European countries, the Netherlands continues to have one of the lowest shares of women full professors (19.3 per cent), but within the Dutch context our case university has one of the highest shares (i.e., a top 3 position) of women full professors since 2005 (increase from 20.6 per cent in 2011 to 26.5 per cent in 2017; LNVH, 2017) and can be considered a 'best practice' (Swanborn, 2010). The university introduced the mentoring programme in 2010 as the main focus of its action plan to improve gender equality, complemented with financial support for women to reduce their teaching activities and for women's networks, in addition to some local initiatives at faculties to support gender equality. The main goal of the mentoring programme is to develop and retain female academic and support staff members:

provide talented academic and support staff with practical insights in the common practices within a university with the aim to develop these talented staff members based on their personal goals and improve their (upward) mobility. Within the university, the mentoring programme can also contribute to maintain these talented staff members in key positions. (Evaluation report mentoring programme, 2011)

The main goal of the programme is geared towards talented women, but by actively involving the mentors in a learning process the programme also considers organizational change as a positive '*side effect*' (Policy document mentoring programme, 2010). For instance, the mentors were provided with a workshop by Dr Jennifer de Vries, an Australian scholar and expert on the 'bifocal approach' towards gender equality (De Vries, 2010). In the workshop, the mentors were challenged to identify and shift gendered organizational norms and work practices.

The programme mainly facilitates mentoring relationships between female mentees and mentors in a higher position. A majority in each yearly cohort of the 30 mentees are female academic staff in postdoc, assistant professor and associate professor positions, complemented with some women in senior support staff positions. Deans and heads of departments nominate potential candidates for the programme based on the selection criterion that 'the mentees should be "real talents" and have the ambition and potential to become a full professor' (Policy document mentoring programme, 2010). The central human resources (HR) department recruits mentors from among full professors who are experts on or actively support gender equality via informal networks. In principle, they match mentees and mentors across faculties, except for when a mentee has a good argument for having a mentor from her own institute, for example, for learning more about the internal politics or expanding her network within the faculty. During a period of nine months, mentees join a kick-off meeting, four thematic workshops (setting goals, strategic decision-making, networking and negotiating), four peer group mentoring sessions and a closing meeting, in addition to the bilateral meetings they plan individually with their mentors. Mentors are offered a preparatory workshop and two peer group sessions regarding their role as a mentor and to discuss structural practices of gender inequality within the university. The mentoring programme was continued in 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017. By 2016, when we finalized our draft paper, a total of 111 female mentees and 41 (male and female) mentors had participated in the programme.

3.2 | Data collection

We applied a mixed method approach which enabled triangulation of data collection methods (i.e., surveys, interviews, focus groups and desk research) and data sources (i.e., mentees, mentors and documents from three cohorts) (Bleijenbergh, 2013; Kram & Ragins, 2007), in order to combine a broad overview with a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of the programme participants. An overview of the data collected can be found in Table 1.

The HR department disseminated the evaluation survey to gain insight in the experiences, evaluation and the effects of the programme for all mentees and mentors from the first and second cohort (2010–2012) throughout the university, which involved 35 mentees (response rate 67 and 60 per cent) and 17 mentors (response rate 54 and 12 per cent). The questionnaire contained 30 open and closed questions with regard to the organization of the programme, the different modules and the effects of the programme.

To further unravel the process of transformational change during the mentoring programme, we collected qualitative data from focus groups, interviews and desk research. Using these data, we address the call for more qualitative and observational research methods in order to uncover 'a rich array of processes and outcomes of mentoring relationships' (Kram & Ragins, 2007, p. 684). The focus groups and interviews include a selection of mentees and mentors from academic staff at two different research institutes within the university: the Management Institute and the Brain Institute. These institutes differ considerably with regard to their disciplinary focus, the ratio between teaching and research (a majority of staff at the Brain Institute only have research duties, while all staff at Management Sciences have both research and teaching duties), the organizational culture with regard to work–life balance,

TABLE 1 Overview of data collected

	Cohort			
	2010–2011	**2011–2012**	**2012–2013**	**Total**
Surveys	20 mentees and 14 mentors (resp. rate: 67 and 54 per cent)	15 mentees and 3 mentors (resp. rate: 60 and 12 per cent)		34 mentees and 17 mentors (resp. rate: 64 and 32 per cent)
Interviews			8 mentors (5 Management Research and 3 Brain Institute)	8 mentors (10 interviews): 5 Management Institute and 3 Brain Institute
Focus groups	1 Management Institute (3 mentees)	2 Brain Institute (6 mentees)	1 Management Institute (3 mentees)	4 groups: 2 Management Institute and 2 Brain Institute (12 mentees)
Documents	Evaluation report pilot 2010–2011		Policy document about mentoring programmeWebsite about the mentoring programme	3 documents

the presence of gender researchers and the representation of women, especially in full professor positions (28 and 10 per cent, respectively, in 2011).

The first author interviewed eight mentors and conducted focus groups with 12 mentees. Mentors were selected from the first cohort and invited to reflect upon their experiences as a mentor. Mentees were selected from all three cohorts and asked to reflect upon their own and their mentor's learning process. Focus groups enabled us to observe the mentees reacting upon each other, which adds depth to their discussion and their account of their experiences in the mentoring programme (Wilkinson, 1998). Finally, we collected policy documents on the mentoring programme in both hardcopy and from the university website (University X, 2015) in order to compare the design and actual implementation of the mentoring programme.

3.3 | Data analysis

We analysed the surveys using SPSS software. Interviews and focus groups were tape recorded with the explicit permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim. The first author made extensive observation, theoretical and reflective memos during data collection, transcription and analysis (Bleijenbergh, 2013) and performed a first inductive qualitative content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) to mark relevant sections of the text regarding design and implementation. In a second round, we looked more closely for sections that related to the different dimensions of transformational change and coded them accordingly. Going back and forth between the data and the theoretical framework engaged us in unravelling if and which conditions enabled the dimensions of transformational change to occur, which will be elaborated in the next section.

4 | FINDINGS

We present our findings by showing how the three dimensions in the process of transformational change evolve and which and how gendered norms and work practices in academia are challenged and changed. For each dimension,

we discuss the specific conditions that enable transformational change to occur. First, we discuss how cross-mentoring creates a safe space to identify and discuss gendered organizational norms and work practices. Second, we show how repeatedly hearing similar stories or participating in the programme stimulates mentees and mentors to revise their narrative. Third, we look in depth at how addressing and equipping all participants as agents for change who experiment with changing gendered norms and practices and create collaboration for organizational change towards gender equality.

4.1 | Cross-mentoring: Creating a safe space for discussion and reflection

Pairing mentees and mentors across faculties proves an important condition to make (gendered) norms and work practices explicit preceding a critical discussion and reflection. First of all, it obliges participants to make their specific context explicit to the other(s). Mentee Susan[1] explained how her mentor from another faculty stimulated her to elaborate on her specific situation, explicitly identifying norms and work practices on which they could both reflect. She appreciated being asked different kinds of questions to those that a close(r) colleague would probably have asked while taking certain practices for granted. Mentee Kate argued that having somebody from another faculty ensures that '*you can paint the picture better, because you have to paint it for somebody else*'. In this way, the mentoring relationship obliges mentees to explicitly identify and discuss (gendered) norms and work practices as a first step in changing them.

Second, by grouping them in peer groups across faculties, both mentees and mentors gained insight in the work practices at other institutes, which increased their awareness of the range of alternatives. In one peer mentoring group, the mentees discussed the formal and informal work practices around transitions to an associate professor position and the differences between the criteria on paper and the interpretations that were used:

> Rose: *So why does somebody who has worked as an assistant professor [mostly their male counterparts], suddenly, at some point, becomes associate professor? What triggers that? Because you know like, if you look at what you're probably doing right now, you're doing much more than what is actually in your current job description.*

Exchanging practices around job promotion gave insight into the different criteria and assessment practices at other faculties. This enabled a critical discussion of the norms and work practices in their own work environment and how these affect women and men differently. For example, they discussed the case of mentees being penalized by their (male) supervisor for being too assertive when asking for a salary increase or promotion. Moreover, they stimulated each other to ask for clarification on promotion criteria and to critically discuss these opaque (and gendered) work practices with their colleagues. The mentors also shared and critically discussed 'best and worst practices' in their peer mentoring groups, for instance regarding remuneration procedures. Thus, becoming acquainted with alternative practices in other departments through peer mentoring groups and cross-mentoring relationships supports questioning what is taken for granted in one's own work environment.

Third, the cross-faculty mentoring relationships between mentees and mentors provide an open and safe environment in which they can share and reflect upon their experiences. On the one hand, mentees could share (gendered) issues that they face, without being penalized for criticizing work processes in their work environment. On the other hand, mentors gain awareness of the challenges women academics face, enabling them to reflect upon their own role in (re)producing these. One mentor reported a specific situation in which his mentee was asked by her dean to take over his teaching activities; this was a question the dean should not have asked, according to the mentor, because he was in a more powerful position and the mentee's dependence on him prevented her from refusing.

Jonathan: *At a certain moment, during the mentoring trajectory, I found it so bad and thought 'how is that even possible?!'. While I realized that I have done the same in the past! Right? I remember that uh ... you don't do it on purpose, but it happens.*

Reflecting upon the mentee's story, the mentor realized that he, as a full professor, had also asked 'questions that should not have been asked' to (female) staff members who were in less powerful positions in the past. Openly exchanging experiences with a mentee from a different institute created a 'safe space' which allowed him to reflect critically upon his own role in (re)producing gendered work practices and indirectly contributing to jeopardizing women's careers and perpetuating gender inequalities.

Cross-faculty mentoring relationships and peer mentoring groups thus create the conditions to increase the opportunity for both mentees and mentors to 'paint the picture' and make (gendered) norms and work practices explicit. In addition, it creates a 'safe space' in which they can exchange experiences, question and reflect upon their own behaviour in (re)producing gendered norms and work practices that are often taken for granted.

4.2 | The power of repetition for changing narratives

The mentoring programme supported participants in changing their narratives about the causes for gender inequality and the 'ideal academic' in different ways. First of all, the peer mentoring groups supported mentees in revising narratives about gender inequality in the organization since exchanging individual and similar stories made them realize that gender inequality is not the result of a lack of women's abilities and ambitions, but caused by gendered organizational norms and work practices. In general, mentees highly appreciate the peer mentoring groups: more than 90 per cent evaluated these meetings as useful or very useful [survey]. They report feeling empowered by hearing the experiences of others and finding recognition for their issues, such as difficult power relations with their supervisors or problems with balancing and prioritizing their activities. By regularly hearing about similar experiences by her peers, one mentee realized that gender inequality might be an organizational problem rather than an individual woman's issue:

Ellen: *In the peer mentoring, by talking about the different problems that we were all struggling with, it is found that the underlying reason has to do with the organization, or how we deal with what the organization wants from us.*

The mentee changed her narrative from feeling individually responsible for gender inequality to acknowledging the role of the organization in (re)creating gender inequalities through work practices.

Moreover, some mentees referred to their experience of being confronted by different stories from other mentees empowered them to revise their dominant narratives about the 'ideal academic' and to become more confident about embodying a different kind of 'ideal academic' and creating her own kind of 'ideal academic career', as for example mentee Lou explains:

Lou: *I decided that within 5 or 10 years I would like to be [...] a role model of a different kind of scientist. And maybe not the traditional scientist, and maybe it might have some disadvantages too, it will cost me something, also with regard to my career ... but that I can have a different kind of profile like 'I did it in a different way'. And maybe I've worked a little less and have beavered away less and have taken some more time for my family or other things that enriched me [...] But that means that I shouldn't look for rewards, because they aren't there when you're trying to make that bridge. [...] But well, it's a lot of fun!*

Lou argues that, after participating in the mentoring programme, she no longer wanted to adhere to what is expected from her (i.e., focusing only on research and teaching activities '*and rat racing in her own niche*', as she calls it in the

focus group). Instead, she changed her narrative about the 'ideal academic' into someone who also spends time within (political) networks outside academia ('*other things that enriched me*') and with her family by shifting her priorities and working part-time at the university. She explains that she expects to possibly receive less rewards in academia ('*I shouldn't look for rewards*'), but it better suits her ideals and (private) situation. When (more) mentees are encouraged to change their individual narratives about what it means to have a 'successful' academic career and 'deviate' from the current norms, the organizational narratives about the 'ideal academic' will eventually change as well and create more room for diverse career paths. Moreover, when they expand this critical discussion and reflection beyond their peer mentoring groups into their daily work environment, the narratives about 'gender inequality' and the 'ideal academic' will move beyond the mentoring programme into the organization.

Second, some mentors' narrative also changed due to their (repeated) participation in the mentoring programme. For example, mentor Julian articulated that it increased his awareness of gendered norms and work practices in the organization and provided him with a better 'gender literacy' (De Vries, 2010):

> Julian: *It [mentoring programme] provided a sort of conceptual framework, which provided a kind of recognition for me, but also a frame [...] If you are not very explicitly ... well ... involved in the gender discussion and working on it ... uh ... then you do everything based on intuition. [...] and the mentoring programme helps you see this on a more professional level. [...] It provides a mirror for your own functioning and that gives a sort of uh ... well, what can I say ... a sort of guide so that you can deal with it more professionally.*

Julian argues that the mentoring programme served as a 'mirror', repeatedly confronting him with 'the gender discussion' and his own functioning and hence increased his awareness of gendered organizational norms and work practices. It provided him with a 'conceptual framework' for understanding gender inequality, which changed his narrative from holding individual women accountable for unequal outcomes to recognizing that academia has a masculine culture which is unsupportive for (women) academics. His story is illustrative for some other mentors in the programme as well.

4.3 | Collaboration for change in experimenting with new work practices

The mentoring programme enabled participants — both mentees and mentors — to become change agents and experiment with new practices that are changing the individualistic academic culture into a collaborative and supportive culture. Both mentees and mentors argue that experiencing the value of collaboration and support stimulated them to become a (better) mentor or supervisor themselves. By reflecting upon their own role in being or becoming a role model and a good 'mentor' in and outside the programme, they became more aware of the importance of mentoring junior colleagues (formally or informally) and the message that they conveyed to them. One of the mentees explained:

> Ava: *I'm also a mentor for the PhD students here at [institute] with [Rose], and this mentoring session has changed the way that I mentor students as well. To listen ... instead of like following these structures and so on, which I tended to do in the beginning and in like fifteen minutes or something like 'ok, question one, question two, question three [bangs with her fist on the table], you're fine, bye bye', or something. Now I'm really like talking to them, like asking 'what is your experience?' and so on. And people are coming back to me spontaneously, so I think that's sort of like a nice assurance as well. It's taking quite a lot of time, but I still find it nice to do.*

Ava refers to the organizational norm that one should not spend too much time on teaching activities, which is reflected in the work practice that is taken for granted of spending only 15 minutes on supervision meetings with (PhD) students. She argues that, inspired by her own mentor, she adapted the supervision of her own

students by taking more time for them and asking questions instead of providing the answers. Her priority shift to guiding (junior) colleagues and mutual support counteracts both the narrative of and the work practices within the competitive and individualistic academic culture. This finding resonates with Ragins (2016), who found that 'today's protégés are tomorrow's mentors' (p. 242) and that formal mentoring is a gateway to informal mentoring within the organization. The emphasis the mentee places on collaboration and support counteracts the individualistic and competitive culture in academia and can slowly become more collaborative and supportive.

Furthermore, the survey and focus groups suggest that a majority of mentees (72 per cent) built a sustainable mentoring relationship with their mentor and a supportive network of peers that lasts beyond the lifespan of the mentoring programme. The mentors also state how their peer mentor groups provided a strong support network and collegiality that they do not experience in the individualized and competitive daily work environment where academics are often '*thrown to the wolves*' (Jonathan) and '*should find their own way*' (Steven). In contrast, the mentoring programme facilitates academics in connecting and collaborating towards a common goal, and the mutual support counteracts the individualistic and competitive academic work culture.

We found that the mentoring programme activated several mentors to initiate small changes in their work environment that contribute to gender equality. To illustrate this, mentor Owen explained how he became determined to talk more openly about gender issues with his staff and ask more questions instead of presenting his own norms:

> Owen: *Of course, it's a very tricky subject, right? It is often politically incorrect and I try to make it discussable. And because I did this more often, I'm finding that it at least gets easier. [...] so I try to ask open questions and my learning goal for this year is to also have an open mind about it. So I don't put my norms forward ... because it is about norms actually, and I don't impose my norms on others. And that is even more difficult. And now I start with an open question, but I still find that I still ... well ... think based on these norms and this framework and start these conversations from that.*

His participation in the mentoring programme made him aware of the importance of starting discussions about gender inequality, both within his group and at higher levels in the organization. One of the norms that he reflects upon is his assumption that he should protect women, particularly when they had children, by not 'over asking' them for committees and other activities. He argues that he now also asks the women academics in his groups for all kinds of academic activities, giving them the opportunity to decline the invitation. He also decided to stop scheduling meetings after 5 p.m. In doing this, he opposes the gendered organizational norm that academics should be available for work in the evening, thus giving women ample opportunity to carry out their care responsibilities, like picking up the children from school or day care. Moreover, he changed current work practices by creating room for discussing the role of gender in the group's work activities and trying to set a good example by being open minded and critically reflective on his own behaviour in the group.

Some mentors described how they have tried to change the policies of their institute. For example, mentor Evelyn went to talk to the head of the central HR department and the dean of the institute to discuss an issue on behalf of her mentee:

> Evelyn: *Her supervisor had asked her [the mentee] whether she had a conflict between her motherhood and doing science. Well, certainly, this is a remark that is just unacceptable! [...] and then I went to the head of the central HR department and said: 'Well, this is what we hear within our faculty. What is the university doing about this? Do you think it's acceptable?' [...] eventually, I also went to the dean and said 'Well, one of my ...', I didn't mention any names, 'but one of your supervisors said this to his/her female subordinate and I don't think it's acceptable! What are you going to do about it?' And then he decided to explicitly ask all full professors what they are doing to promote gender equality during future annual evaluation meetings with them.*

Her mentor Evelyn addressed the gendered norm of the 'ideal academic' not having sufficient opportunity to perform care responsibilities (Herschberg, Vinkenburg, Bleijenbergh, & Van Engen, 2014) when her mentee's supervisor questioned her commitment when she talked about combining her career with care. She used her positional power as a full professor to address gendered organizational norms and work practices on behalf of the mentee and critically discussed the gendered norm of being a 'good academic' at the highest levels in the organization, holding administrators accountable for gendered work practices.

We observed a large potential for transformational change by activating the mentees as change agents in the peer mentoring groups, which has not been fully exploited yet. In our focus groups, mentees inspired each other by exchanging strategies for small organizational changes. For example, mentee Hannah tells the other mentees how she reacts verbally when confronted with 'sexist' work practices:

> Hannah: *If there's anything I think is well … blatantly sexist or maybe not optimally gender neutral, I always draw attention to it. I find it very scary, because I don't know how people will react, […] people can become very defensive and actually say more painful things. And then I think 'I don't want that'. But within my own group I always do this and up to now have always had very positive responses where junior researchers but also senior colleagues then say 'ok, point taken, I didn't think about it in that way'. And that's what I call taking small steps.*

Hannah takes small steps towards changing the communication in her daily work environment by addressing normalized gendered work practices. She functioned as a role model for the other mentees by showing them that small change is actually possible. Addressing and equipping both mentees and mentors as change agents in the mentoring programme mobilizes a collective movement to critically discuss and change gendered norms and practices.

5 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article aims to further our understanding of organizational gender equality interventions and how they contribute to transformational change (De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016; Ely & Meyerson, 2000b). Gender equality interventions based on a transformative approach are still rare (Benschop et al., 2012; Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Nentwich, 2006), and our study contributed to the literature by exploring the dimensions of and conditions for transformational change in a mentoring programme for women. Mentoring programmes are both criticized and praised for their ability to create organizational change (Benschop et al., 2015; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016; Ely & Meyerson, 2000b) and despite the prevailing scholarly criticism, they still exist and could benefit from a deeper understanding. Instead of dismissing them for their focus on 'fixing the women' (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b; Liff & Cameron, 1997), we argue that mentoring programmes do have potential for transformational change. Furthermore, by focusing on the different dimensions of transformational change, we have unravelled the conditions that create the conditions for change to occur.

First, we contribute to the scholarly debate on gender equality interventions by shedding light on how a mentoring programme does have potential for various levels of transformational change. Although previous studies pointed to this potential (De Vries, 2010; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016), we were able to further explore how this process of transformational change unfolded on the level of gendered organizational norms and work practices; organizational members (i) discussing and reflecting upon gendered organizational norms and work practices; (ii) creating new narratives; and (iii) experimenting with new work practices. We showed how cross-faculty individual and group mentoring provokes explicit identification and discussion of gendered organizational norms and work practices in a 'safe space'. Moreover, we illustrated how the mentoring programme enables changing the narrative about the nature of gender inequality in an organization from blaming individual women to acknowledging gender inequalities as a structural issue. It also provides room to create alternative narratives of the 'ideal academic'

(Bleijenbergh et al., 2012; Uhly et al., 2017; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). Finally, the mentoring programme promotes a culture of collaboration and empowers mentors and mentees to become change agents and to initiate small changes with regard to (gendered) norms and work practices in their daily work environment.

We recognize that the status of the university as a 'best practice' for gender equality in the Dutch context suggests a relatively open organizational climate towards gender equality where mentees and mentors might already have a basic level of gender knowledge. However, this is not considered a necessity, since the organizers and trainers of the mentoring programme can also be knowledgeable on the topic and fuel discussions with gender knowledge and continuously could be questioning what is taken for granted, together with mentees and mentors. Moreover, the fact that the mentors who were selected were known to support gender equality may have had a positive influence on the extent to which they are open and reflexive. Extending the gender knowledge of this group of full professors may have contributed to the presence of the critical mass that is required to extend the discussion beyond the mentoring programme in the organization. Comparable change might be more difficult in organizations with a smaller critical mass and mentors that are not supportive of gender equality in the first place.

We argue that the process of transformational change can be considered as a continuum with the different levels of transformational change being dimensions of transformation, as illustrated in Figure 1. As we have shown, these dimensions can also be present in one intervention while mutually supporting each other. Being able to identify and critically discuss and reflect upon their role in (re)producing gendered norms and work practices is not necessary, but may support revising a narrative; this may in turn support experimentation with new practices. It seems that it is an iterative process, which goes back and forth between the different dimensions of transformational change.

Second, we contribute to the literature on gender equality interventions by identifying conditions that enable transformational change to occur. These conditions should allow both transformative learning at the individual level as well as transformational change where gendered norms and practices at the structural level are changed (De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016; Henderson, 2002). Individual learning can become organizational change, when organizational members expand their capacity to critically discuss gendered norms and practices in their daily work environments and, as change agents, experiment with new work practices that counteract a current gendered system. We identified a number of conditions that support the process of transformational change, which we will explicate below.

5.1 | Cross-mentoring

Participants in gender equality interventions who come from different organizational units are obliged to make their local situation explicit before being able to critically discuss them. This improves the likelihood that gendered norms and practices are identified. Cross-mentoring relationships create a 'safe space' for an open dialogue in which participants can openly reflect upon their experiences and specifically their role in (re)producing gendered work practices. Such a 'high-quality relationship' (Ragins, 2016) creates room for mutual learning, connecting participants from the minority (women, in this case) with participants from the majority on issues regarding gender inequality.
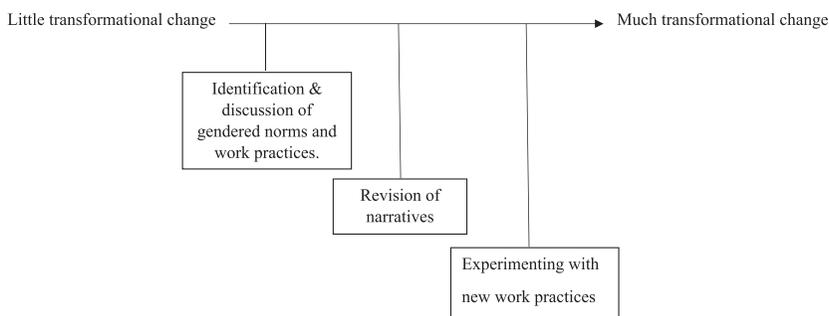

FIGURE 1 A continuum of transformational change

5.2 | Questioning what is taken for granted

Instead of (re)producing stereotypes of women and men in organizations, interventions should facilitate critical discussions in which these are questioned and reflected upon (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b; Henderson, 2002). By continuously asking critical questions, trainers in the programme play an important role in inviting participants to identify gendered norms in their work environment, questioning them and discussing how they might affect men and women differently. Educating the participants on the 'rules of the game' should be followed up by critically reflecting upon these rules and giving participants space to come up with alternatives in a creative manner. When participants expand this questioning into their daily work environment, new norms and work practices can be structurally anchored in the organization.

5.3 | Repeating participation and individual stories

By repeatedly hearing individuals' stories, participants in a gender equality intervention start to realize that the issues these women encounter are not individual, but result from gendered organizational norms and practices. The power of repetition is realized by combining individual exchanges with group activities within one programme, but also by repeatedly involving the same participants in subsequent programmes or interventions, so that they hear several stories and experiences from different participants. Repeating the intervention also keeps gender equality on the organization's agenda as compared to single interventions and creates a long-term commitment from the organizational members. This is in line with Benschop et al. (2015) who argue that changing gendered organizations through gender equality interventions should be a longitudinal process.

5.4 | Facilitating peer support networks

Peer support groups enable participants to exchange experiences and strategies for small change and serve as support networks empowering participants to expand the critical discussion beyond the intervention. Group support counteracts individualistic organizational cultures: by experiencing the value of peer support and mentoring, participants may reflect upon their own supervisory skills and improve them in their role as mentor or change agent.

5.5 | Addressing all participants as change agents

Interventions may create a powerful 'army' of organizational members working for change in gender equality by identifying and addressing all participants, regardless of their hierarchical position in the organization, as possible change agents. Not only the mentors (in higher positions) should be addressed as potential change agents and equipped to create changes in gendered norms and work practices, but also mentees (in relatively lower positions) can be empowered to critically discuss and possibly change them. In the context of the mentoring programme, participants may exchange strategies for small changes and encourage each other to initiate change. Participants sometimes report feeling a 'victim' of the system, but they can become change agents when they gain awareness of their role in (re)producing norms and work practices and potential strategies for incremental change. When organizational interventions that aim for gender equality incorporate an understanding of the socially constructed and gendered nature of organizations and the dynamic between structure and agency, they are potentially successful in promoting transformational change on multiple levels (Benschop et al., 2015; Grada et al., 2015).

To conclude, rather than dismissing traditional gender equality interventions, we should further unravel the conditions that provoke the different dimensions of transformational change, as we have attempted to do in this article. We should also seek to integrate these conditions in future gender equality interventions.

ENDNOTE

[1] The names used for the respondents are aliases in order to protect the privacy of the mentees and mentors involved and to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity.

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